

Liberty Call

Merrie Monarch Festival

By JOSN Tim Walsh • Contribution by David Nagle

THE Merrie Monarch Festival celebrated its 38-year of honoring Hawaiian culture last week. Since its origin in 1964, Big Island's Hilo has hosted the pinnacle of hula events.

According to Dottie Thompson, who has chaired the event since 1969, the festival is dedicated to King David Kalakaua.

The king, often referred to as the "Merrie Monarch," reigned from 1874 until his death in 1891. Kalakaua breathed new life in the nearly extinct cultural traditions of the Hawaiian people.

These traditions included the hula, which the missionaries banned nearly 70 years earlier.

The history of the Hawaiian people survived through the hula and chant since the ancient Hawaiians had no written

language.

"Hula and its accompanying chants recorded Hawaiian genealogy, mythology, and prayers of the heart and mind," said Thompson. "The hula was the means by which the culture, history, stories and almost every aspect of Hawaiian life was expressed and passed down through generations."

The Merrie Monarch Festival is a week-long event beginning every year on Easter Sunday. It includes Hawaiian arts and crafts, a parade and entertainment at local hotels in Hilo.

The parade, lead by the King and Queen of the festival, includes Navy representatives and draws thousands of watchers and keiki candy catchers.

But, the highlight of the festival is the three nights of hula competition at the

Edith Kanaka'ole Stadium. Hula halau (troupe) come from all over the state of Hawaii, the mainland United States and throughout the world to compete in what could be considered the mecca of hula.

The first night is dedicated to individual competition, while the last two nights feature group competition.

Dancers perform two kinds of hula: the kahiko, or ancient hula, with its pulsating chants and rhythms while dressed in the traditional dress of their ancestors, and the modern, or auana style, with its colorful costumes and beautiful, flowing melodies.

Kalakaua once said, "hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." It is a language that still speaks to hearts today. It is, indeed, poetry in motion.

Post Script

While waiting for a flight back to Honolulu at the Hilo International Airport, an impromptu hula began at Gate A5. A stage was set up with three musicians playing for donations.

They called out to the waiting crowd for any hula dancers. The crowd adorned with Merrie Monarch Festival t-shirts erupted with a shout.

"Come on up," beckoned the lead guitarist.

A teenage girl stood and approached the stage. She whispered to the musicians and they changed their tune. She turned and

faced the waiting crowd and started dancing.

Soon, one after another the crowd rose and joined the girl in front of the stage in a contagious hula.

Of the whole Merrie Monarch Festival, nothing said more of the hula or of Hawaii than this crowd waiting at Gate A5 at Hilo's International Airport.

While descending the ramp to board the plane, the music faded and with it, faded the surrounding sense of festival spirit and culture.

Although there may be hula on other islands and through out the world, the heart of it stays in the sleepy, rainy town of Hilo.



JOSN Tim Walsh photo

(Above) The leader of a Hula halau (troupe) performs during the Merrie Monarch Festival.



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(Left) Rear Adm. Conway, Commander, Navy Region Hawaii, Commander, Naval Surface Group Middle Pacific, rides with his wife, Carole. The two were followed by Cmdr. 'Buz' Source, commanding officer of USS Hopper, and marching Hopper Sailors in the Merrie Monarch Festival parade.



JOSN Tim Walsh photo

Above and Below: Members of Hula halau (troupe) perform during the Merrie Monarch Festival.



Lt. Cmdr. Jane Campbell photo