



MEMO TO: Las Vegas Hawaiian Civic Club Board and Membership
SUBJECT: History Report
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FROM: Gail Wright, LVHCC Historian, Patrick Filbert, Editor

THE POLYNESIAN IOSEPA COLONY IN THE UTAH DESERT 1888--1917

The story of the Iosepa Settlement in Utah is about Native Hawaiians (as well as other Polynesians) who left their comfortable homes in Hawai'i to resettle in Utah in the 1880's. What an extraordinary adventure! Today, a trip to Salt Lake City entails going to Honolulu International Airport, flying for approximately 6 hours, covering 2994 air miles. But in the 1880's, while the mileage is about the same, the time to get there is much different. Sailing from Honolulu to San Francisco took several weeks; then travel by carriage and horse back to Salt Lake City, over rough trails, mountains and desert, took another several weeks. What a challenge!

The history of Iosepa has been studied and written about extensively for many years, more so than any other group of Hawaiians who have left Hawai'i to sail the world for adventure or to resettle. Articles about Iosepa have appeared in scientific journals, newspapers and magazines; as well as a comprehensive entry in the Utah Communication History Encyclopedia. Historians and anthropologists have visited and written about this unusual community; archaeologists have excavated the site and there have been at least one college master's theses written. The cemetery, the most recognizable part of Iosepa that remains intact, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

HISTORY: ((Note: I will summarize the Iosepa story for those not familiar with it, much taken from an article in the Utah Communication History Encyclopedia, April 26, 2012, written by Peni Tagoai when he was a senior at the University of Utah, graduating in August 2012. He grew up on the North Shore of O'ahu.)

The LDS Church sent missionaries to the South Pacific as early as 1844, three years prior to the pioneers settling the Salt Lake Valley. At first the work of these missionaries was very slow and unfruitful but as they learned the language and customs of the people, conversions began to increase many of these converts were desirous of migrating to Utah but leaving the Islands was forbidden by their own government. Their leaders felt that the next best step was to gather the Hawaiian saints into one location in the islands.

The first gathering place was established in 1835 in the valley of Palawai on the island of Lanai. This land was first rented from Halelea, a friendly chief, but later purchased from him. In the fall of 1854, the Hawaiian Mormons began to gather there. This proved unsatisfactory, and later a permanent gather place was established at Laie, Oahu, where the Church bought a large tract of ground in 1865. (Atkin)

The Hawaiians continued to cherish a desire to come to Utah. About 1867, a native by the name of Napela, who had been the first Hawaiian baptized, received permission from his government to visit the Utah Territory. Upon returning home, he gave such glowing reports concerning what he had seen at the headquarters of the Church that many more wished to have the privilege of going to Utah. (Atkin)

Getting to Utah usually included coming with missionaries returning from Hawai'i. Once in Utah, the Hawaiians then gathered and settled around Warm Springs in the northwest part of Salt Lake City in

the old Nineteenth Ward. The Hawaiians continued to come as opportunity presented itself until by 1889 about 75 had gathered in Salt Lake Valley. (Atkin)

Language barriers and culture differences made it difficult for these newcomers to adapt to life in Utah. As a result, this led to difficulty in finding employment, which then led to difficulty in providing for their families. (Panek) Also challenging for these Polynesians was the fact that rumors had spread about the Islanders having leprosy—these rumors were unfounded when they were made

On May 16, 1889, the First Presidency of the LDS Church put together a committee to find a permanent home for these Polynesians. This group included three men: Harvey H. Cluff, William W. Cluff, and Fred A. Mitchell. They presented the plan to the Polynesians in Warm Springs to find them a home. The Polynesians selected three men of their own to join this committee: J. W. Kaulainamoku, George Kamakaniau, and Napela (First Hawaiian convert and first Hawaiian to visit Utah). (Atkin). This plan was welcomed warmly and with excitement to have a place they could call their home.



The land unanimously voted on as the home for these Polynesians is located at Skull Valley in Tooele County. Tropical landscapes filled with beaches and greenery were traded for desert farm land. George Fredric Stratton of the *Salt Lake Herald* described a trip into Skull Valley in 1915 from Salt Lake City: “Forty miles to an early breakfast at Grantsville [Tooele County], then another forty miles across the desert took them into Iosepa.”

At its peak in 1916 Iosepa was home to 228 inhabitants, but despite its remarkable successes the colony was also plagued with hardships. The Polynesian settlers were not accustomed to the harsh Utah climate; they baked in the dry desert summers and shivered in the cold snowy winters. Such challenges took their toll, and at times it seemed that the cemetery grew faster than the town. A small outbreak of leprosy in the mid-1890s added to Iosepa’s difficulties. In all, only three colonists contracted the feared disease, but they were kept isolated from the rest of the residents in a barren shack well separated from town. The afflicted hoisted a flag on the pole outside their house when they needed provisions, and in this way the town cared for the lepers until they died. (Reeve)

TODAY: At the height of Iosepa’s prosperity, the town patron, Joseph F. Smith assembled the members and announced that a temple was to be built in Hawaii. He urged the Iosepa residents to return home to help, even offering to pay their way. Although many Iosepans wanted to stay, Smith’s message was widely interpreted as an order. Over the next two years, Iosepa withered—with some residents reportedly walking behind the departing wagons to symbolize their grief. In 1917, the land

was sold to another church company. Some homes were moved and many were razed with their lumber used to build sheep sheds. Livestock grazed among the fire hydrants. (Malakoff)

One resident, Akoni Ho'opi'aina, held out in the ghost town through the 1960's. He died in 1968 and Iosepa's cemetery, long obscured by weeds, held its first funeral in more than 50 years. After his death, almost everyone with first-hand memories of the Hawaiian Village in Skull Valley was gone; but Iosepa wasn't forgotten. A dozen years after Ho'opi'aina's death, a carload of volunteers trooped into Iosepa's cemetery and began cleaning the gravestones. Some were descendants of the few original families that did not return to Hawai'i. Others were from Utah's growing Polynesian community and saw Iosepa as a symbol of their common heritage. (Malakoff)



By the late 1990's, a formal historical society erected a monument and began holding annual Memorial Day celebrations that now attract more than 1,000 people. The celebration includes a giant luau and traditional Polynesian entertainment. It is tradition for children to clean the graves at the cemetery. The association has built a pavilion, a kitchen and a water well, installed bathrooms and built a changing room. The next thing they hope to install is power.

Even though the desert has reclaimed Iosepa and the townsite is gone, it won't be forgotten. It is sacred and the sacrifices the Polynesians made created a when they built the town is a legacy that will live on forever. One can feel it when looking over the expanse of the austere beauty of Skull Valley, reading the names on the headstones in the cemetery that seem so out of place in the desert surroundings, and watching it in the evenings as the desert sunset bathes the landscape and the wind rustles everything it touches. (Miley)

Sources

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