

KEAULANA & THE WOOLSEY POI FACTORY, 1909-1923

[Interviews with Miriam Woolsey Reed and her brother George Woolsey]

Keaulana in Manoa valley was our land, on which taro was grown. At first it supplied enough for the Woolsey poi business at our factory in Kalia, Waikiki, on John Ena Road and Hobron lane, the present site of the Kalia apartments (where we used two and one-half acres). The poi was hand pounded by Hawaiians in the family and by Chinese helpers. The demand for poi increased. Primordial hand pounding would no longer do. In 1909 the Manoa factory was built, on land which had been in our family since even before the *Mahele*.

Keaulana was irrigated from the headwaters of Laniwapo, Waihii, and Waiakeakua, then down Manoa Stream into our land, which lay below the junction of Manoa Road, Dahu Avenue, and Lowrey Avenue (called "five corners").

*Apu wai huli* was the kind of poi we used most, because it was solid and light gray in color. The slip was cut from the mother taro just above the tuber where round eyes could be seen.

The patches were fifty by fifty with three foot banks on each side. The terracing permitted a light irrigation by gravity, from north to south. Preparation began after all water had been drained out a few days before. The tilling was done with the *o'o*, an iron spade with a handle perhaps as long as a man. The *huli* (taro tops) were planted in rows about twelve inches apart, allowing enough room between rows for growth and sunlight.

The water level was two inches above all planting. Water was not allowed to stand for more than twenty-four hours in any

patch, for otherwise the taro would not mature right and would tend to become *Ioli Ioli* (watery and soft). The maturation time is fourteen months.

The start-up machinery and the engine were suggested by the Standard Oil Company office, which had just come to Honolulu in 1909. My mother ordered from a farmers' catalogue a "Corn Grinder," which looked like a giant meat grinder. It was altered to fit our needs with a single worm. The gasoline motor was five h.p. As our production increased, a second motor was added, with 16 h.p. A homemade battery used distilled water, sulfuric acid, and caustic soda in porcelain jars. Fourteen jars held paddles with negative and positive caps, joining battery to engine. A leather belt connected the engine to the mill for the grinding of the taro into poi.

Our father, George Lewis Woolsey (18<sup>73</sup>-1912), put this curious structure on a concrete slab with walls of concrete about three feet high, with tongue-and-groove walls on all sides except for the two wide-swinging screened doors facing the taro washing area. The space above the T&G and the roof was screened completely, for ventilation and light.

Father was a self-made engineer. Whatever he built was for a purpose and was made to last. Most of his foundation is still in use today, some as the very solid base for housing.

The cooking boiler was made of steel plate four feet by eight feet and six inch sides, with a redwood box four feet high on three sides. The front opening had slide-in gates. A concrete ramp was raised about three inches from the floor of the washing area. On the floor of the steel box two by four inch redwood

boards were set to hold taro. Water was one-quarter inch above these slats.

Taro was cooked by steam. The fire box below the steel plate was three feet high lined with fire bricks. It had a steel front door and a red brick exit with a round chimney twenty-four feet high. Kiawe, guava, and coal were used to heat the water.

The water had been a problem. The Board of Health demanded that we cook with "domestic" water (i.e. city water). (The water from the mountains was, presumably, "wild.") In 1909 the closest water line was still at the Cooper house, about half a mile away. We got financing from Chinese to bring in a one and one-half inch pipe line.

Daily cooking was usually twelve bags of taro, each weighing about 125 pounds, three-fourths of a ton. The bags were covered with damp gunny sacks. It took one hour to heat the water to steaming and then six hours to complete the cooking. When we were going at speed, the mill worked twenty-four hours a day. That could result in several tons of poi. We had to hire fire engine horses and drays to pull the load out of the valley!

Chong Hung Lim was my father's helper during the building of the factory, and he became fireman, general manager, and then my mother's righthand man after father's death December 1, 1912. At the peak of our production we had thirty-two Chinese workers. The Chinese, no doubt because of their knowledge of raising rice, another "paddy" crop, were soon experts in taro propagation.

Some of the customers of the poi factory were Kawaiahao Seminary, Mid-Pacific Institute (formerly Mills School), the

Girls' Industrial School (located on the Kaimuki side of the University quarry crater), Matson lines, Young Brothers tugs, and individual homes. Deliveries to all were made with horse and wagon.

When the demand for poi was greater than Manoa growers could provide taro, we went as far as Kaneohe, Waiahole, and Waikane for supplies. One of the growers was Lum Poon. His property, Lua Nui, was located at the base of the hill, outside of Armitage's, next to the present Manoa School playground. A large "Chinese camp" was in the area of the present Manoa tennis courts. We bought much taro from this company.

Wong Nin, on the Woodlawn side of the valley, had his own factory down on Hotel Street.

We used "White Horse" for heavy hauling and delivery to large customers who bought poi in barrels. He also delivered in the McCully area, Waikiki, Kapahulu, and Kaimuki. For town deliveries "Luahine" was used, as she was gentle and not likely to be frightened by the newfangled horseless trucks and autos. We delivered to customers along <sup>Percussion</sup> ~~Puncbbowl~~ Street, among whom were the Kawananakoa's, MacFarlane. On Makiki Street lived Merten, Horner, Desha, Dwight. Other kamaaina customers were Robinson, Dowsett, Cummings, Kumalae, Rice, Cooke, Castle in Waikiki -- too many to remember.

The Board of Health supervised the cleanliness of poi during our time.

Our poi had a certain consistency, not so thin as now.

The workers who cleaned the cooked taro came about six a.m. and stayed until all the day's cooking was completed. (Twelve hour days were no novelty.)

From the washing area, the taro was quartered, placed in barrels, wheeled into the milling room. It was placed in the mill a bowl at a time. A little water was added as the grinding went on. Then it went into another barrel below the apron. Two men kneaded this *poi*, standing at each end of a long board on a platform about waist high.

For large customers the finished product was weighed into barrels. The last barrels were reserved for individual deliveries, the *poi* packaged in mercerized cotton (from Love's Bakery), made out of flour and sugar sacks. Most bought five to twenty pounds a week. We also had special customers who a month in advance would order *Iehua poi* (red color) for their *Iuau*. Our mother, Maka, delivered within Manoa valley by pony and cart.

All of this noisy and exciting, even frenetic, business was part of our family lives, for we lived within its compounds. In this early pre-auto time, the family areas were rather thickly inhabited by animals: cow, goat, sheep, chickens, dog, cats, horses, mules, jackass, burro, pony. "People in Manoa," remembers George, "were very few." Our neighbors were Angie Nina Long, Carlos Long, Manuwela, <sup>Rosa</sup> and the other Woolseys. When George as a ~~as~~ youth went to the mountain pool to fish or pick mountain apples and *kukui* nuts, he might go with Kawanakoa, Paoa, Sterling, Ileole, Keawemahi, Louis.

We always feared destruction by fire. Yet when the end came suddenly, in spring 1923, after only fourteen years, water was the destroyer.

>>> by Miriam Woolsey Reed & George Woolsey (1980 & 1981) <<<

### POSTSCRIPT ON MANOA STORMS

The Woolsey poi factory, as a Hawaiian manufacturing enterprise, employing other ethnic groups, was probably unique on Oahu (and an anomaly in Manoa). It came to a sudden end. At midnight Friday, March 30, a massive *kona* storm began.

It was reported in the *Star-Bulletin* and *Advertiser* without much concern for its impact on suburban farming. The HSB on March 31 (p. 1) has the headline: "Entire Island Soaked by Big Rainfall," which concentrated "on the business district of Honolulu." There was "very little damage...reported by any one company or industry." Wilder Avenue after nine p.m. Saturday was "literally afloat with a stream running through the fire station and with lawns under water." The *Advertiser* of Sunday, April 1, reported (p.1) that "the city suffered little more than a thorough drenching and temporary inconvenience in traffic delay, when at times the streets were flooded...and storm drains and culverts were clogged at times...."

Perhaps the reporters were housebound by the rain?

From the central western slopes of Ualakaa and Tantalus a cascading flood scoured the hillsides. It accumulated a mass of rocks and mud and poured this down across the *makai* and eastern side of Five Corners (its pathway in part through that Gore Road). Across Manoa Road and Oahu Avenue it pushed a frothing and substantial crest. It rolled through the ~~fifty-nine~~ acres of Woolsey taro lands and other taro patches and reached halfway across the valley.

When the storm ended, the taro patches had been filled in, dike to dike. They had become building sites.

Thus ended the Woolsey poi manufacturing business. The Woolsey land had become an "immediate suburb."

Unknown irony appeared only a few days later in Jared Smith's *Star-Bulletin* article of April 15, 1923 (p. 17): "The last decade has seen the transformation of a goodly area of rice, taro, banana and cane land into home sites in the immediate suburbs."

Other great Manoa storms have been recorded. Chinese farmers long remembered the storm of December 13-16, 1883, which is described in a history of taro in *The Star-Bulletin* of Jan. 23, 1940 (p. 9). Dr. Chester Wentworth describes a very heavy storm of Nov. 18, 1930, when in eleven hours some 10" deluged central Manoa (but 19" flooded Nuuanu). ["Geology and Ground Water Resources of the Manoa-Makiki District," Board of Water Supply, Honolulu, 1940, typescript.]

[ CSB. A portion of this account appeared in  
the Manoa News of July 1986.]

9/14/88

DEAR Miriam

9/15/88

The old version of the poi factory (once some 4 pages) has had materials from brother George's interview spliced in.

I hope you will go thru it for accuracy. And perhaps add what you think belongs in it.

Two queries: (1) The date of your father's birth; *Jan 7 1873*  
(2) Is 59 original acres right? *No - 3 acres, other Bishop Est*

This version of the Factory article is intended to stand by itself in the history. (There will be another essay concerning Maka.)

Do you have photographs of any kind concerning the Woolsey factory? Do you have a ground map of the area?

*ck Lyons art*

Please call me when you've finished with this new version. I'll come by to pick it up.

Aloha,

*Charles*

Phone: 949-3561

Charles S. Bouslog  
2365 Oahu Ave.  
Honolulu, HI 96822

*or of your father*