

KAPOHO REMEMBERED

In 1959 Hawaii gained statehood; the same year it lost a town to Pele

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What began as an entertaining spectacle at Kilauea, 20 miles away, soon became a relentless, destructive threat looming in Kapoho's back yard. After the eruption, the site of the buried town became a tourist attraction.

Earlier this year when Mauna Loa sprang to fiery life, the event was seen by many as a celebration of the 25th anniversary of Hawaiian statehood. In 1959, Hawaii's admission to the Union was marked by the eruption of another volcano, Kilauea, with far more dramatic - and devastating - results. The spectacular eruption's initial phase, which commenced November 15, 1959, flared and died 15 times over a 34-day span, filling residents of the Big Island with pride and delight. What started as an entertaining and non-threatening disturbance, however, would soon turn into an unimaginable nightmare.

At the beginning, crimson fingers of lava, sparkling with brilliant spangles of light, flowed from a rift in the southern wall of Kilauea Iki and pooled on the crater floor. Golden fire fountains jetted into the air, one reaching 1,900 feet to become the highest recorded in Hawaii. Cinders showered down, wrapping about tree branches like sizzling, molten Frisbees, and thousands of small fires danced in the bowl of the crater where ohia trees and dry grass ignited.

Aloha and Hawaiian airlines ran additional interisland flights to accommodate tourists. Hawaiian Air provided gin for Pele and free transportation for Leatrice Ballesteros, the mysterious "Lady in Red" who attended all Hawaiian volcanic eruptions.

Uncle George Lycurgus, 100-year old owner of Volcano House, tumbled down the stairs the first night of the eruption, but suffered no serious injury. Families picnicked at the old Civilian Conservation Corps camp while lava spouted above the trees. On one occasion, olive-brown smoke billowed over a mile into the clear blue sky. When it was all over, the immense lava lake looked like a night-lit city with glowing arteries and winking lights.

Over 175,000 people enjoyed Kilauea Iki's vibrant, thunderously noisy and altogether satisfactory display, which continued until a week before Christmas.

Among the observers who called the eruption "more fantastic than anything that happened at Halemaumau" were the 300 residents of Kapoho, a thriving community located in a wide valley 20 miles from Kilauea.

The Lyman family, Kapoho's biggest landholders, owned Higashi Pond - the state's only natural fish-spawning area - and vast fields of sugar cane, a beach development and Warm Springs Resort.

At Warm Springs, where portions of Bird of Paradise and other motion pictures had been filmed, stone steps led to a spring-fed, naturally heated pool fringed by ferns, cattleya orchids and lau hala trees. The grounds and a half-mile drive were landscaped with plumeria, thousands of ti plants, crotons and ginger. Picnic tables and barbecue pits dotted a smooth lawn shaded by mango trees. Slim Holt, who leased the property, had labored for years to create this beauty, assisted by interested individuals and organizations.

With a half-a-million plants on his five acres, Massanori Hongo operated one of the largest wholesale orchid businesses in Hawaii.

A young draftsman, Raymond Suefuji, had left a job in Hilo to put his money and all he could borrow into 23 leasehold acres on which he grew wood roses, vanda orchids and lipstick plants.

Toribio Charles Banquil had won the 1956 Future Farmer of the Year Award for his success in raising papaya on Puna's lava wasteland, and Norman Koshiyama had a coffee grove on his 12 acres.

Scientists who had congregated to observe the volcanic action were "delighted with an eruption that does not threaten any population or property" and "prayed for Madame Pele to keep her fires going." Neither they nor the residents of Kapoho guessed that the beautiful valley was about to become the scene of devastating disaster.

On December 9th, Nick Lycurgus, manager of Volcano House, threw a jug of gin into the crater during a lull to encourage more action. On the 23rd, a Honolulu newspaper carried a front-page picture Christmas card of the eruption with "Warm Aloha" greetings.

Two days after Christmas, seismographs indicated swarms of small earthquakes along the southwest flank of Kilauea, toward the Ka'u Desert and east to lower Puna. Kilauea's

dome and rift zones in these areas began to swell rapidly. Apparently, lava flowing beneath the ground was seeking the weakest spot to surface.

On January 8th, Dr. Jerry Eaton, a federal seismologist, warned Civil Defense officials and police that a new volcanic eruption seemed imminent. On the 11th, scientists made tests at Pahoa, Lava Trees State Park and Pohoiki Road, where the 1955 eruption had started. Earthquakes at the rate of one a minute were occurring at each location.

By January 12th, five-a-minute quakes shook Puna. Many were felt by the residents. "These quakes," Eaton said, "are shallow, originating not more than 2 miles down the earth. They are similar to those that preceded the 1955 eruption." The center of activity had moved from the edge of Pahoa to Kapoho.

Earthquakes at Kapoho became too frequent to count, and at 5 a.m. on the 13th the first damage-causing tremor hit. A large fissure opened in Kapoho Road, running beneath the frame home of Hasakichi Higashi. Earthquakes also caused the land to sink from the center of Kapoho to Warm Springs, a mile-and-a-half away. The width of the sunken area ranged from a few inches on the northern end to 3 feet on the southern end.

The Herbert Kaluna family with nine children, and their visitors, the Benedict Uyetaki family with seven children, enjoyed being rolled about by the quakes. But the fun did not extend to the Mariano Pascual household. The Pascauls' home, situated on a rift line, had tilted at a 30 degree angle.

Kapoho School, built in 1904 and renovated in the 1930's, had its wood frame and sheet-iron roof badly shaken. Before lunch the children were introduced to Ralph Kiyosaki, superintendent of schools, and Walter M. Gordon, superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction. The earth shook as the children began to eat. They giggled and kept on eating.

Emiko Nakamura, teacher of the first, second and third grade told the visitors, "We've had tremors like that this morning, but this one wasn't as bad as some. The children don't mind them."

"Well, I do," Kiyosaki laughed. "Send the children home and tell them to stick by their parents. Don't go exploring the cracks in the ground." The children packed textbooks and materials for delivery to the school in Pahoa, which they would attend the next day. Shortly after lunch, they were dismissed.

Governor William Quinn and officials of the Hawaii National Guard met with Red Cross, Civil defense, county, police and fire department representatives, and county chairman

Thomas Cook declared a county disaster area. Residents were tense but optimistic as the town was evacuated and roads barricaded to keep out all but emergency personnel. There had been a lapse of 115 years between the 1955 eruption and the one preceding it. Surely another couldn't occur so soon.

On the evening of January 13th, at 7:35, a half-mile line of fire fountains, a half-mile north of Kapoho, shot from a cane field owned by state Senator Richard Lyman. Barrels of diesel oil kept in the field exploded as lava crawled toward the mile-distant ocean, and part of a papaya farm encircling the Nakashima home was set afire.

On the 14th, smoke and steam rose 7,000 feet into the air, and six fire fountains discharged molten lava. The main stream crossed the Kapoho-Honolulu Landing Road, while branches traveled toward the sea and Warm Springs.

The Red Cross set up a shelter in the Pahoia school gymnasium for 156 evacuees. Some returned to Kapoho but, finding their homes untenable, did not remain.

Weak areas in the volcano's lava tubes collapsed; with thunderous noise, boiling gray steam shot 600 feet high. New cracks appeared near the tip of the lava flow, and the west end of town sank several more inches. The sky over Kapoho was crimson as lava 8 feet deep and 100 yards wide inched forward. The roar of fire fountains was deafening.

Sightseers were admitted, and during the first three hours, 5,000 arrived. They gathered on the ridge behind Nakamura's store, half-a-mile from the pumping fountains, and on Koaie road, where lava was crossing.

Early on Friday, January 15th, a column of white smoke and steam surged into the blue sky as red-hot lava met the ocean. Lava reached Kaoko Point, three miles from Kapoho, ruining what some considered the best fishing spot on the island. Sea birds, swooping to catch fish killed by super-heated water, were silhouetted against a flaming sky.

Gordon Macdonald, senior professor of geology at the University of Hawaii, made his first appearance, while exuberant volcano watchers backed up traffic for over a mile. By now, an estimated 10,000 visitors had seen the new volcano. Nakamura's Store ran out of ice cream before noon.

On Saturday, while Raymond Suefuji stood sadly watching, lava destroyed his farm. The home Masanori Hongo had erected for his parents was also demolished, but people pitched in to save the orchids which had made him one of Hawaii's biggest flower wholesalers.

"I have to save the plants", he said. "They're hard to get, and I cannot start in all over again - I just haven't the money." Half of his plants perished. The same day, lava claimed a third of Norman Koshiyama's 12-acre coffee grove.

Volcano watchers, along with stunned residents who had returned to collect belongings, were forced to leave when shifting winds blew dangerous sulfur fumes over Kapoho and Warm Springs. Fifty growers, moving orchids and other nursery stock, fought to remain, and officials finally yielded to their pleas.

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lyman watched lava tumble into the sea. Although their financial losses were considerable, Lyman gallantly joked about the family's good fortune in possessing the only two privately owned volcanoes in the world. (The 1955 volcanic cone had also risen on Lyman property.) "We really develop land," had said. "Not even Kaiser or Dillingham develop as we do. We produce our own - fresh - and it's still red hot."

Telephones no longer operated in Kapoho, and roads leading to beach land were impassable where lava had poured into the ocean.

The heat from the volcano was intense and smoke from torched trees made breathing difficult. Golf-ball-size chunks of lava from 1,200-foot blasts of the fire fountains hit workers and newsmen. In spite of the drenching rain, clothing dried quickly and shoes cracked from the hot ground. Ash-blackened faces were scorched; irritated eyes streamed with tears.

The fountains' cinder cone was reported to be double the size of Honolulu Stadium, including grandstands. New fissures appeared, but Volcano Observatory scientists maintained that Kapoho itself was not in present danger.

Lava snaked toward Warm Springs at the rate of one foot every two minutes. By midnight it was burning utility poles 100 feet from the resort.

Traffic came to a standstill early Sunday morning as sightseers clogged the roads. Police regulated traffic to 15-car convoys in and out of Kapoho every 15 minutes. Three huge diesel-powered bulldozers, belonging to Kuwaye Brothers of Hilo, came to the aid of the two dike-building machines supervised by Gordon Macdonald.

Papaya grower Koichi Soga was checking his grove west of the volcano when a shift in wind caused cinders "Big as dinner plates" to fall on him. He escaped, leaving his truck behind.

At 2 o'clock, fountains leaped to their greatest height - 800 feet - with molten cinders

and pumice shooting an additional 500 feet. The lawns of Kapoho were hidden beneath glossy black cinders, the roads buried.

Some papaya groves, as yet untouched by lava, nevertheless were beyond saving. Cinder fallout had stripped and burned the leaves, and the trunks resembled snuffed tiki torches, standing in a lunar setting.

Police officers drove Naluahine, a 102-year-old resident of Kona, on the 3 1/2-hour journey to Kapoho to make an appeal to Pele. With the aid of crutches, the old man reached the lava flow and recited a prayer. Then, folding two dollar bills reverently, he tossed them on the lava. According to witnesses, the flow divided around the bills. Although Naluahine continued to pray for three-quarters of an hour, the money failed to ignite. But when Naluahine said in Hawaiian, "I guess Pele is really angry and will not accept my offering," the bills caught fire. Naluahine seemed gratified and the residents relieved.

Bulldozers erected a quarter-mile line of dikes designed to prevent the lava from reaching Warm Springs. Despite this effort, toward midnight the flow surmounted the embankments. Barbecue pits exploded; trees, shrubbery, tables and benches burst into flame. Lava poured down stone steps in a cherry-red stream. Still water, reflecting the infernal scene, disappeared under the flow. The new cinder cone was dubbed Pu'u Laimanu.

On Monday, January 18th, Governor Quinn declared Kapoho a major disaster area and asked President Eisenhower for emergency funds. The governor spent two hours in the town evaluating its plight and conferring with authorities.

Fifteen tractors supplied by the state Highway Department joined the smoke-hampered dike builders as lava gathered behind Kapoho. The six fire fountains continued their rapid pumping, and a luminous river of lava headed toward Waieka Lighthouse and set the home of M. Takaguchi ablaze.

The flow reached the yards of Kapoho, and men worked all night without light on a wall 30 feet thick at the base and 25 feet high.

Volunteers and friends helped residents, numb from the shock of their loss, to salvage whatever they could. Almost every home in Pahoa opened its doors to store evacuees' belongings.

Macdonald saw no hope for Kapoho. "If we could have started (the dikes) two weeks sooner," he said, "we might have stopped the lava."

Hawaiian Electric crews, removing miles of power cable and dismantling the electrical substation, were deafened by the sound of the volcano as lava leaped 1,000 feet and ash and cinders plummeted the town.

At 3 p.m., fissures split the side of the cinder cone facing Kapoho, and all cars were evicted from the area.

Heat from the volcano caused whirling winds that banged the open door of Nakamura's deserted store and flapped the two signs posted on T. Uyeda's store. One, on the post office, read: "Please pick up mail at Pahoa." The other "The tax collector will be here January 20th to collect income, real property."

Toribio Banquil's papaya grove became a lava casualty. Hawaiian and Aloha airlines scheduled disaster-viewing flights.

On Wednesday morning, the 20th, dikes 70 feet wide at the base and 20 feet high were finished, and a lava flow 40 feet deep was held back. Branches of lava now moved toward Koae and the Kumukahi Coast Guard lighthouse.

Thirty-two firefighters worked 17 hours to prevent one house - Juan Cabelero's - from burning. Thousands of gallons of water from Green Lake were used. Said Honolulu fire chief William Blaisdell, who served as adviser: "This is firefighting at its best."

On Thursday the lava reached the ocean, heating the water to 160 degrees and sending black steam billowing thousands of feet into the air. The explosions broke the lava into tiny particles, creating new black-sand beaches. Thousands of fish died. Many leaped from the hot water; others floated on the surface. Scientists were amazed to discover some new specimens of marine life.

Sulfur dioxide-laden smog blanketed Puna, Hilo, Ka'u and Kona. It covered Mount Haleakala on Maui and traveled 2,300 miles west to Wake Island.

Kapoho residents held a meeting and decided against having their homes moved at a cost of \$350 to \$600 each.

New dikes were erected, but on Saturday the lava reached the small village of Koae. It destroyed O'Mara Na'a uo'o Hawaii Church, a beloved, picturesque pink edifice with a bell tower capping its red roof. The large home used as a meeting house and five others were demolished. Most of the lava covered the former flow, but several new fingers licked through cane and forest land in the Koae and Kumukahi Lighthouse areas. Fiery cinders 10 to 12 inches across pelted Kapoho, setting two houses afire, injuring three

firefighters.

On Sunday, the 24th, a mile-long dike saved the lighthouse from devastation, but a branching stream of lava burned the rest of the houses in Koae.

Black cinders banked Kapoho's buildings like snowdrifts, and piled 5 inches deep on the roads. Police directing convoys of sightseers wore dust masks.

Lava was within 1,500 feet of Kumukahi Lighthouse. The keeper, Joseph Pestrella, insisted that his wife and infant son leave. With the child's dog, Skip, for company, a bed, chairs and refrigerator for furnishings, and a truck to flee in, he settled down to wait.

On January 25th, the thick sulfur haze spread throughout the Hawaiian Islands. Residents suffered headaches, nausea, and eye and nose problems.

In an effort to save Kapoho School, the beach lots and the lighthouse, a final dike was ordered built by Lt. Governor James Kealoha. Cinders were now so deep in town that one house was covered almost to the second story. Roofs collapsed from their weight, and abandoned cars were barely visible. Graders cleared the road twice daily.

The heaviest fallout since the beginning of the eruption sent pumice the size of footballs flying into Kapoho, and a steaming crack 8 feet wide appeared at Warm Springs Junction.

On Wednesday, January 27th, after a two-week struggle, Kapoho succumbed. Lava oozed across the road, destroying the Nakamura home, Hara's Store, the post office and a dozen other buildings, including the Cabalero home - the house firefighters had labored 17 hours to save a week before. A new line of fire fountains shot lava to a height of 500 feet.

The main fountain stopped at 10 p.m. Absolute silence fell. With a fresh surge of hope, property owners resumed firefighting. But the lull was short-lived. Less than 15 minutes later, the fountain became active again, and three cone vents erupted with a roar.

Half-an-hour later, a quarter-mile fissure opened and nine separate fountains rose. These fountains provided a new source of lava which swept into Kapoho, dividing the town. Earthen dikes gave way. Home owners hurriedly removed a few remaining possessions and salvaged what they could of the buildings. Telephone and electric company employees took down the utility poles.

Nearly 30 buildings were lost the next night to a 15-foot wall of smoldering lava, and occupants of the 40 Kapoho Beach Lot homes moved out.

Joseph Pestrella raised the lighthouse flag, turned on the beacon - which would remain lit for four days - and left.

Kapoho's few existing homes were buried by cinders, as lava, surging from the volcano at a rate of 20 to 30 mph, flowed between them. A huge lava wall, fed by the thundering new fire fountains, crushed buildings, burying coconut trees and all else in its path.

Marguerite Ooka, principal of Kapoho School (as her mother had been), watched the school she had attended as a child being destroyed by fire. As the flagpole flared, she said "I just ordered a Hawaiian flag. We were going to raise both flags."

Humane Society officials, spending their second day rounding up stray animals, were aided by four volunteers in catching two lively chickens.

Monday night the moon shone on lava entering Puna Kula Beach Lot area. The \$300,000 development had taken two years to improve, and parcels of land were about to be put on the market.

Alice Kamokila Campbell, a former Territorial senator, had her vision of Pele added to the state senate record at the request of Senate President William H. Hill. Mrs. Campbell said she had seen "a beautiful young woman standing on the embankment of my sacred pool. She wore a long flaming gown, and her jet-black hair hung down her back to her knees." According to Mrs. Campbell, this figure had appeared to her on November 9th and, when recognized as Pele, disappeared.

Serious concern arose over the air surrounding Hilo. Francis Woo, chief of the Bureau of industrial Hygiene for the state Health Department, announced, "If the proportion of sulfur dioxide reaches four parts per million, Civil Defense is prepared to evacuate the city." Declared director Peter Akele, "It would probably take the bigger part of the day to clear the island, but we could do it."

The lighthouse keeper's house burned, along with the assistant's home and the flagpole with its 48-star flag. The light went out when lava reached the generator. The flow stopped seven feet from the door to the lighthouse. Paint blistered, but the tower structure was unharmed.

About a quarter of Lyman's million-dollar Kapoho Beach Lot development, including nine homes, and over half of Puna Kula Beach Lots were destroyed. Ruperto Somera, 61, owner

of the Filipino Store, died from stress caused by the eruption.

School excursions to Kapoho were canceled because of the extreme danger posed by the new series of fire fountains. Farmers from Kamuela delivered truckloads of meat and vegetables for Kapoho evacuees.

Cinders from the eruption traveled 175 miles across water, coming to rest on five miles of beach near Kahului, Maui. One resident suggested, "If they'd just leave it alone, we'd have a black-sand beach like the one at Kalapana on the Big Island."

The following day tons of cinders settled on Maui and Oahu beaches. On Maui, they reached a depth of several feet. People collected them to mix with cement and to add to orchid gardens. On Windward Oahu there were "black-sand beaches" 6 inches deep. Some enterprising residents on both islands sacked and sold the material. Stores charged as much as \$2 a bag.

On February 19th, fountaining stopped. The only remaining building, Nakamura's Store, was torn down and used as material to build a new home for the family.

Hundreds of weekend sightseers trooped through the area, admiring the cinder cone's strange, bright green-and-yellow design layered by the sulfur, and the 500 acres of steaming land which had been added to the island when lava flowed into the sea. Few of Kapoho's former residents joined them.

Displaced families were crowded into the Pahoia school gym, their "rooms" partitioned off by furniture and stage walls. Pajama-clad children pedaled tricycles over the floor and watched TV, happily unaware of their plight. Their elders were still in a state of stunned disbelief.

Mrs. Viloría Estaban, wife of an Olaa Sugar Company plantation worker and mother of 10 children, said, "I live in Kapoho all my life. I never thought the volcano drive us out."

"Nobody knows what we do," said George Simeon, another Kapoho resident.

Hilario Balsita, who had lived 17 years in the Kapoho-Koae district where he cut lau hala to support himself and two godchildren, told reporters, "Now chickens all gone, lumber for new kitchen burned. House pau."

Nari Ridad, a papaya farm worker, had managed to get everything out of his house except the bottle of kerosene he left for Pele. "She got it, too," he said.

The residents received a heart-rending bus tour of their former town. Many broke down

and cried. But at a meeting of the townspeople, most of them decided to stay together and attempt a fresh start near the site. A spokesman said, "Kapoho people want to build the town again. From the ashes will rise a new Kapoho."

Today, 25 years after the eruption, many of the towns people, including Joseph Pestrella, Koichi Soga and Masakichi Higashi, are dead. Others, like Shizuka Inada, live in Hilo. But most followed their original plan to settle in the Pahoia area. Here they raise papayas or grow anthuriums beneath lush tree ferns. Since 1961, the Lymans' Kapoho Land and Development Company has been reclaiming Kapoho's cinder-covered wasteland, and more than 55 acres are covered with flourishing papaya and ornamental shrubbery, grown on an experimental basis.

White lichen, known as "Hawaiian snow", has begun to creep across the clinkery lava bounding the hiking trail that starts near the site of Kapoho, at the foot of the cinder cone Pu'u Laimanu. There is an easy, but slippery, walk to the cone's rim. Toward the ocean, in the direction the lava took, is the junction of routes 132 and 137. On the left is a small cemetery, one of the few spots spared by the lava. The lighthouse at the end of the trail is now automated.

Eerie silence pervades the vast area of twisted lava. In the mist one senses the presence of Alice Campbell's visionary Pele, moving on soundless feet, her long black hair flowing in the wind.

It is difficult to believe that 25 years ago, this was a valley where trade winds rustles fields of cane and rippled lavender seas of vanda orchids. Equally hard to visualize in this quiet setting are the roaring fire fountains, crawling molten lava and the desperate human efforts to stem the relentless flow.

Today, buried beneath this primeval landscape, under 50 feet of lava, lie Warm Springs, Toribio Banquil's papayas, Norman Koshiyaya's coffee grove, Massanori Hongo's orchid fields and Raymond Suefuji's farm. And the town of Kapoho.

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