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On Searching for Iosepa

Lee Bangerter

Two things drew Mormon Hawaiians to Utah at the end of the nineteenth century: the temple and to gather with other Mormons. The temple is a place where Mormon families make a bond that unites them with one another forever. This practice appealed to Hawaiians, as it aligned with their concept of *ohana*, a word that means family, and connotes extended familial links, cooperation, and remembrance. Utah was the central place of Mormon communitarian gathering, a place where Mormons from across the world came together to build up Zion, a collection of communities throughout Utah of church members who sought, according to Mormon scripture, to be of one heart and one mind, and live in righteousness; with no poor among them. Many Mormon Hawaiians were eager to join the movement in Utah.

In the 1870s, small numbers of Hawaiian Mormons started immigrating to Utah, traveling with missionaries returning home. There would undoubtedly have been many more, but the Hawaiian government had severe emigration restrictions in place. In 1873, two native Hawaiian boys, Kahana and Kiha, traveled to Utah with William King and George Nebeker. Kahana lived with William King and his family, and Kiha was adopted by George Nebeker and his wife Maria Louisa. Two years later, a 38-year-old Hawaiian man named John William Kauleinamoku arrived in Utah with Fred A. Mitchell. The next spring, six native Hawaiians arrived, including Likebeka, Kauleinamoku's future wife. A few years later, a man named Makaula, two boys, and a widow named Makaopioio came

to Utah on the same journey. Makaopioio was the mother of Likebeka Kauleinamoku, now married. Makaopioio was also the mother of John Mahunaalii (perhaps one of the boys who came on the her voyage), and either was or would become John Makaula's mother-in-law—he's probably the Makaula who traveled on this ship. In the summer of 1882, three more families arrived in Utah.

Most of the Hawaiians who came to Utah found menial work on the Salt Lake Temple site as stonecutters or blasters. Kauleinamoku and Makaula both built houses near Warm Springs, on the northwest outskirts of Salt Lake City. The majority of Hawaiians who arrived in Utah settled near these two households, in a two-block area that is now Fern and Reed Avenues, just east of 300 West. Church meetings were conducted in Hawaiian every other Sunday at Kauleinamoku's house.

In mid-1880s, the Kingdom of Hawaii revoked the laws that restricted native Hawaiian emigration, and Hawaiian Mormons started to arrive in Utah in greater numbers. In April 1889, at least 12 adults and 17 children left Hawaii for Utah with returning Mormon missionaries, including Joseph Kekuku, his wife, Miliama, and their four young children, Hattie, Ivy, Viola, and Edwin.

By this time, there were somewhere around 75 Hawaiians at Warm Springs, and although they were Mormon, they were not seen as equals by most other Mormons (who were mostly of northern European descent). Leprosy was also a fear, and newspapers in Utah printed reports of leprosy outbreaks in Hawaii and other parts of the world. In 1883, the Salt Lake Tribune claimed a Hawaiian boy arriving in Salt Lake had leprosy, which the Mormon Church's newspaper, the Deseret Evening News, denied. Even if this boy was healthy, leprosy wasn't a groundless fear. H. H. Cluff, one of the missionaries who

had brought Hawaiians to Utah, wrote later in his journal that Kauleinamoku's wife (presumably Likebeka) died of leprosy during this time in Salt Lake, although almost no one seems to have known about it.

A month after that large group of Hawaiians arrived in the spring of 1889, church leaders decided to relocate the growing Hawaiian community. The decision was based on a number of things: the group's inability to integrate with the larger Mormon population, the fear of leprosy among the broader Utah population (and probably the knowledge of Likebeka's leprosy case among top Mormon leaders), the lack of available work for Hawaiians in Salt Lake, the potential for many more immigrants to arrive with no place to live or work, and desire among the Hawaiians to form a separate community. Earlier Mormon communities of Danish, Swiss, and Welsh immigrants had been formed, so the idea to build a separate Hawaiian community was connected to previous settlement patterns that allowed cultural groups to maintain their own customs and language.

In the late spring of 1889, a committee of three former missionaries to Hawaii (including Cluff and Mitchell) and three Hawaiians (including Kaulainamoku) decided on a town site and ranch of 1920 acres in Skull Valley, at the edge of the alkali desert not far from the southern tip of the Great Salt Lake, 45 miles west of Salt Lake City. The property sale was finalized on August 16, 1889, and ten days later, fifty Hawaiians spent their last night in Warm Springs. The journey to Skull Valley took 2 days, and they arrived by wagon on August 28th. They named their new community Iosepa, which is Hawaiian for Joseph, after Joseph F. Smith, a prominent church leader who spent many years in Hawaii and had close relationships with most of the settlers. For the next 27 Augusts, as long as Iosepa was a community, August 28th was Hawaiian Pioneer Day, a

time to celebrate their arrival in Iosepa with feasts, Hawaiian music, and traditional dancing.

Mark Twain recounts his experiences traveling through the American West in his book, *Roughing It*. He gives a vivid portrait of the terrain in this part of Utah not long before Iosepa was settled. He tells us:

Imagine a vast, waveless ocean stricken dead and turned to ashes; imagine this solemn waste tufted with ash-dusted sage-bushes; imagine the lifeless silence and solitude that belong to such a place... imagine this aching monotony of toiling and plowing kept up hour after hour, and the shore still as far away as ever, apparently; imagine team, driver, coach and passengers so deeply coated with ashes that they are all one colorless color; imagine ash-drifts roosting above moustaches and eyebrows like snow accumulations on boughs and bushes. This is the reality of it.

I imagine the group of Mormon Hawaiians traveling hours and hours in wagons, moving farther and farther from civilization, arriving in Skull Valley covered in dust and exhausted, looking out on Twain's solemn, waveless ocean. I drove through this section of Utah on the way to Iosepa a few weeks ago, and aside from the paved highway and a shuttered building that once housed an all-in-one convenience store, gas station, and casino called Last Vegas, I don't think much has changed in the hundred and fifty years since Twain's visit.

Iosepa caught my eye as I paged through a book of interesting drives to take in

Utah. Today, Iosepa is a ghost town, with mostly only a cemetery left. The cemetery is maintained, and a pavilion and modest swing set have been built next to the graves in recent years to accommodate the large group of mostly Polynesians who come to the cemetery each Memorial Day to honor both their heritage and those buried there.

The town is about a mile away, and I knew that the houses are almost all gone, completely demolished, but I thought that remnants of the town would be visible, that the outlines of the houses would still be etched on the landscape with their foundations, that maybe shadows of the streets would still be visible. Aside from a couple of houses still in use by the ranch company that now owns the property, though, the land is starkly beautiful, with mountains that reach up on either side of the valley, the valley floor a vast desert punctuated with irrigated hay fields for cattle and some marshy spots from springs. It was hard to believe that for almost thirty years, Iosepa was in this place.

On Iosepa's Hawaiian Pioneer Day each August, former missionaries to Hawaii brought their families to the celebrations. Prominent church leaders also came, as well as Goshute Indians and neighbors from Grantsville. Young pigs were pit roasted whole and carp caught in the nearby reservoir were wrapped in cornhusks instead of the traditional glossy green ti leaves. Limukala, an algae harvested from the fresh water Kanaka Lake stood in for seaweed. Poi, a staple food in Hawaii, is made from the stem of the taro, which is mashed and steamed into a pale purple pudding. Taro was unavailable in Utah, so Hawaiians in Iosepa made something called *poi palaoa*. Flour, cornstarch, and boiling water were stirred together into a paste and left to sour. The poi was then pounded out smooth until it became fluffy and eaten with fingers. One native Hawaiian visited Iosepa

and when he ate this adapted poi, he said it was “much tastier and better than the expensive haole [white mainlander] food that I had in the American hotels.” Despite the differences, it seems *poi palaoa* was better than no poi at all.

Among the first settlers in August 1889 was Makaopiopio and some family members: her daughter Maria, who was married to John Makaula; her son John Mahunalii, his wife, Victoria, and their daughter Elizabeth; and John William Kauleinamoku, her son-in-law (daughter Likebeka had died of leprosy in 1885). Just a couple of weeks after arriving in Skull Valley, Makaopiopio died and became the first buried in Iosepa.

The population in Iosepa fluctuated a lot, particularly in the first years. New families moved to Iosepa, either from Salt Lake City or directly from Hawaii. Some left Iosepa as well. Before Iosepa was one year old, at least ten Hawaiians had returned to Hawaii. Later that same year, there were at least 22 Hawaiians living in Salt Lake City who had left Iosepa. Most of them planned to return to Hawaii as soon as they could. Although the Salt Lake Temple wouldn't be completed until 1893, many of those who returned to Hawaii traveled 80 miles north of Salt Lake City to the Logan Temple to have their families sealed together.

Iosepa was set up as an agriculture and stock collective, but in practice, it was run by white overseers appointed by head church leaders in Salt Lake City, similar to the way plantations were set up in Hawaii. Complicating the situation, the overseer was also the community's ecclesiastical leader. The overseer and most of the white assistants in the enterprise were men who had spent a number of years in Hawaii as missionaries, so they

spoke Hawaiian, were familiar with Hawaiian customs, and had established friendships with many of the residents or their extended families.

The town was laid out in a model that echoed Mormon settlements across Utah. Streets were wide and oriented on a grid to run north/south and east/west. The streets were given Hawaiian names, and Imilani Square, a large town square in the center, held the church and school. The name was fitting, as *imilani* means to look for or seek God or the heavens.

At its height, accounts paint Iosepa as a vibrant, verdant community irrigated by the abundant fresh springs in the Stansbury Mountains that run along the east side of Skull Valley. For Arbor Day in 1899, the community planted 300 walnut trees, 300 fruit trees, and 100 ornamental trees. Yellow roses lined the edges of the town's streets. Thirty-five years after Iosepa was deserted, a visitor to the ghost town noted the yellow roses, which had "spread to form impenetrable thickets in which birds nest and small gray rabbits and lizards find refuge....[T]he thorny old plants still greet the desert summer with a courageous shower of golden bloom." When I imagine Iosepa, I think of the yellow roses and the music, vestiges of a once cared for, thriving community. I looked for Iosepa's yellow roses on my visit, but found no roses, none of the 500 trees, only desert and ranch land.

The Kekukus, Joseph and Miliama, and their children, Hattie, Ivy, Viola, and Edwin, rode a ship named the Umatilla to San Francisco with Matthew Noall and his family at the end of their mission, and then boarded a train for Salt Lake City, accompanying the Noalls to Utah. Miliama, with a singing voice so remarkable that Susa

Young Gates described her on a visit to Hawaii in 1885 like this: “A solo by Miliama, whose glorious voice soars out, sweet and clear as a silver bell, full of pathos and beauty....It charms you into forgetfulness of earth and earthly things.” The Kekukus, who were in the original wagon train that arrived on August 28, 1889, but who didn’t like the set up, didn’t like getting paid in store credit at the co-op instead of cash, didn’t like not being able to go back and forth between Iosepa and Salt Lake City, were back in Salt Lake City at Seventh North, 254 West in November 1890, with Joseph making \$2.75 a day mixing mortar. Miliama delivered a daughter, Flora, who lived one day that December. Both Joseph and Miliama were ready to go back home. Early February, 1891, Joseph, Miliama, Hattie, Ivy, Viola, and Edwin rode a steamer named Australia from San Francisco back to Honolulu, and then went home to Laie. And they sang and sang in church meetings there, making regular appearances in the Hawaiian mission president’s journal account of meeting participation.

Miliama had an older son, Joseph Kekuku, who stayed in Hawaii when they left for Utah. He was fifteen years old, and headed with his cousin Sam to the Kamahameha School for Boys, a boarding school in Honolulu. Joseph invented the steel guitar and changed the sound of Hawaiian music while he was there. Sam’s daughter said that one day Joseph reached out over his guitar on the couch and something fell on a guitar string. It got him thinking, so he tried a spoon on the string to test out the sound. Out walking along the train tracks next to the cut sugar cane, he found a little iron rod. He took that little rod and used it to make the distinctive sound of the steel guitar. He perfected the steel bar by experimenting in the school’s machine shop.

Joseph spent seven years mastering the steel guitar. He formed Kekuku's Quartet, and in 1904, he left Hawaii to tour the United States and later Europe with his group. He never came back to Hawaii. In 1916, after a musical called *Bird of Paradise* and the Panama Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco introduced Americans to Hawaiian music, Hawaiian music outsold every other music genre in the United States.

In the summer of 1896, news broke in Salt Lake City that there were at least three lepers in Iosepa. J. W. Kaulainamoku, whose wife had contracted leprosy in Salt Lake City in the 1880s, had leprosy, along with Hanah Mahoe, a 45-year old mother and Bessie Peters, a teenager who died soon after the news stories appeared. A little house was built for them one mile out of town to quarantine them, and they had a flagpole out front. If they needed something, they ran a flag up the pole and someone would come see what they needed. I'm sure I read somewhere that the flag was yellow, but I can't find that detail anywhere now. Hanah died in 1896, but J. W. Kaulainamoku lived three more years. His second wife, Kapukini, died of leprosy in 1900. During the massive Arbor Day tree planting of 1899, shade trees were planted around the "Leper Hospital." Over the years, pneumonia, flu, typhoid fever, diphtheria, and smallpox were more devastating to the community than leprosy.

Kaulainamoku and Kapukini had married in 1890, to the dismay of the overseer, H. H. Cluff. When he wouldn't consent to marry them on the grounds that Kaulainamoku would probably develop leprosy, since his first wife had died of it. Kaulainamoku and Kapukini then traveled to Salt Lake City to make their case in front of the highest church authorities. Kapukini had no signs of leprosy, but told the church leaders that she took all

responsibility of the risk on herself. The couple returned to Iosepa with a note signed by the prophet authorizing Cluff to perform the marriage.

In 1908, John Broad married Maggie Kenison, a Samoan woman who had come with a family returning to Utah when she was a young girl. John was five when he immigrated to Utah; Maggie was six. The Broad family had a gymnasium in the basement of their home. Everyone loved to use the space during the cold winter months. I've seen a photograph of the outside of the house reprinted in many articles on Iosepa, and the gymnasium in the basement is invariably noted, but not enough was ever explained about that detail. And what I'd really like to see is a photograph of the inside of the basement. When they returned to Hawaii in 1917, they had four children, three boys and one girl.

John's uncle Henry Nawahine was the leader of the Iosepa Orchestra; Maggie was the vocalist. The orchestra included two violins, a cello, a banjo, three guitars, a ukulele, and a mandolin. John remembered that every Saturday they would play, and people would come to dance. Not just the Hawaiians, but the Goshute Indians, who lived ten miles or so away, and also shepherders. The Iosepa Orchestra wasn't the only music in town; there was also a group known as the Hawaiian Troubadours, and the Twilight Club.

One performer's wife said that Columbia made some recordings of the Hawaiian Troubadours from Iosepa. I haven't been able to find a recording yet, as Hawaiian Troubadours is a very popular name for Hawaiian groups from that era. Members of the group are said to have composed the music for the 1912 play *Bird of Paradise*. One song that a troubadour from Iosepa used to sing to his wife goes like this:

Loved One, era no me a'u

Ka makana a ko aloha

Na wai e 'ole ka 'I'ini

Ua hilo ka'akolu ia.

Loved one, here with me

Is the gift of your love.

How can I help desiring you

Who are bound to me with the triple ties of love.

A 1912 Hawaiian newspaper account of a visit to Iosepa makes it clear that most residents had no plans of ever leaving. By this time, the original settlers had lived in Skull Valley 23 years. Many in the community had few or no memories of Hawaii, and some had never even been there. As the reporter explains, according to some of the residents, Iosepa “is their homeland...and the thought to return to the land of their birth is very far away, except for the fact that their aloha for Hawaii is not gone, as for their kin at home with their never-ending thoughts of them.”

At its height, there were over 200 Hawaiians living in Iosepa, as well as a few Samoans and possibly other Polynesians. Just a few years later, the town would be deserted. Joseph F. Smith, who was by then the prophet of the church, announced plans to build a temple in Laie in 1915. John Broad, recalled that the prophet told those in Iosepa that they had come to Utah for the temple, and there would be a temple in Hawaii, so they could return home. It seems that although the community members were attached

to Iosepa, the excitement and desire to help build the temple in Laie combined with the feeling that the prophet wanted them to go back to Hawaii built up a groundswell, and in 1917, the last families left for Hawaii. The church paid the way of those who could not pay the steamer fares to Hawaii. The Hoopiainas may have been the only family from Iosepa to stay in Utah; one of the sons even stubbornly kept living in a cabin in the now even lonelier Skull Valley.

There is one home site in Iosepa that's been excavated recently by archaeologists. All that remained of the home structure were the stones that formed the house's foundation. Archaeologists found the privy, with broken dishes on the top layer of artifacts. When the family left for Hawaii, they put what they couldn't take with them, mostly dishes, down the privy hole. There were plain white broken plates and broken teacups painted with bright, delicate flowers. There was also a decorated Hawaiian abalone shell.

Those returning to Laie did not automatically blend in with the Hawaiians already there. Many were not moving back home, but rather moving from the only home they knew. One of John and Maggie Broad's sons, Lionel, was five when his family moved there. When his family arrived in Laie, he said they had a "heck of a time," since they had pale skin and spoke English. Leroy Pukahi was born in Iosepa in 1898. His wife remembered that when he arrived in Laie at 17, he didn't speak Hawaiian, didn't eat Hawaiian food, and missed his Utah home, but never went back. Leroy's father was Kahana, one of the very first to come to Utah in 1873 as a young teenage boy. Leroy's sister, Bessie, is most likely the author of this letter, presumably written to Mary Ann

King, her “grandmother,” since her father had spent his adolescence with the Kings in Utah:

Jan 26, 1917

Dear Grandma,

I am very sorry to tell you that I didn't get to see you before we left home the snow was deep we had a cold ride until over the station. O, I was so homesick I wanted to go back again....Papa saw some of his nieces but Grandma talk about rain, it rained nearly every day since we got here. O we like Laie pretty fare I guess later on I like it better but I still don't forget Iosepa.”

In an interview, Lionel Broad recalled the day the last group of residents left Iosepa. He said, “They were sad to leave this place. When we left, I was riding the last wagon, my dad was on the last wagon. All the women walked from here to Timpie Station [15 miles], crying. They didn't want to leave the place. But I was young and I didn't care.”

I spent this past August 28th, that old Iosepan Hawaiian Pioneer Day, in Laie, Hawaii, where many of those settled after leaving Iosepa. I looked for those Iosepans, read through oral histories they and their descendants have left. I looked for them in old ship manifests. I wandered the cemetery, looking for familiar names. I found Alapas, Hubbells, Nawahines, Nahulus, Pukahis—families from Iosepa. Hawaiians who went “home” to Hawaii and kept singing. Martha Maleka Mahiai Pukahi was living in Laie when the Iosepa families moved there. She remembered the Iosepa group organizing the Laie Choral group and John Broad forming a musical group right after he returned.

Martha said, “Laie was noted for its community of musical troubadours and this is the way it still is in Laie.”

John’s son, Lionel summed up the Hawaiian tie to music this way: “When you’re sad you sing. Then you feel better. I think that’s the Hawaiian antidote for loneliness and sadness. Sing. Sing the good songs.” I love that the tradition of singing the good songs began in Hawaii, kept those Mormon Hawaiians company in Iosepa, started right back up when they moved to Laie, and continues on even now.