MARY LEE: CHARITY NEVER FAILETH
by Betty Jean (BJ) Kamaileokaala Lee Fuller

"Whenever you are out at night, during Po Kanc, and you hear drums, know where you are--always be downwind of the Night Marchers. Hide in the bushes. Hope that a member of your ohana is in the procession." Mother said to me, one day, reliving words of her kupuna. Perhaps, I thought, the words were for my benefit, also.

While I was able to understand about the Hawaii of my kupuna, Mother related to me how she was taught by that kupuna, of things Hawaiian while growing up in the little farming village of Waikapu, and the fishing village of Malaaea on the island of Maui. However, though steeped in the things of Hawaii, in every phase, Mother was a true Mormon.

My interest in genealogy and family history comes from the tributaries of Mother's great wealth of knowledge, wisdom and love. She was a great storyteller, riveting the listener to its time and space--informing and enlightening. Today, I will share with you some choice vignettes of Mother's life experiences.

Mother was born Mary Wahineokalani Sylva on December 25, 1908, in Waikapu, Maui, to Mele Kapo and John Kaulia Sylva. She had an older, hanai brother, already, by the time she came into the world. Her only biological sibling, a brother, died in infancy. Her Mother was the thirteenth of twenty children born to Kaohiki II and Kahispo Kekahuna. However, while Tutu Mele was still in her mother's womb, her soon-to-be hanai mother, Mele Kapo Kalanikaū, put her hand on her mother's stomach and said, "This is my child."

Mele Kapo Kalanikau was a Mormon. Our Mormon roots stem from the promise between these two women--Kaohiki and Mele.

Tutu Kauila (who was part Portuguese) came into Tutu Mele's life as a true Hawaiian traditionalist who, although a Christian, practice his Hawaiian religion. However, when he was baptized a Mormon, he put all his tangible Hawaiian religious possessions in a little canoe, set it down in the Pacific Ocean with its bow pointed towards the horizon, let it sail out to sea.

On July 11, 1924, with several young cousins and, along with several Mormon families from Waikapu, Mother and her parents migrated to Molokai to homestead forty acres of raw, red dirt land on the windswept plains of Hoolehua. Because of the conditions, Mother was sorely needed to help clear lantana from their forty acres of land, giving up the chance to attend the Kamehameha School for Girls; Mother's formal education ended in the eighth grade.

Tutu Kauila was part of that famous group of faithful Hawaiian priesthood bearers, who, when a severe drought parched the already arid plains of Hoolehua, gathered at the home of Brother Keanini and, fasting and praying for several days, petitioned the Lord to bring rain to their thirsty farmlands.

Tutu Mele died a year before I was born. I have been told that she was a very patient, hardworking, compassionate, prayerful, faithful woman who lived the gospel. In the early years of the Church on Molokai, she worked alongside the Church brethren to
heal the sick. In the circle of fishermen, she was famous for her diving prowess. I believe Mother inherited all these attributes from her mother (even being a fisherwoman).

Mother held the office of president of both the Relief Society and Relief Society District, collectively for twenty-five years. But, although busy with these callings, she was active in community work.

Her accomplishments in 4-H and University Extension work were recognized throughout Hawaii. On November 26, 1953, she was given the honor of traveling with the first Hawaii 4-H delegation to the 4-H Club Congress, held in Chicago, Illinois. When she became state president of the UE clubs of Hawaii, she traveled extensively throughout the islands and the mainland, representing the homemakers of Hawaii. In this capacity, she shared her Hawaiian quilting knowledge and skills with the women of Hawaii. About forty years ago Mother, and Mrs. Helen Inns, the then Extension Agent of Molokai, co-authored a quilting booklet that became a genesis for other, more sophisticated, quilting books by other authors.

The political atmosphere was prominent in Mother’s life and, although an active registered Republican, she knew no boundaries in her affiliations with candidates from both political parties; she campaigned for anybody who was a friend. She was a poll worker for years.

When Hawaiian issues first surfaced on Molokai (Hui Alaloa and Protect Kahoolawe) in the 1970’s Mother became a kupuna for the opio (young) Hawaiians of Molokai. By this time, her eyesight was far from being perfect. But, in her love for the Hawaiian Nation, she exhibited great fortitude. She was a “gentle” protestor, always reminding the opio that although she respected the gods of her kupuna, there was only one god for her. When she was challenged by a Hawaiian faction to pray to the Hawaiian gods, she refused. Shards of profanity were hurled at her. She never wavered. Holding fast to her Christian upbringing, she calmly, and with great spiritual strength, brought them all back into the group. She was never again challenged. When she was subpoenaed to testify in court on the Kahoolawe issue, the judge asked her why she was protesting; and at her age, she told the judge, “Because I wanted adventure in my life.” The judge had to call a recess. Mother was a champion for Hawaiian causes until the day she died.

Mother was a one person aloha committee. She would go out of her way to create an ambiance that would make a malihini to Molokai feel at home. One of these creations was teaching the hula in four easy lessons--bump the apple, bump the orange . . .

In our small, crowded home of seven children, Mother made room for anybody who needed a place to stay or needed care. I remember her bringing Tutu Polena Manuel home to nurse. But you didn’t have to be a member of the Church in order to be blessed by Mother’s kindness. When the mother of our neighbor friends died, she organized and executed funeral arrangements, then took upon herself the task of searching for clothes for the children to wear to the funeral. When the children’s father passed away, she brought the three youngest home to live with us, becoming surrogate mother to them. She even brought them with us to temple excursions. In 1982, at Mother’s funeral, one of the older boys of these neighbor friends asked to speak. He recounted the story of how Mother, one cold, rainy winter, while his
father was out looking for work, and the family had nothing in the house to sustain them, filled a huge galvanized tub with all the necessities plus something for the children, and quietly set the tub down beside the family’s door. That family did not know, at the time, who brought the tub of “plenty”. Mother was the kind of person who would do a kind deed without fanfare.

During World War II, Mother took in Army laundry. She gave jobs to the women in the community. When she wasn’t doing laundry, she was doing volunteer work for the USO as an entertainer and an organizer. She opened up our home to the servicemen.

If there was anyone in this life who was a spirit sister to Solomon's wisdom and Job’s patience, it was Mother. In 1946, Mother brought home to our house, a little baby girl from Honolulu (who later became my sister, Leah). The baby brought joy to our crowded house, and we shared this joy with the neighbors. However, Dad just about had it with our extended family, and was not about to have another “mouth to feed”. Mother never dwelled on the circumstance, but rather, one weekend, she announced that she was leaving for Maui to attend church conference. She put me and the neighbor aunties in charge of the baby (knowing full well that Dad would have to give a hand). When she returned from conference and announced that she was ready to take the baby back to Honolulu, Dad adamantly announced that she was taking the baby nowhere! Dad expediously began proceedings to adopt Leah. But adoption was not expeditiously granted, for the judge was not sure that they should have another child in the house and they were too old, he thought. When the judge posed the question to Mom about “…what if the baby was…”, Mother spoke up and said that it didn’t matter if the baby was blind, deaf, or crippled, she still would want to adopt her.

Charity began at home. When Tutu Kauila couldn’t pay his huge accumulated hospital bill, Mother took that responsibility to pay the bill. She paid it by working for the hospital with no compensation. When the bill was paid up, the hospital asked her to stay on as a paid nurses’ aide. Through this affiliation, Mother was able to acquire certification as an LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse). Her skills as a nurse went beyond book learning, though, because she was a natural masseuse. That natural skill was greatly utilized in the hospital for the care of stroke patients. When these patients were released from the hospital, Mother followed them home where she continued the therapy, after work from the hospital. These families didn’t have money to pay her, but paid her instead with things from their vegetable gardens, chickens, eggs, and, from their hearts, lots of respect and love.

Mother learned to embalm, the Hawaiian way. In our house, there was a special bottle of Hawaiian salt kept for just this purpose. She and her bottle of salt have been often called upon--sometimes in the middle of the night--to help some family on the homestead.

My mother’s faith, while she was Relief Society district president, was tested. one year during the Church’s annual bazaar. One day she received a telephone call from the caretaker of the Hoolehua community gym. Although the gym was scheduled a year in advance by the Hoolehua Branch, he told her that the Mormons couldn’t have the gym for their annual church bazaar because his “church” was having a huge church conference on Molokai the same weekend of the bazaar, and needed the
gym to house their people coming in from the outer islands. The Molokai "Mormon" bazaars were famous. Besides the delicious foods, the people came to the bazaars especially to purchase the exquisite Hawaiian quilts, quilted by the Relief Society mothers.

The Saints met together in early morning meetings (I followed my parents to these 4 a.m. meetings) to fast and pray that there might be a solution to the dilemma. In spite of the dilemma, though, the Relief Society mothers continued to prepare bazaar items. One day, the gym's caretaker called Mother to say that the floor of the gym was available for the bazaar; the stage sufficed as a dormitory for his church people. It was the best bazaar the branch ever had. And guess who were their best customers!

Mother had great compassion and love for people. She took people at face value and never went beneath the skin. When I was old enough to visit Kalaupapa, when Board of Health policies were stringent (one of the items, among many, was no physical contact between visitors and the residents of Kalaupapa), I had the privilege, for the first time, visiting the beautiful peninsula with her. The old Kalaupapa chapel had a narrow, windowless foyer, where socializing was done before entering the chapel. Lining the walls were benches facing each other. After the last person entered and the side doors were closed, mother would cross the "one step" distance between the benches, and, without forethought about policies, would embrace the Kalaupapa Saints in greeting.

Mother was not afraid to declare that there was always Someone higher in authority, or was greater. In 1959, she came to San Francisco to be with me as I awaited the birth of my first child. When my son was born, and the doctors found that there was abnormality in his kidneys, they hospitalized him. After some weeks, the hospital telephoned to say that there was no hope for my baby and that we should come to the hospital. Mother stood up to the doctors and said, "Is this all you can do for my grandson?" And when they replied in the affirmative, she said, "I know a Doctor greater than you." Indeed, mother sought that Great Doctor. The next day, the hospital told us that my son was about ready to come home.

Mother was a great believer in tithing. When she retired from her job and collected social security, some money from the labor union and little gratuities—pennies, she paid full tithing on these meager earnings. It's no wonder that she never went without.

I would be remiss if somewhere in this presentation I did not pay tribute to the Relief Society mothers of Hoolehua Branch, who had so much love for the gospel that they, too, lived by the Relief Society motto, Charity Never Faieth. These faithful mothers will always be remembered for their love and care they unconditionally gave to the missionaries. Many a missionary will remember the Saturdays the mothers (and it was always Mama Bessie Makekau who volunteered first) who gathered their dirty laundry—returning them on Sunday mornings with the long sleeved white shirts (this was before polyester) all washed, starched, ironed, and neatly folded. And if this wasn't enough, they cleaned the mission home and stocked the kitchen with food. In those days, also, many of these missionaries took home with them a Hawaiian quilt, quilted by these same mothers.
In reminiscing with my sister-in-law, Lagrimas, she said she always knew when mother was going visiting teaching—she wore a white dress and carried lunch with her. Visiting teaching was an all day affair and the homes were about five to forty acres apart. And then she said, as an afterthought, “I’ll always remember the Relief Society sisters doing their visiting in their white dresses.”

Because of the great example our mothers set for us, the young women of the Hooluhua Branch, in 1950, formed the Young Women’s Relief Society—strictly off the record! We met every Sunday morning before Sunday School began. After school, on work meeting days, we joined our mothers in the Relief Society house, an old World War II army barracks on the church premises.

On October 6, 1928, my mother and father, Henry Euy Son Lee, were married. Dad, with no time to think, was baptized into the Church, and faithfully through all his mortal life supported Mother in all her callings, both religious and secular.

In 1938 the Lee family traveled by pineapple barge to Oahu, to be sealed as a family in the Hawaii Temple. At this time, also, we sealed to us, by proxy, my baby sister who died in infancy. In 1957, Leah became part of our eternal family.

Because there was great love and respect for the Hawaiian elders of Waikapu, Mother was taught that they are all ohana —whether related through blood, or through the heart. Today, her children continue the tradition.

Mother was a true Hawaiian who truly loved the Lord. When she emulated her Hawaiianness, she emulated the Gospel of Jesus Christ.