

Pacific Northwest Aloha

Keoni didn't know where the strange-looking sailing ship was headed in February, 1811. He'd never seen a beaver or an otter, never been on a boat bigger than a double-hulled Polynesian voyaging canoe, and he certainly didn't know why the American crewmen insisted upon calling him "John" instead of Keoni.

All Keoni knew was that he and 23 other native Hawaiian Kanakas of the Sandwich Islands were leaving with Captain Jonathan Thorn on a ship they called the Tonquin, and that they were sailing away with the Pacific Fur Company, whatever that meant, and into a new adventure.

As he watched his beloved island disappear in the distance behind them, Keoni worried aloud that he would never see his home again. "Aloha, mai I ko 'u' aina," he whispered. "Farewell my homeland."

Keoni was fortunate that there were other men on board who spoke his language. It made him feel not quite so lonely and alone. At night, when the howling late-winter Pacific Ocean winds made the masts creak and scream like the souls of humans in hell, the two dozen island men huddled together and fought their growing homesickness.

"E 'olu 'olu," begged Keoni of the other men. "Please... Please promise me that if I do not survive this voyage, you will return my body to Waikiki."

Grim-faced and solemn, his companions swore, that if worse did indeed come to worst, it would be so, and this gave Keoni some small comfort.

Day after day, the men scampered up the rigging on the masts and scanned the horizon. How much farther was their destination? And just who was this John Jacob Astor that the Americans were always talking about?

Cabbage, sugar cane, purple yams, taro, coconuts, watermelon and breadfruit had been brought aboard in the islands, so the crewmen were accustomed to the available plant fare, but the protein from the hogs, goats, sheep, and poultry was mostly reserved for the captain and his officers.

Nevertheless, Keoni and his shipmates remained in fairly good shape and good spirits for the six weeks until Cape Disappointment came into view on March 22nd. All men on board, Americans and Polynesian Islanders alike, were grateful for the sight of the prominent outcropping, and excited to be a part of this next phase of exploration.

In 1788, English fur trader Captain John Meares had failed to cross the river bar at approximately 46 degrees north, 123 degrees west, and had subsequently changed the name of the cape from the Spanish San Roque (named for the way the large outcropping looked like a fortress or cathedral) to Cape Disappointment, accentuating his disappointment at not being able to cross the river bar.

In 1792, American Captain Robert Gray had sailed into the river, naming it after his boat, the Columbia Rediviva, and in 1805, Americans Lewis and Clark had come overland to arrive there at the mouth of the Columbia.

But Keoni knew none of any of this, either.

He only knew that he'd been called to line up on the deck of the Tonquin as soon as they'd anchored near what might be the mouth of the river, and Captain Thorn had counted off five men to get into a small rowboat in an attempt to locate the channel.

Keoni was not among the first five, and he watched helplessly as the rough surf capsized the vessel. The entire 5-man crew was lost.

The next day, the men were again lined up on the deck, and another attempt by an additional small boat was hoisted down into the water. Keoni was in this second boat, along with one other Hawaiian Kanakas. But this boat sank too, and only Keoni and one American survived.

In total, eight lives had been lost, of the 10 put to sea looking for safe passage into the mouth of The Great River of the West, and although Captain Thorn thought nothing of it, Keoni was determined to honor the vow he'd made to make sure his fellow sailors were given a proper burial.

On March 24th, the Tonquin crossed into the Columbia's estuary and laid anchor in Baker's Bay, on the way to establishing Fort Astoria, 15 miles farther upriver. But Keoni and his countrymen refused to go until they'd put honest effort into retrieving their friends' bodies.

Keoni took a few of the Sandwich Islanders and went back to the foot of the cape, where they found all eight bodies washed ashore. There on the sand, they built a campfire from the driftwood, and the following morning they buried the Islanders and Americans together—all sacrificed for the Pacific Fur Company.

Keoni took a piece of charcoal from the campfire and wrote the first names of the departed on what appeared to be a plank of their capsized boat. He stuck it into the ground near the graves, and on another piece of wood, wrote "Waikiki," and stuck that also into the sand.

Keoni knew nothing of the shipwrecks and loss of life that both preceded and followed his small ceremony in this "Graveyard of the Pacific." He only knew it was the best he could do, and it turned out to be far closer to honoring their vow than others would do for him when his time came along Vancouver Island a few months later.

"Moe i ka maluhia," said Keoni in his native language. "Rest in peace."