

The Kahiki

Outline for a Story
About a Legendary Polynesian Restaurant

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The Kahiki
The World's Greatest Polynesian Restaurant

1902

Victor Jules Bergeron, Jr. born on December 10 in San Francisco, California.

1907

Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt is born on February 22 in Limestone County, Texas. He then is raised by his grandfather in Louisiana.

1926

Ernest Gantt leaves home and travels around the world on his own, scouring many of the islands of the Caribbean and South Pacific.

1930

Leland Henry born.

1931

In December 1931 the somewhat adrift 24-year-old Ernest Gantt washed up in Southern California, looking for something to do. Something of a proto-beatnik by choice, he had spent the previous years vagabonding on the cheap through some of the globe's more humid locales: Jamaica, Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Marquesas Islands, and Tahiti. By the time he got to Los Angeles, his money had run out.

Gantt made do in the Depression economy through his wits and odd jobs—working in restaurants in Chinatown, parking cars at commercial lots, and doing a bit of freelance bootlegging in the months before Prohibition ended. Sociable and charming, he befriended such Hollywood personalities as David Niven and Marlene Dietrich and through them found occasional work as a technical adviser on films set in the South Pacific. Directors evidently were impressed not only by his knowledge of the region but also by his collection of South Pacific artifacts, which could be borrowed for set props.

1933

In December of 1933, America ended the period of prohibition started in 1920. During this period, bars were secretive, club-like affairs behind locked doors with little peepholes in them. But in December, bars legal once again and allowed to advertise, put up signage and brand themselves. No longer were they bound by the strict and disapproving tenets of the Volstead Act. And after 13 dry years, there were a lot of thirsty drinkers looking for a place with a comfortable bar stool and full bar of real liquor. With so many joints hitting the market, the more astute ones knew they'd need to do something to stick out from the crowd.

1934

Ernest Gantt happens upon a newly vacated tailor shop just off Hollywood Boulevard. It was small—just 13 feet by 30—but Gantt liked the feel of it. With his girlfriend Cora Sund, he got the money together to open a bar at 1727 North McCadden Place, right in the heart of Hollywood. It was a block down from the Hollywood Hotel at the corner of Highland where the Kodak Theater (home to the Oscars) and Grauman's Chinese Theater now stand. Today, block where Don the Beachcomber's once stood is now occupied by Fredrick's of Hollywood, the infamous mail order supply house of naughty lingerie. (Martin Turnbull, "Don The Beachcomber," posted 2/10/12 on his blog).

Gantt entered into a five-year lease of the building for \$30 per month. He built a bar that would seat about two-dozen customers and scattered a few tables in the remaining space. He decorated the place with his South Pacific gewgaws, along with old nets and parts of wrecked boats he scavenged from the oceanfront. He called his watering hole Don the Beachcomber. (Wayne Curtis, *American Heritage Magazine*, 2006).

The young couple decided to theme their restaurant with the latest fad at the time that was Exotic Orient. It was a time when any place west of Catalina Island was considered "foreign" and "exotic." The Chinese game of mah-jongg had become a popular social past-time in the 30s as well as the dishes served with it like egg foo yung and fried rice. (Martin Turnbull, 2/10/12 post)

When you got inside, you had to give your eyes a few moments to adjust to the low-lit atmosphere. The decor consisted of flaming torches, rattan furniture, flower leis, and brightly colored fabrics. Ernest and Cora decided on a series of small dining rooms, which bore scary names like "The Black Hole of Calcutta" and "The Cannibal Room." These shrines to good taste were decorated with palm trees, bananas, coconuts, seashells, shields, shark's jaws, headdresses and carved wooden gods. (Martin Turnbull)

But although Gantt chose an exotic theme for his new venture, his sense of money was much more on the side of thrift than exotica. As tiki historian Wayne Curtis observes he approached his drink menu the same way he approached his décor: with an eye toward

frugality. Rum was the least expensive of the spirits, and Gantt had sampled a variety in his travels. He devised an exotic menu of rum-based drinks that complemented his theme and scratched the names on a board behind the bar. Rum was the “go-to” liquor at a time when vodka and other liquors had yet their place in popular cocktail ingredients. Rum was also the cheapest liquor around, which helped the bottom line. Their cocktail menu read like titles from a pile of Fu Manchu novels: Missionary’s Downfall, Vicious Virgin, Cobra’s Fang and the notorious Zombie. Among those first drinks was the Sumatra Kula, which cost a quarter. The notorious Zombie was so potent it instituted a house rule that nobody could be served more than two Zombies. Gantt is credited as having created the tropical drink genre singlehandedly by mixing flavored syrups and fresh fruit juices with rum. (Martin Turnbull)

The original Zombie recipe may never be known. It was changed in 1956 and even if you worked behind the bar at Don the Beachcomber in the old days you wouldn’t have known what was in it. All you learned from the manual was “1 shot of bottle #7, 2 of bottle #2, 1 of bottle #47, and a splash of #17.” (“The Man Who Stole the Zombie, by Paul Talbott, Scandal Park.com, 7/31/1011.)

The combination of Gantt’s engaging personality and the novelty of his drinks proved irresistible to his patrons. A well-dressed man named Neil Vanderbilt came in one day and ordered one, then another and another. He said it was the best drink he’d had in years. He was a writer for the *New York Tribune* and he soon came back with friends, including Charlie Chaplin. Word of Don the Beachcomber began to spread through Hollywood and beyond. “If you can’t get to paradise, I’ll bring it to you,” Gantt told his customers. (Wayne Curtis)

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Soon, a number of Polynesian inspired places dotted the Los Angeles landscape. The most popular ones were the Zamboanga South Seas Club and the Pirate’s Den, and they were doing a roaring trade. Los Angeles was particularly fertile ground for them. At the time, most Angelenos were immigrants from somewhere else, so the city had little of the sort of shared traditions and conventions that governed how things were done elsewhere. Apart from immigrants L.A. was also full of out-of-work set-designers. Making restaurants into movie sets (later called theme restaurants) was born in L.A. (“I’ll Be Your Tiki Server,” Charles Perry, *LA Times*, 1/17/2001)

In the ‘30s, there might have been a dozen Hawaiian-themed places around Los Angeles, some of them very elaborately done. A place called Hawaiian Paradise had parrots, a dance floor surrounded by a tropical fish pond and a bandstand with two waterfalls. Several of these places featured periodic “rainstorms” on a tin roof to give the appropriate tropical feel. (“I’ll Be Your Tiki Server,” Charles Perry, *LA Times*, 1/17/2001)

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Meanwhile, 400 miles north in the Bay Area, with \$300 of his own money and \$800 borrowed from an aunt, Victor Jules Bergeron opened Hinky Dink's, a beer parlor and luncheonette in Oakland, in 1934. There he sold meals for 25 and 35 cents and beer for a nickel. His place was across the street from his parent's grocery store at the corner of San Pablo Avenue and 65th Street in Oakland, California. As its popularity spread, the menu and decor developed an increasingly tropical flair, and Hinky Dink's soon became Trader Vic's.

At Hink Dinks, Bergeron began inventing rum-flavored drinks with names like "Missionary's Revenge," "Sufferin' Bastard," and "Mai Tai," which means "the very best" in Tahitian. A born promoter, he "sang and even let customers stick an ice pick in his wooden leg" to get customers in these Depression years. The Trader Vic nickname was given to him by his first wife, Esther, because of his habit of swapping meals and drinks for supplies and services. Contrary to a legend he encouraged, he was neither born on a tiny South Pacific Island nor did he lose his leg to a shark. Rather, he was a San Francisco native and doctors amputated his left leg when he was 6 to prevent his death from tuberculosis of the knee.

1936

In July 1936 a wealthy businessman kills a pedestrian with his car, allegedly while driving home after a night at Don the Beachcomber. A Filipino bartender called Ray may have mixed Howard's last drink that night. Ray mixed up the difficult ones. When you ordered a Zombie or a Missionary's Downfall, it was usually Ray who did the work.

1937

By 1937 Ernest Gantt's Polynesian restaurant in LA had outgrown the tailor's shop and Gantt moved to a larger spot in Hollywood. He added more South Pacific flotsam and imbued the place with a tropical twilight gloom. The joint became so much part of his personality that he legally changed his name several times, first using Donn Beach-Comber, then Donn Beachcomber and finally settling on Donn Beach.

The new name was Ernest Gantt's vision of himself as a mellow, dropped-out aesthete, a sort of Gauguin who'd moved to Tahiti permanently without bothering to bring along any paints or canvases. In 1934, when he opened his original Don the Beachcomber bar in Hollywood he'd never been to the South Pacific. (Charles Perry speculates that he was probably under the spell of Don Blanding, a writer popular in the '20s for his poems about Hawaii. ("I'll Be Your Tiki Server," Charles Perry, *LA Times*, 1/17/2001)

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In 1937, Victor Bergeron took a trip to the Caribbean, where he discovered rum drinks. Soon, cocktails such as the daiquiri, mojito and planters punch began appearing at Hinky Dink's. But the exotic drinks didn't fit the deer-antler decor. After a visit to the Don the Beachcombers in Hollywood, and a meeting with owner Donn Beach, Bergeron transformed his bar, and himself, into Trader Vic.

Trader Vic's was a success from the day it opened, due in part to a drink menu featuring 35 different rums, combined with Bergeron's ability to entertain customers. Some patrons assumed the "Trader" nickname came from adventurous dealings in the South Seas, even though at the time Bergeron had never ventured west of San Francisco. His wooden leg added to his mystique. The popular rumor had it that the leg was lost to a shark attack. The real truth was that he had it amputated when he was a young boy.

1939

California's World Fair in 1939 – the Golden Gate International Exposition celebrated for the first time Polynesian culture in the United States. The Theme of this Fair was "Pageant of the Pacific" primarily showcasing the goods of nations bordering the Pacific Ocean. The theme was physically symbolized by "The Tower of the Sun" and a giant, 80-foot statue of Pacifica, goddess of the Pacific ocean.

* * *

The success of Don the Beachcomber was not just a west coast phenomenon and was being watched by people in the east. Especially the famous Zombie drink that Donn Beach had invented. A man named Monte Proser opened Monte Proser's Zombie at the New York World's Fair in 1939. Proser was a native of England and had been a press agent for Walt Disney, Mary Pickford and the Ziegfield Follies.

1940

With the growth of Don the Beachcomber taking off, Donn Beach was called into the United States Army in WWII. He was commissioned and while aboard a convoy bound for Morocco, his ship was attacked by a U-boat. Beach was injured, and after he recovered he spent the remainder of his enlistment doing what he did best: serving up hospitality. The Air Force put him in charge of hotels and restaurants where airmen could rest and recuperate—on Capri and in Venice, on the Lido and on the French Riviera.

(Wayne Curtis)

While he was in the services, Beach's ex-wife, Cora Sund, was left running the business back in California. She proved as natural an entrepreneur as her ex-husband. When Beach returned home, he found Don the Beachcomber had blossomed into a chain, with a handful of restaurants nationwide. Beach had little to do but sit at the bar and cash his checks. The chain would eventually grow to 16 locations.

Beach signed on as a consultant to the restaurant and then packed his bags for Hawaii, where he opened his own unaffiliated Don the Beachcomber in an up-and-coming resort area called Waikiki Beach. His restaurant became an instant landmark, more Hawaiian than most of Hawaii itself. Beach amplified the faux-tropical theme with palms and thatch and a sweeping shingled roof, part space age, part ceremonial Polynesian meetinghouse. The popular arranger and composer Martin Denny played at the restaurant's Bora-Bora lounge for nine months straight near a myna bird trained to squawk, "Give me a beer, stupid." (Wayne Curtis)

In the boozy intimacy of late evenings, a gentle rain would often begin to patter on the corrugated metal roof over the bar—thanks to a garden hose Beach had installed. Always the businessman, he had observed that late-night drinkers tended to linger for another round if they thought it was raining outside. (<http://www.donthebeachcomber.com/history.html>)

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In 1940 the first franchised Trader Vic's opened in Seattle, Washington.

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Based on the success of his Monte Proser's Zombie bar at the New York World's Fair of 1939, Monte Proser opens Monte Proser's Beachcomber in 1940 at Broadway & 50th in a space above the Winter Garden Theatre in Times Square (the same space would later hold Lanai, and then Hawaii Kai). Proser falsely promotes his restaurant as "Home of the Zombie." The Beachcomber became very successful and its success led to a chain of other Beachcomber restaurants back east in Boston, Providence and Baltimore that were not associated in any way with the original Don the Beachcomber of Los Angeles.

Because Proser was thick with the New York mob, legal actions from Donn Beach were ill-advised. But soon, Proser was onto other ventures. On November 10, he opened the famous Copacabana nightclub at East 60th Street in New York City. Although Monte

Proser's name was on the lease, he had a powerful partner in his venture: mob boss Frank Costello.

* * *

Donn Beach might have invented drinks like the Zombie but Vic Bergeron claimed that he invented the Mai Tai. According to Bergeron, he sat down with his bartender one evening in 1944 to create the world-class drink he envisioned. What they came up with was the following formula: 2 ounces 17-year-old J. Wray & Nephew Jamaican rum, 1/2 ounce French Garnier Orgeat, 1/2 ounce Holland DeKuyper Orange Curacao, 1/4 ounce rock candy syrup and the juice of one fresh lime. "We poured the ingredients over shaved ice in a double old-fashioned glass," Bergeron recalls, "shook it well, added one spent lime shell and garnished it with a sprig of fresh mint."

The Mai Tai's popularity soon resulted in a shortage of the limited- production 17-year-old rum, so Bergeron switched to J. Wray & Nephew's 15-year-old version. When that dwindled, he stretched his remaining stock by changing the formula to 1 ounce of 15-year-old J. Wray & Nephew and 1 ounce of Red Heart or Coruba Jamaican rum. He served it to Ham and Carrie Guild, two friends visiting from Tahiti, and after one sip, Carrie pronounced it: "Mai tai—roa aé," Tahitian for, "Out of this world—the best." And the Mai Tai was born.

1945 (After WWII)

The interest in Polynesia grew after World War II when soldiers stationed in the South Pacific returned home with tales of trees loaded with exotic fruits, sleepy lagoons, white-sand beaches, and gorgeous people wearing grass and feathers as they danced half-naked during all-night orgies of food and music. The American imagination seized on this exotic version of island culture, and it exerted a massive influence on Fashion, pop music, eating and drinking, and even architecture. Everything from bars to bowling alleys adopted elements of Polynesian design. Tikis, the carved wooden and stone statues from across the Pacific, found their way into every hotel lounge and suburban living room.

1948

James Michener won the 1948 Pulitzer Prize for his collection of short stories, *Tales of the South Pacific*.

1949

Lee Henry enters OSU in Columbus, Ohio.

The musical *South Pacific* musical by Rogers and Hammerstein is a hit.

Trader Vics in Seattle is opened.

1950

Vic Bergeron opened a Trader Vic's location in Hawaii.

Mai Tais and Pina Coladas, made their way onto many restaurant menus across the country. Restaurants with Tiki themes began to open during the 1950s, holding hundreds of people.

1951

Vic Bergeron opened a Trader Vic's at 20 Cosmo Place in San Francisco.

1954

Lee Henry graduates from the Ohio State University.

Travels to Europe

Begins work at Union Department Store in Columbus. The reason it was called "The Union" was because the Levy family started the business in Chicago during the Civil War. The founder's grandson Don Levy says "the Union was North and was on everyone's tongue at the time." Store founder S.M. Levy was passing through Columbus when he met the then Governor (William) McKinley who suggested S.M. look carefully at Columbus to possibly open a store here. The two became very good friends and S.M. opened a store here. But Lee becomes very bored with the job working in the men's department.

(Photo: Union Departments Store - 1955)

1955

Lee Henry and Bill Sapp open The Top steakhouse in Columbus.=

Lee's trips to investigate Polynesian restaurants. Trips to LA. Lee had an aunt in LA named Gertrude. Experience with Gertrude in the 50s while Lee investigating polynesian restaurants Trader Vics and Don the Beachcomber in LA?

Los Angeles Trader Vics opens. The author who grew up a few blocks away from the LA Trader Vics is taken there by his parents. It becomes one of their favorite restaurants and he visits it a number of times with them.

1956

The Mai-Kai opens on December 28 in an open field on the two-lane Federal Highway on the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It is created by brothers Bob and Jack Thornton who visited Don the Beachcomber's in Chicago as children. Even at that young age they developed a desire to one day create a similar place. When they opened the Mai-Kai they hired away number 2 chef from the Chicago Don the Beachcomber's Kenny Lee and the number 2 bartender Mariano Licudine and the head Maitre d' Andy Tanato along with many staff members.

Their original design cost three-hundred-thousand dollars. It is the most expensive restaurant built in 1956. In its first year it earns over one million dollars, becoming one of the most successful restaurants of its time. Fort Lauderdale in the late 50's was a seasonal place, catering mostly to "snow-birds" and in the first few years the Mai-Kai is only open during the Winter Tourist season.

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The Polynesian phase of American culture, beginning about this time, might have also been inspired as a rejection of the ideas of conformity discussed in the famous book published in 1956, *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte. Becoming a bestseller, it is considered one of the most influential books on management ever written. A central tenet of the book is that average Americans subscribed to a collectivist ethic rather than to the prevailing notion of rugged individualism. A key point made was that people became convinced that organizations and groups could make better decisions than individuals, and thus serving an organization became logically preferable to advancing one's individual creativity. The author felt this was counterfactual and listed a number of examples of how individual work and creativity can produce better outcomes than collectivist processes. He observed that this system led to risk-averse executives who faced no consequences and could expect jobs for life as long as they made no egregious missteps.

Whyte's book led to deeper examinations of the concept of "commitment" and "loyalty" within corporations. Whyte's book matched the fictional best seller of the period, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* by Sloan Wilson in inspiring criticism that those Americans inspired to win World War II returned to an empty suburban life, conformity, and the pursuit of the dollar.

As one Tiki historian has noted, "the Tiki culture provided an outlet for having fun in an otherwise conservative society."

1958

Grass Shack started at 3583 E. Broad Street. The predecessor to the Kahiki. When Lee Henry and Bill Sapp got it was a rough place, patron wise. They got it for a testing ground for the Kahiki. They invented and tested the drinks/food at the Grass Shack.

At the Grass Shack, they worked to perfect the infamous "Mystery Drink." Perhaps the forerunner of the Mystery Drink was described in *Mystic Isles of the South Seas* by Frederick O'Brien, published in 1921. "I had been introduced to a Doctor Funk by Count Polonsky, who told me it was made of a portion of absinthe, a dash of grenadine, the juice of two limes, and half a pint of siphon water. Dr. Funk of Samoa, who had been a physician of Robert Louis Stevenson, had left the receipt for the concoction when he was a guest of the club. One paid half a franc for it, and it would restore self-respect and interest in one's surroundings when even Tahiti rum failed."

The story of the mixologist at the Grass Shack.

A typical day at the Grass Shack.

Polynesian Music

Soon came integration of the idea into music by artists like Les Baxter, Arthur Lyman and Martin Denny, who blended the Tiki idea through jazz augmented with Polynesian, Asian, and Latin instruments and "tropical" themes creating the Exotica genre. This music blended the elements of Afro-Cuban rhythms, unusual instrumentations, environmental sounds, and lush romantic themes from Hollywood movies, topped off with evocative titles like "Jaguar God", into a cultural hybrid native to nowhere.

There were two primary strains of this kind of exotica: Jungle and Tiki. Jungle exotica was a Hollywood creation, with its roots in Tarzan movies and further back, to William Henry Hudson's novel *Green Mansions*. Les Baxter was the king of jungle exotica, and spawned a host of imitators while opening the doors for a few more genuine articles such as Chaino, Thurston Knudson and Guy Warren.

Tiki exotica was introduced with Martin Denny's Waikiki nightclub jungle noises cover of Baxter's *Quiet Village*. Tiki rode a wave of popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s marked by the entrance of Hawaii as the 50th state in 1959 and the introduction of Tiki hut bars and restaurants around the continental United States.

Movie *South Pacific* opens.

1959

The Grass Shack burns down on June 14, Bill Sapp's Birthday. Bill went home when a party was still going on. He got a call from Sondro Conti, bar manager and drink inventor. Conti said "Boss we got a fire here," Bill said "Well put it out." Sondro called back and said "Hey boss this things getting pretty big." Bill "Are we going to be open tomorrow?" Sondro then called back and said."Boss we no open tomorrow!"

(Photo/Illustration: Matchbook cover of the Grass Shack)

Hawaii becomes a state. By this time, Tiki culture was in full swing. Luaus were a popular theme for parties in the suburbs and tropical themed drinks were appearing at bars and restaurants.

1960

August 4. *Columbus Dispatch*. "Foundation is completed for the Kahiki, a Polynesian supper club to be located at 3583 E. Broad Street. It is expected to be the largest restaurant of its type in the world."

September 29. *Columbus Dispatch*. "The city planning commission holds up construction of the proposed Polynesian style 'Kahiki' restaurant on E. Broad Street and Napoleon Avenue because of traffic problems."

The restaurant, designed by Columbus architect Coburn Morgan was built in 1960 at the reported cost of \$1 million dollars. The building could hold over 500 guests, waterfalls, tanks of fish, live birds, large drums, and an iconic monkey fountain known as "George." At the center of the building was a giant stone Moai fireplace.

"The mother ship of all South Seas themed restaurants was located at East Broad Street and Napoleon across from the Dessert Inn (and one-time Playboy club!). It was an easy landmark to identify. Shaped like a Polynesian fighting boat 40 feet tall with giant flaming Moai Heads outside the main doors that opened up into a tropical rainforest and reproduction of a typical Pacific Islander tribal village." Doug Motz.

On Hamilton and Livingston Avenue there was a billboard for the new restaurant with the illustration of a Tahitian maiden with a gardenia in her hair. Doug Motz recalls that the girl in the billboard would "mechanically 'wink' at me every Sunday morning when my parents drove us from our home in the Huber subdivision of Reynoldsburg to Brookwood Presbyterian Church in Bexley. The Polynesian Goddess on the billboard beckoning me to join her for dinner and drinks on East Broad Street scared the devil out of me and I would duck down behind the seat of my parents' station wagon for fear she would see

me. Little did I know how that mystery girl would find her way into the hearts of hundreds, if not thousands, of Central Ohioans.”

“The Kahiki, whose name literally translates as “Sail to Tahiti” according to an undated Kahiki pamphlet, has its’ roots in another of Columbus’ most venerated restaurants – The Top Steakhouse. Lee Henry and Bill Sapp had been operating The Top for 3 years when in 1957 they thought that Columbus could support another supper club and began traveling around the country in search of inspiration. In their travels, it struck them that all of the Polynesian restaurants they visited were doing very well and offered a more casual experience than many of the other clubs of the era. Thus, the idea of the Kahiki began to take shape.” Doug Motz

“The pair hired Coburn Morgan to oversee the design and decorations of the Kahiki and architects Ned Eller and Ralph Sounik of Design Associates. (According to Dispatch reporter Elizabeth Gibson, they had the space because a previous Tiki Bar they owned called the Grass Shack had burned down). Construction began in June of 1960 at a cost of over a million dollars and the Kahiki opened her legendary doors in February of 1961.” Doug Motz

“The design of the building was based on men’s meeting houses of New Guinea and the details featured along the curved roof were found on many of the war canoes of the region. Pelicans and fish lined the apex of the roof, thought to be symbols of plentiful good food. Two replicas of the Easter Island heads stood guard at the doorway that was lined with murals to ward away evil spirits.” Columbus Underground, September 11, 2012. “History Lesson: The History of Columbus’ Most Famed Lost Restaurant.” By Doug Motz. Doug is President of the Columbus Historical Society.

Stepping beyond the up-swooping 50-foot facade the visitor entered a darkened Tahitian village with tall palm trees, waterfalls, thatched huts, idols, and a wild profusion of South Seas-style artifacts. The restaurant was modeled after a New Guinea men’s meetinghouse, between a pair of twenty-foot-high Easter Island idols with flames spouting from their heads. Inside, after crossing a low bridge and passing through a damp grotto, one wandered into a series of dining rooms filled with thatched “dining huts.” The main room, a conical structure with a towering ceiling, was presided over by an eighty-foot-high tiki goddess with glowing red eyes and a fireplace for a mouth. Inside was also an aviary, indoor thatch huts, umbrella-topped drinks, waterfalls and the deep thrum of drums.

“My own strongest childhood memory of the architecture is of the shell washbasins found in the bathrooms and the ‘Thunder and Lighting’ occurring in the tropical rainforests that lined the sides of the village interior. Also featured were giant wall-sized aquariums filled with tropical fish of the South Pacific.” Doug Motz.

In and around the dining huts were totems, carved masks, woven grass mats, parts of shipwrecks, lamps fashioned from seashells, fountains spewing luridly tinted water, adult beverages served in skull-shaped mugs, and an assortment of lavishly varnished blowfish. Localized “thunderstorms,” complete with “lightning,” passed through every twenty minutes or so, drenching the tract of rain forest outside your dining-hut window. (Wayne Curtis, *Atlantic Magazine*, 2001, The Tiki Wars).

The Kahiki’s decorator, artist and engineer Coburn Morgan, was a prominent Ohio restaurant designer whose career may have been launched by his work on the Kahiki. The flamboyant design of the Kahiki was undoubtedly due to him.

In 1960, when he drew the sketch shown above, Morgan was head of the design division of the Tectum Corporation which furnished many of the composite building materials used in the construction of the Kahiki, including pressed wood for roof supports as well as for soundproofing and decorative wall panels. It may also have been used for flooring and for the stylized fish arrayed along the roof’s crest.

For most visitors though, the main draw was the variety of exotic drinks. The restaurant featured three bars and served drinks in over 30 different cups, goblets, and bowls. Visitors and celebrities came to the Kahiki from across the country; the first Columbus Asian Festival was planned in the basement of the Kahiki.

“So patrons were immersed in a total world of the South Seas and while there, could order their choice of exotic fare and island drinks. The Kahiki offered up such drinks as Malayan Mist, Blue Hurricane, Instant Urge, Maiden’s Prayer, Misty Isle, Jungle Fever, Head Hunter, Zombie, and the Smoking Eruption. Each one of these cocktails had its’ own sculpted mug designed just for the drinker who could then purchase it from the gift shop and take it home as a souvenir. (Mrs. Sapp herself made the original mug for the Zombie!) The various bars of the Kahiki used up to 1,000 pineapples and 2,000 bottles of rum monthly to keep up with demand. According to the pamphlet they once sold over 18,000 Polynesian drinks during the month of May alone!” Doug Motz

“As amazing as all these drinks sound, the pen-ultimate Kahiki drink had to have been the “Mystery Drink” which was made to serve 4 people and contained 8 ounces of rum and brandy. Served in a bowl with a smoking volcano in the middle, it was served by the “Mystery Girl” who ceremoniously danced it to your table after being summoned by a giant gong.” Doug Motz.

“The service of this drink was meant to symbolize an ancient sacrificial ritual that supposedly stopped volcanoes from erupting. According to legend, the maiden chosen for the sacrifice was usually the Chieftains daughter. After several days of ceremony, feasting and luaus, the young lady would climb the volcano and fling herself into its crater – yikes!

“At the Kahiki, this was altered to have the mystery girl present the drink to the main Tiki in the restaurant and then after bowing to the idol, would bring the smoking bowl to the diner and present it to their party along with a lei of orchids which were flown in 2-3 times a week from Hilo, Hawaii.

“The Kahiki was also a draw for visiting celebrities, including Milton Berle, Andy Williams, Robert Goulet and famously Zsa Zsa Gabor who allegedly ordered milk – of all things! (It would seem likely that most of these folks were in town for Summer Stock performances of the Kenley Players at Vets Memorial– but that is a story for another day.)

“But all the mystery girls, leis, pineapples and celebrities couldn’t keep pace with the march of time and the Kahiki went through a slew of owners. In 1988 Michael Tsao took over complete ownership and in 1995, began a frozen food company to market Kahiki in grocery stores.

“In 1997 the building was put onto the National Register of Historic Places, but on June 30, 2000 was sold to Walgreen’s corporation and the doors were shut forever on August 25, 2000. The demolition crew literally had to open up the roof to get the large Tiki fireplace out and my thanks to Mike Monello for getting this sad but amazing photograph of the heart of the Kahiki being ripped out.

World Events

March 6. The United States announces that 3,500 American soldiers will be sent to Vietnam.

April 4. At the Academy Awards, Ben-Hur wins a record number of Oscars. Elvis Presley’s song “Are You Lonesome Tonight” is recorded.

May 1. U-2 incident. The events following the Soviet downing of an American U-2 high altitude reconnaissance aircraft over Soviet territory on May 1, 1960. The incident led to the collapse of a proposed summit conference between the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France in Paris.

May 6. President Eisenhower signs the Civil Rights Act into law.

June 16. *Psycho* opens.

July 11. *To Kill a Mockingbird* published.

July 13. Senator John Kennedy is nominated for President at the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles.

July 25. Richard Nixon is nominated for President at the Republican Convention in Chicago.

August 17. The newly named Beatles begin a 48-night residency at the Indra club in Hamburg, West Germany.

Sept 5. At the 1960 Summer Olympic Games, Muhammad Ali (the Cassius Clay) wins the gold medal in light-heavyweight boxing.

September 30. Television cartoon sitcom The Flintstones debuts on ABC.

October 12. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev pounds his shoe on a table at a meeting of the UN General Assembly, protesting the discussion of the Soviet Union's policies toward Eastern Europe.

October 29. In Louisville, Kentucky, Cassius Clay wins his first professional boxing match.

Nov. John Kenney defeats Richard Nixon to become President.

Dec 2. U.S. President Eisenhower authorizes the use of \$1.0 million for the relief and resettlement of Cuban refugees who have been arriving in Florida at the rate of about 1,000 per week.

Dec 12. Supreme Court upholds a lower Federal Court ruling that Louisiana's segregation laws are unconstitutional and overturns them.

1961

February 20, Kahiki opens. The translation of "Kahiki" in Polynesian means "A joyous voyage to Tahiti." The town of Columbus, Ohio, half way around the world from Tahiti was about to embark on their own "joyous voyage to Tahiti."

Bill Sapp recalls when they started the Kahiki the fire marshal came in and said "You can't use the thatch because it is a fire hazard." They told him that they used fire-proofing material on the thatch. They then took him to the burned remains of the Grass Shack and showed him that everything but the thatch was burnt to a crisp so he let them use it.

Yet the thought of a restaurant covered in palm fronds with the chief source of lighting being flaming torches must have been a concern to patrons of the Kahiki. Until they had their Mystery Drink that is. As the newspaper remarked a number of years later, no restaurant with a fire-breathing stone head has ever captured the hearts of Columbus quite like the Kahiki.

* * *

In April of 1961, a few months after the February opening of the Kahiki, Lee and Marilyn Henry traveled to Ithaca, New York to interview with students at the famous Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. It was the key school for those who wanted careers in the hospitality industry and Lee felt the new restaurant needed someone with this training.

Their key candidate at Cornell was twenty-two year old Craig Moore who would graduate in June. Craig had opportunities with the Marriot, Pan Am airlines and food service company at the LA airport called ARA. But Craig wanted food and beverage experience at more of a higher end than ARA and the Marriot, with its great training program for students like him, had no real position for at least a year.

As Craig recalls, “ I think and the excitement that Lee brought sold me. I never planned to be a big Corporation person. I planned to do my own entrepreneurial thing after 4 or 5 years of experience. I really liked the food and beverage part of the hotel business. I also knew that an F&B guy would make much more money running a hotel than just a hotel person.”

Craig accepted the offer to be the manager of the Kahiki and in June of 1961 he moved to Columbus to start his new job. Apart from being astounded when he first saw the restaurant, one of the first things he noticed was the food. As he recalls, it was somewhat of a hybrid Chinese and from the Hawaiian Islands. “When Lee was supreme boss it was great food and that more than anything else is what is required for success in the restaurant business. Phil Chin the original chef was an engineer by education and Lee would have to tell you where he got his food experience. I felt he was a very good hire for Lee. Although the line cooks did not like him and tried to form an alliance with me to get rid of him. They picked the wrong person for that, although I did listen to their complaints. Phil used an abacus to figure percentages on menu items and I used a slide rule. We would race each other figuring these out and he won most of the time.”

Craig soon realized that the new restaurant’s patrons were not just Columbus people but that it was drawing from a wide area. This included a growing number of well-known celebrities who were hearing about the amazing new Polynesian restaurant in Columbus, Ohio. One evening, not too long after he first started as Manager of the Kahiki, Craig seated nineteen-year-old Claudine Longet, a French singer, actress, dancer and recording artist and Andy Williams. The two had met in Las Vegas and recently gotten married. But that night at the Kahiki, they were having a big argument at their table. (It was a preview of later problems in their marriage and the couple divorced in 1975 after a long separation and in 1976 Longet was accused of shooting the ski champion Spider Sabich in the abdomen in the bathroom of the Aspen, Colorado home they shared.)

But the growing number of celebrities were not the only interesting things happening at the new restaurant. Craig recalls “We had a knifing one night from a mistake I made in hiring a tough white ex marine to supervise the dish washers who were all black. Lee gets some delight in describing my face as white as my suit when he arrived and the guy was wreathing on the floor in the basement (knife up his butt) with a big pool of blood, and I was outside waiting to direct the ambulance and police into the back kitchen entry and down the stairs to pick him up. Of course my objective was to keep it quiet from the patrons. Music probably was my salvation with the group of 5 dishwashers because they could sing so well (harmonize) that I would stop sometimes and make a request.”

(Date?) Bill Sapp goes to Miami and hires some Cubans after they left Cuba under Castro. One was a hardware store owner whose son Craig Moore played basketball with at Cornell by coincidence and he worked for the Kahiki also. Another had been a bank officer in Cuba. Later they had two or three Cubans from New York that were experienced waiters with references but allegedly were Castro people to report back to Cuba on the others that were anti-Castro. The FBI came in to see Craig Moore and asked him to keep them as long as he could because they wanted to get the skinny on these bad guys.

About 3 or four days later Moore had to fire one of them and called the FBI to tell them that he had to and they were okay with it. The reason he had to fire him was because an irate customer came to him with a tiny note out of his fortune cookie that read “Tip the waiter 20% for good luck.” As Craig Moore recalls, “How funny was that but I was not one to take any shit from those guys anyway and wanted them out before a murder might have happened.”

Another story comes to mind for Craig Moore. “I was at the maitre'd stand one evening and it was located next to the Outrigger Bar. I had patrons waiting for more than an hour for tables. Sometimes we would go up to an hour-and-a-half believe it or not and people would go to one of the three bars and get soused to say the least. Those drinks had lots of fruit juices in them and lots of rum. Most about 2 or 2.5 ounces. The combinations were lethal.”

“Anyway,” recalls Moore, “I heard a commotion in the bar. It was only 8 or 10 steps to the entry and I was there in seconds only to find the head bartender shirtless and a guy about 8 feet tall bleeding profusely from his nose and cussing up a storm. Soon I found out what had happened in detail. This giant was drunk and since the bar was sunken the tenders and the patrons were eye to eye. The tenders were standing and patrons sitting.”

“An argument had preceded the action and the patron reached across the bar and ripped the tender’s shirt right off of him. (A colorful Hawaiian shirt). The tender threw a punch and it landed and broke the patron’s nose. He was livid and making a scene. I forgot to

mention above that overkill on boos in those days was not a problem for the vendor like today. Anyway, I interceded and we got a roll of toilet paper for him to apply to his nose. I decided to take him upstairs to Lee's office to try and calm him down. Neither Lee nor Bill was in that evening. Lee had a large desk more or less triangular in shape with his chair at the inside of the V. I sat in his chair and this giant was at the outside of the V."

"Lee and Bill had a bathroom between their offices which was used by the off duty police officer when needed. We had outside uniformed officers on Saturday night. There were steel steps that climbed up from the outside (back of the building). This cook started to get really belligerent with me and stood up and started to come around to my side but I was quicker and the desk was probably 9 feet long and we began the chase. He wasn't going to catch me but after two around the desk, the back door opened and what luck for me the policeman walked in. My words were something like "Help, this SOB wants to beat me." Off came his Billy club and he struck the guy right across the bridge of his nose and down to his knees. The handcuffs were on before I knew what happened and that old giant went down the back stairs and downtown. He did sue the Kahiki but I don't know what happened other than our insurance company took care of the issue and I never went to court."

There is a funny fish tank story. Lee was the creative force and Bill Sapp the one who kept an eye on the money. The fish tanks came when Craig Moore was GM and were Lee's idea. Craig thinks they were a fabulous addition. When they were built they were built out side of the window wall of booths 1-8. They were each 100-gallon aquariums and they had hinged above access doors for servicing them during the day. They had some salt water and some fresh water with an array of fish etc. to amaze people. They were beautifully lit and the back glass was painted either scenically or in blue and when lit. They had many fish including live sea horses and blowfish and piranha and vivid colored salt-water fish. Can you imagine sitting within a foot of seahorses swimming at your side? When the fish were being installed Lee, Bill and Craig were watching the fish expert put them in and Bill seemed to know the cost of each fish.

They made a mistake though. Above the aquariums there was no separation. They had some beautiful fresh water eels and at least one maybe more jumped from their aquarium into the next one that had some beautiful salt water fish and started to gobble them up. Bill started reciting the cost of the fish. \$15.00 for that one and \$12.50 for that one. It was hilarious to Craig Moore and showed the different personalities of Bill and Lee. I think Lee was only feeling sorry for the eaten fish. Bill could not care less except for the cost.

* * *

September 14. *Columbus Dispatch*. "Allen Taylor Jr., 25, of 1079 Bryden Road, is arrested in connection with a shooting involving his estranged wife Alice, 22, in the

parking lot of the Kahiki.”

September 24. A supplement in the *Columbus Dispatch* introduces readers to the new restaurant. (See photo in archives for this)

November 22. *Columbus Dispatch*. “The Municipal Airport Commission rejects a request of the Kahiki Restaurant to set up a Polynesian hut with a hostess in the terminal and asks for more information on a toy shop.”

The *Columbus Dispatch* once wrote that the Kahiki “is one of the few restaurants in Columbus in which food can injure you.”

Doug Motz recalls “the crazy billboard at Hamilton and Livingston Avenue which would mechanically ‘wink’ at me every Sunday morning when my parents drove us from our home in the Huber subdivision of Reynoldsburg to Brookwood Presbyterian Church in Bexley. The Polynesian Goddess on the billboard beckoning me to join her for dinner and drinks on East Broad Street scared the devil out of me and I would duck down behind the seat of my parents’ station wagon for fear she would see me. Little did I know how that mystery girl would find her way into the hearts of hundreds, if not thousands, of Central Ohioans.”

American & World Events

Jan 3. President Eisenhower announces that the U.S. has severed diplomatic and consular relations with Cuba.

Jan 17. Eisenhower gives his final State of the Union Address to Congress and warns of the increasing “military industrial” complex.

Feb 1. The U.S. tests it’s first Minuteman I ICBM.

Feb 9. The Beatles perform for the first time at the Cavern Club.

March 1. President Kennedy establishes the Peace Corps.

April 17. The Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba begins.

April 20. Fidel Castro announces that the Bay of Pigs invasion has been defeated.

May 4. Freedom Riders begin interstate bus rides to test the U.S. Supreme Court integration decision.

May 5. Mercury space program. Alan Shepard becomes the first American in space aboard the Mercury-Redstone 3.

May 14. A freedom bus ride is fire-bombed near Anniston, Alabama and the civil rights protestors are beaten by an angry mob.

May 21. Alabama Governor John Patterson declares martial law in an attempt to restore order after race riots break out.

July 25. U.S. President Kennedy gives a widely watched TV speech on the Berlin crisis, warning "we will not be driven out of Berlin." Kennedy urges Americans to build fallout shelters, setting off a four-month debate on civil defense.

Aug 13. Construction of the Berlin Wall begins, restricting movement between East Berlin and West Berlin.

Sept 7. Tom & Jerry make a return with their first episode since 1957, Switchin Kitten.

Sept 24. Walt Disney's *Wonderful World of Color*, moves from ABC to NBC after seven years on the air, and begins telecasting its programs in color for the first time. Years later, after Disney's death, the still-on-the-air program will be renamed *The Wonderful World of Disney*.

Oct 1. Baseball player Roger Maris of the New York Yankees hits his 61st home run in the last game of the season, against the Boston Red Sox, beating the 34-year-old record held by Babe Ruth.

Oct 18. *West Side Story* released as a film.

Oct 27. Confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie: A standoff between Soviet and American tanks in Berlin heightens Cold War tensions.

November 1. The Interstate Commerce Commission's federal order banning segregation at all interstate public facilities officially comes into effect.

November 10. *Catch 22* is first published by Joseph Heller.

Nov 18. U.S. President Kennedy sends 18,000 military advisors to South Vietnam.

Nov 22. *Blue Hawaii* film with Elvis Presley released.

Dec 2. Cold War. In a nationally broadcast speech, Cuban leader Fidel Castro announces he is a Marxist-Leninist and that Cuba will adopt socialism.

December 11. The American involvement in the Vietnam War officially begins, as the first American helicopters arrive in Saigon along with 400 U.S. personnel.

1962

Kahiki Manager Craig Moore married in April.

(Date?) Craig Moore recalls “I only knew about one robbery and they tied Bill Sapp up and had a gun in his face. His office door was shut and they were outside in a room that we even set up for large parties on Saturday nights. Lee had a Myna bird that hollered often and he hollered out “Heh baby, come here!” or something like that. It must have been muffled because the robbers thought it was a person and fled immediately from the scene. Bill was able to untie himself with some effort and call the police. “Saved by a Bird” may have been the headline although I am not sure about whether Bill ever told the press.”

1963

April 2. *Columbus Dispatch*. “Thieves enter the Kahiki supper club by breaking a side window, ransack the second-floor office and leave a large amount of cash on the accounting room floor.”

1964

The visual iconography of the CBS-TV series *Gilligan's Island*, which was originally broadcast in 1964-1967, borrowed significantly from tiki culture, with the "castaways" depicted as building huts, furniture, and housewares that resembled elements of fantasy-Polynesian culture presented to Americans by period bars and restaurants.

1965

October 4. *Columbus Dispatch*. “Two teams of robbers take \$15,000 from the Kahiki supper club and \$5,000 at the Ontario store. Threats to kill employees are made.”

Beachcomber Trio plays at the Kahiki.

1966

July 5. *Columbus Dispatch*. “An armed man robs John Daily, 48, Dayton businessman, and Kenneth Jones, 34, Dayton policeman of \$44,000 in jewels and cash in the parking lot of the Kahiki restaurant.”

August 19. *Columbus Dispatch*. “Hotel and restaurant workers local 505 plans to ‘intensify’ the picketing at Kahiki restaurant. They are protesting the discharge of two employees.”

* * *

The fad of tiki culture was reaching its peak in the mid-60s. But the big generation gap of the late 60s slowed down Polynesian escapism as the children of the Tiki revelers decided to seek their own Nirvana in sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll. (*The book of Tiki : the cult of Polynesian pop in fifties America* - by Sven A. Kirsten.)

1967

Joe Coulombe opens his first Trader Joe’s market on Arroyo Parkway in Pasadena, California. He developed the idea of the Trader Joe South Seas motif while on vacation in the Caribbean when Tiki culture fad of the 1950s and 1960s was fresh in the cultural memory and Trader Vics was at its height with twenty-five locations worldwide. He had noticed that Americans were traveling more and returning home with tastes for food and wine they had trouble satisfying in supermarkets of the time.

While in college in nearby Granville, Ohio, the author has dinner at the Kahiki.

1969

February 17. *Columbus Dispatch*. “Burglars use a cutting torch to open a large safe at the Kahiki supper club and escape with an undetermined amount of cash.”

November 10. *Columbus Dispatch*. “Armed robber gets an estimated \$10,000 from offices of the Kahiki restaurant.”

1971

Aug 14. 75 union members picket at the Kahiki supper club. They are miffed at the non-union construction of the Wine Cellar on East Dublin-Granville Road by Kahiki owners.

By the early 70’s the tiki culture phenomenon (late 50s into 60s) had become a victim of its own success. Over exposure had rendered it cliché and kitschy. It seemed Tiki’s long

and wild success had ended.

1972

In 1972 the original location of Trader Vics in Oakland is closed and replaced by a bay front restaurant in nearby Emeryville, California.

Lee Henry and Bill Sapp open their new Columbus restaurant, the Wine Cellar.

1973

Monte Proser, creator of Beachcomber restaurants in the east and the famous Copacabana in New York dies in October.

1975

May 31. *Columbus Dispatch*. "Five policemen are bitten by an irate woman during a fracas that erupts during an argument with management of the Kahiki over a dinner check."

1978

Michael Tsao is a 27-year-old rising star in Los Angeles' competitive restaurant scene in 1978. Under his management, Trader Vics has become one of the top five restaurants in Los Angeles. Not content to simply manage a restaurant, Tsao starts looking to buy one of his own. His search brings him to Columbus where he steps into the Kahiki restaurant.

"The place had a kind of magic about it. It was the mystique of the Polynesian that made you feel so relaxed and tranquil," he recalls. "Once you got there, you didn't want to leave. It was love at first sight."

Tsao, who had never been to Ohio, bought the restaurant for \$1 million. He packed up his family, chefs and managers and moved to Columbus.

"I didn't even know where Ohio was," he said. "All I knew was Ohio State beat UCLA every year they played them in the Rose Bowl." (*Business First*, Sep 20, 2004. Kahiki Lives. Martha Leonard).

1979

"We were sorry within two weeks that we sold it," he said. "We had this great big gong, like 4 to 5 feet across, that went bong, and right after we sold it they replaced it with this

little thing that went ting.”

The restaurant went through multiple owners. The last was Michael Tsao, who started the frozen-food business and sold the property to Walgreens. Hoover said it was a smart business move. The restaurant was draining, and Tsao wanted more time to focus on expanding the factory.

Tsao's son Jeff said that before his father unloaded the restaurant he had grand dreams for relocating the Kahiki to the riverfront Downtown. But it never panned out because the factory got busy and government support fell short. Then his father died unexpectedly.

"I don't know if it could ever happen again," Jeff Tsao said. "But we're very, very pleased and thankful that we still have so many fans."

But that doesn't necessarily soften the blow.

“I think a lot of people are still bitter about it. We all miss it,” said Stu Koblentz, who was a member of the Ohio Preservation Alliance when the organization labeled the Kahiki one of the top 10 endangered historic buildings in Ohio.

Kahiki fans say the restaurant was a place for special occasions and fond memories.

There are dozens of active Kahiki tribute websites and discussion boards. There are photo albums on Central dot org full of Kahiki swag - drink stirrers, napkins, toothpicks, salt shakers and matchbooks.

Tiki enthusiasts write books and poetry about the restaurant. Columbus resident Jeff Chenault unearthed a 1965 recording of the Beachcomber Trio at the Kahiki.

Dionysus Records produced vinyl copies for sale online, and they're selling.

Other Ohioans remember a prom night, an anniversary getaway, playing table games in the basement or bouncing with excitement as a child, sipping virgin mixed drinks and roasting meatballs over an open flame. Zsa Zsa Gabor famously ordered milk.

“When I was a kid and we'd drive by the huge sloping roof with dragons and torches, it always seemed to me to be a grounded ship on E. Broad Street,” Newark resident Lesa Best said in an e-mail.

"There were macaws in the bar, and the booth walls were lined with aquariums, or 'rain forests' complete with thunderous sound effects. By the '80s, it was past its prime, definitely, and cheesy? Yes it was. But my friends and family loved going because it was different, it was campy and the food was really quite good.

"I long for just one more Mystery Drink."

Each time someone made a pilgrimage to the Kahiki, they would take word back to their

hometowns.

“When I was a kid growing up in Pittsburgh, my dad regularly traveled to Columbus on business,” said Worthington resident Bill Nordquist. “We had a postcard picture of the exterior, and in the mid-1970s I had never seen anything like that.”

Even some people who never went to the Kahiki said they were dismayed to hear it would be torn down.

Jennifer Akers grew up nearby and begged her parents to take her there for her birthday. They told her the Kahiki wasn't in the budget for a family of six, so she never set a foot inside.

But when she heard the Kahiki was auctioning off its wares, she had her chance. Now she owns a copy of its blueprints.

“I spent hours and lots of dollars buying treasure,” she said. “I have boxes of menus, match boxes, napkins, cups. I have the boss' couch right out of his office.”
New Yorker Frank Decaro flew to Columbus when he heard the Kahiki was closing. Ten years later, he still can't believe they tore it down.

“At the point when the last great Tiki bar closes, someone will open a new one and everyone will say these are great,” he said. “It's a shame we always seem to realize too late how much things mean to us.”

Kahiki means "a joyous voyage to Tahiti" Citizens Journal Thursday March 23 1961, "Splendor of the tropics is setting at Kahiki"(article name)

My favorite part was the simulated rainstorm that would hit. You would hear a clap of thunder and rain coming down then streams of water would pour over the windows you were sitting next to.

1970s

Moai out front are not lit from an order from the City of Columbus because of the 70's energy crisis.

1985

In 1985, the original Don the Beachcomber building on McCadden in Hollywood is demolished to make way for an apartment building.

1988

After a slew of owners (Mitch Boyce), Michael Tsao buys out his partner and takes over the restaurant and started a frozen food company next door to the restaurant.

But all the mystery girls, leis, pineapples and celebrities couldn't keep pace with the march of time and the Kahiki went through a slew of owners. In 1988 Michael Tsao took over complete ownership and in 1995, began a frozen food company to market Kahiki in grocery stores.

The author has dinner at the Emeryville Trader Vics for a birthday celebration.

1989

Donn Beach dies on June 7. At the time of his death he held the patents for 80 drink recipes. But something Don the Beachcomber was unable to patent may be his most enduring legacy.

Donald Trump closed the Trader Vic's at his Plaza Hotel in New York, declaring that it had "gotten tacky."

In effect, it seemed that the once ultra chic tiki culture of the 40s – 70s had become ultra tacky in the 70s and 80s. Donn Beach was dead and Lee and Bill were out of the business altogether.

But in the late 80s, there seemed to be an emerging return to the tiki culture. A movement tracked by a number of observers, some big websites and who knows how many thousands of customers out there right now of that legendary Kahiki restaurant in Columbus, Ohio.

1990

The 90s have seen a revitalized interest in this kitsch anomaly of post-war America - lounge bars and the sound of 'exotica' are back in with "urban archaeologists" exploring the lost remnants of Tiki culture across the States, discovering relics from this forgotten civilization in thrift stores, yard sales, and used book and record emporia. (*The book of Tiki : the cult of Polynesian pop in fifties America* - by Sven A. Kirsten.)

1991

Lee Henry & Bill Sapp's Wine Cellar closes.

1992

The Tommy Bahama brand is launched with a theme centered on the tropical island lifestyle.

1995

Tsao starts a frozen-food company next door to the restaurant. Tsao begins packaging and freezing some Kahiki Asian-Pacific favorites, such as egg rolls and stir-fry meal kits. He sells them out of a freezer case in the restaurant's lobby.

"In those days, we had a lot of immigrants coming in from Asia, like Vietnam and China," Tsao recalls. "The husband and wife can't get a job because they don't speak English, so I thought, why not let them come in and make egg rolls. So we began to sell egg rolls wholesale."

Tsao's production line soon grows out of the basement into a 700-square-foot building constructed in the Kahiki's parking lot.

"It would have been so easy for my wife and I to just take the money and go to Hawaii and lay on the beach, but we didn't," Tsao said. "We wanted to save the Kahiki brand and create jobs for a new immigrant base."

* * *

In a 1995 article from *Fortune*, Michael Eisner, the CEO of Disney, who went to college nearby, revealed that he had attended his first drive-in movie in Columbus and enjoyed meals at the Kahiki. The article is placed on a wall at the Kahiki.

1997

The Kahiki is put on the National Register of Historic Places and is the only Tiki type place on this list.

2000

April 17, Walgreens confirms that it wants to build a store where the Kahiki sits.

June 30, Tsao says that he will sell the Kahiki to Walgreens but never reveals how much money it took. "We saw the writing on the wall with Easton and Polaris drawing people

away,” Tsao said. “Everything has its life span.”

July, Tikiskip hears on radio Kahiki is closing, calls Skip Davis at Kahiki no employees know of this news. Michael Tsao is in Hawaii at this time.

August 25, The Kahiki closes its doors before a private farewell party put on by Otto von Stroheim and Tiki news, Tickets are \$100.00 each, the event sells out.

The demolition crew literally had to open up the roof to get the large Tiki fireplace out and my thanks to Mike Monello for getting this sad but amazing photograph of the heart of the Kahiki being ripped out.

* * *

In 2000, Tsao moves his Kahiki Food operations to a 22,000-square-foot plant near Port Columbus International Airport and begins churning out 90 to 100 varieties of frozen entrees, snacks and egg rolls a day for distribution in supermarkets, delis, cafeterias and warehouse stores such as Sam’s Club and Costco. He hires Alan Hoover, a marketing executive with experience at International Paper Co. and Sonoco Products Co., as vice president of sales.

“My first day was spent flying to Chicago for a food convention, where they handed me a Hawaiian shirt and told me to go out and start selling,” Hoover said. “At that point, I didn't even know what a pot sticker was.”

Hoover helps steer the company from a mom-and-pop regional player to a \$15 million company shipping to locations in Mexico, Canada and Central America.

2005

July 22, Michael Tsao unexpectedly dies 10 weeks after the realization of his dream of moving the company into a bigger factory. The company is in debt and in mourning.

November 15, The Kahiki outlet store starts selling off the rest of their stuff. Mostly lights. 11/15/05

The Fraternal Order of Moai (FOM; also often known as The Moai) is a fraternal order and social club founded in 2005 by Matt "Kuku Ahu" Thatcher, Jim "Chisel Slinger" Robinson and Joel "Cowtown Kahuna" Gunn. The Order uses the Moai statues of Rapa Nui as a theme. An initial goal of the group was to preserve the history of and artifacts from the closed Kahiki Supper Club in Columbus, Ohio. Since then it has grown into "a serious group of tiki aficionados" with activity all over the United States.

Members are often fans of tiki culture, the Polynesian pop era, mid-century modern style, and kustom culture and these styles are reflected in the events held by the group. Some members are artists who produce music, carvings, lamps, and ceramics that tie into the theme of the group. The group has been known to provide assistance with preserving artifacts and expertise to local "tiki" businesses.

Even though the group participates in many public events the organization operates like a secret society and many members only identify themselves using aliases. Leaders of the group use obscure titles that combine words from several Polynesian languages.

The group exhibits a bizarre sense of humor and places references to use of time travel technology, combating a zombie outbreak and cloning technology in official information published online. Much of this information refers to a claimed network of scientific research labs in the continental United States called the F.O.M. Test Labs.

2006

September 28, Kahiki items in a warehouse go on sale. One moai and fireplace go to Vermont. The other Moai is in Norwitch township in Ohio. The rest and last of Kahiki items go to Vermont as well.

2006

A group of former Kahiki employees (Theang & Seong, with Francis Llacuna a Hawaiian born guitarist as entertainment) open a restaurant called Tropical Bistro.

2007

A Pittsburgh company buys Kahiki for \$11.7 million, although the factory stays in Gahanna.

Los Angeles Trader Vics closes.

2008

January 27, Hawaiian Bistro closes.

2010

The company makes almost \$50 million in sales a year and sells 70 products in groceries across the country. President Alan Hoover said it still makes many of the dishes from the Kahiki menu.

November 27, Vermont Moai is sold on ebay, Now the Moai will be living on the beach in Hampton, Mass.

* * *

Columbus Dispatch

August 25, 2010.

Elizabeth Gibson

“10 Years After Torches Go Out, Kahiki Memories Live:
Restaurant With Polynesian Theme Has Devoted Fans.”

Ten years ago today, the Kahiki closed its doors to make way for a Walgreens pharmacy. The Kahiki name lives on in a Gahanna-based frozen-food company, but company President Alan Hoover says he still gets calls about the restaurant.

“Two months ago, I was leaving the office in the evening and a couple was walking up the front walkway,” he said. “I asked if I could help them, and they said, 'Yes, we'd like to have dinner tonight.'”

“It's amazing that these things are still happening.”

The Kahiki, at 3583 E. Broad St., was the brainchild of Bill Sapp and Lee Henry, also the creators of the Top Steak House near Bexley. Their temple of Tiki opened in 1961 after their Tiki bar, the Grass Shack, burned down.

They built the Kahiki for more than \$1 million (about \$7.3 million today). Sapp said they sold it to help them finance a new restaurant, the Wine Cellar, also long gone now.

“We were sorry within two weeks that we sold it,” he said. “We had this great big gong, like 4 to 5 feet across, that went *bong*, and right after we sold it they replaced it with this little thing that went *ting*.”

The restaurant went through multiple owners. The last was Michael Tsao, who started the frozen-food business and sold the property to Walgreens. Hoover said it was a smart business move. The restaurant was draining, and Tsao wanted more time to focus on expanding the factory.

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“When I was a kid and we'd drive by the huge sloping roof with dragons and torches, it always seemed to me to be a grounded ship on E. Broad Street,” Newark resident Lesa Best said in an e-mail.

“There were macaws in the bar, and the booth walls were lined with aquariums, or 'rain forests' complete with thunderous sound effects. By the '80s, it was past its prime, definitely, and cheesy? Yes it was. But my friends and family loved going because it was different, it was campy and the food was really quite good.

“I long for just one more Mystery Drink.”

Each time someone made a pilgrimage to the Kahiki, they would take word back to their hometowns.

“When I was a kid growing up in Pittsburgh, my dad regularly traveled to Columbus on business,” said Worthington resident Bill Nordquist. “We had a postcard picture of the exterior, and in the mid-1970s I had never seen anything like that.”

Even some people who never went to the Kahiki said they were dismayed to hear it would be torn down.

Jennifer Akers grew up nearby and begged her parents to take her there for her birthday. They told her the Kahiki wasn't in the budget for a family of six, so she never set a foot inside.

But when she heard the Kahiki was auctioning off its wares, she had her chance. Now she owns a copy of its blueprints.

“I spent hours and lots of dollars buying treasure,” she said. “I have boxes of menus, match boxes, napkins, cups. I have the boss' couch right out of his office.”

New Yorker Frank Decaro flew to Columbus when he heard the Kahiki was closing. Ten years later, he still can't believe they tore it down.

“At the point when the last great Tiki bar closes, someone will open a new one and everyone will say these are great,” he said. “It's a shame we always seem to realize too late how much things mean to us.”

2012

In mid-September, a new Tiki restaurant called the Grass Skirt opens in downtown Columbus, Ohio. Owner of the restaurant Elizabeth Lessner notes that the restaurant will have steaming drinks, a waterfall, Spam, pineapples and maraschino cherries. “We all grew up loving the Kahiki,” she says. (*Columbus Business First*, October 31, 2011).

* * *

September. The DVD of Tiki - Vol. 1 // Finally for sale, DIRECTED BY JOCHEN HIRSCHFELD & SCHLANGO With scenes taken by Tikiskip of the destruction of the Kahiki.

“A dozen years have passed and still the spell cast by the Kahiki remains powerful. So much so, that the fine folks of the Columbus Food League will soon open their own Polynesian-themed supper club – Grass Skirt. When I visited Grass Skirt recently, Managing Partner Carmen Owens suggested that it could be open as soon as late September. She also relayed that there would be a special place at Grass Skirt that will pay homage to the wonderland that was the Kahiki.”

Doug Matz

“So with the memories of a winking Mystery Girl and the Beachcomber Trio blaring on the hi-fi while I sip on a marvelous ‘Polynesian Spell’ I bid you all a fond Aloha!” Doug Matz

Remembering the Kahiki

By Rikki Santer

We linger at that intersection of Napoleon
and Broad where the fat ass of a Walgreens

sits on the flattened ghost of a blueprint for paradise—
a dining palace where we were eager passengers

for that giant Polynesian war ship landlocked and coy.
Tonight, we drift through a drugstore's glass doors

but imagine night fire spewing from the heads of two,
20-foot moai. We filter through Muzak and cash register

din to hear the siren gong of the Mystery Girl with her
alchemist's boat of a drink. We might be flanked by milk

of magnesia and foot creams, but we rise from the foam
of a *Pina Passion* to hover over the span of an aquarium

wall thick with swimming jewels, then cross
the room to a rainforest with preening parrots

and thunderstorms on a timer. At the Outrigger
Bar, decked in the robes of our birthdays, anniversaries

or lusty prom promises, we suck Pu Pu Platter goo
from our occidental nails. Tiki culture massages us

like a feverish cocktail, cocked and tail wagging,
ample breasts top-loading all things trayed.

Tonight, just off the beltway, a Kahiki factory
frames the same logo for its food line, and here

in Walgreens' freezer, we find nostalgia
boxed and gagged. *General Tso's Chicken*

and *EasyCrisp Egg Rolls* call out meekly:

It's [still] *Asian Tonight*.

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Questions

What year did Arthur Godfrey visit the Kahiki? Stories about him and Mystery Girl.

What year Zsa Zsa Gabor visit Kahiki?

What year did Larry FlyDid you ever keep annt visit the Kahiki?

When did Lee get the first idea for the Kahiki?

How was the Kahiki advertised in Columbus? Outside of Columbus?

Stories about employees.

Story of the Mystery Girl?

Story or memory of Coburn Morgan the builder.

Get Craig's memories of the Kahiki.

Trip to Cornel to hire Craig?

Get Bill Sapp's memories of Kahiki.

When was White's *Organization Man* published? The tiki culture as a counterpoint to this. Grey flannel suits and conservative culture of the 50s was ready for exotica in the 60s.

What gave Lee the idea for Kahiki?

Where did Lee and Marilyn live when they were running the Kahiki? Worthington?

Was a journal or diary of Kahiki ever kept?

Describe a typical business day of operation of the club.

Points to Make

The psychology of Polynesia in American culture.

Symbolism of Polynesia. All are islands in the SW Pacific Ocean. So, tied with the symbolism of islands. The Kahiki was in effect an island of exotica in Columbus.

Food and drinks was part of this exotica. Yet it was really the place that was behind the psychology and symbolism of the Polynesian restaurant phenomenon.

Exploration was complete in the 20th century. Most of the world was civilized and discovered. Yet the islands in the Pacific remained wild and undiscovered. Few had the money or the means to journey to them. Yet they could make the trip within the confines of the great island restaurant called the Kahiki.

Approach

Told in the 1st person?

Told by journal entries?

Told by patrons of Kahiki? Perhaps we are with them as they go to the Kahiki for the first time in the 60s?

A recently married couple celebrating their wedding. A couple celebrating their anniversary. A first date. A prom couple.

Told by employees of Kahiki? The trip back to Columbus of a Chinese family to work at the Kahiki.

Told in 3rd person as a straight history?

Incorporate cultural events that happened with events at Kahiki.

Tell as dramatic story with conflict and villain and all.

Perhaps only a slice of time in the story?

Lees trip to Europe and time it opened?

Grass Shack to opening?

Grass Shack through first year of operation?

Visual scenes.

Viewpoint of Marilyn also. When were the girls born?

