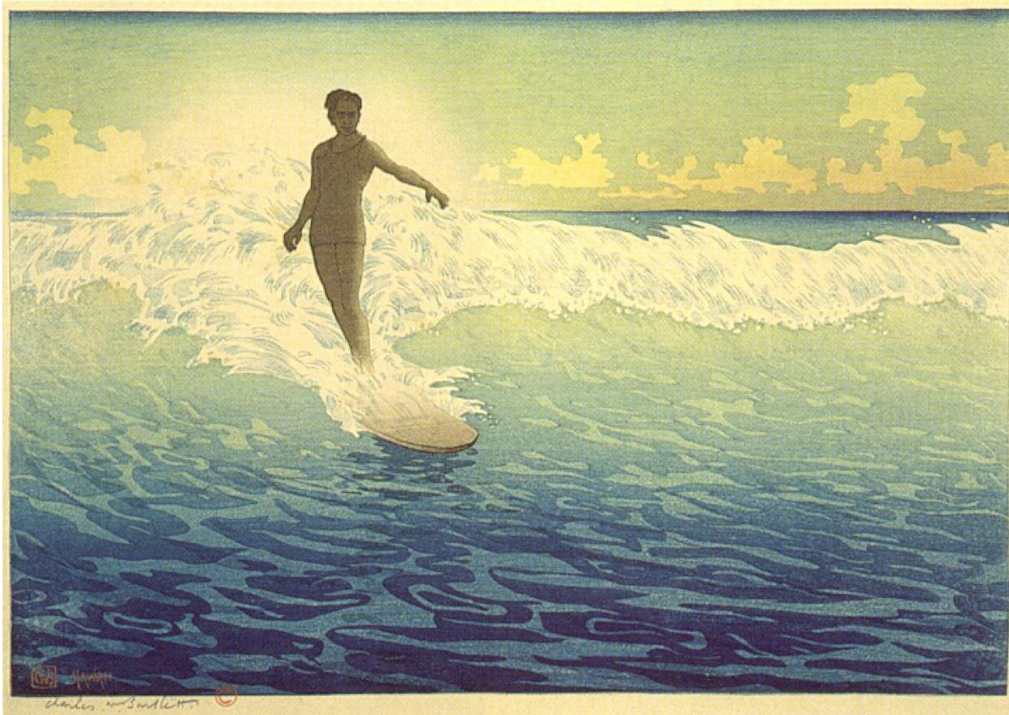


How did the Missionaries Feel about Surfing?



“On a calm and bright summer's day, the wide ocean and foaming surf ... the green tufts of elegant fronds on the tall cocoanut trunks, nodding and waving, like graceful plumes, in the refreshing breeze ... the natives ... riding more rapidly and proudly on their surfboards, on the front of foaming surges ... give life and interest to the scenery.”

(Missionary Hiram Bingham)

How did the Missionaries Feel about Surfing?

Did the Missionaries really stop Surfing in Hawai'i, as we are most often led to believe?

Open any book or read any article about surfing or hula and invariably there are definitive statements that the missionaries "banned" and/or "abolished" these activities.

However, in taking a closer look into the matter, most would likely come to a different conclusion.

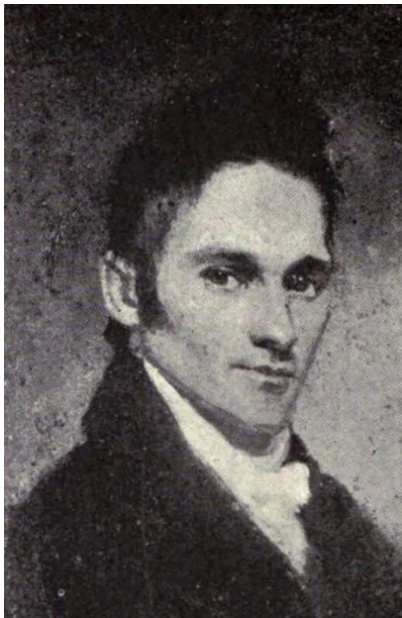
First of all, the missionaries were guests in the Hawaiian Kingdom; they didn't have the power to ban or abolish anything - that was the right of the King and Chiefs.

Most will agree the missionaries despised the fact that Hawaiians typically surfed in the nude and that hula dancers were typically topless; they also didn't like the commingling between the sexes.



So, before we go on, we need to agree, the issue at hand is surfing and hula – not nudity and interactions between the sexes. In keeping this discussion on the actual activity and not sexuality, let's see what the missionaries had to say about surfing.

Let's look at surfing ...



Here is what Hiram Bingham had to say about surfing (Bingham was leader of the Pioneer Company of missionaries to Hawai'i, he was in the Islands from 1820 to 1840 - these are his words:)

"(T)hey resorted to the favorite amusement of all classes - sporting on the surf, in which they distinguish themselves from most other nations. In this exercise, they generally avail themselves of the surf-board, an instrument manufactured by themselves for the purpose." (Bingham – page 136)

"The inhabitants of these islands, both male and female, are distinguished by their fondness for the water, their powers of diving and swimming, and the dexterity and ease with which they manage themselves, their surf-boards and canoes, in that element." (Bingham – pages 136-137)

"The adoption of our costume greatly diminishes their practice of swimming and sporting in the surf, for it is less convenient to wear it in the water than the native girdle, and less decorous and safe to lay it entirely off on every occasion they find for a plunge or swim or surf-board race." (Bingham – page 137)

“The decline or discontinuance of the use of the surf-board, as civilization advances, may be accounted for by the increase of modesty, industry or religion, without supposing, as some have affected to believe, that missionaries caused oppressive enactments against it.”

“These considerations are in part applicable to many other amusements. Indeed, the purchase of foreign vessels, at this time, required attention to the collecting and delivering of 450,000 lbs. of sandal-wood, which those who were waiting for it might naturally suppose would, for a time, supersede their amusements.” (Bingham - page 137)

Most people cite the first sentence in the above paragraph as admission by Bingham that the missionaries were the cause, but fail to quote the rest of the paragraph.

In the remaining sentences of the same paragraph Bingham notes that with the growing demand to harvest sandalwood, there is less time for the Hawaiians to attend to their “amusements,” including surfing. These later words change the context of the prior.



Here is a bit of poetic support Bingham shows for the sport:

“On a calm and bright summer's day, the wide ocean and foaming surf, the peaceful river, with verdant banks, the bold cliff, and forest covered mountains, the level and fertile vale, the pleasant shade-trees, the green tufts of elegant fronds on the tall cocoanut trunks, nodding and waving, like graceful plumes, in the refreshing breeze ...”

“... birds flitting, chirping, and singing among them, goats grazing and bleating, and their kids frisking on the rocky cliff, the natives at their work, carrying burdens, or sailing up and down the river, or along the sea-shore, in their canoes, propelled by their polished paddles that glitter in the sun-beam, or by a small sail well trimmed, or riding more rapidly and proudly on their surf-boards, on the front of foaming surges, as they hasten to the sandy shore, all give life and interest to the scenery.” (Bingham – pages 217-218)

Missionaries Didn't Oppose Surfing ... They Surfed Themselves

Another of the missionary group at the time was Levi Chamberlain, the mission quartermaster in the 1830s;) here is what he had to say:

"The situation of Waititi (Waikīkī) is pleasant, & enjoys the shade of a large number of cocoanut & kou trees. The kou has large spreading branches & affords a very beautiful shade. There is a considerable extension of beach and when the surf comes in high the natives amuse themselves in riding on the surf-board." (Chamberlain – Vol 2, page 18)

"The Chiefs amused themselves by playing on surfboards in the heart of Lahaina." (Chamberlain - Vol 5, page 36)

Another set of Journals, belonging to Amos S. Cooke, also notes references to surfing (Cooke was in the 8th Company of missionaries arriving in 1837:)



"After dinner Auhea went with me, & the boys to bathe in the sea, & I tried riding on the surf. To day I have felt quite lame from it." (Cooke – Vol 6, page 237) (Missionaries and their children also surfed.)

"This evening I have been reading to the smaller children from "Rollo at Play"--"The Freshet". The older children are still reading "Robinson Crusoe". Since school the boys have been to Waikiki to swim in the surf & on surf boards. They reached home at 7 o'clk. Last evening they went to Diamond Point - & did not return till 7 1/2 o'clock." (Cooke – Vol 7, page 385)

"After dinner about three o'clock we went to bathe & to play in the surf. After we returned from this we paid a visit to the church which has lately been repaired with a new belfry & roof." (Cooke – Vol 8, page 120)

James J Jarvis, in 1847, notes "Sliding down steep hills, on a smooth board, was a common amusement; but no sport afforded more delight than bathing in the surf. Young and old high and low, of both sexes, engaged in it, and in no other way could they show greater dexterity in their aquatic exercises. Multitudes could be seen when the surf was highest, pushing boldly seaward, with their surf-board in advance, diving beneath the huge combers, as they broke in succession over them, until they reached the outer line of breakers ..."

"... then laying flat upon their boards, using their arms and legs as guides, they boldly mounted the loftiest, and, borne upon its crest, rushed with the speed of a race-horse towards the shore; from being dashed upon which, seemed to a spectator impossible to be avoided." (Jarvis – page 39)

In 1851, the Reverend Henry T. Cheever observed surfing at Lāhaina, Maui and wrote about it in his book, Life in the Hawaiian Islands, The Heart of the Pacific As it Was and Is, "It is highly amusing to a stranger to go out to the south part of this town, some day when the sea is rolling in heavily over the reef, and to

observe there the evolutions and rapid career of a company of surf-players. The sport (of surfing) is so attractive and full of wild excitement to the Hawaiians, and withal so healthy, that I cannot but hope it will be many years before civilization shall look it out of countenance, or make it disreputable to indulge in this manly, though it be dangerous, exercise." (Cheever – pages 41-42)

Even Mark Twain notes surfing during his visit in 1866, "In one place we came upon a large company of naked natives, of both sexes and all ages, amusing themselves with the national pastime of surf-bathing. Each heathen would paddle three or four hundred yards out to sea, (taking a short board with him), then face the shore and wait for a particularly prodigious billow to come along ..."

"... at the right moment he would fling his board upon its foamy crest and himself upon the board, and here he would come whizzing by like a bombshell! It did not seem that a lightning express train could shoot along at a more hair-lifting speed. I tried surf-bathing once, subsequently, but made a failure of it. I got the board placed right, and at the right moment, too; but missed the connection myself.--The board struck the shore in three quarters of a second, without any cargo, and I struck the bottom about the same time, with a couple of barrels of water in me.." (Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, 1880)

As you can see, there were foreigner reports on surfing throughout the decades. Obviously, surfing was never "banned" or "abolished" in Hawai'i. These words from prominent missionaries and other observers note on-going surfing throughout the decades the missionaries were in Hawai'i (1820 - 1863.)

Likewise, their comments sound supportive of surfing, at least they were comfortable with it and they admired the Hawaiians for their surfing prowess (they are certainly not in opposition to its continued practice) – and Bingham seems to acknowledge that he realizes others may believe the missionaries curtailed/stopped it.



So, Bingham, who was in Hawai'i from 1820 to 1840, makes surprisingly favorable remarks by noting that Hawaiians were "sporting on the surf, in which they distinguish themselves from most other nations". Likewise, Chamberlain notes they "amuse themselves in riding on the surf-board."

Missionary Amos Cooke, who arrived in Hawai'i in 1837 - and was later appointed by King Kamehameha III to teach the young royalty in the Chiefs' Childrens' School - surfed himself (with his sons) and enjoyed going to the beach in the afternoon.

In the late-1840s, Jarvis notes, "Multitudes could be seen when the surf was highest, pushing boldly seaward, with their surf-board in advance".

In the 1850s, Reverend Cheever notes, surfing "is so attractive and full of wild excitement to the Hawaiians, and withal so healthy".

In the mid-1860s Mark Twain notes, the Hawaiians were "amusing themselves with the national pastime of surf-bathing. Each heathen would paddle three or four hundred yards out to sea, (taking a short board

with him), then face the shore and wait for a particularly prodigious billow to come along; at the right moment he would fling his board upon its foamy crest and himself upon the board, and here he would come whizzing by like a bombshell!”



Throughout the decades, Hawaiians continued to surf and, if anything, the missionaries and others at least appreciated surfing (although they vehemently opposed nudity - likewise, today, nudity is frowned upon.)

And, using Cooke as an example, it is clear some of the missionaries and their families also surfed.

Of course, not everyone tolerated or supported surfing. Sarah Joiner Lyman notes in her book, “Sarah Joiner Lyman of Hawaii--

her own story,” “You have probably heard that playing on the surf board was a favourite amusement in ancient times.”

“It is too much practised at the present day, and is the source of much iniquity, inasmuch as it leads to intercourse with the sexes without discrimination. Today a man died on his surf board. He was seen to fall from it, but has not yet been found. I hope this will be a warning to others, and that many will be induced to leave this foolish amusement.” (Lyman – pages 63-63 – (John Clark))

“No Ka Molowa. Ua 'kaka loa ka molowa. Eia kekahi, o ka lilo loa o na kanaka i ka heenalua a me na wahine a me na keiki i ka lelekawa i ka mio.” (Ke Kumu Hawaii - January 31, 1838 – page 70 – (John Clark))

“Laziness. It is clear that they were lazy. The men would spend all their time surfing, and the women and children would spend all their time jumping and diving into the ocean.”

“No Ka Palaka. No ka palaka mai ka molowa, ka nanea, ka lealea, ka paani, ka heenalua, ka lelekawa, ka mio, ka heeholua, ka lelekowali; ka hoolele lupe, kela mea keia mea o ka palaka, oia ka mole o keia mau hewa he nui wale.” (Ke Kumu Hawaii - January 31, 1838 – page 70 – (John Clark))

“Indifference. Indifference is the source of laziness, relaxation, enjoyment, play, surfing, cliff jumping, diving, sledding, swinging, kite flying, and all kinds of indifferent activities; indifference is the root of these many vices.”

Socio-Economic Changes at the Time

Let's look some more - could something else be a cause for the apparent reduction of surfers in the water? What about affects the socio-economic and demographic changes may have had on the peoples' opportunity to surf?

Remember, in 1819, prior to the arrival of the missionaries, Liholiho abolished the kapu system. This effectively also cancelled the annual Makahiki celebrations and the athletic contests and games associated with them.

Likewise, the Chiefs were distracted by new Western goods and were directing the commoners to work at various tasks that took time away from other activities, including surfing.

Between 1805 and 1830, the maka'āinana (common people) were displaced from much of their traditional duties (farming and fishing) and labor was diverted to harvesting sandalwood.

Between 1819 and 1859, whaling was the economic mainstay in the Islands. Ships re-provisioned in Hawai'i, and Hawaiians grew the crops for these needs: fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, cattle, white potatoes and sugar.

With the start of a successful sugar plantation in 1835, Hawai'i's economy turned toward sugar and saw tremendous expansion in the decades between 1860 and 1880.

From the time of contact (1778,) Hawaiians were transitioning from a subsistence economy to a market economy and the people were being employed to work at various industries. (Even today's surfers prefer to surf all the time, but in many cases obligations at work means you can't surf all the time.)

In light of the demands these industries have in distracting people away from their recreational pursuits, let's look at the Hawaiian population changes.

Since contact in 1778, the Hawaiian population declined rapidly after exposure to a host of diseases for which they had no immunity. In addition, many Hawaiians moved away or worked overseas.

The Hawaiian population in 1778 is estimated to have been approximately 300,000 (estimates vary; some as high as 800,000 to 1,000,000; but many writers suggest the 300,000 estimate – a higher 1778 estimate more dramatically illustrates the change in population.)

Whatever the 'contact' starting point, by 1860 the Islands' population drastically declined to approximately 69,800. Fewer people overall means fewer people in the water and out surfing.

In reading what the missionaries and others had to say, it appears that the purported banning and/or opposition to surfing may be more urban legend, than fact. It is easy to blame the missionaries, but there doesn't seem to be basis to do so.

Missionary Period

Over the course of a little over 40-years (1820-1863 - the "Missionary Period"), about 180-men and women in twelve Companies served in Hawai'i to carry out the mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the Hawaiian Islands.

Collaboration between Native Hawaiians and American Protestant missionaries resulted in, among other things, the

- Introduction of Christianity;
- Development of a written Hawaiian language and establishment of schools that resulted in widespread literacy;
- Promulgation of the concept of constitutional government;
- Combination of Hawaiian with Western medicine; and
- Evolution of a new and distinctive musical tradition (with harmony and choral singing)