

Posted on: Sunday, July 2, 2006

## Plantation life

By [Mike Gordon](#)  
Advertiser Staff Writer

If sugar was the engine that drove Hawai'i during the 19th century, immigrant labor was the fuel. Together, they changed the face of the Islands forever by attracting foreign laborers who made Hawai'i their permanent home.

From 1852 to 1946, the sugar plantations lured 385,000 contract laborers to Hawai'i.

The first to arrive were the Chinese, most of them hard-working bachelors who intended to return to China at the end of their contracts, which could last up to five years. They were paid \$3 a month and were charged for passage, food, clothing and housing.

Most were miserable under plantation life. They lived in crowded, unsanitary work camps and shopped at plantation stores. They would get a pre-dawn bowl of rice, then have to hike to the fields for a long day of back-breaking labor. A day in the fields usually lasted 10 hours. A day in the mills was 12 hours.

They would be followed by Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Japanese and Korean laborers, and plantation camps were segregated by race.

By far, the most numerous were the Japanese workers, 180,000 over nearly four decades. The plantations were a great disappointment for them, as they had been for those who came before them.

Their new homes were on parched fields with little shade, surrounded by acres and acres of sugarcane that needed to be stripped and cut by hand. Conditions were crowded. Often, two couples would share a 10-foot-square room that had a kitchen and a homemade stove.

They tried to re-create the village life they left, making small shrines in their homes and crude, homemade hot tubs called furo where men and women soaked after a day in the fields.



After annexation, plantation life improved. Barracks were replaced by small houses, and there was more time for recreation. These workers were photographed in 1958 as they relaxed while off duty.

Photo from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union

And the contract-labor system, which remained in effect until after annexation, amounted to forced labor under brutal plantation overseers, or lunas. Management typically was cold and indifferent.

Housing conditions, jobs and wages differed according to race. The management and skilled jobs were held by whites. The lunas and camp policemen were mostly Portuguese and Hawaiian. The worst jobs were given to Asians.

The work was tedious beyond measure, and painful. Weed-clearing crews worked all day bent over. Workers who stripped the cane of its sharp-edged leaves went home each afternoon with cut and blistered hands. They also had to deal with wasps that infested the fields.

When it was time to cut the ripened cane, they labored amid clouds of dust that made breathing difficult.

Twice a month, workers were paid. They had to bring their small brass or aluminum identification card, which was called a bango and bore their stamped identification number. The pay, too, differed by race. For example, in 1910, Japanese cane cutters earned 99 cents a day, while their Filipino counterparts earned 69 cents a day.

Women worked in the fields, but also did housecleaning and laundry. Their children were employed in shifts that dictated when they would attend school, and they often worked the same 6 a.m.

to 4:30 p.m. shifts that their parents did, laboring as blacksmiths' helpers, camp cleaners, carriers, store clerks, field hands and mill laborers.

Annexation by the United States in 1898 helped bring about a change in the squalid camps. Plantations had to abandon the barracks system and provide small homes for families. This led to workers beautifying their homes with miniature gardens and pools.

Recreation was varied. Workers went fishing or played cards, gambling away their wages on Saturday nights. Filipino workers favored cockfights, but they also spent their wages at taxi-dance halls. Filipino string bands would go from plantation to plantation, and workers would pay for a three-minute dance with a woman.

In 1910, plantations were urged to create baseball teams, provide musical activities and show films. It was more about keeping workers on the plantations and preventing strikes than it was about their emotional well-being.

Even sleep was regimented. The same whistle that stirred workers before sunrise and signaled the end of a shift also blew at 8 p.m. That meant lights out, the end of another day.