
Diversity Among Hawaii's Children During World War II

Jarrod Taylor

“War! Oahu Bombed by Japanese Planes”¹ was the front-page headline found in newspapers from around the world on December 7th, 1941. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States had avoided direct involvement in World War II. As the country was thrust into war, home life for children began to change drastically. As the nation turned its focus to the war effort, many families began relocating to military towns and production centers all across the country. Men swarmed recruiting stations, while others were drafted into military service. As soldiers, sailors, and marines were moved around the country for training, their families often followed. Wives and mothers also went into the factories, taking jobs that had previously been held only by men. Children across the United States mainland were introduced to life on the homefront, while children living in Hawaii, more like children in Europe, experienced first hand the sights and sounds of a battlefield.

It is common knowledge that throughout the history of the United States, words like racism, segregation, discrimination, and prejudice have been at the leading edge of politics and internal conflict. Clearly the United States has moved a long way from the days of slavery, prior to the Civil War, but how does racism in Hawaii fit into the history of the United States? In *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii*, Bailey and Farber quoted a war worker, who discussed how Portuguese people disliked Caucasians, or “howlies,” and Filipinos did not like the Japanese, and the Japanese disliked Chinese people.² It is clear that there were racial differences in the Hawaiian Islands however; the severity of the tension between racial groups was far less extreme than on the mainland. It would even seem that much of the racism in Hawaii during the war was carried across the Pacific by service members and war workers from the mainland.

¹ Headline, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin 1st Extra*, December 7, 1941, <http://archives.starbulletin.com/2001/12/07/news/sb1207a.jpg> (accessed April 18, 2010).

² Beth Bailey, and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 199.

In February 1942, in response to the Japanese attack, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066.³ This order called for people of Japanese ancestry, all across the United States to be placed in internment camps. Americans worried; that Japanese descendants, whether American citizens or immigrants, would be loyal to the Empire of Japan, and therefore act in support of the enemy. There were approximately 122,000 people of Japanese ancestry detained in the United States⁴, and of those more than half were American citizens.⁵ In contrast to the mass collection and detention taking place on the mainland, the military government in Hawaii detained only those who were deemed a threat to security. Less than one percent of the Japanese population in Hawaii was detained, and those who were detained had been placed on a suspect list prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁶ In addition, a small number of other suspected individuals of European descent were also detained. Many of the detainees were investigated, cleared, and released, while others were investigated and cleared without ever being detained.⁷ One would expect that Hawaiians, having been the target in the attack, would have been eager to detain all people of Japanese descent; however this was not the case.

Looking further back into the history of racism and segregation in the United States, it becomes apparent that the Hawaiian Islands never adhered to the same social norms as the mainland states. The doctrine of "Separate but Equal" was a result of the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. This doctrine allowed for separate facilities to be utilized by white people and African Americans, providing that the facilities could be considered equal.⁸ "The Separate but Equal doctrine was quickly extended to cover many areas of public life, such as restaurants, theaters, restrooms and public schools."⁹ It was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court removed Separate but Equal doctrine from the public school system.¹⁰

³ Our Documents, "Executive Order 9066 (1942)",

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=74>, (accessed May 5, 2010).

⁴ Zlata Filipovic, and Melanie Challenger, *Stolen Voices: Young People's War Diaries, From World War I to Iraq*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 136.

⁵ Our Documents, "Executive Order 9066."

⁶ Gwynfreed Allen, *Hawaii's War Years 1941-1945*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1950), 134.

⁷ Allen, *Hawaii's War Years*, 134.

⁸ *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (US Supreme Court 1896).

⁹ Street Law and the Supreme Court Historical Society, "*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896): The Impact of the Case: "Separate but Equal," http://www.landmarkcases.org/plessy/impact_equal.html (accessed April 19, 2010).

¹⁰ Find Law for Legal Professionals, "US Supreme Court: *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)" <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/347/483.html> (accessed April 19, 2010).

In contrast to the United States racial policies in the early 20th Century, Hawaii was a much more diverse community. Prior to being annexed as a territory by the United States in 1898, laborers had immigrated to the islands to work the sugar and pineapple plantations. These laborers came from Asia, Pacific islands, and even Europe. Many either married locally, or sent for their families after establishing themselves in the islands. "By 1920 there were large numbers of plantation families with children."¹¹ Because children living in Hawaii at the time came from so many racial and ethnic backgrounds, public schooling became an issue. Students in the public school system in 1919 included children from Hawaiian, American, British, German, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Korean, Spanish, Russian, Filipino, and some listed as "other foreigners."¹² On the mainland, public schools became legally segregated by race. In Hawaii, "compulsory education had been in effect since 1835, and educators were proud of their record of universal education."¹³

There were some instances of separation taking place in the school system of the Hawaiian Islands; however, the differences were not set by racial inequalities, but by ability groups with regards to language skills. Parents of English speaking students were concerned that their children's education would be hindered by students who lacked the English vocabulary to allow them to participate effectively in the classroom. In 1920, a petition was circulated among parents, requesting that an English language school be established.¹⁴ The petition included a stipulation that students acceptance to the English school would be judged solely on the results of an oral and/or written English test, and was in no way related to race or ethnicity.¹⁵ At the same time, other language schools were started as after school programs. Immigrant parents chose to send their children to these schools which taught their native language and customs, so that their children learned about the heritage and culture of their ancestral homes.

It is a reasonable argument to suggest that the English standard schools which were opened for English speaking students likely provided higher quality education than did the standard district schools. It is also a reasonable argument, that while these schools were not separated by race or ethnicity, a person's first language is typically a reflection of his race or ethnicity. The difference is found when comparing the enrollment practices at mainland schools versus

¹¹ Judith R. Hughes, "The Demise of the English Standard School System in Hawai'i", *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 27, (1993): 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Hawaiian schools. There were no African Americans enrolled at white schools in the United States. In 1920, the San Francisco, California school system established oriental schools for students of Japanese descent.¹⁶ In Hawaii however; students of Asian or other descent were enrolled in English standard schools, providing he or she managed to successfully complete an oral and sometimes written English entrance exam. It was not uncommon to find second-generation students of Japanese, Chinese, or other nationalities enrolled in English standard schools.

By the end of World War II, the English standard school system was being questioned by parents of non-English speaking students. At that point, English speaking parents were not interested in fighting for the standard schools, and the system was easily phased out of existence. English standard schools were completely gone from Hawaii around the same time that black and white segregation in public schools stopped on the mainland.¹⁷ The public education system in the Hawaiian Islands leading up to and during World War II was segregated linguistically, but in contrast to the rest of the United States, the student bodies remained interracial.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, a rush of nationalism surged over the country, and everyone did his or her part to support the war effort. Children planted victory gardens, and collected scrap materials, such as rubber and metal, to help supply the armed forces.¹⁸ Immediately after the attack in Hawaii, Boy Scouts helped to extinguish fires that resulted from the attack, transported supplies and messages, went door to door informing residents of the blackout policy, and even stood as sentries on roadways.¹⁹ A photograph included in Nicholson's, *Pearl Harbor Child*, shows Hawaii Boy Scouts collecting rubber materials. The three boys come from three different racial groups, but are working together to support the war effort.²⁰ This kind of interracial interaction among children was uncommon on the mainland, but was the norm in the Hawaiian Islands.

Day-to-day life for American children during World War II, whether on the mainland or in the Hawaiian Islands, did have some similarities. Children were scared, they felt the excitement of adventure, and developed a strong sense of American pride. In "*Daddy's Gone to War:*" *The Second World War in the Lives of American Children*, William

¹⁶ Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 35.

¹⁷ Hughes, "The Demise of the English Standard Schools" 77-80.

¹⁸ Dorinda Makanaonalani Stagner Nicholson, *Pearl Harbor Child: A Child's Eyewitness View-From Attack to Peace*, (1993, repr Kansas City, MO: Woodson House Publishing, 2009), 43-46.

¹⁹ Allen, *Hawaii's War Years*, 7, 34, 43.

²⁰ Nicholson, *Pearl Harbor Child*, 43.

Tuttle discusses the stories of several children who lived through World War II on the mainland. They shared with him the stories of their nightmares and the fears that came with the news of the Japanese attack. There were some adjustments to daily life as materials were rationed and air raid sirens, drills, and blackouts became normal activities.

In Hawaii precautions were taken a step further. Along with the blackout order, homes, schools, and businesses were directed to prepare bomb shelters. In addition to the bomb shelters, everyone was issued a protective gas mask, in case the Japanese elected to use chemical weapons against the islands. Students in Hawaii were trained in the use of their masks, and conducted drills where an Army officer would fill a classroom with tear gas and have the students walk through to be sure their masks were functioning properly.²¹ Children on the mainland feared bombing attacks, and even invasion by Japanese troops. In Hawaii, further attacks and an invasion by Japanese troops were not only feared, but expected. Because of Hawaii's close proximity to the Pacific theater of operations, most military dependents were evacuated from the islands back to the mainland, as well as "10,000 Island women and children."²² Children living in both Hawaii and in the mainland states were all American children, and their lives were connected through their sense of American pride and wartime experiences.

Homefront life varied from place to place, and there were also many differences between childhood experiences on the mainland in the United States, and in the Hawaiian Islands. Hawaii was placed under martial law almost immediately, and remained so until late in the war. Every citizen over the age of six years was fingerprinted, registered, and issued an identification card.²³ Curfews and blackout policies were enforced across the entire territory, and radio silence was observed for a short period after the attacks as well. In the islands, many schools were temporarily closed because of damages, while others were taken over by the Army to be used as hospitals and shelters. As the United States entered World War II, the gap that already separated the American childhood experience for those children living in the Hawaiian Islands from those living on the mainland, grew even wider. Children living in Hawaii during the Second World War grew up surrounded by racial and ethnic diversity, which was further defined by the closeness of combat, and a feeling of nationalism that developed across the country in the face of world war.

For those remaining on the islands, there were many changes. Because the islands were so isolated, shipping and receiving supplies

²¹ Tuttle, "Daddy's Gone to War", 8.

²² Allen, *Hawaii's War Years*, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 120.

and even mail became a logistical nightmare. The Pacific Ocean was patrolled by the Japanese Navy, and what supplies did reach the islands were of military necessity. Personnel transportation between the islands and the mainland was also stopped. Only those needed to fill positions in the islands were allowed to travel. The islands began to be flooded with military personnel and war workers. With this sudden increase in mainlanders arriving, social norms in the islands began to be questioned by the newly arriving visitors.

As Hawaii was home to a diverse population well before the outbreak of World War II, it would seem that the complications and conflicts between different ethnic groups were perhaps imported with the sudden dramatic increase in servicemen and war workers arriving from the mainland. Bailey and Farber state that, "Many of the mainland war workers were self-consciously and blatantly racist."²⁴ Censors often found negative comments about race in war worker correspondence with the mainland. There were complaints about the, "black, brown, and yellow man" and how he stood on equal footing with the Caucasian war workers.²⁵ According to Bailey and Farber, "Hawaii had no 'Negro Problem' before World War II."²⁶

Another area that racial lines could be contrasted with those of the mainland was at United Service Organization, or USO functions. The USO was responsible for several facilities in the islands which hosted dances and social functions in order to provide entertainment to the troops who were based in Hawaii. Mabel Thomas was responsible for one of these clubs, called the Muluhia.²⁷ While these clubs were frequented by service members, there was a great shortage of women in the islands. Thomas enlisted the help of female college students from the University of Hawaii to dance with the servicemen, and provide them with a temporary companion. In the fall of 1943, Thomas held a formal dance, and concluded the event with a grand march. She was hoping to impress "General Richardson, and the top ranking staffs of Army and Navy."²⁸ With the grand march successfully completed, General Richardson congratulated Thomas and inquired about the national origins of the young ladies who participated in the dance. "Thomas identified them for him: 'Hawaiians, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, Spanish, Javanese, Malayans, French, Danish, Germans, Jewish, and Hungarians...the Chinese-

²⁴ Bailey, and Farber, *The First Strange Place*, 35.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Hawaiians and half Whites.”²⁹ The diversity among young female volunteers who helped Mabel Thomas entertain the troops at the Muluhia’s formal dance again demonstrated the feeling of pride and nationalism that swept over the nation, and remained throughout the war. Clearly racism, prejudice, and discrimination were of little concern in the islands at that time.

Finally, there are debates over the state or racial affairs in Hawaii. In her article, “Disrupting the ‘Melting Pot’: Racial Discourse in Hawai’i and the Naturalization of Haole,” Judy Rohrer discusses both sides of this debate. There are those who use the word, “harmony,” to explain the interracial relationships in the Hawaiian Islands.³⁰

I would argue that Robert Ezra Park’s “discourse of racial harmony” is perhaps not a perfectly accurate description of the social interaction in the Hawaiian Islands during World War II.³¹ Racial and ethnic tension did exist between certain groups, and the haole elite did maintain power from the time before annexation, and then relinquished the power to the United States government. The idea of racial harmony could be used to describe the territory of Hawaii much more than it could the mainland of the United States.

Others would say that Hawaii was illegally annexed by the United States, and that “colonization and racialization go hand in hand.”³² The culture in Hawaii today is certainly much different from that found in the territory of Hawaii during the Second World War. Less focus is placed on race, ethnicity, and nationality, while the dividing lines are set between “Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians); locals; and haoles” (white people).³³ This dividing line is set even less between locals and whites, but more between locals and newcomers. Even Caucasians who have lived in the islands for an extended period of time may be considered a local. I would assert that these are certainly cultural differences, but not necessarily racial conflicts. People of any race or ethnic background may eventually find themselves on the side of the locals, provided they are willing to adapt to the island way of life. One could argue that in World War II Hawaii, the idea of racial harmony on the islands was much closer to reality than was a scene of racial conflict and superiority.

As the American war effort picked up momentum, the Hawaiian Islands were flooded with war workers, and military servicemen. When these groups landed in Hawaii, they brought with them, their own racial

²⁹ Bailey, and Farber, *The First Strange Place*, 52-53.

³⁰ Judy Rohrer, “Disrupting the ‘Melting Pot’: Racial Discourse in Hawai’i and the Naturalization of Haole”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, No. 6 (2008), 1113.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1112.

³² *Ibid.*, 1111.

³³ *Ibid.*

ideals from the mainland. While the United States maintained "separate but equal" facilities for African Americans and Caucasians, Hawaii continued to function with minimal racial conflict or discrimination.

In Hawaii, the reaction to the attack was much more personal. On the mainland, many people were not familiar with the actual location of Pearl Harbor. The nationalist movement that swept across the country affected those living in Hawaii just as deeply, if not more so, than those living on the mainland. This could be said for adults and children alike. Because Hawaii was already such a racially and culturally diverse community, the sudden attack strengthened the community more so that weakened it. As mainlanders continued to struggle over racial issues; those living in Hawaii continued to look beyond racial boundaries.

The divide that separated the lives of children in Hawaii and the rest of the United States grew wider through the war years. Hawaii's children experienced events that were more closely related to the experiences of children living in Europe during the war. The separation of public schools by spoken language is much less racially motivated than the separate but equal policy adopted on the mainland. The use of oral and written English entrance exams allowed for students to be judged on their individual language skills as opposed to their skin color, or ethnicity. It was certainly those students from different races and ethnicities who were left out of the English standard school system, but not on a basis of color. When a child who was unsuccessful on his entrance exam became proficient at English, he or she would be accepted into the English standard system.

Another way that the war separated the culture of racism in Hawaii from that on the mainland was the way that young women from the University of Hawaii volunteered their time in order to entertain the troops. These women came from all different races, and nationalities, but still volunteered to support the American cause.

Finally, racial viewpoints in Hawaii differed for adults as well as children. As a community, Hawaii reacted to the disastrous blow that Japan landed on the Navy's Pacific Fleet. The people of Hawaii came together in order to promote the defense of the islands and of the nation. Children, who learn from parents and elders, were there to witness what was taking place. Being raised in a community which already enjoyed the benefits of acceptance and diversity, these children continued to live together with minimal conflict. As the United States of America was thrust into World War II, racism continued to be a serious cause for concern at all levels of society on the mainland. In Hawaii, racial differences became less of a concern for adults and children alike, as national pride and patriotism were placed at the focal point of the Hawaiian culture.

Jarrold Taylor, is a senior majoring in History with a Secondary Education Teaching Certificate from Mattoon, Illinois. He wrote this paper for Historical Research and Writing with Dr. Sace Elder during the spring of 2010.