

Press Club Award

Hoe Hana Women

by Mary Cooke

This story made Mary Cooke, staff writer for The Honolulu Advertiser, the current winner of the Sarah Park Memorial Award presented annually at the Gridiron Dinner of the Honolulu Press Club.

This award is given for the best story combining human interest and drama.

The Paul Beam Memorial Award went to Jack Teehan as the top award for outstanding performance in the field of journalism. Teehan also won the nod for the best news story of the year.

In the field of photo journalism, the K. Shimogaki Award for the best spot news photo went to Gordon Morse. Robert Young was the winner for top feature photo. All winners are Advertiser staffers.





HOE HANA WOMEN (women who work with the hoe) were a once familiar sight on every Island sugar plantation.

The remaining handful who still chop weeds in the cane brake are living dolls, old dolls . . . last of the immigrant Japanese laborers brought here in their youth to toil in the Hawaiian sugar fields.

As they near retirement age, it's almost time to turn the page, close their chapter in Hawaii's epic story. But when they set down their hoes and make the traditional low bow of courtesy and respect, we're moved to bow as low.

The women shown on this page work the Oahu Sugar Co. fields between Waipahu and Wahiawa. Years ago

the female work gangs were 100-strong. Now all but these, and a few on the Neighbor Islands, have gone to rest.

They were the kimono-clad, getta-shod women who clip-clopped about their daily tasks, each with a baby strapped to her back. They trotted, not walked, to the nearest cane field, wash tub or wood stove. Work was a privilege, employment an honor.

"Arigato," they murmured into their obi fronts, then turned out in the wrappings of the Japanese field hand.

In the darkness before the dawn they entered the field. When the afternoon whistle signaled "pau hana," they washed and ironed and scrubbed and cooked and sewed. And bore children.



But these old tiller girls raised more than cane and babies. They launched a segment of American society that is unprecedented in its three-generation rise from gang labor to social and economic power.

As they got the babies off their backs they dressed them in gingham frocks and shirts and tiny gettas and taught them to trot . . . but in the direction of school. Public school till early afternoon, Japanese language school till early evening.

Then they saved against the day their brood was ready for trade schools and colleges. Money from Hawaii poured into business offices of the higher halls of learning. It came from remote villages with names like Puhi, Paia, Waipahu. Staid college administrators might have been astonished at the source, but that was 30 years before Mainlanders began to notice what was happening in the Islands.

Our little old heroines are grandmothers now, hover-

ing on the 60-year mark of their sturdy, useful lives.

"They've done their share," affirmed Robert C. Stewart, OS Co. harvesting overseer.

He cut the engine of his pickup truck and nodded toward six little round figures in straw hats, bobbing and swaying in the cane field.

"Oba san! (Lady!)" he called.

"Hae! Nanika? (Yes, what is it?)" came the response.

"Ano-ne . . . peekcha . . . newspapah you . . . Asato-san, Oshiro-san, Kumasaka . . . (You picture . . . put in newspaper . . .)."

Wails of pleasure, embarrassment and hilarity filled the air. Strong square hands flew up to cover mouths, foreheads, eyes. Shoulders heaved. Short spasms of laughter, staccato bursts in Japanese, then one strong clear cry: "Aaaaahhhh . . . hila hila! Cr-roes all *lepo!* (We're shamed . . . clothes too dirty!)"

Then they started to move forward, coming with a rolling, toe-out gait, the better to navigate plowed earth. Their arms bowed out on either side, the better to fend off razor-edged cane leaves. From head to toe, they were swathed in grades and shades of blue denim, white cotton, yellow straw and smoked glass.

They stood like chubby statues, grinning at the strangers in their midst. Their round faces, polished by soap and sun, beamed with such an overflow of well being and good will that suddenly the plantation statistic (each old lady works better than half an acre a day) became plausible.

Their teeth flashed white and strong. Their skin showed no grime or sweat, scarcely a wrinkle.

Beneath the Farmer Brown hats, each head was swathed in soft cotton fabric, folded square across the brow, tight over the ears and back of the neck and tied in a square knot over the chin or mouth . . . as expertly contrived as surgical dressing, sure protection from the elements.

For the rest, layers of shirts, pants, divided skirts, aprons, leggings, denim tabis, arm guards, dark goggles and heavy gauntlets kept them immune from their arch enemy, dirt.

Stoic and shy, they posed for the camera, then burst into a spate of merriment caught by The Advertiser photographer (top picture).

Then they vaulted into the back of the truck and arranged themselves in orderly rows, faces front, feet together, hands in laps. They looked demure as nuns. They chattered like parakeets.

As the truck lurched off, six little hands went up. Until they were out of sight, they waved up and down, up and down, like little girls. Those happy old faces smiled to beat sunshine itself.

Over the hill they went, strong as men, happy as children, women who surely live in deeds, not years, and "needeth not to be ashamed."

Of such stalwart stock will come more leaders of the Pacific . . . more leaders of Hawaii.