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Family uncovers Oahu shark tale after 91 years

By Terry McMurray
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An Exeter, Calif., woman, who heard tales of how her great-great-grandfather died in Honolulu — that he was attacked and eaten by sharks in 1900 — wanted to find out if the stories were true.

The woman, Lesa Thompson, was able to confirm at least the "eaten" part of the story through the help of the Honolulu Medical Examiner's Office and the files of The Honolulu Advertiser.

Thompson wrote to Dr. Alvin Omori's office asking if it had any record of a coroner's inquest mentioned on an old death certificate for Emil Uhlbrecht. The office had no records that old, so chief investigator Frank Quallen asked investigator Susan Starrett to check with the state archives and a city reference bureau, but also found no such records.

Starrett, however, arranged to have checked the microfilm of The Advertiser's predecessor, the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, which ran a story of the incident on Page 9 on July 20, 1900.

Quallen sent a copy to Thompson, ending a family mystery because, Thompson wrote, her great-great-grandmother never wanted to talk about it, so her great-grandfather, born seven months after his father's death, never heard the full story.

Said Thompson last night: "All she told him and her other three children while they were growing up is that their father was eaten by a shark

spoke of.

"When informed of this, her agony became so great that the foot was shown her . . .

"The wife looked but an instant, then she fell back fainting.

"It is he," she cried. Mrs. Uhlbrecht was certain of her identification."

The news story said the fisherman would not eat the shark as intended "but boiled the liver and secured three quarts of oil."

The account said the identification by Mrs. Uhlbrecht "created an intense sensation in Honolulu and was almost the sole topic of conversation during most of the day."

"They always wondered about it, our parents always wondered and so did we. I decided to ask just to try to find out what happened. It's kinda strange to just tell people your great-great-grandfather was killed by sharks off the coast of Hawaii."

Thompson said Uhlbrecht had come to Honolulu about a year earlier as "bicycle racer."

According to The Pacific Commercial Advertiser's page-long account, Uhlbrecht drowned Sunday, July 14, after being knocked into the ocean by waves while hunting sea-shells near Makapuu.

Searchers predicted his body would be carried by ocean currents to Waikiki.

But, on July 17, John Kinipeki, "a fisherman born in the South Sea Islands," caught an 11-foot, 9-inch shark with "a very large mouth," pulled it into his canoe after an hour-long battle between Kakaako and Honolulu Harbor, hit it on the head, and paddled home.

The next day, he and friends opened the shark "to sell its flesh and oil... and were horrified to find in its stomach a human foot with skin and flesh intact and two other bones totally denuded of flesh."

"Word was sent to (police) Captain Parker, who with another policeman hastened to Kakaako, where the natives live..."

A doctor said the bones were "those of the pelvis and right femur of a white man, while the foot, which was severed at the ankle, was proof even to a layman of its having been very recently attached to a body."

The remains were taken to the police station and "here, late in the afternoon, they were seen by the widow of Uhlbrecht."

"She arrived at the station in a high pitch of excitement and begged Deputy Sheriff Chillingworth to be permitted to see the remains. The Deputy attempted to prevail on her not to insist on her errand but nothing could dissuade her. She described the peculiarities of her husband's feet, and Chillingworth found the mark she