

Tales of Old Hawaii



By Russ and Peg Apple

TIE TOGETHER North America's Canadian Pacific Railway and Hawaii's Necker island and what do you get?

Blood pressure rising in statesmen, that's what, as international complications set in.

Canada's transcontinental railroad runs west to the deep water port of Vancouver and stops there.

NECKER ISLAND is a narrow ridge of volcanic rock that protrudes above the Pacific ocean about 400 nautical miles northwest of Honolulu. It is uninhabited now, but sometime in the remote past there was at least a semi-permanent colony of early Hawaiians.

Before the CPRR-Necker matter was over, two U.S. Ministers in Hawaii wrote frantic dispatches to the Secretary of State. Honolulu businessmen and government leaders used the potential tie to blackmail the U.S. government: the President of the United States sent a message to Congress; U.S. Senators raged; and two British warships sailed around Necker to make soundings. One sent a landing party ashore. Two of the stone images they collected are now in London at the British Museum.

NO, THE CANADIANS didn't want to run a railroad, or even a ferry, across the ocean from Vancouver to Necker. They did want to lay a submarine cable.

Britain wanted to link together her growing Pacific empire with a cable network.

The plan was to run a cable from Vancouver to Necker; to Fiji; to Tonga; and then all the way down under to New Zealand and Australia.

For the use of Necker, the Canadian Pacific RR—a government railroad—would tie in Honolulu.

For years, Honolulu had wanted a cable connection to the rest of the world. Wireless hadn't been invented yet, and it took about two weeks to get a letter to or from North America.

TELEGRAPH lines were running

Necker and the Cable

all over America and Canada, clicking out messages in Morse code. Telegraphers had discovered that the electricity didn't leak out if proper cables went underwater. Already a cable crossed the Atlantic ocean—Cyrus West Field had financed it in 1858.

Honolulu businessmen wanted a cable connection to America. So did the Provisional Government they controlled. This was 1895, two years after the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani.

All Hawaii had to do to get an overseas cable was to lease out a small rock that nobody lived on. That easy.

BUT TO LEASE out Necker island to a foreign government, Hawaii had to get the go-ahead from the U.S. The Reciprocity Treaty said so.

The blackmail of the threat of a British cable to Hawaii might jar loose an all-American cable, which was what the haoles in Hawaii really wanted.

In the annexation agreement Hawaii proposed to the U.S. was a clause that said the U.S. would lay such a cable. It had been knocked out in Washington.

IN 1889, WHEN the Canadian cable had first been proposed, the U.S. minister in Hawaii had warned that a British cable to Hawaii was a threat to America. He said that a British cable would mean "a gradual, peaceful conquest of the political control of Hawaiian affairs and the diversion of trade and commerce to other channels and the sympathies of the people to other governments than that of the United States, where it legitimately belongs."

He meant that instant daily communication with the British empire would bring Hawaii back under British influences.

IN THE SIX years before 1895, when Hawaii asked the U.S. for permission to lease out Necker, England had acquired 25 island groups in the Pacific.

America was eyeing Pearl Harbor for a navy base and coaling station, and turned down the idea of leasing Necker to the British for a cable station.

Hawaii's blackmail didn't work. The U.S. said no in 1895 and didn't lay a cable. That came in 1903 through private enterprise.