

# Q A King, Several Queens And Four Mules

by Scott Whitney

**T**here are things I forget about Moloka'i if I'm away too long. For instance I wanted to make several phone calls as soon as I got to the hotel from the airport. But a quick glance around my room reminded me that most hotels on Moloka'i don't have phones—or air conditioning. Or room service. And I would also be spared the intrusion of maids making up beds or replacing towels each day, or leaving orchids and chocolates at the evening turn-down.

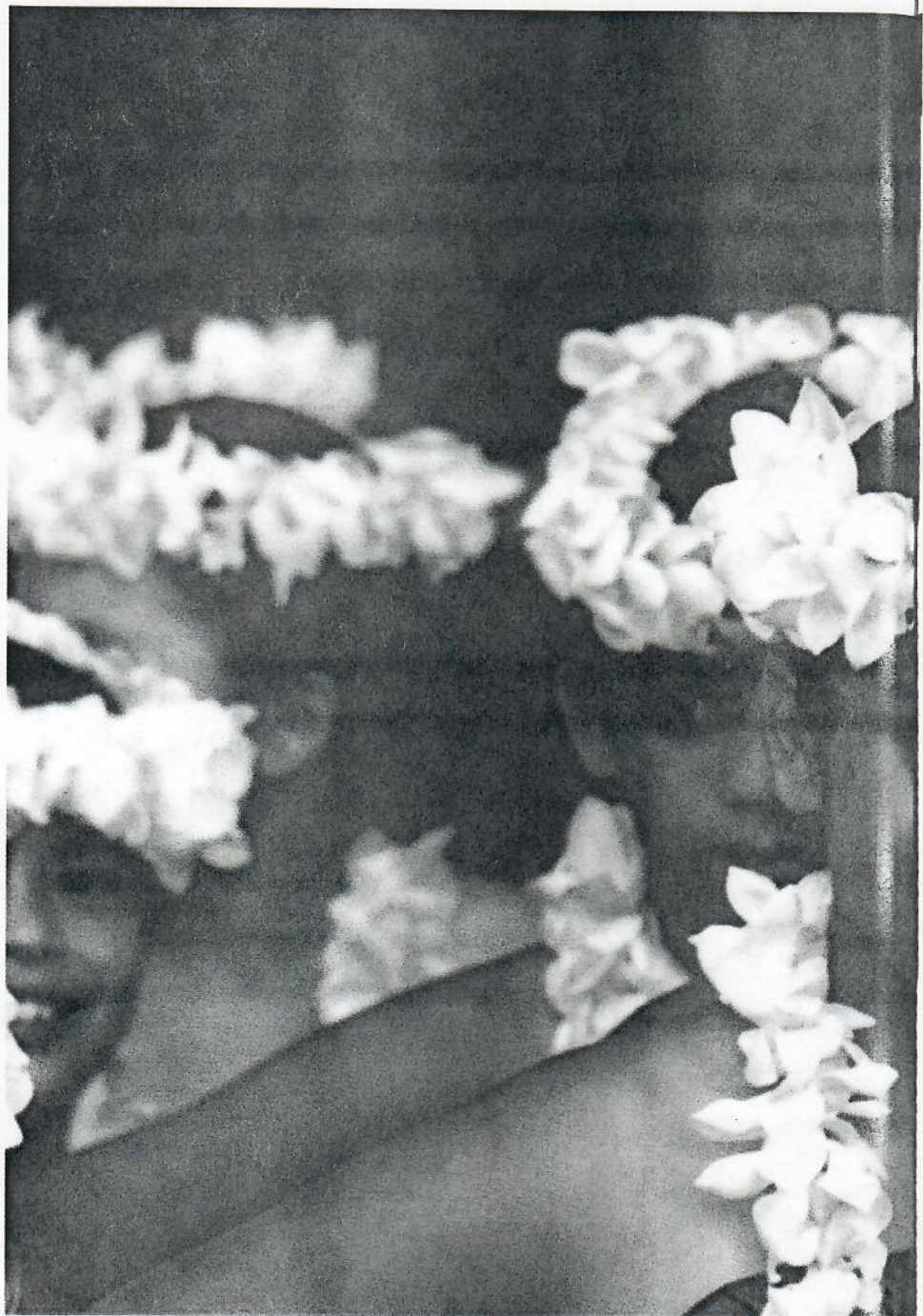
Moloka'i, I reminded myself, is not for the finicky or the fast-lane visitor. There are only two places with decent food—three, if you want to add the one gourmet dish served at the Moloka'i Drive In: beef stew bowl with curly fries. But even where the food is good, the service is usually at Moloka'i speed.

I have been coming to Moloka'i since the mid-1980s, but I had never seen the Aloha Festival and Mule Drag

Photos by Thomas Woolsey  
Roads Photography

Right: Keiki hula dancers, Aloha Festivals celebration on Mololoka'i.

Opposite, top of the page, from left: Muleskinner Buzzy Sproat with Friendly the mule, Pā'ū rider Renee Yasao, pageant queens Miss Summer (Evalani Faraon) and Wee Miss Summer (Sarah Sahagun).  
Opposite, bottom, Auntie Moana Dudoit





**That's the least of what you need to put on the Moloka'i Aloha Festival Parade and Mule Drag. A look behind the scenes shows Moloka'i at its best.**



staged each October. This year—I would. The parade took place on Saturday morning October 4, and the Mule Drag was run along the same Kaunakakai street as soon as the parade was over. Small-town celebrations can tell you a lot about how a community works, and that is part of what I was able to see during the three days I spent catching up on the public life of Moloka'i.

**Not Stubborn, Just Smart**

The Friday before the parade and mule race, I drove up to the mule barn in the Kala'e heights. This is where Buzzy Sproat keeps the 23 mules that carry Moloka'i visitors down the switchback trail to the Kalaupapa peninsula. It was here, at the bottom of the highest sea cliffs in the world; that Catholic missionaries like Father Damien, Mother Marianne Cope and Brother Joseph Dutton spent their energy and health caring for Hawaii's Hansen's disease patients.

I walked past that morning's riders as muleskinner Kaleo finished his orientation, fielding the questions of his nervous group.

In the Mule Ride Inc. office (really a sectioned-off room in the barn) I tell the receptionist I'm from HONOLULU magazine and would like to interview Buzzy. Since this is Moloka'i, she doesn't ask if I have an appointment. Leaning into the barn, she calls out: "Buzzy, a magazine writer!" She's seen my kind before.

Buzzy Sproat's grandfather was a Missouri muleskinner who came to the Kohala Sugar Plantation on the Big Island. He trained and ran the mules used to construct and maintain the irrigation ditches. Sproat's father took

over the job from his father and, in turn, passed on the skills to his son. Buzzy moved to Moloka'i in 1973 to become mule trainer for the original mule ride company, which had the cutesy name, "Tropical Rent-a-Mule Company."

Sproat has a well-trimmed gray beard, and he is wearing a leather blacksmith's apron and cowboy hat. He is happy to talk about mules, the work of his life. I asked him what advice he gives entrants in the Mule Drag. "Mules are not stubborn, they are smart. If the mules don't want to go, they won't," he says simply. "If you face them and pull, they don't like that. It's better to face the direction you want them to go in, then just run."

**Auntie Moana, Queen of the Microphone**

A friend told me years ago about the Mule Drag, describing it as a race in which the local drag queens pulled mules down the main street to see, not only who could win, but also who was the best dressed, or who put on the best show.

So there was a pun embedded in the title of the Moloka'i Mule Drag: It referred both to the effort to drag the mule down Ala Malama Street, and to the possibility that the human contestant might be "in drag." Moloka'i is famous, not only for its mules, but also for its mähū, the Hawaiian word that translates into modern slang as drag queen.

Historically, all the Islands have had small communities of mähū living publicly and assuming important





family roles, but modernization and American-style discomfort with gender-bending has made it difficult for these groups to survive in public life. Still-rural Moloka'i has the last such community of mähū retaining its place in the civic life of the island. But this may be changing. No one entered the mule drag in drag this year. And imported fundamentalist pastors on Moloka'i have very publicly opposed a yearly drag pageant put on by the mähū community.

Yet the queens still play an important role in public events. For instance, at 4:30 that Friday afternoon, Auntie Moana (Butchie) Dudoit took her place on the make shift platform on the main Kaunakakai street—"where the old gas station used to be," is the usual, helpful direction given to visitors.

As in most Moloka'i events, Moana is the master of ceremonies. For years she has had her own wahine hula hālau and driven one of the local school buses. Moana has been able to adjust her civic identity by dressing in "low drag." This afternoon that means a blousey top and floral patterned shorts. Her legs are shaved perfectly, her hair is nicely done up and she sports new retired-movie-actress eye glasses.

I still remember Moana in the mid-1980s, waving as she passed in the school bus—a silhouette of high hair and earrings at the head of a busload of rowdy kids who never thought twice about calling her Auntie. And on another Moloka'i trip a decade or so ago, I saw Moana and her adult hālau performing on the same make shift stage (when the gas station was still there). Back then, I had asked the haole lady visitor standing next to me how many of Moana's dancers she thought were biological women.

She was disoriented for a moment, then squinted more closely at the dancers across the street. As what I suggested began to dawn on her, the squint changed to a frown, then to a tentative smile as she looked around and saw that no one cared.

### Blowing Kisses

Back on this 1997 Friday afternoon, and on the same stage, it is 4:30 and Moana is in a snit because her musicians have not shown. She has to round up some last-minute replacements.

Ready at last, she calls out, "Girls, *mai*," beckoning and coaxing the keiki halau from the sidewalk where they have been giggling and preening. The line stretches toward the stage from their dressing area, which is the alley next to Friendly Market. With 15 young dancers trying to line themselves up on the

older ones in the back row dance with perfect grace and confidence—knees bent slightly, a steady genuine smile on every face. At the end of their number Moana shouts, "Mahalo, ladies," and they exit stage right.

The next group is of older girls, in yellow shifts and holding red feather 'ulī'ulī—small gourd rattles. They dance an ancient mele called Moloka'i Nui a Hina, a tribute to the protectress of the island. Meanwhile, a few cars and red-dust pickups idle down the main street, and Moana waves regally to the drivers she knows, which are all of them. The low, orange sunlight of late afternoon inflames the red and yellow dancers' costumes as if Hina herself had set them aglow. When they are done, Moana yells, "Take a bow, girls." As they start to leave, she stops them. "Girls," she coos, "blow your kisses."

Family and friends watch from across the street, many sitting in the backs of pickup trucks. Maybe next year the new Malama Cultural Park will be finished. The park, placed near the wharf where a few dedicated drinkers used to lounge in the undergrowth, will have a proper hula stage with amphitheater-style seating. Down the road from the new cultural park, a new cafe and microbrewery are being constructed. Each of these small changes will alter the island ever so slightly.

After the street corner hula that night, I go by the Pau Hana Inn. Stacey, another member of the mähū community, is dinner hostess in the dining room. Unlike Moana, Stacey is in full, mu'umu'u drag. She confides that she hopes business is slow so she can get off early. She'll be doing hair for the (real) ladies in the Moloka'i Pā'ū Riders group.

The really important social event this evening is happening over at the Rawlins Service Station, which is celebrating its reopening after closure to dig up and replace underground tanks. Everybody who's anybody is at the party behind the service station. Kaunakakai is



cardboard rectangle of the stage, Moana has to perch at the microphone, whispering instructions and gesticulating to get them into proper lines. One small girl is oblivious to her commands. "Baby, *huli!*" Moana stage-whispers, "turn around." The young one is quickly put in order and the lines are good enough for Moana to shout "*mākaukau*," ready. The musicians, three guitars and three last-minute 'ukulele, begin.

The girls have their hair done up perfectly, and each has a discrete touch of lipstick. The younger ones are sometimes clumsy or artless, but the



already buzzing with the news that the kālua turkey is the best dish there.

### Scenes From a Flatbed

After dark, I drive down to the end of the Beach Road, to Thad Camara's house, where the float for the Pūnana Leo o Moloka'i is being put together. Many young Hawaiian parents and their children will work through the night arranging the red ginger, the kukui nut leaves, the moss and heleconia and fan palms—all arrayed around the deck of a simple flatbed truck to a design by Penny Gomard. Pūnana Leo, the Hawaiian language preschool, may be one of the most important saviors of the language on Moloka'i, the island that (except for Ni'ihau) has the highest percentage of Native Hawaiians in its population.

The float has a big brown hand reaching out of all the greenery, representing the force and guiding hand of traditional culture. Next morning the young Pūnana Leo children will ride their flatbed-turned-rain forest—all in white malo and kīkepa, looking like perfect white blossoms in all the lush greenery. (Indeed, *pua*, the Hawaiian word for blossom, also means child.) The many hours of work will be worth it, since their float will win the first place among the three floats entered.

Early Saturday morning, a few hundred yards from where the Pūnana Leo float is still being worked on, the royal court, which has also been up most of the night preparing, is trying to get everyone in costume and placed on the royal float—another disguised flatbed. They are in the parking lot behind the Moloka'i Visitor's Association office. Queen Jonnette Kainoa Kaiuwenaole Spencer and her husband (the king) Eugene Kahiliulaokalani Spencer, are trying to get their extensive royal court organized.

The official color for the Moloka'i Aloha Festivals is green, the color traditionally associated with Moloka'i, so Jonnette is dressed in a green kīkepa, and Eugene wears a green velvetine cape with a chiefly helmet, also green. With everyone in costume and placed on the flatbed, the driver lurches through the gears. As he does, royalty, spear-bearers and attendants all tumble into each other. This has everyone cracking up, but Eugene is a little worried that the court will look undignified during the parade if the lurching continues.

### Backyard Horses and Girl Scouts on Skates

An hour later, up at the National Guard Armory, Stacey is spraying hair like mad. The Moloka'i Pā'ū riders, all in green with the contrasting black of kukui nut lei, are nervous. One of them has never ridden a horse in her life. Some of the mounts are what Moloka'i people call "backyard" horses, rarely groomed, and not used to being disturbed except perhaps for a weekly ride into town.

Two hours later, back down the hill, the parade is scheduled to start at 9:00 a.m. and, amazingly, it does. It is always led by a police cruiser, usually driven by Captain George Kaho'ohanohano. Since this is the Maui County Police Department, their chief is in Wailuku, and the captain is the highest ranking officer on Moloka'i. But Kaho'ohanohano is on vacation this year, and the duty sergeant has asked patrolman Michael Hale to do the



Photos by Thomas Woolsey  
Roads Photography

Above, from left: Schoolkids line the sidewalks to watch the parade, the Hawai'i Matusri Taiko drummers were a hit.

Page left: The Budget Rent A Car team races with its mule, Po Kāne

honors. "Can you believe a haole from Maui is leading the Moloka'i parade?" he tells me later.

Hale's cruiser is followed by the Fire Department's engine truck E-4, a beefy yellow Pierce-Arrow aptly named "Ha'aheo o Moloka'i"—the pride of Moloka'i. Firemen said that if they got a call during the parade, the patrol car could lead them out of formation in an orderly manner. I asked if they had a ladder truck, but the firemen looked at me like I was from off island—or just off. "This is Moloka'i," they reminded me, "we don't need a ladder truck."

At her post on the hula stage, Auntie Moana announces the parade with her usual flair. After the fire engine

come some boy scout troops, then the royal court. It seems to have found its pace and the truck is moving smoothly. One of the spear bearers sees a friend on the side of the street and can't help smiling, but he quickly recoups and stares blankly again into his wooden spear.

In addition to Moana and the royal court, the parade had a wealth of other kinds of queens. There was the newly crowned Wee Miss Summer, and the Miss Summer and the Ms. Tiny Summer (and one of the Summer queens was not tiny at all)—children and teenagers who had won beauty pageants. There was also a Ms. Aloha Baby and a Ms. World 1997. Most of these royals rode in the back of pickup trucks.

But perhaps the most stately and impressive of all was the Pā'ū Queen, Mrs. Julia Hoe, who rode horseback with her grey head held in perfect posture and 27 pikake lei around her neck—one for



each of her children and grandchildren. Then there were girl scouts on skates and soccer kids and the Pā'ū riders from Kaua'i, Lana'i and Moloka'i—each followed by its own indispensable pooper-scooper. Jack Magoon and his wife, the major shareholders in Moloka'i's coffee plantation at Kualapu'u, both looked spry and happy to be riding in the mule wagon driven by CEO Dan Kuhns.

The hit of the parade, especially since the Moloka'i High School band was not marching this year, was the Hawai'i Matusri Taiko drummers from Wahiawa, O'ahu. Led by Faye Komagata, whose husband has priestly responsibility for the Moloka'i Buddhist Soto Mission, the group pounded out their extraordinary percussive routines from the bed of yet another slow-moving flatbed. Their drumbeat ricocheted off the slopes above Kaunakakai, down to the wharf and back again. Chicken skin. **CONTINUED ON 103**



### Carrots for Friendly

The parade seemed to end just as it had reached a steady pace. Time for the Mule Drag. It took some time to get the mules to their starting point at Kalama Service station. Soon enough though, Buzzy had introduced the teams to their mules: Po Kāne, Friendly, Paleface and Black Jack. As of Friday night, the number of teams had yet to be finalized, so this morning there was much last-minute organizing and rounding up of high school kids to fill out the six teams.

The race goes from Kalama Service Station, down Ala Malama street, around traffic cones set up just past Friendly Market, then back to finish at Kalama Station. The teams pass off the mules, relay fashion, to other team members who make the return trip after the turnaround.

"Hook 'em up," Buzzy shouts as the teams try to queue up at the elusive starting line. Off they went in a cloud of confusion, the mules running with only minor encouragement. The only excitement was a near mule crash as Lynne Peleholani's Budget Rent A Car team and the Moloka'i Ranch team rounded the cones.

The first heats eliminated three

teams. The surviving teams then ran a final heat. It was the Moloka'i Ranch team vs. the team from Travel Shoppe. Most of the mule mavens were betting on the Moloka'i Ranch team, since the ranch cowboys are experienced with livestock and since there is a certain amount of professional image to keep up in front of the community. On the sidelines, Buzzy admitted that Friendly, the mule given to the Travel Shoppe team, was a known slouch and unlikely to be an asset.

But after another flurry of confusion from Kalama station to the cones and back, the Travel Shoppe team, with Friendly as their mule, won this year's championship. Travel Shoppe's owner Karen Buhr said it was the first year she had entered. Her team consisted of her two sons from the Mainland, Jim and Jeff King, and Gerry Garcia. They were helped by last minute recruits from Moloka'i High: Stephanie Tollefson, Malulani Dudoit and David Kadawaki.

After the race, Buhr's team seemed as surprised at their win as Buzzy was with his mule, Friendly. "I can't believe this," Sproat kept saying after the race. "Friendly don't give a rip about anything. He's the laziest mule we got. All he cares about is getting home to eat

and rest." Buzzy had also told me the day before that mules don't like carrots, but Friendly did. And that's what Buhr's team used as bait.

The Moloka'i Ranch cowboys walk off with their thumbs in their jeans pockets, trying to look like good sports, trying to look as if they don't care.

### A Fragile Refuge

Despite the days of planning and the late hours of rehearsing, decorating, grooming and costume sewing, it all ended so quickly. At mid-day Saturday I found myself walking along a side street toward the Moloka'i Drive Inn. Moana's microphone voice echoed through town from her new stage at the Mitchell Pau'ole Community Center, where she was handing out the float and pā'ū prizes. I saw some of the Moloka'i Pā'ū riders, in their smart green and black costumes, walking toward their cars. One was crying—the one who had never ridden a horse before today. Perhaps she was sad at their coming in third out of three, or maybe she was just relieved after so many days of hard work and nerves. Stacey's hair spray, though, had kept this rider's hair in perfect condition even through the mid-day sun.

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## MOLOKA'I

In front of the Moloka'i Drug Store, and the small professional building it anchors, I recognized Ed Kashiwamura guiding a weed-whacker through the perfectly groomed landscape that he had designed. Kashiwamura taught special education at Moloka'i High, then spent 22 years as principal of Kaunakakai Elementary. He educated two generations of barefoot Moloka'i kids with the same care and attention he gives now, in retirement, to the red ti and ornamentals along the drug store parking lot.

Moloka'i has always been a refuge where rare people like Kashiwamura or Buzzy Sproat or Moana Dudoit can thrive. The island shelters other rarities, too, like the sea turtle, the *hunakai* (a sanderling) and Monk seals at Mo'omomi Dunes. And there are 219 species protected by the Nature Conservancy in the upland bogs and rain forests of Kamakou Preserve. Two birds live there whose only home on earth is Moloka'i—the *kākāwahie* and the *oloma'o*.

But small islands are always vulnerable to outside forces. Rare birds are not the only beings at risk. The cowboys and the muleskinners can easily be lost to the mechanization of ranching. The *māhū* might closet themselves due to imported fundamentalism. Hawaiian children could lose their language to cable television. Economically, the visitor industry is vulnerable to rising airline fares, and farmers and merchants worry about interisland shipping rates. The Moloka'i workers who once commuted to Maui each day were left high and dry when the ferry service to Lahaina stopped. It is all very fragile.

At the end of the road I went inside the Moloka'i Drive Inn. As I finished ordering a stew bowl and curly fries, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the king, Eugene Spencer, smiling in a puka T-shirt and shorts. "It was a smooth ride," he said, since I had last seen him with his court tumbling around him before the parade. "The driver finally figured out the gears."

Now it was time to feed his court, and he picked up soda flats full of take-out. He and Jonnette still had the royal ball to get through Wednesday night at the Pau Hana Inn. But I knew that they would have plenty of help, and that they would do just fine. **PAU**

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