

Necker—Mystery Island of Hawaii

By E. H. BRYAN, JR.

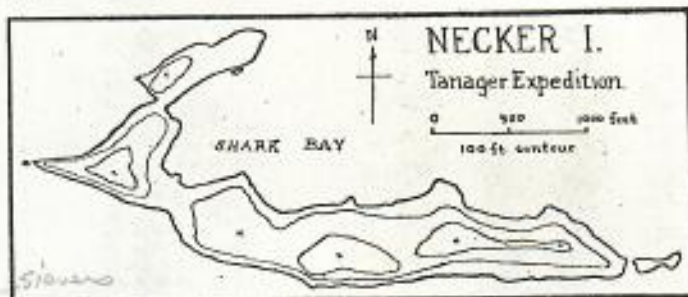
Curator of Collections, Bernice P. Bishop Museum

NECKER ISLAND is a precipitous, narrow ridge of volcanic rock, about 1,300 yards long, east and west, by a tenth as wide. It has an area of 41 acres. From the western end a narrow spur extends about 200 yards northward, like the bone point on an Hawaiian trolling hook. The main crest undulates in a series of five hills: the western most of these, called Annexation Hill, is 246 feet high; the next, Flagpole Hill, 185 feet; the middle one, Summit Hill, 278 feet; the next, Bowl Hill, 260 feet; and east of that a narrow ridge, slightly over 200 feet high. To the east of the north spur, the highest point of which is 156 feet above the sea, is Shark Bay, a shallow, rocky cove, too rough to provide a landing place for the greater part of the year, when the trade winds blow. West of the spur, however, is a small cove, where landing can be made on rocky shelves in moderately calm weather.

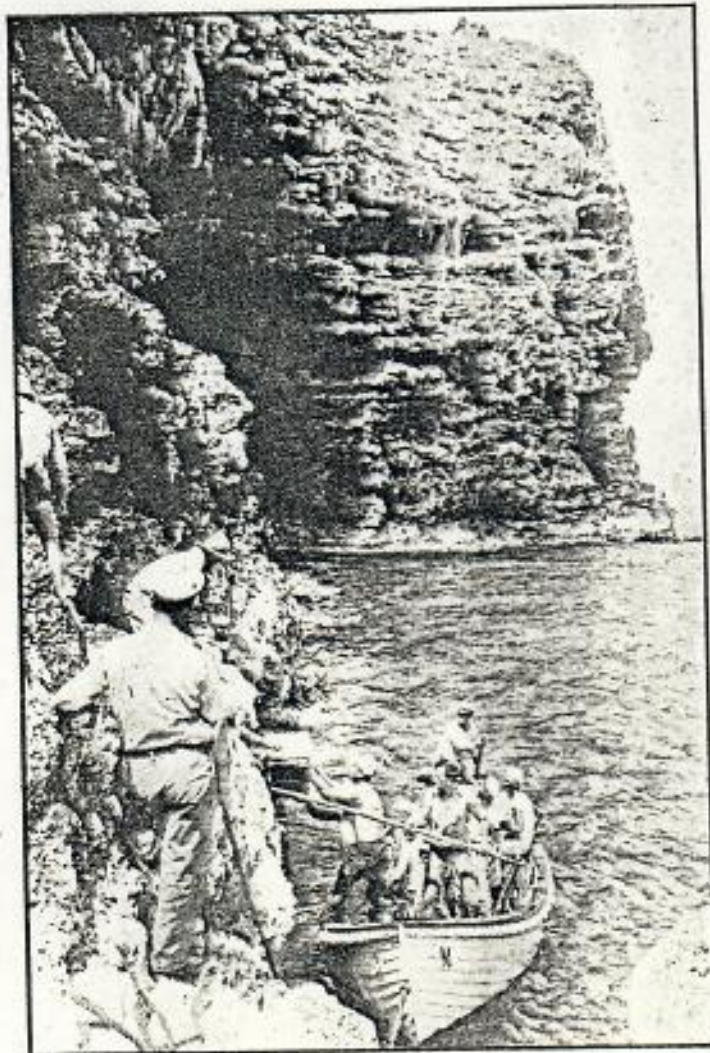
This rocky islet, particularly its nearly vertical sides, appears from a distance to be bare of vegetation. Closer examination discloses that its gently rounded crest and narrow terraces on its flanks are sparsely carpeted with five species of low, nearly prostrate plants: a species of goosefoot shrub (*Cheopodium sandwicheum*), which is common throughout the main islands of the group, known to the Hawaiians as aweoweo, is commonest on the terraced slopes; a bunch grass (*Panicum torridum*), called on the main islands kakonakona, is found on the northern slope, but very dry much of the time; purslane (*Portulaca lutea*), the common ili weed, is common on the flat tops; pickle weed (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*) grows on the lower northeastern slope of Annexation Hill, where it can be reached by the spray from waves dashing into Shark Bay; and a few plants of the much-branching ohai shrub (*Sesbania tomentosa*) sprawl, vine-like, along the windswept crest. None of the plants reaches a height of more than two feet above the thin, rocky soil. There is no sign of half a dozen other species of plants which were carefully set out by C. S. Judd, Territorial Forester, in June, 1923; apparently they could not stand the unfavorable conditions.

Dr. Harold S. Palmer in 1923 estimated that the rainfall might be 20 to 25 inches a year. Two small seeps of water, strongly tainted with guano, might together furnish ten gallons of water a day. The only inhabitants larger than cockroaches and a native species of Rhyncogonus weevil, related to another on Nihoa and a number on the main islands of the Hawaiian group, are the birds. There are hordes of them, all sea birds. At certain times of the year their eggs cover every bit of level ground so thickly that it is difficult to walk without stepping on them. The birds rise in clouds at ones approach. Some species cry all day, and others moan and howl all night. The five days we spent on the island in June, 1923, seemed long enough to devote to such an inhospitable place.

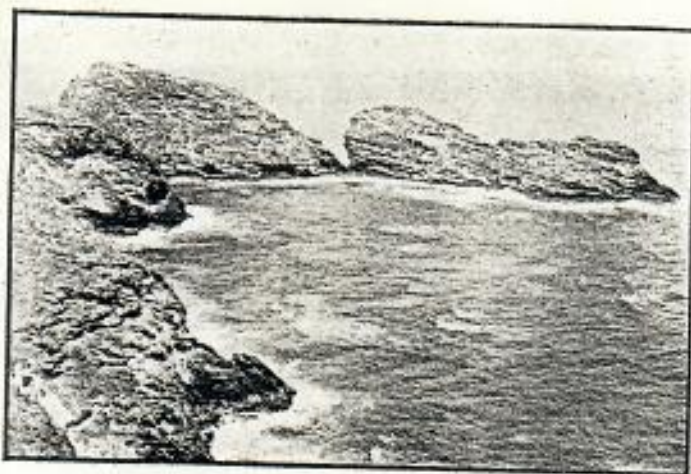
And yet to the student of native culture Necker Island is perhaps the most interesting spot in the Hawaiian Islands. By its very isolation and lack of hospitality it has preserved evidence of the culture of what is believed by Kenneth P. Emory, ethnologist at B. P. Bishop Museum, to have been



archaic Hawaiians. On the main islands of the group this ancient culture has been overlain by the changes brought about by the incoming Ari'i and their priests who arrived from the Society Islands by canoe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Only fragments of the ditches, fishponds and other stone structures, ascribed to the Menchunes, represent this early culture on the larger islands. But on Necker were some 34 temple platforms, which seem to find their nearest counterparts in the marae of southeastern Polynesia. There, also, were found the famous stone images, beautifully carved stone bowls, adzes, sinkers, a grindstone,



Landing at Necker Island, 1923—H. S. Palmer Photo, Courtesy Bish. Mus.



Shark Bay, Necker Island—E. L. Coom Photo, Courtesy Bishop Museum

and human bones, all mute evidence of at least semi-permanent residence by a Polynesian people. Those who are interested in this subject will find Emory's "Archaeology of Nihoa and Necker Islands" (Bishop Museum Bulletin 53, 1928) a well written, convincing and entertaining account.

Necker Island was unknown to the Hawaiians at the time of its discovery on November 4, 1786, by La Perouse. This famous French navigator sailed within a third of a league of the island on his passage westward, noting the perpendicular cliffs, white with the droppings of birds, the absence of trees, and the violence of the sea which made it impossible to land. He called it *Ile Necker*, in honor of Monsieur Jacques Necker, French Minister of Finance under Louis XVI.

John Turnbull who visited the Hawaiian Islands, December, 17, 1802 to January 21, 1803, in the British ship *Margaret*, mentions in his account of the voyage that he learned that two Hawaiians, who had been engaged to dive for pearls on a reef in the leeward Hawaiian Islands, had landed on Necker, and had their curiosity aroused by a "range of stones, placed with some regularity in the manner of a wall, and about three feet high." They were apparently the first persons to set foot on Necker Island in modern times.

Lieutenant J. M. Brooke visited Necker during January, 1859, determining its position. During the summer of 1859, Captain N. C. Brooks, of the Hawaiian bark *Gambia*, on a sealing and exploring voyage, passed the island, but makes no mention of landing, although he states that "there is a



Annexation Hill, Necker Island—E. L. Coom Photo, Courtesy Bishop Museum

ravine makes down from the southeast end of the rock, where at some seasons there is water. A boat may land in good water at the foot of this gulch."

In 1894, Captain J. A. King was commissioned by Sanford B. Dole and authorized to annex Necker Island in the name of the Provisional Government of Hawaii. On board the Hawaiian steamer *Iwalani*, Captain William K. Freeman, arrived off Shark Bay on Sunday morning, May 27, 1894, at 11 a. m., and landed immediately. The landing party consisted of Captain King, Captain Freeman, Benjamin H. Norton, and nine sailors. A flagpole was erected on Annexation Hill, the Hawaiian flag hoisted, and Captain King read the annexation proclamation. In the course of their exploration of the island the party found some stone images and noted the stone platforms with their rows of upright stones. Fragments of six images were collected during the four hours spent on the island. Copies of seven photographs, taken at the time by B. H. Norton, engineer of the *Iwalani*, are now preserved in Bishop Museum.

On September 24, 1894, H.B.M.S. *Champion*, Captain Rooke, landed a party on Necker Island, which collected four more images, two of which are now in the British Museum. On July 12, 1895, Captain King headed another expedition to Necker, on the Revenue Cutter *Lehua*, to map the island and see if additional images could be found. Dr. William T. Brigham, first director of Bishop Museum, went to make scientific observations, but discovered no additional images. The survey was made by F. S. Dodge, of the Government Survey. Professor W. D. Alexander was also a member of the party.

Several other landings were made during the following quarter century, including two by George N. Wilcox, two by officers of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Thetis* (1910 and 1913), H. L. Tucker and excursion party in 1917, and the late Gerrit P. Wilder, Warden of the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation, on the lighthouse tender *Kukui*, October 6, 1919. Mr. Wilder found the leg of an image.

The *Tanager* Expedition put two parties ashore between June 12 and 29, 1923. At this time a plane-table map was made by Charles S. Judd and Dr. H. S. Palmer, and a careful study was made of the plant and animal life by other members of the party. The *Tanager* returned July 14, 1924 with a party which made an archaeological survey of three days.

Officially Necker Island is part of the City and County of Honolulu, being one of the islands acquired by the United States, July 7, 1898. On June 2, 1904 it was leased for fishing purposes for 21 years. February 3, 1909, it became a part of the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation, and as such it is administered jointly by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of the Biological Survey and the Territory of Hawaii.

Pineapples in 1843

Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, of the United States frigate *United States*, at Waiakea near Hilo on the Island of Hawaii, in July of 1843, wrote that "the level land of the whole district for about five miles is one continued Garden, laid out in patches of fifteen rods square and ditched, planted with bananas, pineapples, taro, melons, and tappah trees, beside sugar cane, which flourishes luxuriously in every direction."