

## The Guns of Yesteryear

The Citizens Guard of Hawai'i aided in the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i; now their guns will be housed in its palace.



COURTESY HAWAII STATE ARCHIVES





**M**ike Sheehan's home on O'ahu is impressive, with high-arched ceilings, a fireplace complete with an old Christmas wreath and vintage Hawaiiana paintings. But the most impressive display, at least at the moment, is the collection of antique firearms laid out on a white sheet on the floor of his living room, including a gleaming 1866 "Golden Boy" Winchester rifle with a bronze receiver; two pistols with ornate swirls carved onto their brass grips; a group of 1886 Winchester rifles, with chips and scratches here and there but otherwise in surprisingly good condition. The guns

are heavy, much heavier than one would expect. The 1873 Winchester saddle-ring carbines are shorter and lighter, easier to carry. Engraved on the rear of the stock are the initials "C.G.H."—Citizens Guard of Hawai'i.

Among the many artifacts of old Hawai'i, CGH firearms are among the most desired by serious gun collectors. The 79-year-old Sheehan possesses the largest (and most valuable) CGH collection in the state, with a total of sixty pieces. Inspecting the collection is Leona Hamano, curator of 'Iolani Palace—Sheehan has asked Hamano to come to his home and view his historic



**OPENING SPREAD** / The Citizens Guard of Hawai'i (CGH) squad assigned to Thomas Square under Sgt. CM Cooke. A volunteer militia organized in the late nineteenth century, CGH was loyal to the new government following the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893.

**TOP** / CGH gun collector Mike Sheehan poses with his prized 1876 Winchester musket. Only 617 of this model were ever made.

**BOTTOM** / Medals belonging to CGH sharpshooters; drills and shooting matches were held regularly to maintain marksmanship.

**AT LEFT** / Sheehan intends to donate his CGH weapon collection to 'Iolani Palace; certifications of registration will be generated for each gun.

collection in order to begin the process of donating it to the palace.

Up against a floor-to-ceiling window, ten 1876 Winchester muskets with bayonet tips are lined up on a gun stand. These are especially prized because only 617 of this specific model were made—the fewest of any Winchester rifle ever manufactured. Seven of Sheehan's collection of ten have consecutive serial numbers. "Having that many consecutive serial numbers," he says, "now that's like winning the lottery."

**The Citizens Guard** was a volunteer militia group active in the





An 1895 image of the CGH squad assigned to Pearl City. Alfred G. Reis, seated in the front row far left, wrote on the back of the photograph that he is the last surviving member of the guard. The image was originally featured in a 1942 issue of the *Honolulu Advertiser*.

aftermath of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. Only those who swore loyalty to the new Provisional Government that took power after Queen Lili'uokalani was deposed, and later to the Republic of Hawai'i, could join. Many were skilled marksmen, qualified to join the National Guard Sharpshooter units and the Mounted Police force—drills, target practices and shooting matches were held regularly. Initially 390 enlisted, but the CGH grew to more than 600.

Notoriously, the CGH was called into active duty during the 1895 Wilcox

Rebellion, when a group of royalists led by Robert W. Wilcox tried to reinstate Lili'uokalani. Around five hundred Citizen Guards, armed with the latest repeating Winchesters, took part in the fighting. They also guarded government buildings and assisted police officers. The short-lived counterrevolution was quickly quashed, and three years later, Hawai'i was annexed as a territory of the United States.

Among the weapons in Sheehan's collection is an 1886 Winchester rifle with the initials "R.W." carved near

the receiver. Sheehan believes it might have belonged to Wilcox himself. Beside Wilcox's rifle lies another 1873 saddle-ring carbine, which belonged to Volney Ashford, a captain who battled Wilcox. "This is interesting, isn't it?" muses Sheehan. "These two rifles next to each other that were once from opposing sides."

For those familiar with the turbulent history of Hawai'i, the CGH's role in defeating the Wilcox Rebellion is controversial, especially because they played a significant role in the





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overthrow of the Hawai'i monarchy. Sheehan recalls receiving a CGH rifle from a family whose ancestors were citizens of the once-sovereign Hawaiian nation. Once they learned the history behind the rifle, they were all too happy for Sheehan to take it off their hands, trading it for a shotgun.

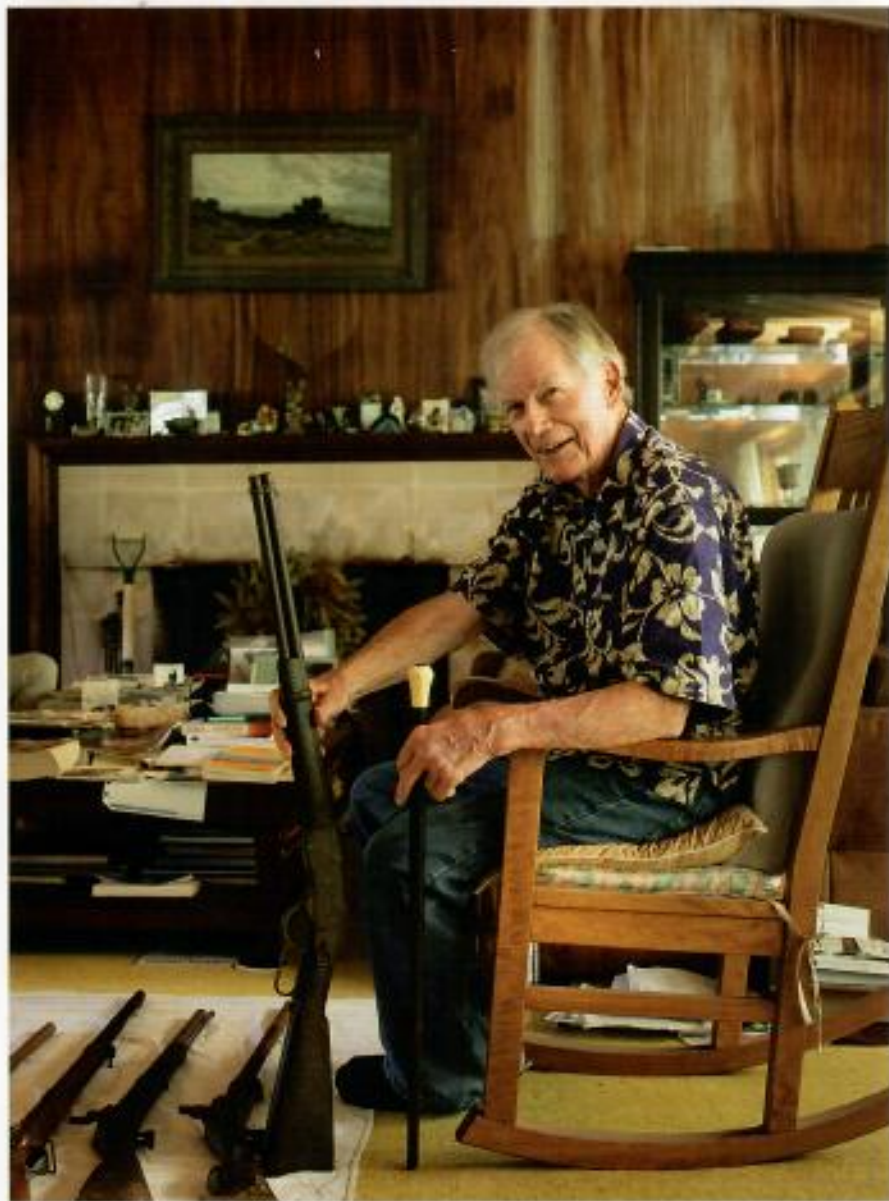
But such controversy is part of what interests Hamano in the collection. "I do believe in telling the hard and ugly truths, and what better place to do so than 'Iolani Palace?" she says. "They are parts of history to be taught and learned,

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not silenced. It is important to tell the whole story."

**A former undercover cop,** Sheehan's love for guns goes back to his childhood. When he was five years old, he lived next door to a Marine Corps captain, who taught him how to shoot. One day, the captain gave him a test: If he could dismantle a .45-caliber automatic pistol and put it back together blindfolded, he could keep the gun. The firearm had belonged to the captain's second lieutenant, who was killed in Tarawa during World War II.

Sheehan returned home that day to his shocked parents with his first gun, and he hasn't stopped collecting since.

"Some people collect Pokémon cards, others collect toys and, well, I am an avid collector of history, and part of that is guns," he says. Despite his age, Sheehan still walks tall and upright, with sharp blue eyes and a Clint Eastwood jawline. How many guns does he have in total? He admits with a sheepish smile that he owns about 100, and 60 of the some 350 CGH guns known to exist. "Gun collectors can be mad, you know," he laughs. "By 'mad' I mean crazy! They'll



**TOP /** Collectors can prove the authenticity of their gun by tracing its serial number at the Hawai'i State Archives.

**BOTTOM /** An 1895 photo of the Leleou and Nu'uuanu Bridge CGH squad led by Capt. B. Ordenstein.

**AT LEFT /** "Some people collect Pokémon cards, others collect toys and, well, I am an avid collector of history," says Sheehan, seen here with an 1886 Winchester rifle that belonged to Capt. Volney Ashford, who fought royalist Robert Wilcox.

do just about anything to get their hands on a prized gun."

He has crazy stories of trustees sneaking guns away from deceased grantors, of eccentric millionaires with expansive collections hidden away, of having his own guns stolen at the airport. And, he says, once collectors are on the hunt for a certain artifact or type of gun, they won't give up easily. Sheehan himself is hooked on CGH firearms, scouring online auctions, sifting information on forums and attending collectors' events. He's found them scattered around the world,





Above, a standard-issue CGH badge in the collection of the Hawai'i State Archives. Membership in the guard was restricted to men who took an oath of loyalty to the Provisional Government that assumed control after Queen Lili'uokalani was deposed.

including in Maryland, New Zealand and even as far away as Liberia.

But many are lost. Sheehan theorizes that the Honolulu Police Department disposed of them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Back then, if there was a death, the police would be called. Let's say that the deceased person had a bunch of guns under his bed or in the closet. Police officers are supposed to turn those things in, but in the old days they would periodically hire a tugboat, go out to the harbor and throw those things over. I've been told that many of these things were extremely valuable collector's pieces but now destroyed."

Stacks upon stacks of papers are piled high across Sheehan's coffee table, dining table and on the floor. Among them are scanned copies from CGH records he's found at the State Archives. Together with his late friend John A. Bell, Sheehan spent decades researching these rifles. It became their pet project—matching serial records, researching history, transcribing and typing up roster information from the archives. "We still don't know where the bulk of

the 1876 Winchester muskets went after they left the Winchester factory, nor how they got to Hawai'i," says Sheehan. So, the work continues.

**The easiest way to spot a CGH rifle** is the distinctive "C.G.H." engraved into the rear of the stock. There are some fakes out there, too, and Sheehan's seen his share. "I've studied enough of the real thing to spot when the engravings look a little off to me," he says. He authenticates them by digging through records at the State Archives and matching the serial numbers from the guns to the extensive squad rosters.

For fellow gun collector and history buff Ken Kiwada, this is fascinating research. The 44-year-old has been collecting for ten years, and in 2019 he found and bought an 1873 Winchester saddle-ring carbine rifle on a whim from an online estate sale. Not every gun has such extensive records that are so well documented, which is one of the reasons why the CGH collection is so interesting and valued by collectors. Kiwada spent a day at the State Archives

trying to find and match serial numbers for verification and to see who was the original owner. But they're not always a guaranteed find, as the most complete records are for Winchester 1876 rifles, and Kiwada came up empty.

I visit the State Archives, too, rifling through black-and-white photos of mustachioed guards with boater hats and gently turning fragile pages of squad correspondence, trying to decipher the sweeping black cursive handwriting—squad rosters, letters to officers, enrollment applications, reports, journals. These records date from 1893 to 1902, containing personnel records that include serial numbers and each rifle's owner, occupation and notes like "Carpenter. Dead. Where is rifle?" "Rifle lost in fire" and "Discharged. Rifle returned to headquarters."

During my visit, State Archivist Adam Jansen emerges with three artifacts: four delicate, silver-and-copper medals given only to CGH sharpshooters, and a faded gold badge with a star and the words "CITIZENS GUARD." He hopes that gun collectors might consider donating rifles to the





Following the 1895 Wilcox rebellion, CGH was reorganized into five divisions: Honolulu, areas outside of Honolulu, Hawai'i Island, Maui and Kaua'i. Pictured above is the squad assigned to the area near Punahou School in Honolulu. After the United States annexed Hawai'i in 1898, the CGH disbanded as a volunteer militia but remained active as a social club.

State Archives, too, and add to the current collection of CGH artifacts.

Another way to prove authenticity is by paying the Cody Firearms Records to receive a letter of provenance, which is what Kiwada ended up doing. "There are fakes out there, so having that provenance from the records backs up the history of my gun. Now I know that my rifle was manufactured on January 28, 1891, and shipped to Hawai'i on February 10, 1891, order number 75. It is so cool to connect a tangible item in your hand to the history of Hawai'i," he says.

Kiwada plans to donate his gun to Bishop Museum, where three CGH rifles are already on display on the third floor of Hawaiian Hall. The process is fairly simple: Donating a firearm requires you to give up ownership, and it'll enter into the collection at the museum. "There's no guarantee that it'll be displayed all the time," Kiwada says, "but my contact at Bishop Museum told me that they don't have many CGH rifles, so they will rotate them. That means when my rifle is not on display, they'll clean and maintain it. For me it's important that it's available for people to see this piece

of history, instead of having it just sitting in my private collection at home."

Sitting on the brown leather couch in his home, Sheehan chats with Hamano about donation logistics. Although Hamano prefers to keep the guns at 'Iolani Palace's Hale Koa Barracks, the former armory, there's a major obstacle: The HVAC system needs an update. "To preserve the guns, they would need to be placed in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment. High humidity can result in corrosion and mold growth on the metal and wood components. Low humidity can result in splintering. As a precaution, the guns would also require fumigation treatment prior to entering the palace to avoid pest infestation, such as termites," she says. "To display the guns collectively in Hale Koa, the barracks, we would need to create an entire space for an exhibit, which I look forward to being a part of."

Following the overthrow, much of what you see in the palace's rooms today was dispersed around the world. The rooms were turned into executive offices to serve the succeeding

governments. Since the 1980s, as part of a continuing effort to restore the palace to its grandeur, the nonprofit Friends of 'Iolani Palace has been able to bring the palace's objects—the artwork on the walls, diplomatic gifts, furniture—home. "Imagine having a treasure of our ali'i somewhere in Alabama, completely displaced from its origin," says Hamano. "It is always exciting to have them found and brought home."

There have been other artifacts returned to 'Iolani Palace over the years, like a silver nut bowl that was gifted by Princess Lili'uokalani and later purchased at an antique store or flea market in California prior to its donation to the palace. The donation process for Sheehan's CGH rifles has just begun, but he's hopeful. Like Kiwada, Sheehan would rather have his guns being appreciated by the community in an exhibit instead of sitting at home. "Perhaps having my collection on display at the palace will inspire other gun collectors around the world to return CGH firearms back to Hawai'i, where they belong," he says. **hh**



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