

Clare Boothe Luce

Hawaii's most internationally famous resident talks bluntly about writers, presidents and the landscape of Honolulu

Over the years Clare Boothe Luce has been a journalist, playwright, congresswoman and ambassador. She was the first woman to hold a major U.S. ambassadorial post. From 1953 to '57 she served as ambassador to Italy; a decade earlier, she was a U.S. representative from Connecticut. She is the author of countless newspaper and magazine articles and the much-acclaimed play, *The Women*. For 32 years, until his death in 1967, she was married to Time magazine publisher Henry Luce.

Since 1969 she has lived in Hawaii, in a palatial Kahala home. Her husband had bought the property several years earlier, but they had never gotten around to moving here. After his death, attracted by Hawaii's climate and natural beauty, and desiring to consolidate all her possessions under one roof, she came here.

Today, at 77, she is far from retired. "I'm away maybe four or five months a year," she said, "but never the same five months. I had a job on the president's intelligence board under Nixon and Ford that took me

to Washington once a month, but Carter disbanded the board, which was very stupid of him, because it was his own eyes and ears into the intelligence community. Since then I have not had a regular job. I go back and forth occasionally because I'm a consultant to the Library of Congress and a member of the board of editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*."

When HONOLULU first called Luce for an interview, her secretary said that she was not taking calls that day because she was writing. Luce later explained that she is always busy writing something—articles, book introductions, etc.—and also was about to give a couple of speeches, one at an FBI banquet, after which she was scheduled to travel to Westminster College in Missouri to deliver lectures commemorating Winston Churchill. While at home, she also entertains a steady stream of houseguests and visiting VIPs.

A staunch and often eloquent spokesman with a conservative viewpoint, Luce has relatively little inter-

est in local politics, but sees America in a state of economic crisis, a situation she feels most journalists are incapable of describing. In her own (inimitable) words: "The journalists of today cannot wrap their minds around the incredible complexities of 150 nations in foreign affairs, most of which are in a state of rapid upheaval. Most journalists today are absolute ignoramuses about economics. I know very little about economics myself, but at least I know enough to know that they know nothing! So as the tremendous problem here in America is presenting itself as an economic problem, the journalists cannot deal with it, and so they confine themselves to reporting, say, the campaign that is going on for the man who is supposed to handle this incredible situation, as a game of goose!"

Luce was interviewed on a patio of her Kahala home by associate editor Victor Lipman. Although her eyesight is failing and her voice may not be as strong as it once was, her convictions are still firm and her tongue sharp.



"I knew Hemingway quite well. I did not often want him in my house because he drank and sometimes broke up the furniture."




"Honolulu is probably one of the most stupidly planned cities in the world, considering the possibilities for beautiful planning."



"Oh, I'm not feeble or anything like that. And as long as I have my marbles, I'm not too bothered about anything else."

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HONOLULU: Did you read *The Powers that Be*, David Halberstam's book?

LUCE: No. I know David Halberstam, but I haven't read his book.

HONOLULU: There was one thing that stuck out in my mind from the book, and that was that Halberstam said your husband was always upset with Franklin Roosevelt for treating you, in Halberstam's words, like "a pretty (silly) thing." Was this true?

LUCE: There's not a word of truth in there. Not a *word* of truth! First, Roosevelt didn't treat me like a pretty silly thing; he paid me the compliment of sending the vice president of the United States, who was Henry Wallace, 17 times into my district to defeat me for Congress! And I think I was the only congressman in the history of the United States that a president of the United States, after his own election, bothered to mention as a defeated candidate. By the way, he made a mistake. I *wasn't* defeated. The night he was elected for his fourth term, he was notified of his overwhelming election around 11 at night. And when he finished telling everyone how happy he was, he said it also made him very happy that he had defeated the lady from Connecticut. Or that the lady from Connecticut had been defeated. Only he spoke rather prematurely because I wasn't defeated, and I managed to squeak through by around 500 votes. So his information was wrong. But I don't consider that treating me like a silly thing; he treated me like a real opponent.

I think he *was* very annoyed with me because I had originally been a New Dealer. As a matter of fact, I was the "kitchen maid" on the so-called kitchen cabinet, and I don't think he liked it that I changed from the Democratic to Republican party. But that was a matter of necessity because when I married Harry Luce, I had no intention of spending the rest of my life quarreling with my husband about politics.

HONOLULU: You didn't think *he* was going to change and become a Democrat?

LUCE: No. [laughs] No way!

HONOLULU: So you're saying that story of Halberstam's is basically incorrect?

LUCE: Oh yes.

HONOLULU: Where do you think he got the story, if it's incorrect?

LUCE: Oh, Halberstam is a very

brilliant, a very charming man. I like him very much. But if you read his books, he plucks up myths and stories and so on. If people live long enough, there is sort of an accretion of myths and stories that are not true told about them. So people tell stories, and they're amusing, and most of them are quite harmless.

Others are not so harmless. And other people print them because they're amusing to read. [laughs] But they're legends.

HONOLULU: Of all the U.S. presidents you've known, whom did you find the most personally likeable?

LUCE: Well, I've known them all personally, or at least I've met them all, since Woodrow Wilson. Now which president did I like as what—as a human being?

HONOLULU: Yes, just as a likeable person.

LUCE: Well, I knew Jack Kennedy since he was a boy. And considered him a

friend, and he was very fond of me too. He used to write me even from the hospital, when he was in the hospital after the PT boat thing. So I think I knew him best, and was on a very warm and friendly basis with him.

I knew Nixon well enough . . . The ones I've known best were Jack Kennedy and Roosevelt and Hoover and Nixon. And Ike—oh Ike, I should not have left out Ike! No, I have to change everything: as friend, Jack; as president, I liked Ike best.

HONOLULU: You mean you liked how he used his political power?

LUCE: No, as an attractive and amiable and agreeable president.

HONOLULU: Of all the presidents you've known, whom would you consider the most intelligent?

LUCE: Well, intelligent . . . I don't know quite what you mean by that. The two best *educated* presidents of my lifetime, the two most *intellectual* presidents, were Woodrow Wilson and Herbert Hoover. Herbert Hoover was a man of great intellect.

HONOLULU: OK, I was thinking of

the deplorable condition of the American economy and American foreign affairs. There is a history to the mess we're in. But what one *can* say is that he has done a great deal to make it worse. What makes it difficult for people to come to grips with Mr. Carter as a politician is that he is a

mirror image of the American mind at the moment. And the American mind itself is full of contradictions, full of confusions. There's no consensus on where America wants to go, and there is a highly volatile public opinion that changes from day to day. Mr. Carter reflects all that so brilliantly that many Americans seem to have the impression that he is a most reliable character, simply because he reflects at any given moment what they are thinking. This makes him a very hard man to beat, but a very poor president for a country which

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intelligence not so much in terms of erudition or intellectuality, but basic horse-sense. Good common sense.

LUCE: Oh Ike, Ike. Ike was a man with tremendous intuitions about human beings. And that very often reflects itself in that mysterious word called charisma. He was a very charismatic character. Now there's no doubt Nixon was a very intelligent man, which makes his ultimate stupidity at Watergate all the more appalling.

HONOLULU: What I'd like to do is name some individuals and get your impressions or opinions of them. Just whatever comes to mind. First of all: Jimmy Carter.

LUCE: One has to begin by saying that he is not *entirely* responsible for

is in a condition of crisis.

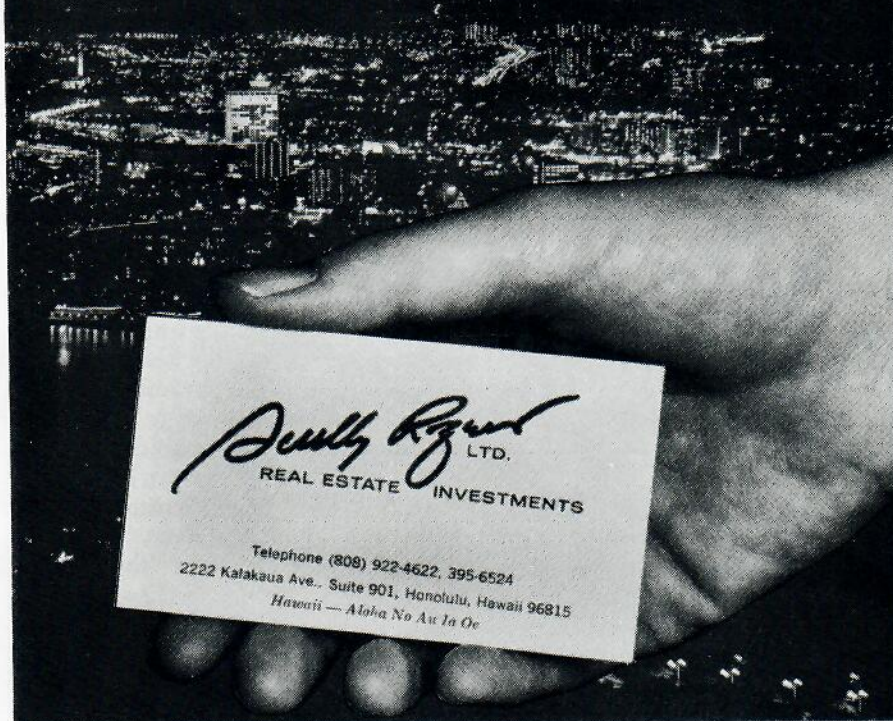
HONOLULU: Next person: Ernest Hemingway.

LUCE: I knew him very well. Quite well; I wouldn't say very well. I did not often want him in my house because he drank very heavily and sometimes broke up the furniture. But I always wanted him on my bookshelves.

HONOLULU: Ronald Reagan.

LUCE: He's a better man than people think. I've known him now for many years, and happened to have seen more of him than I normally would because his in-laws lived next to us in Arizona and he used to come over from Los Angeles to visit them with his wife. I remember well when he told my husband and me one night that he intended to run for governor

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of California. And I thought that rather odd. I tended to think of him as a most amiable and agreeable movie star. My husband said, "I've talked to him very often. He's a lot smarter than what you might think from what people say."

Mr. Reagan is finding out, of course, that what you say in a democratic country in which most of the media are liberal, when you are in sight of the White House, has to be said much more carefully than what you say when you'd like to be president but people think you haven't got a chance. I'm enough of a journalist to realize that the scenario for defeating Reagan was laid down some time ago. And that was: Concentrate on him as a man who makes gaffes. That was in the works a year ago even before he began to make a gaffe. The whole name of the game is to make Reagan look worse than Carter; not to make Carter look better than Reagan, but Reagan *worse* than Carter.

HONOLULU: Barbara Walters.

LUCE: I like her very much. I've been on her program a number of times and seen her as a friend a number of times in New York, and I think she's a remarkable girl. Really remarkable. Works very hard. Tickled me *pink* that she was the first million dollar salary in the interviewing game.

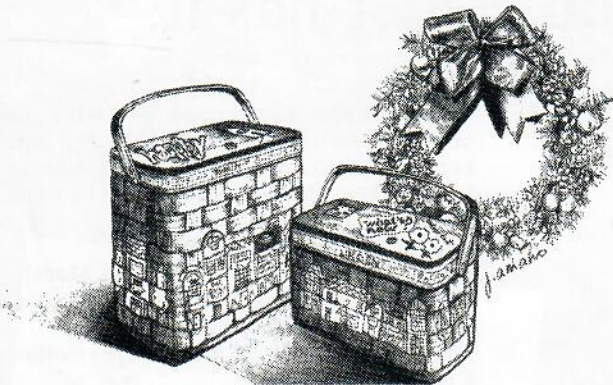
HONOLULU: John Anderson.

LUCE: [laughs softly] I find it difficult to know why there's such excitement about him. I think the reasons for the excitement are probably reflected in that cartoon *Doonesbury*. You see, in *Doonesbury* he's the candidate for a great number of these characters who belong to what you might call "the new class"—the people who drink wine and not beer at rallies. I think he's the new class candidate, and also the candidate for the people who are too intelligent to take Carter and too prejudiced to take Reagan.

HONOLULU: Frank Fasi.

LUCE: I haven't gone into the background of Mr. Fasi too heavily. I remember when I first came out here it was clear that the newspapers were against him, and what was called the Burns machine was against him, and that vendetta seems to have been inherited by Gov. Ariyoshi, and they never stop picking on *poor* Mr. Fasi! It seems to me that as mayors go, he's a pretty good mayor. I like him.

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HONOLULU: Teddy Kennedy.

LUCE: Well, you know, Joe Kennedy used to say, "Bobby Kennedy is *my* son; Teddy is Rose's baby. Joe and Jack are little different than either of us." He thought, I think, that the sun rose and set on Joe. When Joe was killed, he put his hopes in Jack. I don't think anyone thought that Teddy would have the substance necessary to become president of the United States. It was enough that he would go on somehow as a politician.

HONOLULU: George Ariyoshi.

LUCE: I don't know Mr. Ariyoshi very well.

HONOLULU: Marilyn Bornhorst.

LUCE: [gives a quizzical look]

HONOLULU: She's a local councilwoman.

LUCE: I have not involved myself at all in local politics because they are just as time-consuming as national politics, and besides which I have other concerns which would make it impossible for me to follow through. This is a Democratic state, the Republicans are vastly outnumbered, and what is plain to be seen is that the political game is played within factions of the Democratic party.

HONOLULU: You've known Hemingway, you've known all these presidents—you've had opportunities to get to know quite a few prominent people throughout the years. Were there any people about whom you felt, "Gee, I would really have liked to get to know that person"—but didn't get a chance to?

LUCE: Oh, there were two or three writers I would have liked to have known, but I never made any great effort because I've long since discovered that the best there is about a writer is generally in his books, and if it is his books you've been much in love with, you may even find his personality a little disappointing.

HONOLULU: Who are the writers you wish you had known?

LUCE: Well, Tolkien. I would have *adored* to have known Tolkien. He's dead now. An Englishman. Now I knew Rebecca West and H.G. Wells, I wanted *awfully* to meet George Bernard Shaw and get to know him, but I did do that. Willie Maugham I knew. American writers? Well, I've known a number of the best and some of them I wished I hadn't known at all because they were so disappointing as people. Faulkner, for example, what a great writer he was! A splendid writer. But one of



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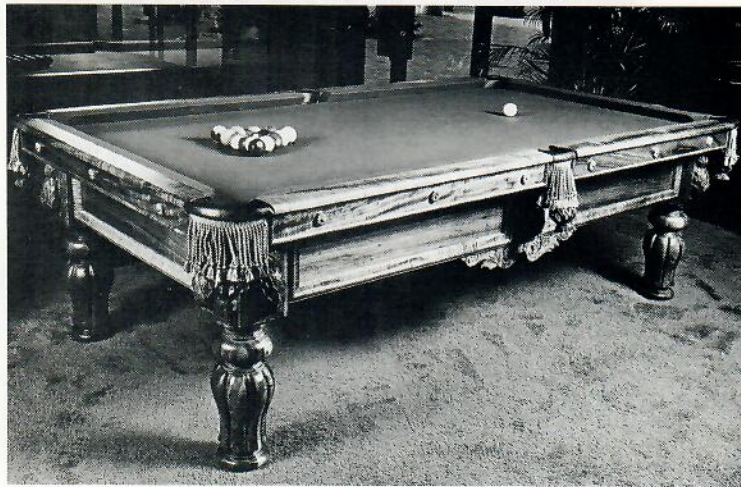
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the most unattractive human beings you ever met!

HONOLULU: In what sense unattractive?

LUCE: He was unattractive to look at, his manners were very bad. I remember the first time I met him. I was an editor at *Vanity Fair*, which was the great artistic and literary magazine of its day, and I went to the station to get him and bring him to a studio to sit for his portrait. And he got off the train, I got him into a taxi—and I was very young then, and rather pretty too—and I was thinking what an unattractive little man he was, when at that point he took off his shoes in the taxi and said that his feet were sweating! It had been so hot in the train his feet were sweating. And he had a hole in one sock. Well, I thought that was *very* unattractive and very bad manners. And I met him on a number of other occasions and felt the same thing.

Now you know there is a tradition in America of "the writer as a drunk," and it has been my misfortune to meet a number of them. Mailer, for example. I don't think he drinks as heavily now as he did when I first knew him . . . Anyway, I'm too old to bother with famous people who get themselves drunk.

I remember once—very amusing story—a woman called Elsa Maxwell, you probably never heard of her, but I used to call her "the little St. Francis of the rich" because she was always entertaining very rich people who were too bored to entertain themselves. And she threw a vast costume party (it was in New York in the days when costume parties were given) and I was invited to this thing and I had just made friends with Thomas Wolfe. He was a great huge fellow, rather dour and heavy, but I thought him very interesting. I was quite young, and in those days one wants to know the famous well, so I was very interested in Thomas Wolfe. So I called up Elsa Maxwell and asked if I might bring an escort, and she said, "Of course, dear. Who is it?" and I said, "Thomas Wolfe."

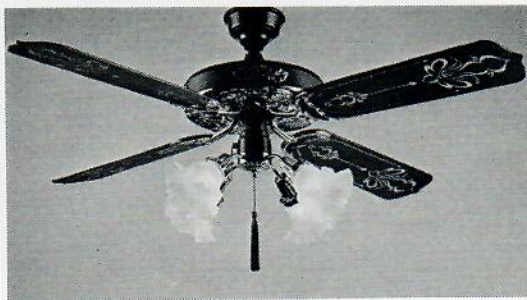
"No, no, no," she said, "you may not bring him!"

Well, I said, "Why not? Do you know him?"

"No, no, no," she said, "I don't know him."

And I said, "Well, do you know anything wrong with him?"

"No, no, no," she said, "I don't



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know anything wrong with him, but I don't want him at my party."

And I said, "Why not?"

And she said, "Because there is *nothing* like a famous intellectual to spoil a really good party!"

And you know, as the years went by, it turned out she was really quite right. One should never include them in evenings where you expect to be gay and have fun. Because they can depress people. Especially if, like Thomas Wolfe—he was another one—or Hemingway, or Faulkner, or Mailer, or Eugene O'Neill—he was another one—they get drunk!

HONOLULU: Do you watch a lot of television?

LUCE: Much too much, yes. I've got this home box office, and cable television, and all the rest of it. And, as you can see, my eyes are very poor, and I'm getting quite old and I find I can no longer work and read at night. I don't watch television during the day; I begin watching it around 8:00 at night.

HONOLULU: What programs do you like to watch?

LUCE: Oh, I like to watch the full-length movies, when there is a good one, without the commercials. I watched one last night with my houseguest, one of the funniest pictures I've ever seen, called *The In-Laws*, with Peter Falk. It's a spoof on the CIA that I thought was absolutely hilarious. Funny as anything.

And then I have a Beta-Max, one of those machines that takes what I like off the air, and I frequently will take off a documentary because I find that public television here is very good, and that a number of programs bear seeing two or three times. There's one called *Life on a Silken Thread*, about spiders, and one called *Telescopes and Termites*, and, oh, a number of programs. Documentaries.

Then there are about three programs that I like. I like *The Muppets*—I'm madly in love with Miss Piggy. I sometimes watch *M.A.S.H.*, sometimes watch *Barnaby Jones*, and sometimes watch *Barney Miller*.

HONOLULU: How about *Lou Grant*? Do you ever watch that?

LUCE: No, that is such nonsense! I consider my old husband one of the great editors in the world, and he would bust his buttons laughing at *Lou Grant*. I mean, one such episode in a lifetime, one of these heroic actions, one of these defenses of

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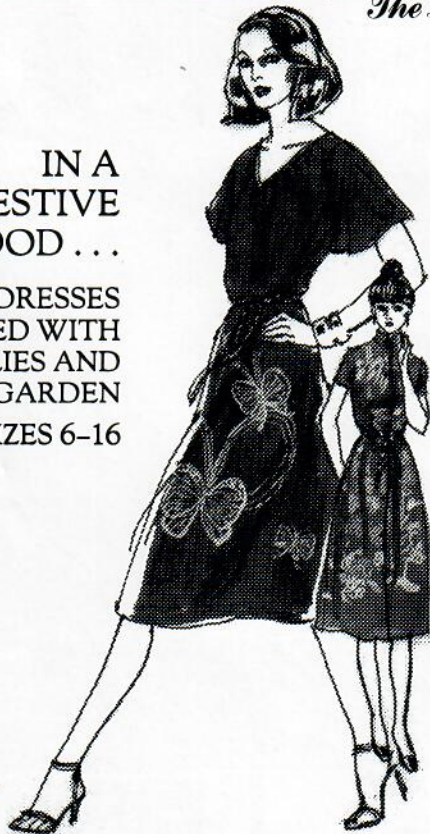
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freedom in a lifetime is what the average editor does. Most of them are really sheep in wolf's clothing, scared of their own shadows.

HONOLULU: Since you moved here in '69, do you feel Hawaii has changed for the better or for the worse?

LUCE: Obviously, from the point of view of people who preferred the Islands for their physical beauty, it's changed for the worse. I suppose it has changed for the better though, as far as the living standards of the ordinary natives, if you want to call them that, or the residents of the Islands. I don't think there are many people who have lived here for years who think well of what's happened to Waikiki. It is not so much that Honolulu has more people and more buildings, it's that it's probably one of the most outrageously stupidly planned cities in the world, considering the possibilities there were for beautiful planning.

HONOLULU: What do you mean? What possibilities?

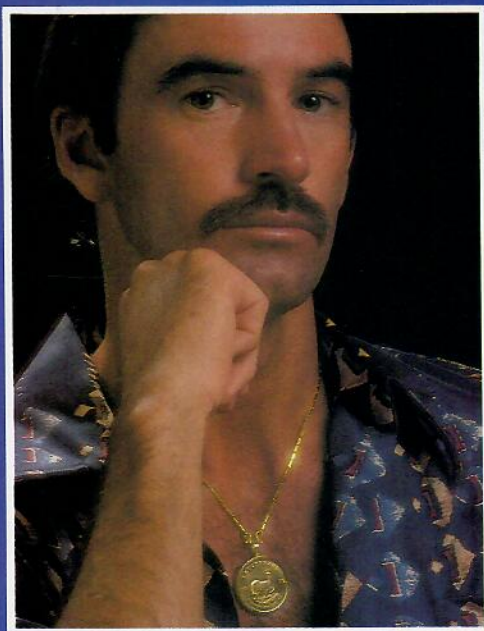
LUCE: It's a jungle that even makes Miami look beautiful. If you want to contrast it with a heavily built area in the tropics, one could contrast it with Singapore, where there are great green stretches between high-rises. But this is a jungle, a *jumble* rather, of high-rises and, on the whole, abominably bad architecture. I'm not sure, but it would seem that the other Islands are trying to refrain from that mistake, and are building their hotels and buildings with decent intervals of green spaces and parks and gardens between them. Even little intervals of green will make all the difference in the way urban architecture looks.

HONOLULU: So you're not referring specifically to Waikiki, but to Honolulu in general, the whole urban sprawl?

LUCE: The whole urban sprawl, yes. Then there is this somewhat ludicrous triple highway. You know, the overpasses—what do they call them?

HONOLULU: Skyway? Or viaduct?

LUCE: Viaduct. Everybody knows that on an island of this size there has got to be a limit to the amount of vehicular traffic you can have. Now I remember when I first came out here in '65, the newspapers were full of the idea that Honolulu, like Bermuda and other places in the Caribbean, should install bicycle paths, which would provide the tourists with a



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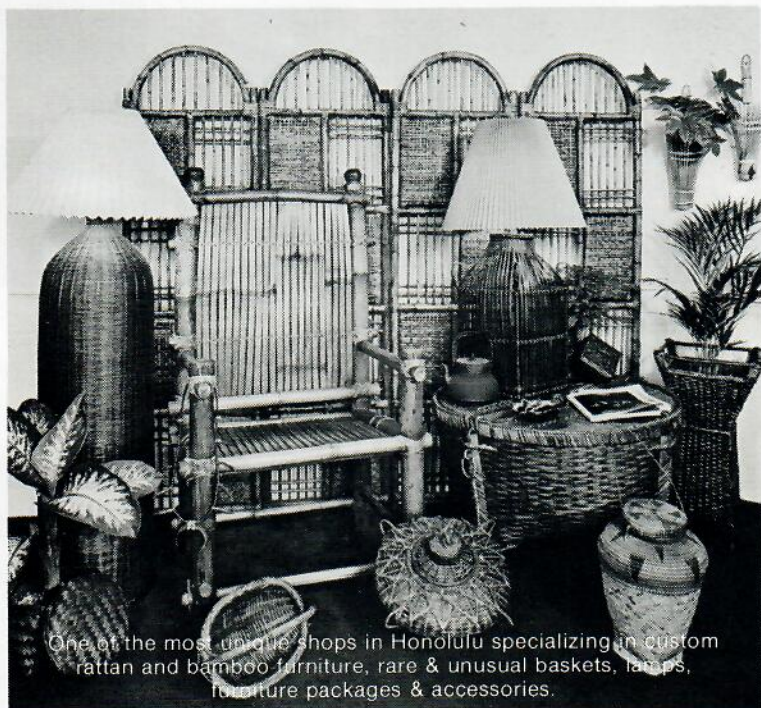


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distraction, relieve the traffic, and would be a convenient form of transportation for people who only had short distances to go.

They never put in bicycle paths. And this was folly from the beginning. You know, I read excerpts from the government's report on tourism, and there was a sentence in it which said, "What kills tourism is tourism."

HONOLULU: You talked about limiting vehicular traffic. How would you go about doing that?

LUCE: Well, that's not for me; I'm not a student of traffic. I just know that common sense tells you there has to be a limit. You have to figure out what you're going to do, and you don't wait until there are traffic tangles that last for two or three days, or until what is left of the Islands is gobbled up with cement.

HONOLULU: You once called Hawaii "the most beautiful place under the American flag." Do you still agree with that?

LUCE: I think it is, yes. How long it will remain that way, I don't know.

HONOLULU: Do you consider yourself more or less of an optimist than when you were 25?

LUCE: I make my friends laugh because I say what I've discovered after a lifetime is that the real difference between an optimist and a pessimist is that pessimists are better informed.

It depends on what you're asking me about. Am I optimistic about the future of mankind? Yes, I think we're going to be around an awfully long time. Am I optimistic for the present outlook of the United States? Not very. Am I optimistic about the continuation of science and technology and great new discoveries being made? Yes. Am I pessimistic about the upheavals they will cause? Yes. So you see it depends what I'm asked. I'm not very optimistic about the economy of the United States for the next 10 years.

HONOLULU: How is your health?

LUCE: For a woman my age, it's not bad at all. But old age is a shipwreck. And it begins when you get up in the morning and you realize you're never going to feel better the next day. But my health is pretty good.

HONOLULU: You look very well.

LUCE: Oh I'm not feeble or anything like that. And as long as I have my marbles I'm not too bothered about anything else.



HONOLULU

HOLIDAY ANNUAL

Volume XV No. 5 November 1980

Features

68 THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA

By Victor Lipman

Nainoa Thompson, who navigated *Hokule'a* to and from Tahiti earlier this year, is the first Hawaiian in centuries to navigate a canoe the way his ancestors did.

On the cover: Nainoa Thompson navigating *Hokule'a*, illustrated by Anthony Gruerio based on a photograph by Chad Baybayan.

74 THE NIGHT THEY BOMBED TANTALUS

By John J. Stephan

It was one of the more bizarre episodes of the second world war, but it held more significance than either side realized.

78 SPLENDID HAWAII

Stunning photography from a handsome new book.

84 HONOLULU'S MEMORABLE MANSIONS

By Brian Nicol

Sound, beautiful houses, like sound, beautiful bodies, possess no immunity from the erosions of time.

92 HAWAII'S FRAGILE RIDDLES IN STONE

By Kay Swenson

Many of the prehistoric carvings called petroglyphs are being thoughtlessly destroyed.

98 THE INEVITABLE VISITING WRITER

By Tom Horton

Each time a writer sets into port, Hawaii is dissected anew—but how much better it was done when at the hands of masters.

103 HONOLULU'S GREATEST DETECTIVE

By Bob Dye

The difference between Charlie Chan and Steve McGarrett is perhaps the difference between Honolulu then and Honolulu now.

106 THE RETURN OF THE FLOATING PALACES

By Brian Nicol

Three American-flag luxury liners will cruise the waters of Hawaii.

112 A ROYAL WEDDING

By Cynthia Eyre

Two descendants of Hawaiian royalty are married at St. Andrew's Cathedral.

116 THE PATH OF PROGRESS OVER THE PALI

By Rick Stepien

"Johnny Wilson's road" replaced the footpaths and the horsetrails; the "Puka in the Pali" replaced "Johnny Wilson's road."

120 PRIMITIVE UKIYO-E

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Interview

53 CLARE BOOTHE LUCE

By Victor Lipman

Hawaii's most internationally famous resident talks bluntly about writers, presidents and the landscape of Honolulu.

Departments

6 EDITOR'S NOTES

9 ABOUT TOWN

14 LETTERS

18 CALABASH

31 PARADISE OF THE PACIFIC

Pualeilani
(February 1922)

36 POLITICS/Richard Borreca

Plotting in the Senate

41 CLASSICAL MUSIC/Ben Hyams

Pianos hold keys to past

44 HAWAIIAN MUSIC/Brian Blevins

Yesterday and today together

170 WEEKENDING/Brian Nicol

Molokai's Halawa Valley

176 SPORTS/Jim Hackleman

Athletes' dental mentor

178 FASHION/Deborah Witthans

Hawaiian fashion today

185 MOVIES/Joseph Hurley

Feelings

190 FINDS

191 BUYING POWER/Ruth Kenyon

Using water wisely

195 CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Stepquote
(October's solution: page 38)

196 HOME COOKING/Margaret Stone

To stuff a bird

198 GARDENING/Laura Dowsett

Goodbye noise

203 DINING CUES

214 INDEX OF ADVERTISERS

218 AFTERTHOUGHTS/Tom Horton

In the closet without a car



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THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA

Hokule'a's navigator Nainoa Thompson

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