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KAUA'I

Why The Hanapēpē Massacre Was Largely Forgotten For Decades

A team of amateur sleuths found the mass grave from the 1924 conflict. Kaua'i then spent \$1.4M to buy the battle site and plans to transform it into a public memorial park.

By Brittany Lyte / About 20 hours ago



Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2025

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What happens when the remnants of a painful page in history fade from public memory?

It took a small band of amateur historians and community members years to find the mass grave and stitch together the missing details of the deadly labor dispute known as the Hanapēpē Massacre.

Those grassroots efforts have come center stage in a government project to preserve the historical landmarks that includes over \$1 million in county funds.

The story begins in the West Kaua'i town of Hanapēpē more than a century ago when Filipino sugar plantation workers on strike for fewer hours and fair pay, from \$1 to \$2 a day, seized two strikebreakers on bicycles. Kaua'i Sheriff William Crowell tried to free the captives, but the strikers refused to let them go.

The standoff escalated into a fierce battle on Sept. 9, 1924, between dozens of armed law enforcement officers — many of them deputized on that day — and about 150 Filipino strikers. All told, 16 Filipino strikers were shot to death while four sheriffs died from stab wounds.

It was one of the deadliest conflicts in Hawai'i's history and set the plantation-era immigrant labor movement back for decades.



In May, Kaua'i County purchased a vacant lot where the bulk of the fighting in the Hanapēpē Massacre unfolded as part of a plan to transform the space into a public memorial park. (Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2025)

Public outrage was muted in the immediate aftermath of the killings. Higher wages and improved working conditions for immigrant laborers wouldn't be achieved for many years.

But the labor conflict reflected growing tensions between the Western plantation owners and the foreign laborers who were beginning to agitate for better working conditions. It also highlighted the lack of immigrant justice in the then-U.S. territory.

The Filipinos themselves were divided with men from the region of Visayas leading the strike. The two kidnapped strikebreakers, who survived, were Ilocanos. As a result, many sugar plantation owners stopped hiring Visayan Filipinos, instead centering their recruitment efforts on illiterate Filipinos from other regions.

With the march of time, many details of the Hanapēpē Massacre dissipated from public memory and the site was eventually occupied by a gas station and later a vacant lot where people sometimes dumped wrecked vehicles.

'We Should Always Remember'

Today, the spartan quarter-acre lot off Kaumuali'i Highway in the red-dirt-dusted town of Hanapēpē is on the verge of a transformation into a historical park anchored by a monument to recognize those who died.

"It's important to know the horrific acts of the past so we don't make the same mistakes again," Mayor Derek Kawakami told Civil Beat. "I think it has a resonant

message for the people of today and the people of tomorrow and we should always remember parts of our history that we never want to return to.”

In May, Kaua‘i County finalized a \$1.4 million deal with the Texas-based oil, gas and renewable energy company Par Pacific Holdings to buy the pair of side-by-side parcels that constitute the future park. The money came from a fund endowed by a half-percent of the county’s annual real property tax haul that’s designed to help preserve open space, shoreline access and other important natural and cultural resources.

The fund is typically used to acquire land for ecological or recreational conservation. In recent years it has funded land acquisitions that have expanded the size of Black Pot Beach Park in Hanalei and preserved access to the dirt trail down to Hideaways Beach on Kenomene Bay in Princeville. The battle site purchase marks the first time the fund has been used to preserve a site for its cultural value.

The county is also considering an additional \$215,000 investment to anchor the park with a historical monument. It’s soliciting monument design ideas from artists.

A mile away, an unmarked earthen depression where the slain strikers are buried at the Hanapēpē Public Cemetery will finally get a memorial marker.



The mass grave where 16 slain strikers were buried in 1924 was rediscovered in October 2019 by Mike Miranda and the small team of history buffs he assembled to uncover lost details about the Hanapēpē Massacre. (Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2025)

The amateur historians who rediscovered the mass grave also spurred a change in the cemetery's stewardship. The county, believing it owned the property, had long maintained the cemetery. But new interest in the site led county workers to discover that the state is in fact its rightful owner. The state has since taken over maintenance duties and plans to properly mark the mass grave and erect a separate monument to honor the slain police officers and the Filipino plantation workers buried there.

When it's installed next year the memorial will feature two concrete columns separated by a gap that symbolizes the two sides of the conflict.

“The way they’re oriented is that no matter the time of day, there’s always a shadow cast,” said Eric Agena, the Kaua‘i program manager for the Hawai‘i Department of Accounting and General Services. “The shadow represents that dark chapter of labor history.”

The Search Begins

Mike Miranda, a leading member of the band of amateur sleuths that solved these decades-old mysteries, said the new knowledge about the massacre offers a timely teaching moment.

Growing up on Kaua‘i, Miranda, 45, of Līhu‘e had never heard about the Hanapēpē Massacre until he learned about it in an ethnic studies class as an undergraduate sociology student at the University of Hawai‘i in 2003.

Several of his O‘ahu-born classmates had learned in school about the violent labor strike. But Miranda didn’t have a clue, and that embarrassed him. He couldn’t find any books on the subject at the UH library, but his curiosity was piqued. It also felt personal: His great-grandmother was among the first wave of Visayan Filipinos who migrated to Kaua‘i to work on plantations.



An opportunity to settle an unresolved history in the tiny West Kaua'i town of Hanapēpē found history buff Mike Miranda in 2019. Over the next few years he would rediscover the names of the victims of a violent plantation-era labor strike, help preserve the battle site and uncover a forgotten mass grave. (Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2025)

Back on Kaua'i, Miranda attended a celebration at Hanapēpē Town Park in 2006 marking 100 years since the first Filipino laborers arrived in Hawai'i to work on the sugar and pineapple plantations. The event included the dedication of a plaque to honor the people who died in the Hanapēpē Massacre.

“The lapse of time and the loss of records have obscured the identities of several of those who died,” the plaque read. “Out of respect for those whose names are not known, none shall be listed here. They shall remain nameless, known only to themselves, to their families, and to God.”

Miranda found it curious that the park selected to host the plaque had no historical significance to the event.

After the ceremony, a publicized list of the names of the victims of the Hanapēpē Massacre was found to contain errors. Some of the people on the list had outlived the labor strike, presenting another puzzle.

Honolulu Star-Bulletin Last Edition

14 PAGES—HONOLULU, TERRITORY OF HAWAII, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1924.—14 PAGES *** PRICE FIVE CENTS

20 DEAD, ORDER RESTORED AT RIOT SCENE; FUNERALS THIS AFTERNOON

PROVISIONAL COMPANY OF NATIONAL GUARD SELECTED FOR KAUAI DUTY

GUARD LEAVES FOR KAUAI TO RESTORE ORDER

KAUAI TENSE BUT QUIET AFTER BATTLE

Approximately 100 Select Men To Arrive At Ahukini Today

A message from Capt. E. M. Bolton, acting adjutant of the national guard, who is now en route to Governor Wallace R. Farrington this afternoon, said the situation was quiet, that Sheriff Rice had announced the guard was coming, and that funeral services were being held this afternoon for those who lost their lives in the fight yesterday.

Major "Alvin" C. O'Connell, captain of the Hawaiian national guard, who were called out in order to restore order on Kauai, where a riot broke out Tuesday, sailed from Pier 14 at 11 a. m. today on the steamer Kilauea for Ahukini.

The detachment which left this morning was under the command of Capt. Gordon Rice. Two machine guns, a large quantity of ammunition and traps, which will be used to transport the supplies for the Hawaiian guard, were put on board the steamer shortly before she departed.

The distance between Honolulu and Ahukini is approximately 70 miles and the steamer is expected to make the trip in about seven days. This would mean that the Hawaiian guard would reach Kauai at 2 p. m. today. Orders to "stand by" the steamer were issued by officials of the Inter-Island Steam Navigation Co. shortly before the ship left the pier this morning.

The order calling out the National Guard were issued verbally at Honolulu by Governor Wallace R. Farrington, following a formal request for the assistance from Sheriff William Rice of Kauai.

Following the receipt of the first news of the riot, the Governor ordered to have Capt. E. M. Bolton, acting adjutant of the national guard, fly to Kauai in a naval airplane. The plane also carried J. K. Hixon, secretary of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association.

With his arrival on Kauai late

Arrival of National Guard Expected To Halt Trouble, But Police Are On Alert

Thrilling Story of Battle Told By Survivors; Police Heavily Outnumbered

BULLETIN
(Special Star-Bulletin Radio.)
LIHUE, Kauai, Sept. 10.—Another Filipino died at noon today, bringing the total casualties of Tuesday's riot to 16 Filipinos and four special police.

By J. WALTER DOYLE
Star-Bulletin Staff Correspondent

LIHUE, Kauai, Sept. 10.—The strike situation at Hanalei was quiet but tense today, following the battle yesterday between Filipino strikers and special policemen, in which four policemen and 15 Filipinos were killed. Arrival of national guardmen from Honolulu this afternoon is expected to prevent further outbreaks.

Deputy Sheriff William O. Crowder, who was out about the town with a case knife in the utility, was on the job this morning, in Honolulu. Sheriff Rice, with the special policemen, rushed to the scene from Lihue when informed

LOEB, LEOPOLD SENTENCED TO LIFE IN CELL
Boy Murderers and Judge Heavily Guarded From Mob As Sentence Passed
Defendants Show Little Emotion; Only Youth Saved Them From Noose

(Associated Press by Naval Radio.)
CRIMINAL COURTS BUILDING, Chicago, Sept. 10.—Sentence of life imprisonment for the murder of Robert Franks, aged 14, and 99 years' imprisonment for the kidnaping of the boy for ransom, was meted out to Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold, Jr., by Chief Justice John E. Cawery of the Cook county criminal courts today.

Only the youth of the defendants saved them from the noose, the judge said.

It would have been the gall of these youngsters, the justice declared, "to impose the extreme penalty under the law. In choosing, however, to sentence to death, the court is moved chiefly by the age of the defendants, who are less than 18 years. It is not for the next to come, capital punishment, but to believe it to be within the province of justice to impose sentence of death on persons who are so young."

The defendants, accompanied by their attorneys, appeared in the court in all parts of the world, and with the assistance of the court, a communication was sent to the families of the defendants.

FRANKS MURDER **U S Sailors** **TRASK MOVES TO SAY STRIKERS KIDNAPER MEN**

Scanned image of the front page of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin published on September 10, 1924 with the headline "20 Dead, Order Restored At Riot Scene; Funerals This Afternoon" (The Honolulu Star-Bulletin/Newspapers.com)

More than a decade later Miranda received a phone call from the Filipino American National Historical Society, asking if he would be willing to explore the forgotten history of the Hanapēpē Massacre and present his research at the group's 2020 biannual convention in Waikīkī.

Miranda wasn't sure why the historical society had chosen him for the task, but he agreed to poke around in exchange for a trip to the convention.

Miranda rounded up a couple of friends and fellow history buffs and started searching public libraries for clues about who exactly perished in the Hanapēpē Massacre and where they were buried.

Forgotten Victims

On a trip to the Hawai'i State Archives on O'ahu, Miranda met Chad Taniguchi, a fellow UH alumnus, who had in 1975 collected interviews of surviving participants and witnesses of the clash for an oral history project.

The last surviving witnesses — sisters who ran for cover in a crack seed store when the fighting broke out — had died in 1998. But many of the known victims still had descendants in Hanapēpē. Inspired by Taniguchi's work, Miranda set out to talk to the town's elders and try to track down the victims' living relatives.



Old Hanapēpē town is known as “Kauaʻi’s Biggest Little Town.” The town is built along a strip of pavement less than a mile long. (Kuʻu Kauanoē/Civil Beat/2020)

New awareness about the event is inspiring a new generation of Kauaʻi residents who trace their roots to the event to confront a lost chapter of their lineage. Others with a familial connection to the law enforcement officers who shot and killed the strikers are making amends for an uncomfortable chapter in their family history.

But Miranda had a rocky start to his investigation. Some people shut their door in his face when he came around looking for answers. Others demanded he drop his little history project. The pushback, Miranda said, came from fear that digging into the past could stir up bad blood between the offspring of the strikers who died and the sheriffs who shot them.

Miranda kept probing. Word quickly spread that he was trying to uncover forgotten truths about the Hanapēpē Massacre, leading a local genealogy buff to

join the effort and the rediscovery of a list of the names of the victims in church and funeral records.

“What kept me working on it was wanting to not let this go forgotten and also to let the kids who grew up here learn about it,” Miranda said. “That and we had a lot of lucky breaks.”

The interviews Miranda conducted helped him and his team narrow down the location of the mass grave to three possibilities. After analyzing the ironwood trees in archival images of the 1924 funeral, they zeroed in on one: A coastal public burial ground known to locals as the Hanapēpē Filipino Cemetery.

Miranda then found an engineer on the island who had ground-penetrating radar capable of discovering buried bodies without digging them up. When Miranda told him about his project, the engineer volunteered his time and equipment to scan the cemetery grounds.

The team got a tip to scan the ground around a gnarled tree, where the radar revealed a series of foot-long burials, likely the bodies of children from an era when it was not uncommon for babies to die before their first birthday.

The eerie discovery left them no closer to finding the plantation workers’



The unmarked mass grave where 16 Filipino plantation workers who died in the Hanapēpē

graves.

Massacre were buried in 1924. (Courtesy: Mike Miranda/2020)

In the cemetery one day in October 2019 Miranda noticed a line of trees that resembled the landscaping in the 1924 funeral photos.

On a bare stretch of scrubby earth between disorderly rows of headstones, the radar turned up one casket-shaped burial after another — 16 in total. Choking dust billowed around the team as the searchers stood awestruck before breaking into a celebratory round of high-fives.

“Holy crap!” Miranda recalled thinking later that night. “This is kind of a big, big thing to do.”

It took several days to map the unmarked mass grave. On one of those days, a descendant of one of the sheriffs who died in the Hanapēpē Massacre went out to the cemetery to watch. Later, she called Miranda and his team over to her great-grandfather’s grave.

Behind the trench where the Filipino strikers are buried, there’s a small, triangular rock hand-etched with the date of the Hanapēpē Massacre. The headstone bears no name. But Miranda said the woman told him it marks the burial of one of the sheriffs.



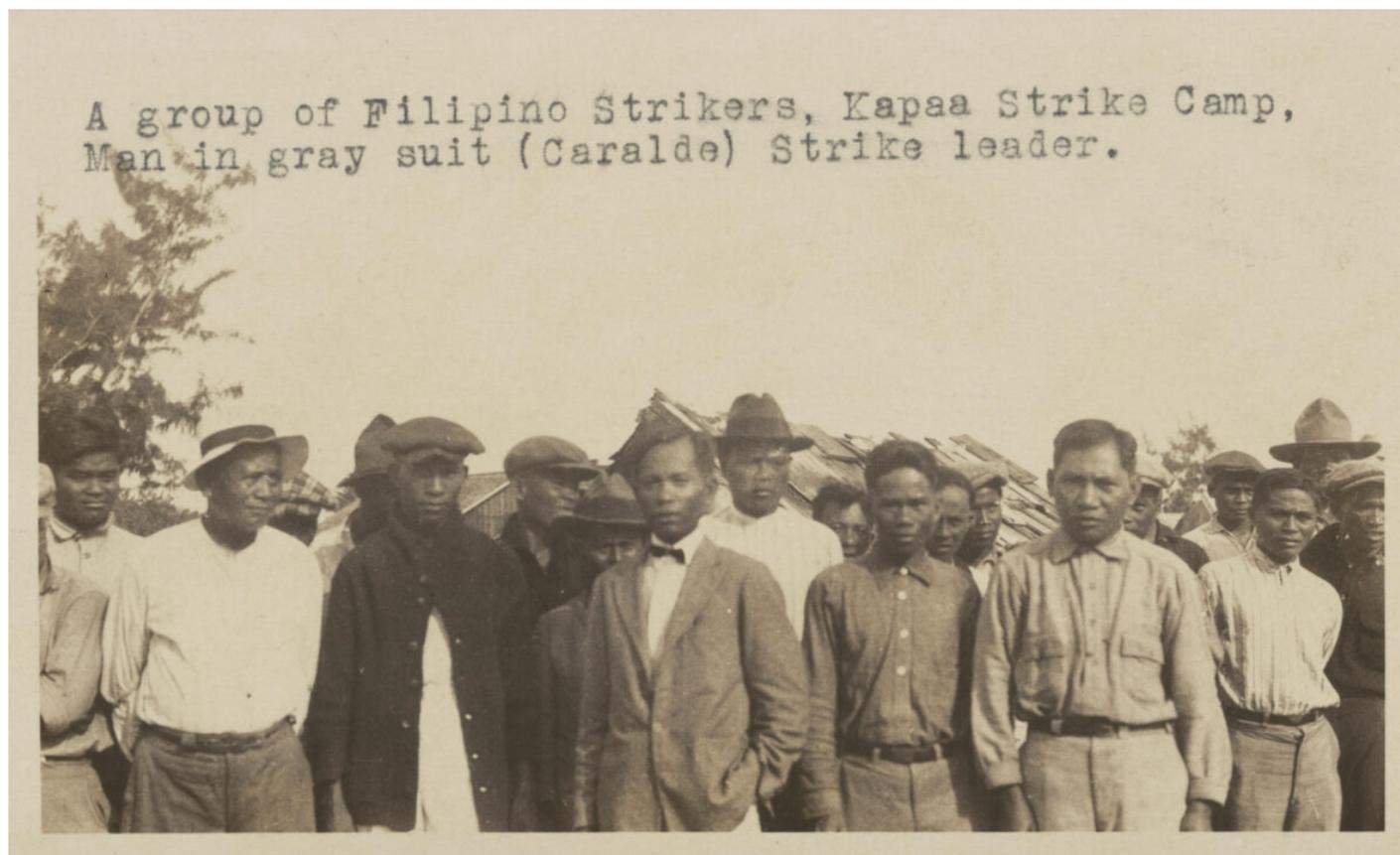
A rudimentary headstone marks the burial of a sheriff who died in the 1924 labor rights clash between 16 Visayan sugar workers and local authorities. (Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2025)

After the coronavirus broke out, the Filipino National Historical Society canceled its Waikīkī convention. But the pandemic provided Miranda free time to probe deeper. Instead of sourdough baking or jigsaw puzzles, he knocked on the doors of Hanapēpē residents with roots dating back to the battle.

This work helped the county substantiate the cultural and historical value of the battleground as it began two years of negotiations to acquire the site.

The rediscovery of a violent episode in Kaua'i history in this arid, tight-knit town of nearly 1,400 residents has been controversial at times.

Early efforts to fill seats on a community advisory board formed to guide the county's historical preservation efforts easily attracted offspring of the slain strikers but failed to draw in the sheriffs' descendants. Uneasy with the history, they feared a memorial to the labor strike victims would portray their ancestors in a negative light.



The sugar strike on Kaua'i had two camps. About 150 Filipino plantation workers were stationed at a Japanese language school in Hanapēpē. Another 400 strikers occupied the Hee Fat rice warehouse building in Kapa'a. This photo portrays some of the strikers in Kapa'a in 1925. (Hawai'i State Archives)

Over the years, efforts to build bridges between relatives of the strikers and sheriffs have been successful, and descendants of the sheriffs have since joined the advisory group. Some of them have recommended that the county refrain from etching the word "massacre," on any memorial marker and instead refer to

the event as the Battle of Hanapēpē. No decision on the wording has been made.

“It’s sensitive,” said Kaua‘i Deputy Planning Director Jodi Higuchi Sayegusa. “It was a tragic event and lessons were learned on both ends and we’re trying to focus on peace and bringing people together.”

“To say that it was a massacre infers that it was one-sided,” she explained. “What descendants from the sheriff’s side are saying is many of those folks were only just deputized the day of (the battle) to help back up the sheriff. So they weren’t necessarily on the wrong side. They were just trying to do their job that day.”

About the Author



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