

#### IV. The Island of Moloka'i

##### A. Formation of Moloka'i

The island of Moloka'i lies twenty-five miles southeast of O'ahu. It is the fifth largest island in the Hawaiian chain with an area of 261.1 square miles. During the Tertiary period, two separate islands, West and East Moloka'i, rose above sea level. As the islands grew and began to merge, lava from a caldera that formed on East Moloka'i gradually began to fill the channel between the islands, forming Ho'olehua plain. This area was submerged in late Pliocene or early Pleistocene time, separating the landform again into two islands. Later in the Pleistocene epoch, renewed volcanic activity on East Moloka'i resulted in formation of Makanalua volcano (of which Kauhako Crater remains), whose lava flow formed the Kalaupapa peninsula. Eventually the plain between East and West Moloka'i re-emerged and the island again took shape along its present configuration.<sup>1</sup>

Moloka'i measures about thirty-eight miles long by a maximum of ten miles wide. "Topside" Moloka'i, as the part of the island excluding Kalaupapa peninsula is referred to, consists to the east of a range of high, jagged mountains culminating in 4,970-foot high Kamakou Peak. Narrow valleys open to the sea on the southeastern edge. A low plain separates this section from Mauna Loa, a tableland at the western end of the island that reaches an altitude of 1,380 feet. Riddled by gulches, it is much drier than the rest of the island. Most of the present ranching and agricultural activities are concentrated in the drier southern and western lowlands.

##### B. Formation of Kalaupapa Peninsula

Stretching from the east end of the island west along the north shore for a distance of more than twenty miles are some of the most spectacular seaside cliffs found anywhere in the world. Ranging in

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1. Catherine C. Summers, Molokai: A Site Survey, Pacific Anthropological Records No. 14 (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1971), p. 1.

height from 1,250 to 3,500 feet and higher, these verdant pali are made even more beautiful by the presence of innumerable waterfalls. The promontory with which the story of leprosy in Hawaii is so closely intertwined is situated about in the middle of the north shore of Moloka'i. Here the last independent phase of volcanic activity on the island created a flat tongue of land isolated from "topside" Moloka'i by the fortresslike cliffs. This peninsula comprises 3,500 acres of flat land on which the early leprosy settlement was located, accessible from the rest of the island only by means of trails cut into the pali. Three streams--Waikolu, Wai'ale'ia, and Waihānau--draining north onto and just east of the promontory, have cut large valleys into the mountain range. Easternmost Waikolu Valley (3,400 acres) once served as a source of food for early native inhabitants and later for the leprosy victims.

Highest point on the peninsula is Kauhakō Crater, about 500 feet above sea level and forming a central dividing ridge. It contains a lake of brackish water connected subterraneously with the ocean. Soil on the peninsula is fertile. Underneath the volcanic ash and decomposed lava is a bed of hard volcanic rock of which occasional outcroppings can be seen and which forms a steep solid barrier against the sea to the north and east. The beach can be reached at Kalawao to the east and at Kalaupapa to the west. The Kalaupapa side is well protected, receives more direct sunlight, and has a good climate. On the Kalawao side, tireless assaults are made on the headlands by northeast trade winds. The cliffs cut off sun in the early afternoon and chilly rains often fall. The climate there becomes cold, rainy, and penetrating. Such conditions are intolerable for leprosy victims, who are extremely sensitive to temperature changes.

#### C. Early Population of Moloka'i

The population of Moloka'i around the time of Captain Cook's arrival in the islands has been roughly estimated at 10,500 people. In 1832 the island missionary estimated that, based on a census recently

taken by teachers, there were at least 6,000 inhabitants on the island.<sup>2</sup> The primary occupations were farming and fishing. Many people lived on the east end of the southern coast of the island, the shoreline of which was ringed by a large number of fishponds. The low floodplains there were used for agricultural purposes. Only a scattered population was found in the central part of the island, while activity in the extreme western plateau portion was confined to cultivation of the sweet potato and offshore and deep sea fishing by a very small group of people. On the northern edge of the island, the population was found in Halawa Valley (in 1836, 500 people), and in Wailau (100-200 people), Pelekunu (200+ people), and Waikolu valleys, and on the Kalaupapa peninsula (2,700, probably including Waikolu).

The days of these early Hawaiians were spent in acquiring food and building shelters, in constructing heiau for public worship, and in participation in various games, such as kōnane, or in sports such as bowling or watching the ali'i participate in hōlua sliding. Early Hawaiians living on or near the peninsula enjoyed swimming out to one of the islets (Okala or Mokapu) near the shore and jumping off the heights, suspended from parachutes braided out of palm leaves, to be carried over the water by the strong trade winds--a form of early-day hang-gliding. There is also mention of boys at Kalaupapa being skilled surf riders. Inhabitants of the area are known to have journeyed to the nearer islands--Maui and O'ahu--in dugout canoes, probably for social as well as trading purposes.<sup>3</sup> Other older Hawaiians, especially those living in Pelekunu Valley, usually made summer migrations for food gathering and visiting purposes. Kalawao and Kalaupapa provided good fishing grounds where provisions could be laid in for the winter.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Report of the Station at Kaluaaha Molokai from the 7th of Nov. 1832 to June 1st 1833, in Molokai Station Reports, 1833-1849, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Hamilton Library, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, p. 10.

3. Summers, Molokai: A Site Survey, pp. ix, 3-4, 194; George Paul Cooke, Moololo O Molokai: A Ranch Story of Molokai (Honolulu: Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 1949), p. 117.

4. Damon, Siloama, p. 27.