

SPOTLIGHT ***The Sensory Experience*** ***that is the Mai-Kai***

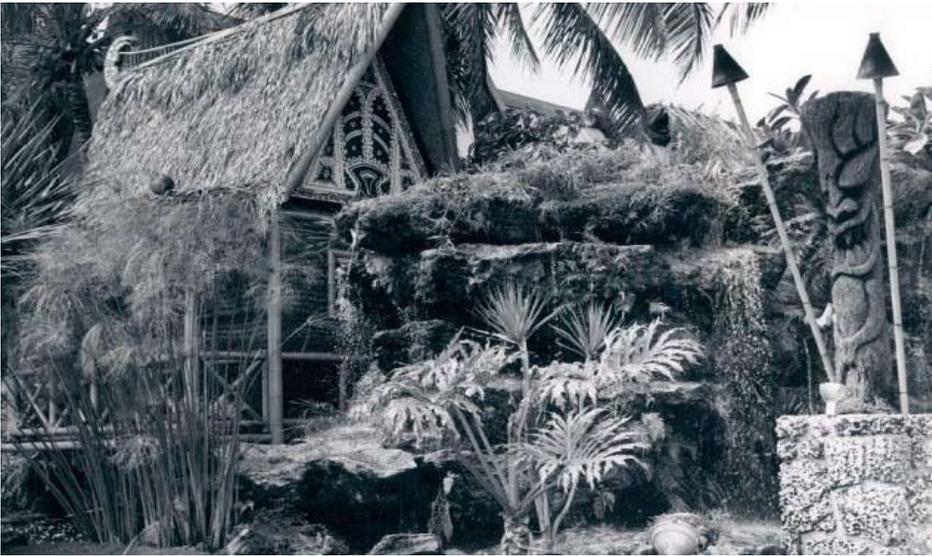
By Anne E. Sallee

Anne E. Sallee has lived in Oakland Park about ten years but probably knows as much about it as most residents, having published a glimpse of Oakland Park's history in *Images of Oakland Park*. She was elected to the Oakland Park City Commission in 2009, and served as Mayor in 2012-2013.

Growing up in the Caribbean, Anne presumed the Mai-Kai was a tourist attraction. But after the first visit she was hooked. Fascinated by this family success story that has quietly thrived, outliving the Polynesian-themed restaurants that came before and after it, the Mai-Kai is much more than a tiki rum bar with a dinner show. The Mai-Kai is a treasure with a rich history and many fascinating stories to tell!



Original Entryway Sign. Image courtesy of the Mai-Kai.



Thatched-Roof building in front of the Mai Kai. Courtesy of the Mai Kai.

In the 1950s, conditions in post-World War II America were perfect for two young Stanford University graduates from Wilmette, Illinois, to come to Southeast Florida and build what is arguably the longest-standing and most successful Polynesian-themed establishment, a mecca for Tiki-philes, the Mai-Kai Restaurant.

In a 1988 *Sun-Sentinel* interview, Bob Thornton said, “From the time I was eight years old, when my folks took me and my brother to eat at Don the Beachcomber in Chicago; I’ve loved all things Polynesian. While other kids dreamed of becoming firemen, my brother and I dreamed of opening a South Seas restaurant. We didn’t know a thing about food, but the bridges, the torches and the funny masks were irresistible.”

Bob and Jack Thornton’s timing was impeccable. Hawaii had been annexed and would soon become a state, the writings of Thor Heyerdahl and James Michener were widely read and the musical *South Pacific* was a stage hit. World War II had profoundly affected every aspect of life in America, from work, shopping and popular entertainment. As American soldiers returned home from World War II, they brought home stories and souvenirs from the South Pacific. Once

the war was over, life would never be the same.

The explosion of Polynesian kitsch pop culture and the availability of mass-produced, low-cost air conditioners for homes and commercial properties led to dramatic population growth in South Florida in the 1950s.

As WWII veterans and their families moved to South Florida, where many had spent basic training, the stars aligned for the success of the Thorntons’ Mai-Kai, which means “the finest” in Hawaiian.

As fans of Don the Beachcomber’s

and Trader Vic’s, with their Cantonese cuisine, exotic rum punches, flaming torches, rattan furniture, flower leis and brightly colored fabrics, Bob and Jack Thornton studied their predecessors, emulated what worked and invented the rest. They created the Mai-Kai Restaurant, which opened on a deserted area of Federal Highway on December 28, 1956.

To visualize a Polynesian oasis in the sleepy location just outside of Fort Lauderdale, on the west side of Federal Highway in Oakland Park, took great imagination. When they purchased the land in the middle of nowhere along U.S. 1, there was no stop light from Oakland Park Boulevard to Pompano Beach. Many of the surrounding roads were dirt and the only sign of life were the cows in a pasture nearby. Milk was 22¢ a quart, and Boca Raton was drafting its first city charter. Bob and Jack Thornton cobbled together family funds and a reluctant bank loan, and searched for just the right artifacts that would depict the customs and village life of Polynesia, whose many islands are bounded by a triangle formed by Hawaii, New Zealand and Tahiti. Though a few original works of art remain in the restaurant, many would later become prohibitively expensive to insure and were donated to the Fort Lauderdale Art Museum and Stan-



Mai-Kai in 1962. Courtesy of the Mai-Kai.



Bob Thornton. Courtesy of the Mai-Kai.

ford University, the Thorntons' alma mater.

The Mai Kai was built and designed by the esteemed Fort Lauderdale architect Charles McKirahan, who shared a love for all things Polynesian with the Thornton brothers, and decorator Wayne Davidson. The Mai-Kai's original construction cost was about \$400,000. It was the most expensive restaurant built anywhere that year. The success of Mai-Kai was quickly apparent as its earnings exceeded the initial investment in its first year, making it one of the most successful restaurants of its time. The restaurant consisted of four rooms that could seat 150 people, with a small gift stand by the front desk selling souvenirs. As the restaurant grew, so did the lagoons, rivers and luxuriant gardens that wind around, creating the feel of an exotic tropical village.

Initially the front section of the roof over the dining area was open to the sky and tables were moved in during inclement weather. A sliding glass roof was later added

which was closed to keep the dining patrons dry. The ceiling was permanently enclosed in the '60s when the work and maintenance of a sliding roof became more aggravation than value.

The dining areas included an upscale private dining room, called the Bangkok Room, designed in Thai style. If you look at the ceiling of the current gift shop, you can see what remains of the Bangkok Room décor. The Mai-Kai was the hippest spot in town, one of the top-grossing restaurants in the United States and the largest consumer of rum in the nation.

The Polynesian Revue that is synonymous with the Mai-Kai experience was introduced January 2, 1962. Every year, the Polynesian Revue is restaged and is performed by Hawaiians, Tahitians, Samoans and Maoris, who are directed by Tahitian-born Mireille Thornton, wife of Mai-Kai owner Bob Thornton. Mrs. Thornton continues to remain the show's principal choreographer and costume designer. The show remains the longest-running

Polynesian Revue in the mainland United States.

From Navy officers on liberty to Saudi kings, the show kept a full house every night. "In those days, they were the number one place in town," says Jack Drury, who handled public relations for the Mai-Kai from 1963-1983. "During the season, you couldn't get in. There was a line around the block. We promoted the whole image. If you came to Fort Lauderdale, you had to go to the Mai-Kai before you left." Patrons regularly caught glimpses of the celebrity set such as Joe Namath, Johnny Carson, Ed McMahon, Yul Brynner and Omar

Sharif.

As the numbers grew, creativity to make room for more seats stretched the limits. The show stage had a railing that was raised before and between shows to make room for tables. There was a seating area behind the stage which staff had to block from the stage during shows to keep patrons from accidentally wandering through the stage on their way to the restrooms. In a passageway from the kitchen, small two-top tables were added along the wall and diners ate as staff whizzed by, earning that area the nickname "I-95."

The early restaurant boasted two bars: the Molokai Lounge with its 1880s seaport saloon decor, and the Surfboard Bar. The Surfboard Bar was designed like a long sleek surfboard and the barstools were designed to look like pineapples. The image behind the bar changed from daytime to nighttime lighting once or twice every hour. The Molokai Lounge was a bit smaller than now but had the same shipboard feeling.

In the 1970s, the Mai-Kai under-



The Surfboard Bar with Mariano Licudine. Courtesy of the Mai-Kai.

went a \$7 million expansion under the supervision of architect/designer George Nakishima. The expansion included a \$600,000 kitchen with a unique Chinese-style Mongolian brick smoke oven, the only one of its kind in Florida and one of only four in the United States. The restaurant's seating capacity was expanded to over 700. The building to the north of the entryway was added to make room for the South Seas Trading Post, a larger gift shop and offices. This later became the Bora Bora Room, used for private parties and office space and the gift shop was returned to the restaurant. On Monday, October 24, 2005, when Hurricane Wilma clobbered South Florida, the damage was so severe the Bora Bora Room could not be re-opened, and serves now as storage. The gift shop was moved back into the main building. Dave Levy, Mirielle's son and corporate vice president, estimated

36 • Broward Legacy

that Wilma caused more than \$1.3 million in damage to the Mai-Kai. Notably, the restaurant opened as soon as the power was restored on November first and the staff did not lose a day's pay.

Although Jack Thornton sold his share of the business to his brother in 1969 and Bob Thornton passed away in 1989, Mireille Thornton, Bob's widow, runs the restaurant with her son and daughter, Dave Levy and Kulani Thornton Gellardi. They continue to maintain the character and special flavor of the Mai-Kai, "The Finest," to this day. The building and grounds of the Mai-Kai have withstood hurricanes, challenges to the economy and changes in society for the past 55 years. In a 2007 *Sun-Sentinel* article, Diane Smart, then president of the Broward Trust for Historic Preservation Inc., said, "The Broward Trust has placed the Mai-Kai

on its website list of significant Broward County architecture and believes the (Old Flame) qualifies for both local and national designation as a historic landmark."

The ambiance, the libations, the food, the gardens and, of course, the show, whether for a visit to the Molokai for Happy Hour or an evening with the full dinner show experience, are an unparalleled sensory experience! If you haven't been yet or have dismissed it as a tourist trap, you are missing a uniquely memorable encounter in our eastern Broward area.

Credits:

Sun Sentinel

Mai-Kai Staff; Pia Dahlquist and Kern Mattei, Jr.

Mai-Kai Press Releases

Tiki Central Forum