

Eager to own clothes and the many other dazzling items of foreign produce brought in by traders and missionaries, the Hawaiians worked with uncharacteristic zeal to purchase such articles. The chiefs, coveting foreign luxuries, contracted for more and more finery of increasing expense. Debts incurred by these indulgences were paid off largely through the work of commoners who were taxed heavily by indebted chiefs. The time consumed in all these new, civilized activities left the people little time for recreation of any kind.

The combined effect of all this—the fall of the kapu system, the loss of leisure time, the attractions of a new culture, and the restrictions of a new religion—upon the decline of traditional pastimes, as well as upon other ancient customs, was augmented by an incredible population decline that spread throughout the islands. In 1778 when Cook arrived, an estimated 300,000 lived in the Islands. By 1900 the number of Hawaiians (including part-Hawaiians) had dropped to 40,000 and comprised only one fourth of Hawaii's total population. Aside from the cultural disorganization this implies, the Hawaiians' pathetically depleted numbers must certainly have figured in the decrease of their surfing activity.

Surrounded by these strange and unfamiliar pressures and forced to adjust to an entirely new social environment, it is no wonder that the Hawaiians let all traditional pastimes fall away as they rushed to catch up with the world. Surfing's decline, as one among a number of dying sports, was only a single phase in the complicated changes of the Hawaiian people. Because the sport, with its associated elements, was so much a part of the old way of life, the abandonment of these traditions was bound to affect it. By the turn of the century, surfing in Hawaii was near extinction.

To see what almost happened in Hawaii, let us leap for a moment two thousand miles south to Tahiti, where another Polynesian community suffered similar religious upheaval, population decline and cultural change. As we have seen, wave-riding in pre-European Tahiti was a favorite with children and adults of both sexes, and it

ranked second only to Hawaii's sport in the Pacific. Today all that remains is an occasional youngster skimming through small waves on a body-board. Not a surfboard is seen on the waves that break around this fabled south sea island. The changes wrought by western civilization virtually eliminated a once popular recreation. In recent years a few surfers have travelled there with modern boards and have discovered good waves on many beaches. Tahitians are often encouraged to try a board or to build their own, but their reaction is almost always the same. It is a children's pastime, they say. No one seems interested. Any type of ocean recreation, in fact, is considered to be for children only, and modern Tahitians rarely go near the beach unless necessity or livelihood require it.

As long ago as 1891 surfing in Tahiti had apparently already disappeared. In that year the American historian Henry Adams observed, "As for the Tahitians that have come within my acquaintance...they have been the most commonplace, dreary, spiritless people I have yet seen. If they have amusements or pleasures, they conceal them. Neither dance nor game have I seen or heard of; nor surfing, swimming, nor ball-playing nor anything but the stupid, mechanical himene [hymn-singing]."6

In those days Hawaiian surfing was little better off. Just a year later, in 1892, Nathaniel Emerson wrote this of Hawaii: "The sport of surf-riding possessed a grand fascination, and for a time it seemed as if it had the vitality of its own as a national pastime. There are those living...who remember the time when almost the entire population of a village would at certain hours resort to the sea-side to indulge in, or to witness, this magnificent accomplishment. We cannot but mourn its decline. But this too has felt the touch of civilization, and today it is hard to find a surfboard outside of our museums and private collections."7

The museum would indeed have been an incongruous end for what was once such a vigorous and spectacular sport. Although surfing wasted away during the 19th century, it did not die. *He'e nalu*, in fact, fared best of all the traditional Hawaiian sports and

games. Most of the others quickly disappeared early in the period of foreign contact. Surfing's flame died down, but a fortunate combination of circumstances preserved in Hawaii the Polynesian pastime that disappeared completely in such other early cultural centers as Tahiti and New Zealand. From somewhere a spark remained to smolder through the dark century of Hawaii's transformation. It was nearly one hundred years after the abandonment of the taboo system, when what little that remained of the old world was almost unrecognizable, that new, fresh elements in a changed Hawaii fanned the spark and brought the sport of surfing back to life.