

Trabing

Mostly about People

5/11/65

By Wally Trabing



Hilo Hattie's Still Hoppin'

Waikiki, Hawaii — When Hilo Hattie came over to my table and kissed me on the forehead, I knew, irrevocably, that I could never return to 35, which has been my official age.

Hattie's smacks are badges of memories, conferred upon those who look old enough to have wiggled to her muu muu movements at the St. Francis in San Francisco, to her records and movies while with Harry Owens and his Royal Hawaiians. In 1941 she also made appearances in that delightful little palm fringed city of Santa Cruz at the Coconut Grove and in Rio del Mar.

She's still doing the Hilo hop as a regular here in the Tapa room of the Hilton Hawaiian Village on Waikiki beach where the rains have stopped and sun-tan lotion is dripping from the coconut palms, and the sea is 78 degrees and soft as silk.

My corner room on the eighth floor (\$18 to \$30) has a champagne view of the Koolau range which hulus across the edge of the 44 mile long island of Oahu and banks up clothly clouds.

It rained early this morning, but this was to wash down the palm fonds and Ti leaves and put dew diamonds on the orchid blooms which grow like the Joneses.

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This evening, after Hilo finished her first show, we talked about her past.

I'll be darned if her real name isn't Clara Nelson.

She's not a sunburned Swede. She's pure Hawaiian and looks it, but she's been married 16 years to Carlyle Nelson, a musician from Bakersfield where the oil derricks waver in the evening breeze. They have no children.

Hattie is 63 now. Smaller than I had remembered, just over five feet and lighter now (140) than she used to be (180), but still looking like a muummued imp under her fruited straw hat.

What I liked was that she was nice. The publicity people tried to build her up as a slick golfer.

"Oh, posh," she said (probably slang she picked up at the St. Francis) "I still haven't broken a 100 yet. I just like to play because its fun." It's good for one's wiggle, too.

Hattie still sings her old identity songs, "When Hilo Hattie Does The Hilo Hop," from which she took her stage name; "Little Grass Shack in Kalakaua, Hawaii," and "The Cockeyed Mayor of Kaunakakai."

Mrs. Nelson said the Cockeyed Mayor song was written many years ago for a party given in honor of Warner Bax-

ter, the movie star (Cisco Kid) who came to Hawaii for a visit.

"You know, we can write songs about almost anything, but it's most fun to write about people.

"Anyway, Mr. Baxter came over and they made him honorary mayor and what a party it must have been. It lasted a week, and he got pretty cockeyed, and that's how the song came about.

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Hattie was born Clara Haili, in Honolulu. Her father was a printer, but died before her birth; her mother was a nurse.

She finishel high school and taught for 16 years, starting in 1923, in a sugar plantation town.

Her voice matured in a church choir where she sang in Hawaiian. She first visited the mainland in 1936 as a member of the Royal Hawaiian Girls Glee club.

There, she was discovered and eventually joined Harry Owens and became the Clown Princess of Hawaii. Her first movie was "Song of The Islands" in 1941. She has appeared in 10 films since then.

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Oh, sure there have been changes.

"When I started out, I sang simple Hawaiian things, the old religious songs, the chants, but I have had to keep up with the times; the songs have changed, they've become more Americanized.

"It used to be that only the wealthy came over here. Now we get more of the working class and small town people, some of whom expect the Hawaii that they dreamed about 20 to 30 years ago when they couldn't afford the trip," she said.

Still most of them have seen Hattie at one place or another and they come up in streams and begin with, "I saw you back in—".

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Tourism is growning. We working blokes must have a little grass shack to lay our head at night and the Hilton has 1065 rooms.

Poshy as it looks, you put your swimming duds on in your room and plow milky white and knobby kneed through the lobby toward the beach.

Later you can go to a party and get cockeyed like Warner Baxter did. The air is warm as an electric blanket set at 8.

The women appear here like they do at home under soft lights.

I am smiling.

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