

Set against the lush Ko'olau Range, O'ahu's Kualoa Ranch has been a shooting location for Hollywood productions such as *Lost* and *Jurassic Park*.

HOME ON THE RANGE

The lore and legacy of the Hawaiian *paniolo*

By Lavonne Leong

An hour north of Honolulu, just past the surf town of Hale'iwa, the Kamehameha Highway narrows to a country road, and the "Seven Mile Miracle" begins: a long stretch of golden sand and ideal surf conditions that has helped make the island of O'ahu famous around the world. To my west, as I drive north, lies a string of legendary beaches, including Laniākea; 'Ehukai, which offers views of the famed Banzai Pipeline reef break; and Sunset. It's sun, sand and waves all the way—Hawai'i as everyone envisions it.

Today, though, I signal right and turn inland, onto a bumpy dirt road that leads toward the rolling hills and pastures of Kawailoa Ranch, into the heart of a Hawai'i few visitors ever see. Yet the story of the *paniolo*—Hawaiian cowboy—is deeply ingrained in the history of the islands.

A sign nailed to a coconut-tree stump reads, *E komo mai. Pani ke puka*: "Come on in, and close the gate." It's the day of the O'ahu district finals for the Hawai'i High School Rodeo Association, and anticipation runs high. Beyond the gate, framed by plumeria and hibiscus, are

row upon row of trailers and beautifully groomed horses. Kathy Rita, district president of the HHSRA, greets me and offers me a strip of sweet, chewy dried mango—the perfect Hawaiian snack.

As we talk in the makeshift shade of the announcer's stand, the contest unfolds. Many of the competitors got their start in rodeo as young as age 5, participating in scaled-down events such as goat tying and roping pretend steers. As high schoolers, they skillfully compete in classic rodeo events, such as breakaway roping and barrel racing. Today's winners will take home coveted rodeo belt buckles and earn spots at the state finals in Waimea on the Big Island—the birthplace of ranching in Hawai'i. At the

state finals, prizes include places at the National High School Rodeo Association finals in Gillette, Wyoming, and a chance to win big-money college scholarships.

Rita's 20-year-old son, Levi, and 19-year-old daughter, Shelby, have been among the competitors at the national finals; her sons Jake, 17, and Wyatt, 15, have also competed on the youth rodeo circuit. In 2009, Levi and his teammate, Jordan Gomes, had one of the finals' fastest team-roping times—an impressive 7.1 seconds.

Many of the kids who participate in the HHSRA are from multigeneration

ranching families, remarks Rita, but not all. She points out a teenager in a Western-cut, aloha-print shirt whose blond braids fly behind her as she urges her galloping horse down the final stretch of the barrel race. She came from a surfing family, says Rita, but as a child, decided to "cross the road" that divides the beach from the inland hills to join the children in the North Shore's rodeo community.

Around us, families swirl by in a sea of cowboy hats, boots and jangling spurs, while country-western music plays through the loudspeakers. Despite the Western influence, this event is also unmistakably Hawaiian. The salt breeze from the beach less than



A paniolo on horseback demonstrates his roping skills at the Big Island's Parker Ranch, one of the oldest and largest cattle operations in the United States.

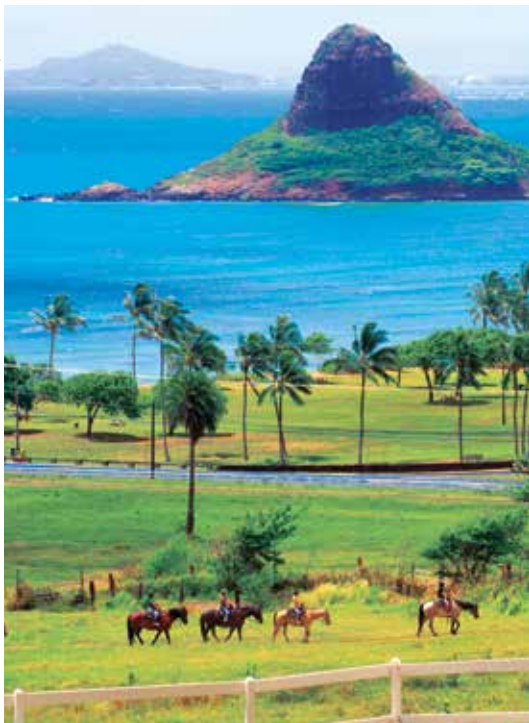
COURTESY: HAWAII TOURISM JAPAN (HTJ), OPPOSITE: DANA EDMUNDS / PHOTOLIBRARY





Above: A paniolo rounds up cattle at Maui's Haleakala Ranch, on the slopes of the massive dormant volcano Haleakalā.

Below: Guests can ride horses while enjoying views of Kāne'ohe Bay and Mokoli'i Island while visiting O'ahu's Kualoa Ranch.



a mile away cools my skin. Kids swing on the hanging roots of an old banyan tree. And the names on the rodeo roster—Ka'apana, Shintaku, Akoi—are of an island heritage.

Events such as this are one way the paniolo culture of hard work, riding, roping and livestock care is passed along to the next generation. Whole families pitch in, as Rita's sons Levi and Jake are doing today. Levi—who now runs cattle on a 300-acre farm—corrals runaway cows between rounds as Jake drives a tractor around the ring, smoothing the churned ground in preparation for the next event. Rita's father, a former dairyman, is also in attendance.

While some of the day's contestants will attend college on rodeo scholarships, many others will enter ranch work, particularly on the neighboring islands. On Maui, Ulupalakua Ranch and Haleakala Ranch, both on the slopes of the massive dormant volcano Haleakalā, are working cattle operations of 20,000 and 30,000 acres, respectively. The Big Island, the largest of

the Hawaiian Isles, boasts ranches that are even larger: At 130,000 acres, Parker Ranch is one of the oldest and largest cattle operations in the United States.

Reflecting on her children's success on the rodeo circuit, Rita says she hopes many other competitors from Hawai'i will do just as well, or even better. "It's been a hundred years since Ikua Purdy," she tells me, referring to one of the most celebrated paniolo of all. "It's everybody's goal to take one more national title home."

Ikua Purdy found fame in 1908, when Big Island rancher Eben Low—recognizing that Hawaiian cowboys could ride, rope and wrestle steers with the best of them—took Purdy and two other paniolo to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to compete in the World Steer Roping Championship. They were the first group from Hawai'i to make the long, expensive journey. Wearing flower lei on their hats and riding borrowed horses, the three paniolo were considered curiosities until Purdy entered the ring and handily broke the world steer-roping record with a time of 56 seconds. One of his fellow paniolo, Archie Ka'au'a, secured third place in the contest. Purdy and the others returned to Hawai'i to huge acclaim.

The 45 students riding in the youth rodeo finals have high hopes for earning prestigious prizes of their own. Each is also carrying on a Hawaiian tradition made possible by an event that took place about a decade before the American West was even a twinkle in the eyes of Lewis and Clark.



COURTESY: ANNA RANCH HERITAGE CENTER (2); SADDLE PHOTO: KENDALE PHOTOGRAPHY

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PANIOLO

The paniolo story begins in the Kingdom of Hawai‘i, where in 1793 British captain George Vancouver presented a gift of several longhorn cattle to King Kamehameha I while visiting the Big Island. The king placed a *kapu* (taboo) on the seasick animals to give them a chance to recuperate and reproduce; no person was to harm them. By the time the *kapu* was lifted many years later, the cattle had proliferated, becoming a serious nuisance as they uprooted gardens and trampled fields with impunity.

By around 1830, the cattle had been brought to other populated Hawaiian Islands, as had horses, which first arrived in the islands in 1803. Around that time, King Kame-



hameha III, hearing of the prowess of the Mexican *vaqueros* (cowboys), invited three of them to make the journey from Mexico to teach the islanders their ranching skills. Hawaiians called them *paniolo* (a Hawaiianization of the word *español*) and took to the discipline at once, says Billy Bergin, a historian and veterinarian, and founder of the Paniolo Preservation Society. “Hawaiians are natural athletes. They learned fast, and it pleased their Mexican teachers to no end,” he says.

Hawai‘i’s ranching landscape, however, was very different from Mexico’s. Ranches could stretch from the beach into the mountains, to an elevation of thousands of feet.

On the Big Island, the landscape was dotted with *kīpuka*—areas of fertile grassland surrounded by rugged, newly laid lava. The paniolo adapted the skills they learned from the *vaqueros* to suit the needs of a string of tropical islands and their rich culture. For instance, to be transported between islands, cattle had to be led into the sea and swum on and off ships, part of a practice known as *hō‘au pipi*. And until a couple of genera-

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Clockwise from top: At the scenic Anna Ranch Heritage Center on the Big Island, visitors can learn about the paniolo life by touring a ranch house filled with artifacts such as traditional *noho lio* saddles (pictured). Student Corinna Silveira, a member of HHSRA, participates in the barrel-racing event at a rodeo held in April at the Big Island’s Parker Ranch.

“A lot of these rock walls you see from that period were built to keep cattle out, not to keep cattle in,” says Kay Kammerzell, executive director of the Big Island’s Anna Ranch Heritage Center. Hunting the cattle for food was common after the *kapu* was lifted, but “it became clear,” says Kammerzell, “that something needed to be done other than running after them on foot.”



COURTESY: THE PANIOLLO PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Right: Ikuu Purdy, one of Hawai'i's most legendary paniolo, found fame in 1908 when he broke the world steer-roping record in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Opposite: A historical photograph of Anna Leialoha Lindsey Perry-Fiske, who was raised in the island-ranching lifestyle of the early 20th century, as a pā'ū rider in a parade.

tions ago, the clearing of wild cattle dominated the ranching experience. Cattle clearing—the process of hunting wild cattle to make way for more domestic strains—was one of the riskiest things a cowboy could do, involving the pursuit of an angry, horned animal over uneven ground before roping it and tying it to the nearest tree.

Paniolo such as Ikuu Purdy practiced their fast-roping skills not just for the rodeo ring, but out of everyday necessity. Uniquely Hawaiian rodeo events still held today—such as *po'o waiū*, in which a steer is roped and then secured to a post—came into practice during this era.

A specialized Hawaiian saddle called the *noho lio* was modified to withstand conditions including humidity, saltwater, sea-level heat and upland chill. Flower lei appeared in hatbands and around horses' necks, particularly for special occasions. Eventually, in some areas, the lariat and the surfboard were sights almost equally common. Victorian travel writer Isabella Bird recalled seeing “surfboards, paddles, saddles, lassos, spurs, gear, and bundles of *ti* leaves” lying on the floor of a Big Island home.

Living largely outdoors, the paniolo shared a spirit of camaraderie. They often raised their families in housing provided by the ranches at which they worked, and supplemented their incomes with fishing, says sixth-generation Hawaiian rancher Robby Hind. “After work, they'd go down and ‘throw net,’ or fish. The sea was such a part of everybody's life in Kona [on the Big Island].”



COURTESY: ANNA RANCH HERITAGE CENTER

Pā'ū Riders

Though paniolo were mostly men, Hawaiian horsewomen were equally accomplished in the saddle—and they knew it, according to Kay Kammerzell of the Anna Ranch Heritage Center. “The Hawaiian women didn't want anything to do with riding sidesaddle,” says Kammerzell. “They wanted to be able to do as the guys did, to steer and ride fast.” When their enthusiasm for riding astride collided with the age's prim 19th century sensibilities, the *pā'ū*—a flowing, split skirt created by wrapping and draping almost a dozen yards of material—was born. At first made from practical cotton and donned to cover the legs and keep dresses clean, the *pā'ū* evolved into an elegant garment in colors that often represented the riders' island of origin or allegiance: pink for Maui, red for the Big Island, purple for Kaua'i and a golden orange for O'ahu.

Victorian travel writer Isabella Bird wrote of the “graceful and exciting spectacle” of Hawaiian *pā'ū* riders on a festive but ordinary Saturday afternoon:

“The women seemed perfectly at home in their gay, brass-bossed, high-peaked saddles, flying along astride, barefooted, with their orange and scarlet riding dresses streaming on each side beyond their horses' tails ... while the men were hardly less gay, with fresh flowers round their jaunty hats, and the vermilion-coloured blossoms of the *ohia* round their throats.”

Paniolo and *pā'ū* riders, says Billy Bergin of the Paniolo Preservation Society, are “male and female components of cowboy life.”

Pā'ū riding is serious business among Hawai'i's horsewomen. Today, elegant *pā'ū* riders and their garlanded horses are a favorite part of parades across the state. Honolulu is a great place to see regal *pā'ū* riders. The Aloha Festivals Floral Parade, being held this year on September 24, and the King Kamehameha Celebration Floral Parade each June are two of the city's most popular parades. —L.L.

These families passed Hawaiian traditions and language down through the generations.

“When I was a kid,” recalls Hind, “all the cowboys spoke Hawaiian. They would be talking in Hawaiian, then talking in English. Nobody else, when I was growing up, spoke Hawaiian—it was only on the ranch.”

In her memoir of a childhood on a Maui ranch, early-20th century writer Armine von Tempski fondly recalled the paniolo of olden times: “Men with spurs at their heels, knives in their leggings and flowers in their hats. Men who spoke with great outdoor voices which filled the kitchen with

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rolling Hawaiian words and booming Hawaiian laughter.”

PANILOLO TODAY

You don't have to go far to see and hear evidence of Hawai'i's paniolo heritage. It's all around, from the *pipi kaula* (dried beef) found at authentic *lū'au* to the magnificently draped and garlanded *pā'ū* riders who participate in the islands' many civic parades. The signature sounds of contemporary Hawaiian music wouldn't be the same if the first Mexican vaqueros hadn't

Kammerzell says that many natural landmarks—which paniolo once used to guide themselves home after a long day of clearing cattle—have both practical and spiritual significance.

brought with them Spanish guitars and the songs of the open range. Local legend has it that when the vaqueros returned home, they left their guitars behind. The paniolo are said to have retuned them, to create the distinctively sweet and complex sound of the slack-key guitar.

Today, when you see wide-open, rolling land in Hawai'i, there's a good chance there is, or once was, a ranch on it—from Kualoa Ranch on bustling O'ahu to the thousands of acres ranches on the Big Island and Maui.

There are fewer ranches today than in the past. Corn, a source of cattle feed, must be shipped from the mainland and is vulnerable to spikes in both commodities prices and fuel costs. Even at surviving ranches, the widespread use of ATVs and other updated ranching methods means there are fewer cowboys.

However, horses remain an integral part of ranch life in Hawai'i: Even relatively young ranch operations, such as the Galimba family's Kuahiwi Ranch—which they founded on the Big Island in 1993—

Experience the Paniolo Lifestyle

There are plenty of ways for visitors to learn more about the paniolo. They include the following:

Moseying into town. From the moment you set foot there, it's clear that Waimea on the Big Island and Makawao on Maui are paniolo towns. You'll see men in cowboy hats, boots and Western shirts, and hear talk of rodeos and riding. Waimea is the gateway to Kohala, the region where the paniolo got their start.

Going riding. Paniolo Adventures (www.panioloadventures.com) takes visitors on horseback rides through the breathtaking landscape of Ponohele Ranch, a working Big Island cattle ranch that stretches from the mountains to the sea. Other places to ride horses are Parker Ranch on the Big Island (www.parkerranch.com), Gunstock Ranch on O'ahu (www.gunstockranch.com) and Princeville Ranch on Kauai' (www.princevillerranch.com).

Exploring history. Learn about the paniolo life at Anna Ranch Heritage Center (www.annaranch.org), on 110 acres in Waimea on the Big Island. Tour the ranch house, filled with artifacts and antiques from the paniolo heyday, and gardens that are maintained as Anna Leialoha Lindsey Perry-Fiske, the "first lady of ranching," once had them. An on-site saddlemaker and blacksmith provide demonstrations.

Visiting a ranch. Many Hawai'i ranches that run cattle have also branched out. Stop in at Ulupalakua Ranch (www.ulupalakuaranch.com), order a locally farmed elk burger from the grill and sample the sparkling pineapple wine. At Kualoa Ranch on O'ahu (www.kualoa.com), ride on horseback across the same open countryside that has served as a backdrop for Hollywood productions from *Lost* to *Jurassic Park*.

Seeing a rodeo. Professional and youth rodeos are held on every major island. The largest are Makawao Rodeo on Maui, which runs over the Fourth of July weekend; Kauai's Waimea Round-Up Rodeo & Town Celebration, which happens in February and celebrates that island's rich paniolo past; and the Kona Stampede on the Big Island, which takes place every March. Please visit www.thecowboycalendar.com for more information. —L.L.

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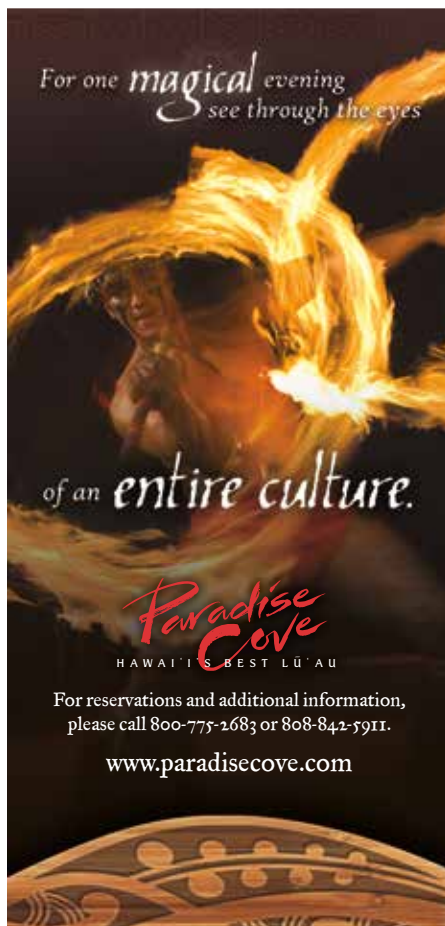


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use horses extensively to manage cattle and cover terrain not suitable for an ATV.

"Where we are, there's a lot of rock," explains rancher Michelle Galimba. "Horses are a lot more nimble, and a lot more subtle. They'll know their job. I have this old gray horse—he'll just look at a cow and give it stink-eye, and that cow will get back in line," she laughs.

Billy Bergin of the Paniolo Preservation Society notes that old-time paniolo skills are experiencing "something of a renaissance," including a renewed interest in traditional materials—such as rawhide rather than nylon for roping. Galimba has also noticed an influx of young cowboys seeking work at local ranches—a development she attributes to the public's growing respect for farming and locally sourced foods.

The older generation of paniolo has much to pass on, she continues. "You learn a certain way of interacting with the environment from the older folks. There's a certain body of knowledge that will get transferred through 'talk story.' Like my father. He's been around forever here, so he would say, 'If it doesn't rain by this date, we're in trouble.'"

"There's a real connection to the land," agrees Kammerzell of the Anna Ranch Heritage Center, who says that many natural landmarks—which paniolo once used to guide themselves home after a long day of clearing cattle—have both practical and spiritual significance.

"When I've listened to some of the local cowboys talk about their fathers and their

grandfathers, and how they were cowboys—we're talking generations of paniolo. They know the name of every *pu'u* (hill), every stream, every gulch. Today, we look up and say, 'Oh, a hill. That would be a perfect place to build a house with a great view.' Over here in Waimea, they have such a connection to the *pu'u*, it would be devastating to see them developed. They are part of the landscape, the viewscape, the history."

Like the workdays of their forefathers, the days of modern paniolo are filled with physical tasks that require skill. Galimba recounts a recent day spent rounding up cattle on horseback, all because "somebody left the gate open. All the cattle that we had carefully separated into the small ones and the big ones, they got mixed up together," she says with a smile.

Oops. I recall the sign on the coconut stump at the youth rodeo, asking all comers to *pani ke puka*. Did I remember to close the gate? Yes, I think with relief. I did. ▲

Lavonne Leong writes from Honolulu, where she lives with her husband and children.

GETTING THERE

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