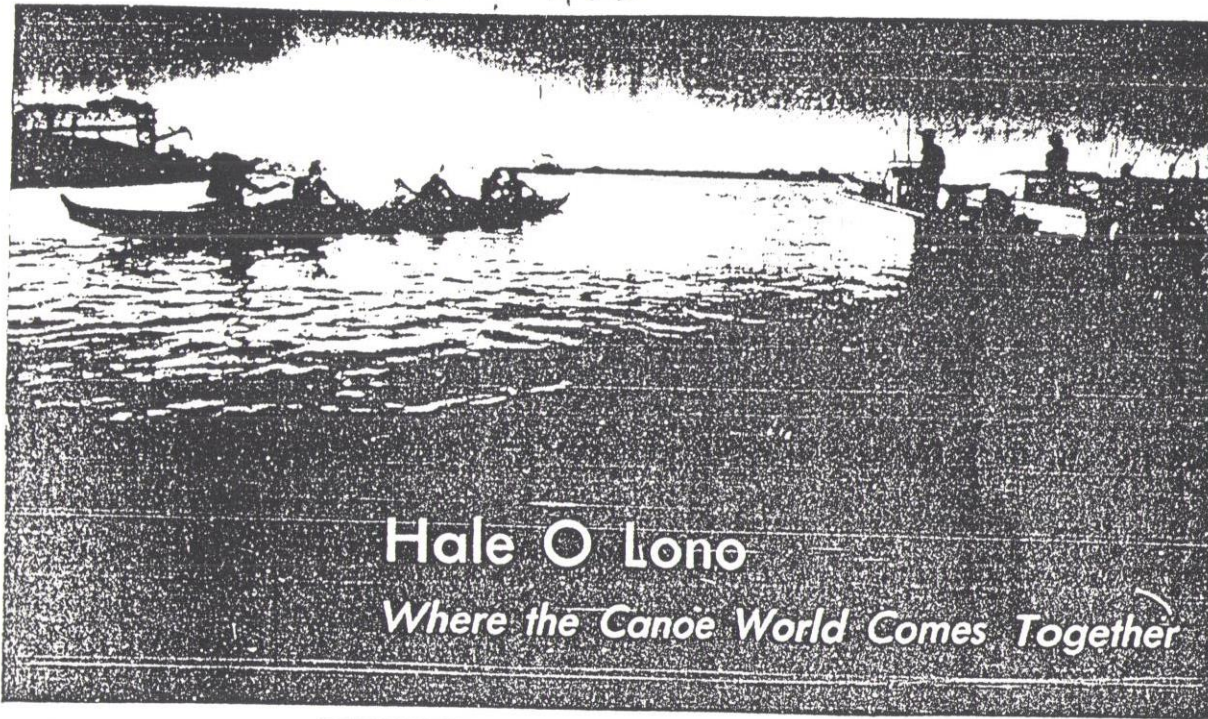


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Hale O Lono Where the Canoe World Comes Together

By Mike Gordon
Star-Bulletin Writer

HALE O LONO, Molokai—It is a Brigadoon-like change, a metamorphosis that happens here only twice a year when the center of the Hawaiian canoe paddling world is a lonely harbor surrounded by rocks and thorns and red, red dirt.

Hale O Lono is where the world's best paddlers come to challenge each other—and the often angry Molokai Channel in a 40.8-mile race to Oahu.

The women came here in September. The men were here on Sunday.

It is a carnival of lycra, neoprene and nylon; of brightly colored fiberglass "rocket boats" (lime green, orange, yellow, blood red and blue); and of dark koa wood boats, boats with a sensual, spiritual feel to them.

ALL AROUND are paddlers scurrying with final preparations. Arms windmill about in an effort to warm stiff muscles.

The morning sun, bright and just off the horizon, sends their shadows dancing

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along the shore.

A paddler sands the blade of his paddle, one can only wonder why.

Relief paddlers dash to escort boats to store gear and then dash back to help put a canoe in the water.

Rigging is checked and rechecked. Nylon spray-guards that keep the water out of the boat are double sealed with duct tape and silicon gell.

HALE O LONO is alive with a sense of joy, a sense of mission, with the lure of the channel.

"If we beat you, you gotta buy the beer."

"Where's the sun screen?"

"Just relax gang."

"My wrist hurts."

"Don't worry, you'll do fine."

Old friends greet each other once again. Handshakes all around. Back slapping and nervous laughter.

The sure words of an old paddler settles a crew, braces it for the challenge ahead, for house-sized swells that sometimes march through the channel.

"You can do it. Don't be afraid. You got to be pushing, pushing, pushing. When it hurts you have to push more. For this club, for yourself. Concentrate and find that happy feeling."

"Another crew receives its final instructions.

"Open up your mind. You are the master. Concentrate on what you're doing. Listen only to your captain. Do whatever is requested of you. Pay attention to every stroke you pull."

EVERYWHERE there are cameras. Click, click, click, click.

One young paddler leans forward on his paddle, thoughts perhaps straying to paddling's peculiar brand of pain.

And then there are Hawaiian prayers, dotted here and there with words that refuse to translate: Australia, Canada, Illinois.

And singing. Hands are clasped all around for "Hawaii Aloha." Some of the voices fill the air with inspiration, others should only be heard in shower stalls.

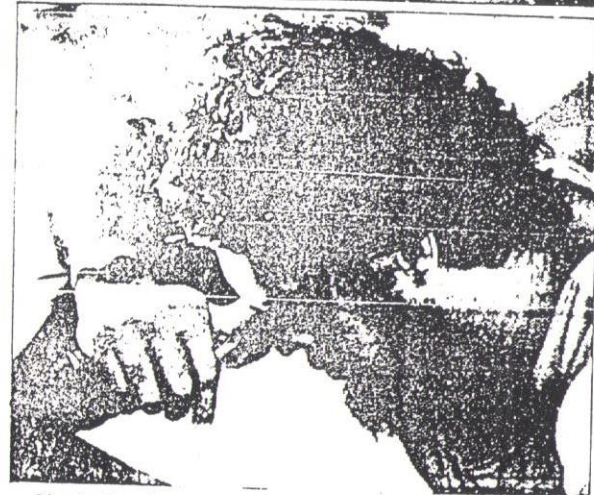
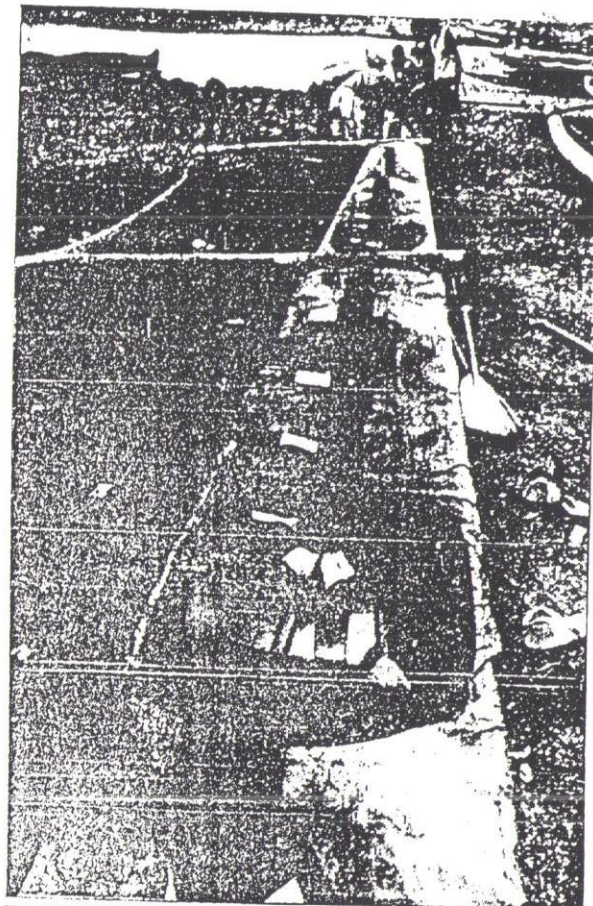
THE CAMERAS keep clicking. Click, click, click, click.

With the closing of the last verse, a cheer goes up and the paddlers head for their canoes.

They slip them into the water with the tenderness of a lover and head for the starting line, for lure of the channel.

As the last escort boat slips out of the harbor entrance a silence grips the coastline.

The red dirt blows in the wind.



Physical and mental pre-race preparation is demanding.