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THE POLYNESIAN CULTURAL CENTER: A MULTI-CULTURAL  
THEME PARK EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Founded 25 years ago, the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC) has prospered in both quality of setting and quantity of visitors to the point of being the number one paid tourist attraction in the state of Hawaii. Indignous to its success has been its ongoing efforts to present the cultures of Polynesia in an authentic, informative, and entertaining way by using young men and women from throughout the Pacific who are attending university at adjacent BYU-Hawaii. The presence of these young people from throughout the Pacific and from numerous other foreign countries, all mixed together in a harmonious working environment, is a tribute to the leaders of both PCC and BYU-Hawaii. Over one million tourists a year have taken the opportunity to enjoy these many cultures by observing peaceful interactions of the students in a theme park environment.

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Tourism has long been a force for peace. Whenever two or more contrasting types of individuals have come together a necessary alliance of trust and hospitality has come to the fore. People's interest in other people has raised the level of human interaction far beyond the politics and conflicts of everyday living.

Thomas Cook illustrated this best by his personal ability to negotiate travel rights and privileges for Christian groups from England who desired to see the Holy Land. The politics of the time prevented such an accord at the official government agency level, and travel was more talked about than accomplished. There have been very few times in history and very few places throughout the world that have been inaccessible to tourists. Tourism has been for many centuries an informal peace envoy, a way to reach the unreachable, to accomplish the impossible.

Augustine is supposed to have said, "The world is a book. He who stays at home only reads one page." When one travels, it is difficult if

not impossible to not gain insight into, and an appreciation of, the one's life and environment of fellow man. True, one can read about it, or even see it via movies or television, but the sights and sounds, the smells and colors all experienced first hand lend a dimension of understanding not obtained any other way.

Accessibility to other lands with their people and cultures, as easy as it has become in today's society, has often had the effect of changing or destroying the very thing that one has traveled to experience.

Often manifested through its culture, the ability of a people to retain its uniqueness while moving along with change has been formalized in the concept of theme parks and more particularly cultural theme parks.

While most tourist attractions have their roots in the natural or historical setting, theme parks are usually an exception. By establishing a theme and then having all exhibits, shops, restaurants, etc. incorporated around that theme, the park creates its own environment. Participatory areas have been added in many cases to give people a hands on experience, a sense of realism that in the past was left to the creativity of one's mind.

Cultural theme parks involve a restoration, a return to what once was, with all the advantages and none of the disadvantages. Visitors are able to learn about the material culture, the performing arts, and the beliefs of other nations in the past. Employees serve as guides and dress according to the custom of the day. They also serve as demonstrators of the arts and crafts along with the daily living skills of that cultural time period.

The evolution of amusement parks to theme parks and theme parks to cultural theme parks has matched the interests of the traveling public, who are seeking out and expecting a more worthwhile return on the money they will invest while traveling. Cultural theme parks are few in number. A multi-cultural theme park such as the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC) is unique indeed, and stands virtually alone as an example, a beacon, a light to the rest of the world. Its very existence defies tradition. By being where it is, and during the moment in time that it has occupied and continues to occupy, it has been and should continue to be one of the most forceful evidences of how cultural cooperation dignifies and elevates man. By bringing multi-ethnic cultures closer together in a harmonious and peaceful relationship, the Polynesian Cultural Center has become a successful and inspiring tourist attraction.

When the Polynesian Cultural Center opened in 1963, skeptics said it didn't have a prayer of survival. Travel industry experts regarded the Center as a \$2 million investment that would go broke. The first key to the success, they were saying, in any enterprise, and certainly one as complex as a multi-cultural theme park, is in the planning. Get outside consultants on the job to advise, question, and debate. Determine appropriate locations, several if possible. Conduct feasibility studies, especially economic ones. Arrange for environmental impact analyses, traffic-pattern studies and marketing research studies, and when all this is done--then decide.

When tourist-wise travel experts listed what they considered the drawbacks were to such a venture ever getting under way, they marvel that it ever opened at all. Consider:

(1) that the hundreds of young men and women (approximately 700) working as employees and performers at the Center are university students you'd hardly expect to find daily serving, teaching, and entertaining throngs of vacationing visitors of all races, colors, and creeds. Yet this is precisely what they do, in order to work their way through school.

(2) who would dream that anybody in his or her right mind would pay all that money for airfare to Hawaii, then give up a day on the beach or golf course to wander around something called a "Cultural Center?"

(3) the location--a long hour's drive from Honolulu on the twisting Windward side of the island near the Northshore surfing sites, to a remote beachside town that few non-Hawaiians have ever heard of. Yet over a million tourists every year, from all over the world, find their way to the Polynesian Cultural Center and the town of Laie.

Apparently, someone forgot to tell the folks at the center and in the community of Laie. Instead, the center struggled through lean years to become Hawaii's most popular paid tourist attraction, a distinction it still holds today. For a period of approximately 18 months, it looked as though the skeptics were right. Sometimes as few as 10-15 tourists were watching the evening show performed by a cast of 150 people. According to available estimates, more than 15 million visitors have toured the 42-acre center over the past 25 years with current yearly visitations exceeding one million per year.

Sitting on what was once scattered taro patches and sugar cane fields, the center covered a 12 acre area when it opened in 1963. It was conceived as a source of employment for the Pacific island students who could not otherwise afford an education at the adjoining Church College of Hawaii campus (now known as Brigham Young University--Hawaii Campus). The center's goal to fulfill all employment needs have long been met and it continues to develop in size and financial stability.

Both the university and the center are owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The university is supported financially by the Mormon church while the Polynesian Cultural Center is self-sustaining, a directive it was given from the beginning.

Considered a cultural workshop, there are no professional entertainers and there is no recruitment at the Polynesian Cultural Center. All basic functions are fulfilled by the young men and women from throughout the Pacific basin who are students at BYU-Hawaii.

In a state where "Aloha" is synonymous with tourism, being the number one paid tourist attraction is bound to be the center of attention for both prospective tourists and for those who focus their time, talents, and energies around the tourism industry.

This 42 acre spot on the northern windward side of the island of Oahu, cooled by the tradewinds from the east and kept green by moisture laden clouds that yield to an abundance of sunny skies--this success of the Pacific, once called the flop that flipped, is today the world-renowned Polynesian Cultural Center.

#### WHAT'S BEHIND IT ALL

(1) A story of faith, dreams, and hard work.

(2) A story of men and women who saw the age-old customs and cultures of Polynesia dying away.

Many literary artists like Melville, Stevenson, London, Michener, and others have written about Polynesia, bringing a form of immortality to the people of the Pacific, but having written about their cultures, left those same cultures to wither and to die.

Men and women in our time have done something tangible to preserve--for all the world--these dying island cultures as precious fragments of a heroic and all-but-gone-forever past.

The Polynesian Cultural Center has turned conventional show-business upside down. The very things that were supposed to keep the customers away in droves, turned out to be exactly what the tourists wanted all along.

The show-business and tourist-trade irony is that it's a non-profit enterprise. Every cent of the revenue is plowed back into the center, is paid to the students, or is used to help support the university. Many see this as one reason for the center's success. Tourists not only love the 42 acre living museum and what it's doing, they also feel good about supporting it.

Certainly there's a host of other alluring things to see and do on the various islands of Hawaii. But those who find their way to the quiet, self-sufficient community of Laie, do so for reasons that can only be described as refreshing. Forget the sun, sand, surf, and sex that is promoted so heavily by Hawaii's competitors for tourists and the money they bring with them. Welcome back a renewed and growing interest on the part of knowing and caring tourists, who in turn are searching out those events and activities that portray the cultural heritage of mankind.

Some, it's true, come to Laie because it is the site of a Mormon temple; a relative few others because it's the home of the Hawaii campus of Brigham Young University. But for the most part, however, the tourist travels to Laie to see and experience for themselves the warmth and friendship, the lore and excitement, and the authentic South Pacific pageantry of the Polynesian Cultural Center.

One must understand the essential intertwining of the three institutions that totally dominate the community of Laie--the temple, the university, and the Cultural Center--their relationship to one another

and to the community in which they reside. For here we have a marriage of faith and good works that goes back in island history to the 1850's and the arrival of the first Mormon missionaries to the Sandwich Islands, a marriage that has stood the test of time as the islands have forged towards the 21st century.

#### FAITH PRECEDES THE MIRACLE

It is necessary to know that of the three institutions, the temple came first. As a religious body which emphasized missionary work from its very beginnings in the 1830's, it wasn't many years before representatives from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (often referred to as Mormons or just Saints) were found on the shores of the islands of Hawaii (then called the Sandwich Islands). While little success was had among the white population, great success was experienced among the Hawaiian population. In time, Laie, on the island of Oahu, was designated as the gathering place for members of the church, a place already known as a sanctuary by the Hawaiian people. A 6,000 acre piece of land was purchased upon which the people could dwell, grow in faith, and at the same time produce a living. The construction of a Temple in Laie (completed in 1918) was the first temple built by the Church outside the United States. It would become a cornerstone and anchor for the faith of the people in both Laie and throughout the islands of Hawaii and the Pacific.

This desolate coastal plain in time gave way to a thriving agricultural community. As the Hawaiian islands moved into the 20th century and headed for World War II, the sugar industry began to falter and attention was focused on new ways to improve the economic standing of the people in the area. The Church was also feeling the economic crunch as more and more people went without jobs. But the Church was also a growing Church and funds were constantly needed, especially for building programs. What to do?

#### FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

Fund raisers of many types were tried, most without great success. Financial sacrifice for the Church was, however, an unquestioned act of the faithful. New ideas were needed! The initiation of the Hukilau seemed to be the answer, and as it turned out, was a great success. Held on the shores of the Hukilau beach in Laie, what few tourists there were making their way along the winding windward side of the island found themselves hailed down by residents standing along the highway waving their hands and signs. For a small charge, these fortunate few were personally involved in the excitement of the day's activities. Casting their nets out into the sea, bringing the catch in, cooking it, and eating the meal accompanied by local music and dance proved a tremendous success, both financially for the members of the Church who lived in Laie, and for the tourists who gained an unexpected but memorable foray into the culture of Polynesia.

## FEEDING THE MIND AS WELL AS THE SOUL

The establishment of the Church College of Hawaii in 1955 followed some years after the completion of the temple. Its aim and mission was to provide a higher educational opportunity for the youth not only of Hawaii, but of Tonga, Tahiti, Fiji, Samoa, and the other Polynesian islands. Students began to arrive from all over the Pacific, and in time from Asia and the mainland. Although most Pacific students were cash-poor, they were wealthy in two commodities: enthusiasm and the rich traditions of their own Polynesian cultures.

But those events that threatened the economy of the islands also impacted on the foreign students attending the college. Within five years after the university was established, growing public concern forced immigration officers to put a stop to foreign students competing for jobs in the local market--a move that directly affected foreign students from throughout the Pacific attending BYU-Hawaii. This posed a dilemma for these Pacific students who wondered if they would ever finish school because of a lack of money. Meanwhile, the university provided additional grants to tide them over the unexpected situation.

Jobs outside the school were no longer available. To convert the assets that the students had into income, the school's leaders turned their attention towards the well-known Laie Hukilau. After looking at the reasons for the success of the Hukilau which had been in operation since shortly after the end of World War II, plans were laid that would eventually expand the Hukilau concept into a full blown Polynesian entertainment center. The Hukilau's success showed that tourists would pay to enjoy authentic Polynesian dances and music. This added weight to an unusual suggestion that the school's students pay their tuition by performing as a group for paying audiences.

## A MIRACLE IS PERFORMED

Members of both the school faculty and the community combined talents to instruct a small group of students. Finally, polished and proficient, they found a ready market for their off-campus cultural shows. Beginning in 1959, the students juggled schoolwork with evening performances in the International Marketplace in Waikiki, for military groups, conventions, and at various parks around the island. Under the title of "Polynesian Panorama," the students also performed in the Hilton Hawaiian Dome (then called the Kaiser Dome) in 1960-61, and in 1962 in the Waikiki Shell. About this time, Church leaders in Hawaii and on the mainland approved plans for a major Polynesian music and cultural center right next to the campus.

## BIRTH OF A MULTI-CULTURAL CENTER

Abandoning the proven success of the CCH's Polynesian revue in Waikiki for a regular stage show at a remote location 40 miles from Honolulu's popular tourist centers seemed foolhardy to many at the time, but Church leaders were looking past short-term problems to a major tourist attraction that would help thousands of needy and deserving students.

At the same time, the proposed center could honor and help preserve fast disappearing aspects of ancient Polynesian cultures, giving visitors from around the world a close-up look at people from many cultures working together in harmony and love. When the plan was in motion, families in Laie were asked to help out with their time and skills to build what would be known as the Polynesian Cultural Center.

This they did, in an outpouring of voluntary effort that's remarkable, even in Mormon Church history. Land was cleared, buildings constructed and students trained. In 1963, the Polynesian Cultural Center opened its doors to what many experts considered to be an economic disaster. How wrong they were! The union of faith and works was now complete. A miracle had indeed been accomplished.

Laie also blossomed, barren plain that became a green garden. Cultures commingled and intermingled. A patchwork of ethnic neighborhoods grew. One can easily find Caucasian, Fijian, Tongan, Samoan, Hawaiian, along with Filippino, Chinese, Japanese, and other cultural groups within a one-block square. Intercultural neighborhood parties have become the norm and not the exception to the rule. Children play together, go to school together, and worship together. Everyone is "colorblind." The people all consider themselves part of the same "family," a recognition that in the family of mankind, brother and sister are words to be taken literally and that action and reaction to one another is governed accordingly. Complementing the community environment, the Polynesian Cultural Center has elevated that feeling to another level in its portrayal of the cultures of Polynesia via music, dance, arts and crafts, and food for the benefit of both the tourist and the performers.

Many have felt that the Polynesian Cultural Center was destined to be built at the particular time and place that it was, because of the outstanding spirit of giving among the Saints in the surrounding community of Laie and at the university. That spirit of giving has remained over the years in Laie, and is a reciprocal process for both the Polynesian Cultural Center and the university. Annually the Center donates to the university, in the form of student wages and grants, all its income above its own operation and expansion expenses, and certain financial grants to worthy community education and improvement programs.

The university in turn provides its students with quality, fully-accredited educational opportunities, the best collegiate campus facilities in all Hawaii for a school its size, and one of the lowest tuition rates of any private university in the nation.

Both the university and PCC are models of support for worthy community programs and provide hundreds of valuable full time jobs to the North Shore.

Both also actively work to preserve the ancient cultures of the Pacific while training the young men and women of those same ancient cultures for the careers and opportunity of the future.

Twenty-five years have now passed since those first exuberant student entertainers, dressed to represent alis of old Hawaii, warriors of New Zealand, princesses and voyagers and leaders of Tonga and Tahiti and Samoa, performed that historic first Polynesian Cultural Center show.

Over 15,000 students have worked at the Center over those years and then gone their many ways. The university has grown as has the center. Over the years, government leaders and experts in education and tourism from around the world have been among the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Polynesian Cultural Center and for many, adjacent BYU-Hawaii and the Mormon temple. Many have come to learn why this school/multi-cultural theme park combination works so well, so far from the center of Hawaii's tourist area.

They learn that it starts with good people from many cultures, united within a dynamic Christian faith, who understand the prophetic destiny of the university. It includes hard work, enthusiasm, and patience. And all who participate, students, educators, administrators, workers and, paying visitors, find themselves in a noble cause: caring for, learning about, and teaching the people of the Pacific and in turn, being taught.

Wherein then lies the uniqueness of the Polynesian Cultural Center? From what source does it attribute its success? Does it function as a force for peace in a troubled world? Can it be duplicated or replicated by others. What message does it have to tell the world?

This blending of multi-cultures into a highly successful tourist attraction deserves world wide attention. An alliance of necessity has allowed both young and old from around the Pacific Rim to retain culture and set aside customs. Cultures can be shared. That is not necessarily true with customs. Culture invites cooperation while customs can be devisive and produce antagonisms. Culture generates meaning while customs are often meaningless. What then is the common strand that holds it all together--the cultural glue that has bound the students and workers of the Polynesian Cultural Center into a sense of oneness, of belonging or purpose?

It is a faith, religious or otherwise, that allows one to be both different and yet the same. A faith that what you are and what you are doing is important to: (1) yourself, (2) your associates, (3) your community and, (4) your fellow man. It is a faith that allows genius to emerge from genuineness. You can't fake love of fellowman. Together we stand, divided we fall. Doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. A faith that acknowledges that we are, after all is said and done, indeed children of our Father in Heaven, brothers and sisters in a global

world!

It is that uniqueness that sets apart the Polynesian Cultural Center on the island of Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands. A multi-cultural theme park that, in all probability, can not be reproduced anywhere else in the world without building on that same foundation. A tourist attraction that shows through living example how peace can be had and held throughout the world.

#### INTO THE FUTURE

What lies ahead for the Polynesian Cultural Center is a question that many ask and the answer is both simple and complex. Its original mission will be preserved--to provide jobs for the students attending Brigham Young University-Hawaii, to preserve the cultural heritage of the people of the Pacific and to teach others what that is. And yet change has and continues to be an integral part of this great center. There is no doubt it will grow in physical size as expansion plans already laid provide for additional visual presentations. It is possible that many of the other cultures of the Pacific Rim such as China, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, etc., will be accommodated in villages of their own and that the Center could become known as the Pacific Cultural Center. This would broaden the intertwining of cultural relationships and serve to strengthen even the bond of friendship and peace amongst people from around the world. Certainly authenticity and entertainment will continue to go hand in hand.

#### MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL

While millions of visitors have and will continue to benefit by the Polynesian Cultural Center experience, it is equally important to look at the effect of all of this on those who work there, especially the students from Brigham Young University-Hawaii. Their experience while working there will be limited in most cases to no more than four years, the length of time necessary to graduate from university. During that time, they will have danced together, sung together, served food together, sold crafts together, and demonstrated arts and crafts together. They will have gone to classes together, dated each other, and in many cases married each other. They will have learned how to communicate with each other (even though their native languages are different), care for each other, defend each other, laugh together, and cry together. They will have seen both the best and worst in each other and for all of this, they wouldn't trade it for any material reward offered. They will come away from the experience knowing that people can be different but important and of great worth, that love knows no boundaries, that we are indeed our brother's keeper. They will have a vision of the pathway to peace and an understanding of how to stay on that pathway. And best of all, year-after-year, these students will continue to go out into the world and be a living example of how to make it all work!

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