

GUEST: JOHN CLARK

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One of the guys that I interviewed was a man named Kerr. He was born back in the 1890s, so he was a surfer as a young child. By the time he was already ten years old, he was already surfing in Waikiki. And Queen was still alive at that time, and she had a home called Hamohamo, which is right where the Pacific Beach Hotel is. And she had a pier that ran out from her home, that went out into the water. And she would sit out on her pier, and she would watch the surfers, which were right out in front of her. Anyway, this guy and another friend of his, she would ask for them; she would ask them to go out and surf, just so she could watch surfers while she was sitting on her pier. He and his friend named the spot Queen's. And that's Queen's—

That's Queen's Beach?

That's Queen's Surf.

Oh, Queen's Surf.

[CHUCKLE] Queen's Beach is a little further down the road. So anyway, that's Queen's Surf that's almost now—it's almost straight out from the Duke's statue.

We're surrounded by water, so it's only natural that many of us play and work in the ocean. But as we're enjoying our beaches and reefs, how many of us are curious enough, and persistent enough, to learn the background of our favorite fishing or surfing spot, what its name means, who's responsible for naming it, and what role does it play in Hawaii's history? Next, on Long Story Short, we'll meet a man who's combined a love of the ocean with an insatiable curiosity.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to Long Story Short. When you think of a name, do you ever wonder what's behind that name? For instance, why is a place called Toes, or Snipes, or Gums? How about the name John Clark; a relatively simple name, only two syllables, but the simplicity of the name hides the complexity of the man. He served in the Army. He was a lifeguard at Sandy Beach, waterman, and firefighter who worked his way up to Deputy Chief of the Honolulu Fire Department, author of a series of nonfiction book about Hawaiian waters. Somehow, it seems only natural that this complex man, with a simple name, is a descendant of a sea captain.**

His name was William Carey Lane, and he came here in the 1850s. And in 1853, there was a smallpox epidemic that was going on in Honolulu. So he was here. He had decided to make his home in the islands. And he was asked to take some medicine to a Hawaiian couple down where the Royal Hawaiian Hotel is. So he did; he met their daughter, he married her, and ended up making Hawaii his home.

But he planned to do so, even before he met—

Met her

—and fell in love.

Yes.

Was he at the end of his career, or did he just decide, Heck with my career, I'm staying?

He—exactly that. He decided that he didn't want to go to sea anymore. And he really loved Hawaii, he decided to make it his home. So he married her, they ended up having twelve children, six boys and six girls. And the first Clark that came to Hawaii married one of the six girls. So anyway, going back to that marriage between the sea captain and Kahoolimoku—that was her name, I'm fifth generation from that marriage.

You seem to concentrate your fascination and your—

[CLEARS THROAT]

—passion where the sea intersects with the shoreline.

[CHUCKLE]

The coastal areas, not the deep sea that your—

Yes.

—your ancestor loved, or once loved. You love that, where water and land connect.

Yes; exactly right. My mother likes to say that she and my dad had me swimming even before I walked. They took me and put me in the ocean before I was even a year old. So that connection for me and the ocean and the beach has always been there from the very beginning. And that was really reinforced when I learned how to surf. I started surfing when I was eight years old. And—

Who taught you? Or did you learn yourself?

Oh, no, not at all. My dad was in construction here in Hawaii, and one of the guys he worked with was a man named Clarence Maki. And Clarence was an avid surfer—actually, an avid surf photographer as well. So anyway, he and my dad were talking one day, and Clarence just told my dad that he'd be willing to teach me how to surf. He did, and I've been a lifelong surfer since.

What was your upbringing like? Where'd you grow up, and what was it like?

I grew up at a place called Kaalawai, which is over between Black Point and Diamond Head. It's a little community there.

Were you right on the water?

Oh, no, no. We were back up towards Diamond Head Road. But anyway, that's where, really, that I learned to surf in Waikiki, but that whole Diamond Head-Kaalawai area was my backyard.

What was it like? I don't know that area, except to walk along it. What—
Oh.

—was it known for?

Actually, Kaalawai was known for several things. As far as traditional Hawaiian resources go, it was an area known for *limu*, for seaweed. There's a lot of *limu* there—or there used to be. There used to be *wawaeiole*, which is a thick, green *limu*, and then a finer one that everybody calls *ogo* now. But we used to call it *manawea*, *limu manawea*.

Did you gather that for salads?

Yes, we did. So those two, I find them every once in a while when I go back there to surf. But not too much. But there were also octopus there. People would come spearing for octopus. And there's a seasonal fish that used to run through there, the mullet. And they would start off in Pearl Harbor in schools of thousands, and they would just start flowing around the island, and they'd run all the way down the coast, all the way around Makapuu Point, and then head up towards the windward side.

Does that still happen?

No, not like before. We don't see those mullet runs before. But the throw net fishermen, when they would run, and it would be in the fall, when the *anae*, the mullet used to run through there, the throw net fishermen would come from all over the island to throw net on the schools.

Did you go down to the beach every day?

Almost. [CHUCKLE]

What was your routine? Before school and after school, or after school?

No, only after school. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] 'Cause lot of folks came to school with their hair dripping wet.

Yes; no, that wasn't me. [CHUCKLE] But I did surf a lot after school. And like I said, that was my backyard, all those spots. I surfed a lot.

What kind of boards did you surf on, as you went along?

I started off on balsa. So I started surfing in 1954, and that's just when the foam boards are starting to make their appearance, mostly in California, and they're just starting to make their way to Hawaii. We don't actually get a foam surfboard factory here, which was the Velzy Factory, until 1960. So those first six years of my life, or my surfing life, anyway, from '54 to '60, I was riding a balsa board. So it was what we used to called a Malibu. It had a kick in the front, and it was just a single fin. And of course, no leashes.

And there are two of your surfboards behind you. Tell—

Yes.

—me about those boards. They look like they've seen a lot of action, and—
[CHUCKLE]

—and they've been cared for.

Yes, they are. Those are called *alaia*'s, and the *alaia*'s are traditional Hawaiian surfboards. Anyway, one of them, the one with the round nose, is made out of redwood and pine. And the other one is made out of all traditional Hawaiian wood; it's *wiliwili* with *koa* strips, stringers. So anyway, the *alaia*'s are boards that I still ride 'til this day, as opposed to a regular surfboard. And—

No fins?

No fins at all. So they like to side slip; they don't a line quite like a regular surfboard does.

And they're not that long.

No; they're only five-feet-two, both of them. And they're very thin too; they're only three-eighths of an inch.

What size waves are they best on?

They'll ride anything up to like double overhead waves. Just gotta get out there and fly. [CHUCKLE]

And what's the story of how the boards were made?

Besides board surfing, besides learning how to surf on a surfboard, I've also been a *paipo* rider all my life. And one of the guys that I ride *paipo* with builds *paipo* boards. So when I started researching my book on traditional Hawaiian surfing, I wanted to know what it was like to ride a traditional board. So I just asked my friend—his name's Bud Shelsa; I asked Bud if he would build me an *alaia* board, and he did. So we started off with the one with the round nose, and then I got to know that board. And then I decided to try something a little different, shape wise, and we went with the second one, the one with the *wiliwili* and *koa*.

In the Hawaiian culture, *mooolelo*, storytelling was crucial in passing down the history of the Hawaiian Islands from generation to generation. In today's world, the *mooolelo* behind many of Hawaii's beaches and landmarks would be forgotten and lost without people like John Clark.

So you were an early swimmer, an early surfer?

Yes.

But those skills are different from collecting and writing about swimming and surfing, and coastlines. How did that all come together?

It actually started with surfing. When I got into my teens and I started surfing around the island, when I got a driver's license and my friends did too, we started surfing all the different spots around the Island of Oahu. And I actually got interested in the names of all these different spots; where the names came from, what the story was, the *mooolelo* behind the names. And I just started just collecting these as I went along over the years. So anyway, in 1970, when I got out of the Army, I became a lifeguard at Sandy Beach. And as I sat there on my tower, I decided that I was gonna do something proactive to try and reach people and before they got in the water, and got in trouble. So I started writing

about Sandy Beach, I started writing about water safety. But when I read this material over, I thought it was really boring. I thought no one would be interested in it. So all this stuff that I'd gathered about surf spots and names, and where the names came from, I decided to combine that information with the water safety stuff. So I just rolled it all into one, and I ended up with a book.

Speaking of names, Sandy Beach—

[CHUCKLE]

How more basic can that be?

[CHUCKLE]

Does that have a Hawaiian name, or a history that's more interesting than the words, Sandy Beach?

So the area where Sandy Beach is, is called Wawamalu. And if you go out and look at the old highway bridge out near the entrance to the Hawaii Kai Golf Course, you can see the name Wawamalu; it's still on the bridge out there. But anyway, the name Sandy Beach actually came from the *ulua* fishermen that fished at Bamboo Ridge, which is over by the Blow Hole. And they would fish at Bamboo Ridge, and they would just call the beach next door ... the sand beach. They'd call it Blow Hole Sand Beach; that was one of their names. Anyway, Blow Hole Sand Beach got edited down to "sand be"—Sandy Beach, and nowadays, the kids just call it Sandy's. Simple.

There are so names that make you wonder. And there are also more than one name for a place.

Yes.

So you had to figure out which is the more appropriate. And then, there are probably different versions of how things came to be named the way they are.

Yes, there are. So that's something that I've done all my life, just collect all of these stories, and then just kind of balance the stories one against the other, and try to come up with what I think is the original version, the original *moolelo* for that place name.

How do you go about finding the *moolelo*? I mean, how do you do it? You show up at a beach, you're curious about it, and then what?

Well, because I'm a water person, I guess I can talk surf speak, or I can speak the language. And I just talk to guys or girls in the water, and I say, What do you call this spot? And, I mean, where did the name come from? So I just pick up stories as I go. And I also go through literature. People besides me have written about surf spots and about beaches, and just different places. So I gather all this material, and I just kinda sift through it, and come up with what I think is the legitimate story behind the name.

Do you try to find people who are living there, or associated with the beach a long time ago?

Oh, yes.

You go away from the beach to find the story?

Yes, I do. In fact, that's one of the things that I've done religiously over the years, is going to the communities and talk to the *kupuna*; the people that were born and raised there, that know the area, that know the names. And the Fire Department was wonderful for that. Because everybody has a fireman in their family, or everybody knows a fireman. So I would ask the guys at work. I'd say, Oh, you're from Kaaawa. Do you still have family out there? Can I go talk to your grandma or your auntie, or whatever? And then you get the ripple effect. So I talk to the grandma in Kaaawa, and she says, Oh, now, you gotta go talk to my sister in Punaluu. Or, You need to go talk to my dad, who's out in Laie.

And did you know you were gonna put the information into books? Did you have that idea to begin with?

No; I never did, you know. Just going back to Sandy Beach in 1972; I never thought that I would ever put all of this information into books, into what turned out to be an entire series of books. They were just things that I was interested in, you know, I gathered the information.

And you were methodical about it. You thought, back in 1972, to take down names, and commit—

Yes.

—it to paper.

Yes. I really valued the information that people gave me, and I thought it was important to recognize them, to honor them for, confiding in me and helping me with what I was after. So I did. That's something that I've done all these years, is acknowledge everyone who's contributed to my work.

Can we take some surfing sites that lots of people know—

[CHUCKLE]

—but they may not know the origin of the name.

Sure.

For example, along Ala Moana and Waikiki, there are all kinds of surf breaks.

Yeah.

And people know the names, but they might have forgotten the reason. Some—

Sure.

Some, you can tell, some not.

Sure. Well, if you want to start at Ala Moana, first of all, you have Magic Island. And there's a spot out there that's called Bombora's. And Bombora is actually an aboriginal word; it came from the Australian surfers who came here to Hawaii. And somebody just tagged that name for the surf spot out there. You move—the next spot down, going west now, is Baby Haleiwa's. That's named, because that spot breaks just like the surf spot Haleiwa on the North Shore. It's got the same right with a pocket on a shallow reef on the inside. So that's for a geographical comparison. And then you hit Courts, which is named for the tennis courts—

Which are right across.

Exactly right. Straight in; that's your landmark. You go a little further down, you hit Concessions, right out in front of the food concession. So anyway, all of the spots, they all have a story, they all have some reason that they were named. A lot of the names come from just geographical location.

There was one near where I grew up, Niu Valley, called Snipes. Do you know the origin of that?

Yeah; Jerry Lopez told me that story. Snipes are birds.

Mm.

And the snipes were the little seabirds that were running back and forth on the beach at low tide, just foraging for food.

There's another surf spot called Gums. What's the story there?

[CHUCKLE] Okay; Gums is out on the North Shore, and Gums is at Ehukai Beach Park, right next to the Pipeline. Anyway, Randy Rarick told me this story.

Who grew up in Niu Valley, by the way.

Who grew up in Niu Valley, and who surfed at Snipes, and he named Toes too, by the way. Randy is the one that came up with that name. But anyway, getting back to Gums. Randy said that there was a surfer out there who had false teeth. And one day, he got hit in the mouth by his board, and he lost his false teeth.

M-hm.

So everyone was teasing him about coming in toothless. So the spot just got tagged Gums.

Gums.

Which it's been ever since.

There's also Yokohama Bay, which folks on the Waianae Coast have now taken to calling by its original Hawaiian name.

Yes.

Keawaula.

Keawaula; exactly right. So anyway, back when it was called Yokohama, the train, the OR&L train used to run from Honolulu around Kaena Point to Haleiwa, and actually beyond. The train actually ran up 'til 1947. But anyway, there was a camp out there, um, of repairmen who were mostly Japanese workers. And their job was to repair the tracks. So Yokohama was one of the ports where a lot of the Japanese came from, when they came to Hawaii. So that name just kinda got tagged with them, to that particular bay, Keawaula Bay.

And why was it called Keawaula? There must be a reason for that.

There is.

That Hawaiian name.

[CHUCKLE] Well, the name Keawaula is actually three words in Hawaiian. It's ke, which is, the; awa is harbor; and then ula is red. So it means, the red harbor. And there are squid in the Hawaiian Islands, besides octopus, now—these are the true squid, and they school. And when they come into a harbor and they're schooling, and they're mating, they turn red. And so it looks like the water turns

red, because the schools are so massive. So anyway, that's the *mooolelo* behind Keawaula, is because of the squid schools that used to come in there seasonally.

You know, we were talking a lot about ...

[CHUCKLE]

—things you can see, you know, surf sites.

Yes.

But ... I live on the North Shore, and—

Oh.

—I've always lived around or among surfers.

Okay.

And ... it appears to me that there's a whole world out there that a lot of us don't see, but it's as real as anything to those who are in the waters a lot. So many people know the underwater landscapes just as well as they do the streets of—

Yes.

—the town.

Yes. Well, you're actually making a very good point. Surf spots are ocean parks. And that's how surfers see them. So if you think of your favorite park, or your favorite golf course, or the tennis courts where you play tennis; to a surfer, a surf spot's the same thing. That's his park, that's his area where he does his recreation, his activities. So you're right. The surfers know the ocean bottom, they know all the quirks, and the currents, and what happens if it's high tide and low tide, whether it's summer or winter. All of that stuff plays in, and they know their spots just as well as golfers know their golf courses.

No matter how random life is, sometimes people become who they were destined to be. In the case of John Clark, he channeled his love of surfing, his career as a firefighter, and his passion for historical research into leadership of the Hawaiian Historical Society.

I've always liked English. I've always been a very good reader. A voracious reader, actually. So I thought I would be an English major, and that's what I started off doing up at UH Manoa. But as I got into it, I realized that I really didn't want to be a teacher, which is pretty much where you have to go if you're an English major. So I switched; I switched my major to Hawaiian Studies, which was what I was personally interested in. And at that time, I was already in the Fire Department, so I didn't have to worry about my degree being my profession.

I see.

I already had my profession. So I got a degree in Hawaiian Studies.

How did you go, all of a sudden, from water to fire?

[CHUCKLE] I was a lifeguard for two years; that was from 1970 to 1972. And my roommate at that time was a guy named Aaron Young, and Aaron was working for Hawaiian Tel. So anyway, Aaron decided that he wanted to be a fireman,

and after he got in, he said it was a really good job, it was a good lifestyle, and he encouraged me to take the test, which I did. And one of the reasons I did is because at that time, there wasn't any upward mobility in the lifeguard service. If you were a lifeguard, you were a lifeguard pretty much for life. So there wasn't too much chance of me moving up in the ranks, getting higher pay; you know, that kinda thing.

M-hm.

And in the Fire Department, it's just the opposite. They're a big organization, lots of mobility, lots of room to get promoted.

And lots of different aspects of the work.

Yes; including ocean rescues. The Fire Department here does ocean rescues. So that's something that I did as the years went along, too.

And when you ended your career after thirty-three years—

Oh, yes.

—Deputy Fire—

Fire chief.

—Chief.

Yes.

Far away from the water.

[CHUCKLE]

And even fires, right? You were in an—

Yes.

—executive role.

Yes. So the last seven and a half years of my career were as the Deputy Fire Chief of HFD. But even that was good, too. During that time, I went and got a master's in public administration. And I really took that job seriously, of being a public administrator of a first responder agency.

You've spent a lot of time gathering information, writing, and taking—

Yes.

—care of the publication of books. Why do you do it? Do you make a lot of money from it?

Oh, no. It's all for love. [CHUCKLE] Just real quick; the royalties are very minimal from the sales of all of my books. And the royalties that I do get, I just channel them back into the research, and all of the field trips that I do for the current projects that I'm working on. So there's no money in it. But I really enjoy doing it. I think that I'm capturing pieces of Hawaiian history that other people haven't. And the feedback that I get from people that read my stuff tells me that I think I'm touching some bases out there. Maybe not making a homerun with everybody, but I'm touching some bases, and people seem to appreciate what I do.

Sometimes on a mainland trip, I go to one of these, say, LA subdivisions, you know, malls. And you don't—

[CHUCKLE]

You don't see any distinguishing characteristics, or landmarks.

Yes.

It's just paved.

[CHUCKLE]

I think it would be really hard to live in a place like that.

That you can't relate to somehow; yes.

What's the history? I don't know. [CHUCKLE]

Right. So that's something that I've tried to do for Hawaii. So if you live in Lanikai, you know where the name came from, what it means, you know the history of the area. If you live on the North Shore, why Sunset Point is Sunset Point, and you know why Rock Piles is Rock Piles, and all the rest of it.

I notice that you've been the president of the Hawaiian Historical Society—

Yes.

—for years.

Yes; for six years. [CHUCKLE]

Why? What do you enjoy about that?

The Hawaiian Historical Society ... does what I do. They preserve Hawaiian history. And that's something that I've been doing all of these years, is telling history, telling Hawaiian history through the beaches. So to me, it's a perfect fit. The Hawaiian Historical Society has a library, they have an archive. They're one of the key resource research centers here in the Hawaiian Islands. And I'm a part of that. I'm a part of the journal that we've put out. In fact, I'm one of the editors of the Journal of Hawaiian History. So it all plays in, it all ties in, and it all works out really well for me.

Even if it's land history?

Yes; even if it's land history. [CHUCKLE]

So the next time someone asks you where the name Snipes came from, or why Queen's Surf is called Queen's Surf, pass on the *moolelo*. Then, tell them that you heard it from the guy slipping down the face of a double overhead on the *alaia* surfboard. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A *hui hou kakou*.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of **Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox**, visit pbshawaii.org.

Is there a favorite surf site name that you've come across? I know they're probably all like your children, but is there a favorite one?

Actually, I enjoy all of them. I like all of the names and all of the stories. But I'll tell you this real quick. The spot that I get asked the most often about, over any spot in the Hawaiian Islands, is a spot out in Makua that's called Pray For Sex. And Pray For Sex actually comes from another surf slogan from the 60s, which was Pray For Surf. Somebody just change one word in the slogan there, and

they actually wrote it on a rock out there. So you can go out there right now, and see Pray For Sex; it's still written on that rock.

And what is another name for that surf spot? Is there—

Oh.

Is there another name for it?

It's actually more of a little bodysurfing spot out there. The rock that it's written on has a Hawaiian name; it's called Pohaku Kulalai. And there's actually a little marker out there that explains that. But people still know that 'til this day. And every time I talk to people about surf spots, they always ask me about that one.