

Maui sugar workers intent on going strong till the end

By Lee Cataluna
January 31, 2016

Puunene, Maui >> From the fourth floor of the HC&S boiling house, you can see three old churches, the school that the plantation built in 1922, and the irrigation ditch where, almost 80 years ago, legendary coach Soichi Sakamoto trained champion swimmers.

You get up there in an old freight elevator with a pull-down cage door that is original to the 1901 structure. It still runs with a reassuringly steady hum as it takes you past huge metal boiling pans, miles of pipe and thick ceiling beams that are still sturdy after a century of hard, heavy work.

This day is voggy, and the haze blots out much of the view of central Maui. Still, you can see pieces of the past – mango trees where plantation houses used to be, parts of the train tracks that once brought the sugar to the docks.

When Alexander & Baldwin announced Jan. 6 that Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Co. would end sugar production, the news was framed as the closing of an era.

I went to HC&S with the idea of trying to write an elegy for the plantation — not a sprawling memoir for all of sugar, but for the very specific identity of these fields and this factory and the men and women who love them.

But what I saw was that it isn't over yet. There is one more proud season left.

Sons of sugar

Rick Volner's great-grandfather came from Portugal to work in sugar on Maui. His grandfather worked in sugar. His grandmother worked for 40 years in the lab in Paia analyzing the cane juice for things like sugar content.

This Maui-born son of sugar will be the last plantation manager in Hawaii.

Volner has been at HC&S for 18 years, the last four as manager. He got his degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and took a job as an agricultural engineer at HC&S. He figured his training could be adapted from mechanics to farming. And besides, the factory and the power plant would be right up his alley.

"At the very root, an engineer is a problem solver who takes on a challenge and finds an elegant solution," he said.

It was a temporary job, but he was eventually hired on permanently and put into a management training program. He is 41 years old, working with people who have been on the job at HC&S longer than he's been alive.

"It's a source of pride that HC&S has been so good for so long, well after other plantations

faltered," he said. "We have the advantage of contiguous acreage, but a lot is because of the employees. HC&S always attracted the best. We have good training. We're finishing this year strong."

Volner is congenial and easy to talk to, the kind of manager who can tell a story where he isn't the hero.

There was a project in Paia where they had to install a pipe. On the map for the project, the pipe was to run alongside the road in a straight line. When the crew got out there, though, they came up against a huge, almost impenetrable rock shelf.

"I was thinking, we have to bring a hole ram or break the rock. We still have a dynamite license; maybe we should do that."

Over the weekend, Volner chewed on the problem. He decided to go out to get another look at the site. "The trench had been dug and covered and the machine had moved on. The pipe had been installed," he said.

The crew had simply gone around the rock shelf, poking along as they went to see where the edge of the rock was.

"I saw a line on a map and thought, 'We have to follow the line.' But they thought, 'We can go through the rock or we can go around.' The end result was done safely, cheaply, efficiently. It was a few feet more of pipe but three days less of work," Volner said. "It was humbling, but it makes you appreciate that kind of knowledge and experience."

There are many stories like that on a sugar plantation. So much science is involved — biology, chemistry, engineering — but there is an element of intuitive knowledge that's also required.

"We've let people use that knowledge. That's the beauty of the plantation," Volner said. "Things are done a certain way for safety, reporting purposes, legality, but in some areas, there's latitude allowed for that kind of ingenuity."

Volner describes the factory as "a 100-year-old rusting building where inside, everything is automated." There are sensors that monitor and control everything from the moment the cane comes in from the fields to when it comes out as raw sugar and every step in between. Volner can monitor how much cane is going through the factory on his iPad at home.

Robert Luuwai is the vice president of factory operations. He's also a Maui-born son of a multigenerational sugar family. He graduated from St. Anthony and Oregon State. In May, he will mark 30 years with the company.

Luuwai talks like an Advanced Placement science teacher who expects his students to be as quick as he is. He knows the back story on every piece of equipment in the factory.

"This pan boiler is from 1920," he said, gesturing to a hulking vat in a row of similar equipment. "The inside is copper and brass. It ran until 15 years ago. You can't get it out of here. It's stuck."

Luuwai is proud of the factory, of the original redwood floors that have become rough and beautiful over time, of the steel beams that were put together with rivets like those in skyscrapers and battleships; proud of the time in 2006 when an earthquake knocked out every power plant in the state except for HC&S. This factory can survive shaking.

There are legends about HC&S, like the one about the welder who was so strong he could rip quarters in half. ("That's true," Volner said. "He was my uncle.") There's also the one about the old Puunene swimming pool being heated by a steam pipe from the factory. (Some say yes, others remember it being cold.)

Luuwai believes there's a time capsule somewhere under one of the original beams, buried there as the factory was being built a century ago. He doesn't want to dig it up.

“We can repair anything”

The employee break room in the machine shop is about as perfect a dugout as any grime-covered, hard-hat worker would want. There are rows of mismatched lunch tables with mismatched chairs and wooden benches. Two strings of blinking Christmas lights are strewn across the ceiling, remnants from past festivities. A collection of microwaves, toaster ovens and random appliances are stacked on one table. Not all are in working order, but here, the idea of “broken” is only temporary because these men can fix anything. Stuff doesn't get thrown out.

There's an old Philco refrigerator with its rounded-edge door standing against the far wall, an eBay treasure. There's a tall glass bottle with chili pepper water on one table that has more chili peppers than liquid. People keep bringing in more peppers and packing them in the bottle.

Here's the thing: When you walk into the private space of a tight-knit group of workers, where you're clearly an outsider even though you're invited, it's an uncomfortable feeling. But not here. If you're welcomed in, you feel welcome. There is no artifice. The cluttered walls look soothing and homey. The hard benches are comfortable.

A row of memorial programs from the funerals of retirees are displayed along one wall on top of photographs and posters and union notices. When an old-timer dies, someone goes to the service to pay their respects, then brings back the program so the departed's photo can be there with the work crew. There's nothing morbid or sad about it. The gang's all here. They call the collection of funeral programs the “Wall of Fame.”

In today's Internet-educated but misinformed world, people think of plantation workers as unskilled, mistreated and stuck in terrible jobs. That is not true, particularly in areas like the machine shop. Here, they are as skilled as surgeons and as courageous as warriors.

One time, a steel blade in one of the mills got stuck while the mill was full of millions of pieces of chopped cane. They couldn't open the access door to get to the problem. They had to get a chain saw to cut a hole in the side and feel through all that bulk to find and fix the blade.

Then there was the time a primary water line got plugged under the factory and they had to swim down there to fix it.

Millwrights Koa Martin and Carl Rackley are like the archetypal work-buddy characters from countless TV shows. Martin is brawny and philosophical. Rackley is angular with a boyish smile. They've worked together for 12 years. Rackley describes the closeness of their relationship this way: “We've been to each other's kids' parties. He cooked for my wedding.”

The two tell stories of grueling schedules and difficult working conditions — 10 days straight of 12-hour workdays, doing back-to-back shifts, staying on the job until whatever broke was fixed and the factory was running. All these are war stories, told with swagger, not complaint.

“Sometimes, you're at work so much you forget what your own house looks like,” Rackley said, “but it was some of the funnest times. Not many will ever experience that.”

“We enjoy the challenge,” Martin said. “We enjoy being able to handle whatever is thrown at us.”

When the conversation gets flowing in the break room, the stories just get bigger. There was the time a motorcycle got picked up with the cane and hauled to the factory. It made it through

all the mills, leaving scrapes on all the knives.

One time, part of a Volkswagen that had been stripped and dumped in the cane field came in with a load of cane, but they spotted it before the load got into the mill. Then there was the time that Martin was running the mill and he brazenly bet the harvesting supervisor that the factory could get ahead of supply during his shift in a kind of “Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel” challenge.

The competition was fun, until Martin pushed the machinery too hard and a massive 100-foot chain came loose from the main carrier. He can laugh at it now, but when the red light came on that night and the whole operation shuddered to a stop, it wasn't funny.

But it was fixable.

As millwrights, Rackley and Martin can operate any piece of machinery, open it up, diagnose a problem, fix it, weld it, put it back together again.

HC&S is the only private company in the state that has a federally recognized trade apprenticeship program. It also has the largest machine shop in Hawaii outside Pearl Harbor. As Luuwai puts it, “We can repair anything. We can make anything. We can fix and fabricate.”

One of the plantation's unclaimed exports over the years has been the number of workers who came through the apprenticeship program and then went on to work for other Maui companies.

For Martin, who is a third-generation HC&S employee, the plantation always felt like a place where a man who wanted to better himself and his family's circumstances would find support.

“I wouldn't have had the courage to buy a house if I didn't have a place like this to lean on,” Martin said.

For Rackley, it is a dream job. “I was always the kid who took his toys apart,” he said.

Martin filled out a job application last week. Under “past experience,” the 41-year-old had only five jobs to put down: small jobs he had during high school, the construction job he worked before coming to the plantation, and the nearly 20 years he's been at HC&S. His job-hunting is halfhearted. He isn't focusing his energy on what happens afterward. That will come soon enough.

“For me, those questions are premature. They're on the side, for later on,” Martin said. “For now, I'm not going to downshift. I'm going to come to work every day and give it everything. Do the best that I can. Until the end. Then I can hold my head up high and tell my kids, ‘I worked for HC&S.’”