

Part country market,
part living history museum, Keauhou Store brings
the past into the present

The Store that Time Forgot

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There's a note on a rusted tin can beneath the vintage rotary dial telephone on the wall of Keauhou Store. It reads: "Please deposit coin before using telephone. This is a business phone. Please let owner know before making long distance calls. If so where to."

In most commercial settings this tableau might stand out as a quaint decoration placed to lend an air of historical authenticity or to pluck a string of nostalgia for simpler times. But not here. For many years this was an actual pay phone for the community of farmers and ranchers who lived around Hōlualoa in Kona. The phone has long been out of service, but it has never been moved. "When we found the can, it was still half full of coins, the oldest from 1914," says Thea Brown, who with help from her husband Kurt, now runs the Keauhou Store as a combination country market and living history museum.

The Browns bought the place in 2010, lock, stock and barrel. And there was a lot of stock, plus more than a few barrels. When the couple began sorting through the boxes upon dusty boxes stored in closets and back rooms, they were surprised to find a trove of unsold merchandise and other curiosities that had accumulated over the decades.



"It was crazy," says Thea. "It was like a treasure hunt every day. But it was also like a bomb had gone off. If you set a screwdriver down anywhere, you would just lose it." Some of what they discovered—hundreds of Japanese records from the 1950s, for instance—is up for sale. But most of it is simply on display. There are bales of Kona-grown cotton wrapped in

brown paper and string, boxes of Dubble Bubble gum and Dipsy Doodle candy bars, mid-twentieth-century signs advertising Coca-Cola and Star Kerosene Oil, antique birdcages and bicycles, vintage camera supplies and auto parts, black-and-white televisions and knitting needles. Like the telephone and its coin can, the store's other contents tell of an intact history—of family, business and town—that stretches back nearly one hundred years.

The Keauhou Store opened in 1919 along Māmalahoa Highway, which was then one of Kona's main thoroughfares. It was constructed by its original proprietor, Yoshisuke Sasaki, who emigrated from Japan to Hawai'i in 1900 at the age of 15. Yoshisuke initially worked in Kona building coffins and redwood water tanks, then moved on to larger and more complex carpentry jobs. Among his enduring handiwork are the Buddhist temple for the Dai-fukuji Soto Mission in nearby Honalo and the ornate archway at the Tong Wo Tong cemetery, the store's next-door neighbor.

From the street, the original Keauhou Store appeared to be a simple, one-story plantation-style building with a sweeping view of coastal Kona's lava fields and deep blue sea. Actually, the store was a three-story structure that spilled down the side

The Keauhou Store dates to 1919, when Yoshisuke Sasaki opened a small grocery and dry goods store beside the cemetery in Hōlualoa on Hawai'i Island. It grew to become a virtual department store, carrying a variety of merchandise ranging from knitting needles to auto parts to the latest black-and-white televisions sets. Today the store is run by Thea Brown (above) and her husband Kurt.





of the steep slope. Over time, Yoshisuke expanded the store horizontally along the roadway, and in 1947 he added a fourth story and the current art deco façade.

From the start, the store was at the center of its community. In the early years, when Yoshisuke and his wife Kuma ran it, the store was a link in the chain of supply for local farmers, who would take credit against

the future earnings from their macadamia nut and coffee crops. In some cases, bills went unpaid and farmers abandoned their land; Yoshisuke picked up those leases and began farming coffee and macadamia nuts himself. He is said to have been one of the first to dry-roast macadamia nuts, which he did in a roaster he built himself and which is still tucked away in a back room.

“My father was quite an energetic guy,” recalls Gilbert T. Sasaki, one of Yoshisuke’s sons. “A small guy, but lots of energy. During the day he’d do carpentry. Then he’d come home and do the store work. And then he also had the farms.” Gilbert is 93 now and lives with his wife, Betty, in Honolulu, but he ran the store for much of the 1940s and still fondly recalls his early years in Hōlualoa.

The Keauhou Store was a general store in every sense of the word. It was both gas station and post office, as well as a place where you could buy groceries and hardware, magazines and musical instruments, jewelry and underwear, spark plugs and Christmas lights, small appliances and large ones. It was also Kona’s first Schwinn bicycle dealer. Today you can see a framed letter on the wall from Honolulu’s Eki Cyclery. Dated July 24, 1942 and addressed to “T. Sasaki”—that is, Gilbert, who then went by Tetsuo—it explains, a bit emphatically, the reason for the delay in delivering a new Schwinn bike: “The uncertainty is due to the fact that we are at WAR.”



The Browns literally got more than they bargained for when they bought the Keauhou Store a few years ago. The place was a musty, faded remnant of its old self, but it was chock-full of inventory remnants from throughout the twentieth century, plus office supplies, business equipment and unclaimed Sasaki family mementos. The Browns refurbished the store and reopened it in 2011.

In a back room the Browns have re-created Yoshisuke’s office as a historical exhibit with, among other things, a large safe, a wood-paneled radio, an ancient typewriter, several business ledgers written in Japanese, an antique suitcase, several early twentieth-century carpentry tools, a collection of old fishing reels, a set of 1930s-era Japanese student association yearbooks, a felt bowler hat, a hatbox from John Cavanagh Ltd. in New York, a framed photo of the emperor of Japan and some photos autographed by actress Gloria Jean.

By 1940 Yoshisuke and Kuma had three sons living at home: 17-year-old Tetsuo (a.k.a. Gilbert), 15-year-old Rikio and 10-year-old Yoshikiyo. There’s a photo of an adult Rikio on one of the store’s walls, date unknown. He’s standing on the store’s front lanai. Bushy mustache, receding hairline, pens in shirt pocket, he leans on two post office boxes. One is a standard home mailbox, the other is an official blue and white US Postal Service letterbox—incoming mail for the family and the store, outgoing mail for the community.

In the 1940s Yoshisuke and Kuma had largely turned the daily operation of the

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Today the store is once again a community gathering place as well an informal yet remarkably rich living history museum filled with artifacts the Browns discovered on-site. For the history minded visitor, it's an open time capsule brimming with curiosities from throughout twentieth century. Some of the historic merchandise is displayed side by side with the contemporary merchandise.

store over to their sons. In the early postwar period Rikio was drafted into the Army, and for the next several years Gilbert ran the store. “The hours were long, very long,” Gilbert recalls. “I used to go in at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning. The morning guys would call and call because they wanted gasoline, or a fisherman would need something. Then in the evening the people who finished work would come. Guys who played music, they would come. So we stayed late, sometimes until midnight.” Here Gilbert pauses and then chuckles. “It was a hectic life, but it wasn’t bad. You know what I mean? Everybody was nice.

I made a lot of friends. Good life, I think.”

Rikio went on to finish his military service and study appliance repair on the GI Bill. Eventually he returned to Hōlualoa and took over the store from Gilbert. But the changing times were not kind to country general stores, and Rikio presided over this one’s decline. The extension of Kuakini Highway in 1967, which diverted travelers away from Māmalahoa Highway, was a big blow. Then in the 1990s environmental laws forced Hawai’i’s older gas stations to either upgrade their underground tanks or stop selling fuel and remove the tanks altogether. Rikio opted for the latter.

Yoshisuke passed away in 1974, Kuma in 1983. Rikio single-handedly kept the waning store going until he passed away in 2009, at which point it went to Gilbert. But the store—like all of the farmland Yoshisuke acquired—was on leased land, which was a factor in Gilbert’s decision to sell. Also, there was the fact that Gilbert was 86 when Rikio passed away. “I don’t want to say we were too old, but we were well past retirement age,” he says. “So we just let it go.”

Kurt and Thea have lived in Kona for more than thirty years. They had driven by



The store offers local produce, some of it grown by the Browns themselves.

the Sasaki place many times, but they had never gone in. When they began shopping for real estate, they never imagined they would buy the run-down country store. “We were kind of looking for an investment property, maybe like a rental,” says Thea. “I was driving by one day and saw the ‘for sale’ sign on it, and it just seemed so curious. It was so intriguing because it was full of all the old stuff, and it was just a jumbled-up mess.”

On a whim the Browns made an offer they were sure the Sasaki would reject. When it was accepted they were, almost accidentally, in business. “We weren’t really sure what our plan was going to be for it,” Thea says, “but the place itself just kept pushing us to keep it as a store. We decided pretty much from the beginning that we were going to keep everything and not start selling things off.”

It took about nine months from the time they closed on the mortgage to the time they opened their doors to the public on January 1, 2011. With the exception of hiring a roofer and electrician, Kurt and Thea did all of the work themselves, which, in addition to cleaning, painting and carpentry, included a lot of sorting through goods: everything from gold tooth fillings to bicycle parts to miso barrels to all manner of business and personal papers.

“Rikio was a lifelong bachelor, and after his mom died he was pretty much here by himself,” says Thea. “I don’t think he ever really cleaned anything after that.” Even so, as the Browns restored the place, they also marveled at the original craftsmanship. Nearly all of the store’s current display cabinets and furniture were handmade by Yoshisuke and required little more than a

vacuuming before they were good to go.

These days Keauhou Store’s stretch of Māmalahoa Highway is part of the Kona Heritage Corridor. Tourist traffic is increasing, but that’s not all. On weekdays during the school year, three separate school buses use the store as a stop. Kids flood in every afternoon, and Kurt and Thea have now been here long enough to see the first group of kindergartners through to the sixth grade, and the sixth graders on their way to high school graduation.

The store has fresh produce for sale, some of it grown onsite, along with hats, clothing, jewelry and a variety of other goods made by local crafters. In addition to being a carpenter, Kurt is also a luthier. Some of his guitars are for sale, along with a few other musical instruments. Thea runs a small bakery and lunch counter in one corner of the store. In place of gasoline, the Browns have installed a purified water filling station, and there is once again a full-service postal shop. They’re also growing coffee out back—though when Thea is asked whether the couple plans to put Yoshisuke’s roaster back into service, she rolls her eyes. “That’s a project for another time,” she says.

All of which is to say that six years in, the Browns have re-established Keauhou Store in the day-to-day life of Hōlualoa. “Every week someone comes in and says, ‘I got my first bicycle here,’ or ‘This is where I got my first pair of shoes,’” says Thea. “There’s still a core group of people living here whose parents and grandparents used to shop in the Sasaki’s store, and now we’re seeing their grandchildren and great-grandchildren here, which is really sweet.” HH