

GUEST: NANETTE NAPOLEON

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ō it used to be more popular in my parentsqgeneration, where the whole family would, you know, pack up for the day, and go to one cemetery and spend the whole day, or go to several during the day. And there used to be a lot more families that youq see in the graveyards. Um, but unfortunately, generations later, um, we donq have as much connection to ō the graves. And so we donq see that as much.

“She has dedicated her life’s work to something mostly associated with death. But she doesn’t see it that way, because to her, graveyards give us a fascinating view into people’s lives. That’s Nanette Napoleon on Long Story Short.

Aloha mai kakou, I’m Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of “Long Story Short,” You’ll meet a vivacious, athletic, upbeat person who—from the job she created for herself—may seem obsessed with death. Nanette Napoleon is considered Hawaii’s leading expert on graveyards. A trustee of O’ahu Cemetery in Nu’uanu, she’s the author and photographer of a book on Hawaii’s oldest public graveyard. She gives walking tours of the site and she supervised documentation of more than 300 graveyards and 30,000 tombstone inscriptions throughout the state.

Because of her pre-occupation and profession, one might suspect that this Kailua High School graduate had grown up a gloomy isolated child. Absolutely not true—not true at all!

...you have a big family. How many relatives do you have?

Oh, my gosh. Yeah; I come from a big Hawaiian family. Both my mother and my father are part-Hawaiian, and they both come from big families. My father was one of eight, and my mother was one of fourteen. And I still have probably um ō seventeen living aunts and uncles, and about sixty-something first cousins.

Your dad was Nappy Napoleon; but not the Nappy Napoleon people associate with canoe racing.

Right. Uh, but that’s the Nappy Napoleon who’s a paddler. But my father was also well known, and his name was Nappy. His real name was Nathan Nihi Napoleon, Sr.; but all his life, he went um, as Nappy, as did his father and uh, another one of his brothers. It’s a- so- natural. Yeah; it’s a natural name for Napoleon. So um, people always ask that. But I always correct them and say, No, not the paddling Nappy, but the beach boy Nappy, um, who was a beach boy at the Halekulani Hotel for uh, over twenty years.

What was your childhood like? Where did you grow up, or—or did you actually grow up pretty much on the beach at the Halekulani?

Uh, in my uh, mid-years, I- we did. But my family um õ I was born in Kailua. And then when I was two, my family moved to Al- Alameda, California. My father went to work for Matson. And we stayed there for eight years, and then came back to Kailua. And then my father and his uh, two brothers opened a beach boy stand in uh, Waikiki, next to the Moana Hotel. And then a few years after that, my dad started his own concession at the Halekulani Hotel.

And did—was that a family affair?

Uh, it really was. Um, my õ all of us six kids, as we were growing up, as we got older, um, we all worked for my dad on the weekends; extra money. And when we weren't working, we were there anyway, because we just wanted to go to the beach and surf, and sail, and play in- play around, and have a good time. When you uh, finished high school, you did give it a shot, working fulltime with your dad on the beach.

I did. I thought I wanted to um, be a beach girl for the rest of my life. Cause I really loved the beach and surfing, and all that. Uh, and so right out of high school, I had no plans to go to college, and I went uh, to work for my dad fulltime. But after about six months, it started getting a little old for me. [chuckle] I wasn't active enough. I- I was used to doing it on weekends and holiday, summers, like that, and it was always very much fun. But I found out that doing it every day was a little bit different. And so I wanted to do a little bit more than that. And so the- I decided- after a year I spent on the beach, I decided to go to college. And I was the first one in õ in my whole Napoleon line, I think õ uh õ to go to college, and graduate from college.

And it wasn't like a bolt of lightning that hit me, and so all of a sudden I'm gonna be this cemetery researcher person. Um õ but it was in- started in my consciousness, and as I went around, I no- I started just noticing graveyards here, and graveyards there. And then the next thing I knew, I was õ walking into them, and seeing what I could see.

And the first thing that I- I realized after visiting several, was that they're aesthetically very um, interesting places to look at. Because I've always been, since uh, high school, interested in photography. So um, I started going back to take pictures of the graveyards. And after a while, um, I started actually looking, and reading the tombstones, and I- I realized that, Wow, this is some interesting information here. And I saw some well known names that uh- from history, Hawaiian history. And I thought, Wow, these places are, you know, pretty interesting, and they're kind of historical. So that piqued my interest, and then you know, I graduated from- went on, graduated from college. And I- but I always had that interest, and I would always visit graveyards wherever I was, whatever island if I traveled.

For years Nanette Napoleon kept her passion for cemeteries to herself. Then at a change meeting at a cocktail party, she discovered she was not alone in her interest.

And then I found that uh, one of the men in the group um, had lived on the East Coast, and that he had been interested in graveyard for many, many years. And so he and I kinda went off, and we sat on a couch and got into this long conversation about graveyards. And I thought, Wow, this is great.

M-m.

The first time I ever met somebody like me, who is interested in graveyards, right?

Because—Because—Because your friends and family had—

Yeah.

--said, what?

They said- everybody said, Oh, that's weird, or isn't that kinda morbid that you have this interest, right?

And you didn't consider it morbid?

Not at all; not at all. Um, so one- kind of not tell people sometimes, because I didn't like the reaction that I got, right? But here was a guy who was just as much into it as I was. And then he turned me onto the fact that um- or told me about a group on the East Coast called the Association for Gravestone Studies, which is an international uh, group of cemetery researchers. Um, some academics and non-academics. And then uh, I immediately wrote them, and found out, wow, there's a whole group of us out there. [chuckle] And so I joined up, and- and for twenty years now, I've been going to uh, annual conferences uh, throughout the United States. We have a journal, and we have a quarterly newsletter. So that's- um, I've learned so much from that organization.

Nanette Napoleon had connected. She found her place in the world...and soon delved into one particular cemetery in Nu'uaniu as the centerpiece of her research.

...and you did a book about Oahu Cemetery.

M-hm.

Would that be your favorite cemetery?

It is. Because um, it's visually the most stunning, and there's so many different kinds of markers to look at, and to talk about. And plus, there are so many uh, famous people from Hawaiian history there; hundreds, hundreds of famous people.

For example?

James Campbell, who uh, came from Europe and he- as a carpenter. And he settled here and became fabulously rich as a sugar planter.

After buying land that everybody else thought was worthless.

That's right.

But he found out you can get water to it.

That's right; in the Ewa plain.

M-hm.

And he brought in a special drill team, because nobody had- had drill bits to drill through the hard coral uh, rock after the soil. And nobody could irrigate out there. Uh, but he had the- brought in some technology, new technology that could drill, and then hit water, and o the land that he had bought for pennies was all- all of a sudden worth, you know, many hundreds of dollars. So that's how he made most of his money.

And the man they call the father of baseball is buried there.

The father of American baseball is right here in Hawaii. And don't let anybody tell you it's Abner Doubleday. It's- Because-

--Alexander Cartwright.

It's Alexander J. Cartwright. And he came out here from New York. Um, he had an interesting story. Um, he and his brother, in 1849, went west as- to go to California, as- in 1849.

Gold rush?

Gold rush. They rushed to California. They went broke, like all of their friends. And then um, the brother went back across country, but Alexander decided to take the sea route. And so he got on a ship that was going to eventually get back to Boston. But that particular ship uh, like many did in those days, came out to Hawaii first, and then went around the Horn. They picked up goods, dropped off goods. So his ship came to Hawaii. When he got here, he- he was feeling pretty sick, so he said, Okay, I'm gonna stay in the islands 'til I get we- better, and then get on another ship and go home. Uh, and he did. But he liked it here so much, that when he got back to his home, he picked up his whole family, and they uh, emigrated to the islands.

Wow. Who else?

Uh- oh, Sterling Mossman, musicians, uh- recently, one is uh, um- oh- glad- uh, Gladys Brandt, from the University of-

M-hm.

--Hawaii, and other things.

And Kamehameha Schools.

Kamehameha Schools.

There's one uh, statue; uh, it's a tombstone at uh, Oahu Cemetery, where it's so different from all the rest. But on the other hand, it feels like it's in keeping. I—I believe it's a life-sized statue of Duke Kahanamoku's sister.

Right; right. Um, and I have that- a picture of it in my book. Um- oh- her name was Maria, spelled like Maria, but pronounced Mariah. And she was uh, baby of the family. There were seven brothers, and then her, the baby. And unfortunately, she got a- uh, was ill, sickly as a young adult, and she died when she was only in her mid-twenties. But at the time of her death, she was uh, um- oh- betrothed to an Italian baron. And the baron was heartbroken and he went back to Italy, he ordered- took a picture of her, and ordered uh, a life-sized statue of uh, to be carved in marble. And it was, and it was brought back and installed in the graveyard. That's the only life-sized uh, full-body image of a person I've seen in all- in Hawaii. But when I tour uh, graveyards all around America, I see many, many more um, full-sized bodies.

It seems as though um ... cemeteries are the place where you find out people's histories. And in fact, uh, aren't there some wonderful stories of how people died?

Yeah.

You know, I mean, uh, the tombstone actually explain; uh, sailors who went to the aid of their fallen friend—

That's right.

--and died themselves, trying to rescue him.

That's right. Um, some of them say, like, um- oh- fallen from the mast, you know, and they don't say drowned, they say um- oh- or they, drown- drowned whilst bathing. [chuckle] You know; taking a bath in the ocean water. And they- they- most of the sailors, people don't realize, in that era, couldn't swim. So they had to have a rope tied around them, and they would jump in the water. But sometimes they drowned doing

that, or they· they fell of the mast, or· it was such a dangerous profession. Uh, in the storms, the big blocks, tackles and ropes and things, um, you know, would swing around and they· hit somebody in the head, kill them. Um õ so it was a very dangerous profession. And· and so many of the uh õ well, in those days, in the 1800s, uh, you couldn· õ keep a body on a ship, because there was no refrigeration, and bring them home. So they all had to be buried at sea. But then the next port the ship landed at, the· the fellow sailors would go out and buy a tombstone for their falling sailor, shipmate, and erect it in the local cemetery, and say this· on such-and-such date, to commemorate their passing.

There—there’s one here that’s—I mean, there—there are a number that are so sad, in that a guy who was twenty-eight years old was in Hawaii only fifteen days, and apparently was sick the entire time, and then is laid to rest—

[INDISTINCT]

--in this place where he knew so few people, and had lived—

Yeah.

--so little.

Right. And um, you know, the parents, would never õ have the opportunity to come and see the marker or anything, but they felt very strongly that they should be commemorated in a physical way, you know, even though the body wasn· there.

Um õ

There—there are a lot of different areas of Oahu Cemetery.

M-hm.

Some are ethnic.

Ethnic.

And uh ... aren’t there—

Religious.

Aren’t—aren’t there some Civil War differentiations, too?

The õ Oahu Cemetery is the only cemetery that has a Civil War plot. It· called the õ uh, listed as the Grand Army of the Republic Plot, or the GAR. And these were veterans of the Northern Army, Marines, and uh, uh, Navy veterans who survived the Civil War, and went about their lives, and ended up in Hawaii and settling in Hawaii, and· and died in Hawaii. And after the war, the veterans formed a uh, veterans· organization called the GAR, which actually became a very uh, prominent political group in America, in general. Uh, so they started a branch of the GAR in Hawaii, and those guys that were veterans joined, and they had a thing going, and they· part of their dues went to buying a plot in Oahu Cemetery, so that when they died, they could be buried together.

What about Confederates?

No Confederates. Uh, it was only for um, the uh, Northern forces. The GA· this particular plot. But there are other um õ um õ Civil War Confederates buried in the cemetery; a few.

Among the many aesthetic riches found in cemeteries is a very specialized photographic process. As Nanette Napoleon points out in her book on O’ahu Cemetery, “Tombstone photos bring the dead to life for the casual viewer.”

If I do another book, it'd be about those porcelain portraits, 'cause I love them. Um, and they're very important, actually, for families. Because in those days, people—the regular person didn't have cameras. Cameras weren't even invented 'til 1860s. Um, so the average person didn't have them. So if you wanted a photo, you had to go to a studio and pay for a photograph. So families did that. And then when somebody died, and they went to the funeral parlor, and they wanted one of those, they had to bring a family photo in, give it to the mortician. They would send it off to um, the mainland. There was only a few places on the mainland who did it. They would take a picture of the picture, and with that negative, then expose that negative onto that uh, piece of porcelain which is chemically coated with photographic chemicals. So you expose it onto that, and it goes on there as a picture. And because it's on porcelain, uh, and you put it up there, it lasts ten— it lasts sometimes I've seen them as old as a hundred years old.

We have Oahu Cemetery, which is—I mean, I—I love the—the wrought iron and the—and the ... shape of the tombstones. But there are others that are tucked away in places where—

Yeah.

--today you wonder, Why would they put a cemetery—

Yeah.

--there? But of course, Hawaii has changed, and you wouldn't put a cemetery next to an onramp of a freeway, but that's—

[chuckle]

--what we have. Right?

Onramps of freeways, um in the middle of a parking lot at Windward Mall, in the back side. There used to be St. Ann's Church located in that spot. Uh, the church moved across the street, and that lot was abandoned for many, many years, and the—the church eventually was torn down, but the graveyard um, that—that associated with the church remained at that location. Even though it was all grown over, and everything. But then in the 70s, was it, they were gonna build Windward Mall. And uh, they were going to first bulldoze it over, but um, some people in the community, including myself, um, petitioned that and said, No, save the cemetery. So they did. And they cleaned it up, and put a fence, white picket fence around it.

It's the back lot of the—

Yeah.

The—the shopping center parking lot.

Yeah, and you park right next to it, and everything.

Isn't that where um ... Kau'i Zuttermeister is buried?

Yeah; Kau'i Zuttermeister is over there. Who else, uh oh. One of the more interesting ones from that graveyard is uh, a couple of men who, on December 7, 1941, uh, were one of sixty-five civilians who died, uh, as the result of the attack on Oahu. A— a lot of people don't realize that that attack not only happened at Pearl Harbor and Hickam, but um, throughout the i— our island, Oahu Island. And that there were actually civilians who had no connection with Pearl Harbor or any of the military bases, that were killed. And uh, there are two buried in that cemetery who were relatives, who worked at Pearl Harbor, both of them. And [CLEARS THROAT] when they heard on the radio uh, pearl— this is not a drill, and they called all the people who

worked at Pearl Harbor to report to your stations. So it was four men who got in a car, and they were all related, and all from the windward side; they got into this black sedan. As they went— that's how they went to work every day. They went over the Pali, came down the Pali, and then they were going over a— the hill in uh, Alewa Heights.

M-hm.

And right in the middle of the intersection, um, an American anti-aircraft shell came, and fell, and hit them directly on the top of the car. And you've probably seen the uh, photo from— it's always uh, in ō when they're talking about Pearl Harbor things. Uh, so it hit the car, and all four men were killed.

Knowledge of the incident led Nanette Napoleon to uncover more stories of civilian deaths in the December 7th attack.

And there were two markers of two little girls, young girls. And ō uh, with the same last name, and the same death date; December 7, 1941. And I said, Okay, wait a minute. I don't think— unless they were killed on the same day in a car crash, or something, something's going on here. So I called up um ō the historian at uh, Pearl Harbor, and I asked him, You know where— anything about civilians who died on December 7th? He said, Yeah. You know, we have some information, and it's— they're in these boxes over here. Uh—

It wasn't a readymade report.

Yeah.

Not at all.

No; no. So uh, I said, Oh, can I come and look at that? So he allowed me to do that. And I— I instantly got interested in the story. And ō and uh, for a number of years, I've been collecting uh, data about them; who they were, exactly who they were, how old they were, where they were, how they died.

And nobody had done that before?

Nobody; no, nobody had done that. Ev— not even the Pearl Harbor guys. They had all this data, they— but they hadn't put it together. So I was the first one to kinda do that, and um ō and then ō uh, comes the year of the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor. And ō um ō I wanted to do something to commemorate those civilians. Cause every Pearl Harbor day comes along, and they always talk about the military casualties, right? And we have Arizona Memorial, and all kinds of things. But nothing for the civilians. So ō I just happened to be going to Washington, DC to study— uh, do some cemetery research in the archives over there. And I— I made a trip to uh, Senator Akaka's office. I wrote him ahead of time, and I said, You know, is there anything we can do about these civilians? And so um ō as a result of that, um, he generated uh, a resolution to acknowledge uh, those civilians.

You know, you are known for having picnics at Oahu Cemetery—

Oh. [chuckle]

--just to enjoy the ... the ... the rural charm in—in the—the—

M-hm, m-hm.

--park-like setting.

M-hm.

And to—to honor folks, you know, to feel at—at home there. Um, and I thought of

you when one Memorial Day, I went to Valley of the Temples, uh, where my grandmother is buried. And there was a ... several large families with picnic uh, chairs—

Yeah, yeah.

--and they had hibachis,

and·

[chuckle]

--they had ...

I love it.

--Subway sandwiches, and they were playing music.

Yeah; yeah.

And it was the most natural, warm, wonderful thing—

That's right.

--I'd seen at a cemetery. It was just um ... people were at home with their loved one, and—

M-hm.

--they were actually telling stories, and—

Yeah.

It was as if the person buried there, or ... aro—whose spirit was still around, could hear.

Yeah. And I love that about Hawaii. It's probably the only place in the United States where people do that. Because there's a long history in doing that. Um, and it comes from the Hawaiian culture, where Hawaiians um, remember family gravesites, and they put uh, makana, um, gifts at the gravesites. And that has sort of been um, a- adopted by other cultures. An- and um, it used to be more popular in my parents' generation, where the whole family would, you know, pack up for the day, and go to one cemetery and spend the whole day, or go to several during the day. And there used to be a lot more families that you'd see in the graveyards. Um, but unfortunately, generations later, um, we don't have as much connection to the graves. And so we don't see that as much. But um, as part of my mission in Hawaii when uh, that is the reason why I've developed walking tours and lectures. I- I want to see people get more connected back, the way they used to be connected to the graveyards and- and do those kind of family things. So that- so that our generations below us will remember and pay tribute to their ancestors.

You see the most interesting things left on gravestones. For example, can you give me some of the—the—the more unusual ones you've seen, besides the orange that—

Yeah.

--Asian families often leave.

Uh, well, the orange is actually, uh, for specific ethnic groups; that's for either Chinese or Japanese. Not- Not everybody.

Not Koreans?

Uh, not so much Koreans. Japanese- yeah- or Chinese. More Chinese and Japanese. Okinawan. And- and that has to do with bon season and Buddhist ritual of uh, they call it feeding the ha- hungry ghosts. So you go to the family gravesite to pay homage to ancestor, you leave foods to feed the hungry ghost. Because if you don't,

then the ghost can turn to an angry ghost, and can do bad things to the living. So that's why you must do that. And then uh, foodstuff uh, incense, you burn incense to awaken the spirits. And— and that's sort of like a calling card saying, Okay, we're here. And they— they smell the incense, they know you're there. And then you do your ceremonies, and then at the end, you burn firecrackers to chase away any angry spirits around the area, and keep the place uh, sacred.

You get a sense of what a person was like, sometimes. I—I—I know this one place where I always see a uh, a can of a certain kind of beer.

M-hm, m-hm.

And there's cigarettes.

Cigarettes, uh — candy. If it's a child, uh, toys, little toys if it's children.

Or a pinwheel, sometimes.

A pinwheel; lots of pinwheels.

I—I read a book recently where um, uh, one of the smallest self-governing states in the world in the Pacific, uh, Niue—

M-hm.

--um ... they have these family graveyards, and you always put something that reminded you of the person there, or their favorite possession. And so there— um, a number of the women have sewing machines—

Oh.

--on their graves.

Toy sewing machines? Or little—

No, real—

Real— sewing machines. Real sewing machines? I've not heard about that one. Oh, that's cool.

...what are the rules? I mean, there are people who say, Oh, that's ... you know, you—don't be stepping near—

Yeah.

--the gravestone—

Yeah.

--and what—what are you doing, being so curious.

Right.

I mean, i—is there—are you not supposed to step on the gravestone, are you— what—what—what's ... what's not proper?

That's a good question. And what I tell people when I go on tours, 'cause they always ask me that, is that it's dependent upon your culture. That every culture, be it Chinese, Japanese, um — Filipino — all have different beliefs on the afterlife, about death and dying rituals. So what I tell people is that whatever you come from, whatever tradition you come from, that's what's — right for you. If somebody else has something different, like y— your family may say, Oh, we don't— don't step on graveyards, 'cause you're interfering with the spirits, or something.

Or don't eat lunch over there.

Yeah; don't eat lunch, don't wear something.

Don't play your happy music.

Yeah; yeah. Um ò so it just depends on what you learned from your culture. An- and nothing is uh ò more right or wrong than anything else; everybody ò is- to me, has um, is validò

When I hear you talking about cemeteries, I hear you talking about the history of Hawaii, and what—

Yeah.

--what a cemetery can tell you about what people did in life.

Right.

And that's the attraction for you?

That's the attraction for me, and- and I like to pass that on. Because ò a lot of people just think of cemeteries as just simple ò repositories for their dead; okay, someplace to bury their dead. But they uh ò but are they- who are they for more? Are they more for the dead, or are they more for the living? In my mind, they're- they're more for the living. Um, they're- they're a place that we can physically go to, to connect us with our ancestors. Um, some people don't need that connection, that physical connection. But um, most people in our cu- Western culture need that, and- and most cultures around the world. That's why almost every single culture has some kind of burial ground of some kind. Not all, but most.

If you had to describe to people, and make them really understand what your— what your um, joy in this is, what is it?

I get a lot of joy from um ò the physical way that cemeteries look, and how they feel. They're very peaceful, park-like settings. And some people have a hard time- they say, Oh, I'd never live next to a graveyard, or they don't like just wandering around a graveyard. They'd go there for a funeral or something, then they kinda dig out of there. But um ò for me, it's really relaxing and it takes me- transports me back in time. And when I'm in, particularly like Oahu Cemetery, I just go blank, and I'm like in this other world in- in the 1800s all the time. [chuckle] And it's fascinating for me, you know.

So the next time you're in a cemetery, pay attention to the little details—the doors into the past left slightly ajar, beckoning you to enter a different world. They're not necessarily spooky or morbid places. It all depends on your perspective. I hope you've enjoyed this half hour of Nanette Napoleon's refreshing perspective. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

What else have you seen on uh, gravesites?

Um, you know, we talked about Alexander J. Cartwright, the baseball guy.

M-hm.

Um, for many years now, people uh, who know baseball um, they make special pilgrimages to his grave, and they will put baseballs with- signed by them. Or uh, Little League teams will go, and it'd say From the ò Pearl City Little League Team, and dated and everything. And- and I fi- and all the balls are still there. And um, sometimes bats uh, baseball cards, baseball caps. Uh, I remember touring some graveyards uh ò during a cemetery conference, and we went to the gravesite of Joe DiMaggio. And he had choke, all kind-

M-m.

--baseball ò

M-hm.

--you know, memorabilia stuff.