

The History of the Ilikai

*“The Ilikai might never have been built except for a **poorly thrown football** and might never have become famous except for a **genie in a bottle** and a **charismatic law enforcement officer**”.*

The area in which you are now standing was inhabited by native Hawaiians dating back to at least the 12th century. Over the centuries it was here that they harvested seaweed and built a series of fishponds which filled with clean ocean water with each high tide. This area and its ponds provided a reliable source of food and the area was of great importance to the Hawaiians. The largest of these ponds was reserved for the use of Hawaiian royalty. The Hawaiian’s called this area Kalia and it was considered sacred.

In the 1450’s the ruling chief Mailikukahi established Kalia as the royal capital of the Hawaiian Island kingdom.

Four centuries later (in 1875) a ship containing Chinese immigrants departed from Shanghai for an arduous 65 day journey to the Hawaiian Islands. Among the men heading to Hawaii to work in the rice fields was a man named Ho. Later he would have a son named Ho Ti Yuen who would work as a clerk at the prestigious Pacific Club in Honolulu and import Chinese food and products for the growing Chinese population. Ho Ti Yuen had 9 children, one of whom was born in 1903. He named this child Chinn Ho, and when this child grew up he would impact Hawaii dramatically.

*One mile from the area in which you are now standing, and 17 years later, an event occurred at Honolulu’s McKinley High School that would ultimately alter Kalia’s landscape and future. During an informal football game a **poorly thrown football** flew into the air and crashed through the front window of the school. One of the boys responsible for this errant throw was Chinn Ho and the school's principal held him personally responsible for the damage. The principal told Chinn Ho that he must pay \$30 to replace the broken window. In order to raise this money Chinn formed a fundraising club with several friends. This club then sponsored dances and events at the school in order to pay to replace the broken window. Many years later Chinn Ho’s successful experience forming this high school club likely helped generate the confidence necessary for him to form Capital Investment Corporation which would later play an essential role in acquiring the financing to build the Ilikai.*

In 1922 efforts (which began originally in 1913) to classify the fish ponds, duck ponds, and rice paddies in Kalia as “unsanitary” resurfaced and under the direction of the US Army Corp of Engineers, Hawaiian Dredging began digging the Ala Wai canal. This canal diverted the streams that flowed into Kalia which had created the marshland considered “unsanitary”. Building this 1 3/4 mile canal changed centuries of Hawaii’s landscape and forever altered the usage of this area.

In 1935 interest arose in creating a boat harbor where this new Ala Wai canal met the ocean, and dredging of the area began. Over the ensuing years the material dredged out of the harbor area was deposited into the area in which you are now standing thereby creating dry “land” from what was originally marsh.

By 1959 Hawaiian Dredging realized that the land that their dredging had created was now a valuable waterfront. They interested two investors, Guy Harrison and John Driver into developing it. In turn these men started advertising that they intended to build a 20 story apartment building in this area. However their proposal received a very poor response from buyers and they only collected \$100 deposits from 800 people. Soon they realized that their efforts were not going to be successful.

But later in 1959 Chinn Ho became interested and he bought 6 1/2 acres of the filled-in area for \$3,800,000. He signed the purchase agreement on his 57th birthday. His idea was even more bold than his predecessors since he envisioned a larger 1000 unit apartment building that he would call the “Ilikai”. In the Hawaiian language “Ilikai” means “surface of the sea”.

In 1961 Chinn Ho commissioned John Graham to design the Ilikai. Graham had previously designed the Space Needle for the 1960 Seattle World's Fair as well as the Ala Moana shopping center (just 3 blocks away) which was the largest shopping center in the world. Later in 1961 Chinn Ho would be joined by his high school classmate (and Hawaii’s best known citizen) Duke Kahanomoku to plant a monkey pod tree in what would become the center courtyard of the Ilikai. That tree still stands 75 feet from where you are currently standing.

Construction of the Ilikai started in 1961 and would continue for 3 years. It was a highly ambitious plan and when completed it would produce the largest apartment building in the world.

By 1963 Chinn Ho began advertising that his company, Capital Investment Corporation, was offering, “a new elegant Hawaiian address for those who value fee ownership in Hawaii”, and who wanted to, “enjoy the convenience of cosmopolitan

living". It was an address where, "one could live forever in luxury and comfort".

However, by the end of 1963 sales of the apartments had stagnated with only 300 of the 1000 available units being sold. The concept of owning private apartments combined with a collective ownership of common areas was new and neither well understood nor received. Consequently, Chinn Ho changed his plans and decided to sell part (504) of the units in bulk as a hotel and the remainder (509) to private individuals as apartments. In order to accommodate hotel guests he had new plans drawn that added the "Top of the I" which was an upscale restaurant on the roof of the building. In order to get to the roof of the building he added a glass elevator on the outside of the building which was the only place an elevator could be added at this stage of construction. This glass elevator was one of the largest in the world. Other amenities that hotel guests would expect were also added at this time.

On February 29th 1964 the doors of the Ilikai officially opened. The building was built upon 1359 pilings (with a total length of 46 miles) driven into the bedrock below. It contained 1156 telephones (the first building in Hawaii to have a telephone in each room) requiring 114 miles of telephone wire. It had 13,000 doors. It had 17,000 electrical plugs (powered by 7 huge transformers) requiring 500 miles of electrical wire. It had 36 miles of carpeting. It had 5 restaurants including the Beau Rivage that used \$30,000 worth of sterling silverware. It had a doctors office, a dentist office, barber shop, beauty shop, shoe repair shop, and a sauna. A total of 750 union employees worked here at its peak. Howard Donnelly, the Ilikai manager insisted that every lady hotel guest be given a red carnation each evening. A one bedroom apartment sold for an average of \$22,000 and a two-bedroom for \$40,000. Maintenance fees for a one-bedroom were \$58/ month. A hotel room with a city view rented for \$12/night and with an ocean view \$27/ night.

*In 1965 one of America's favorite TV programs was I Dream of Jeannie. It starred Barbara Eden and Larry Hagman. Barbara Eden was the **genie in the bottle** who was eager to grant wishes, and Larry Hagman was a mesmerized and somewhat bewildered Air Force pilot. Two episodes of the show were filmed inside the Ilikai and when a producer in Los Angeles was editing the show's film he noticed those shots and he thought it would be the perfect place to film a pilot for a new TV series that was being considered. The new series would eventually be called Hawaii 5-0.*

*Early one morning in 1967 a helicopter pilot named Irwin Malzman flew a helicopter to within 100 feet of the lanai of Ilikai's unit 2613. Standing on that lanai surveying the ocean below was an actor originally from New York named Jack Lord. Soon he would become better known as Steve McGarrett, the **charismatic law enforcement officer** of Hawaii 5-0. This lanai segment coupled with the music of the Ventures Hawaii 5-0 theme song became the opening scene for the top-rated show in America from*

1968-1980 (281 episodes) and firmly cemented the Ilikai's future. Over the years many of Hawaii 5-O's shows were filmed inside of the Ilikai and the Ilikai became known throughout the world.

Some of the stars and well known people that bought units at the Ilikai or stayed here include;

Pres. Ronald Reagan	Chinn Ho
Pres. Lyndon Johnson	Jack Lord
Pres. Gerald Ford	Jim Nabors
Senator Daniel Inouye	Ferdinand Marcos
Bill Boeing Jr	Burgess Meredith
Elvis Presley	Patricia Neal
Otto Preminger	Tom Jones
John Wayne	Vikki Carr
Engelbert Humperdinck	Lucille Ball
Dolly Parton	Mickey Mantle
Jack Benny	Michael Jordan
Barbara Eden	Larry Hagman
William Randolph Hearst	Henry Winkler

In addition, all three of the Apollo 13 astronauts (Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert, and Fred Haise) stayed in the Ilikai as they recovered from their unplanned and almost tragic emergency splashdown off the coast of Hawaii in 1970.

In 1965 Western International began managing the Ilikai. In 1974 Chinn Ho sold the Ilikai to Western International for \$35,000,000. In 1980 Western International changed their name to Westin.

On May 12 1987 at the age of 84 Chinn Ho passed away and was laid to rest. He had risen from harvesting rice (for 25 cents an hour), selling bags of mesquite beans (for 15 cents a bag) and delivering the Star Bulletin newspaper on the streets, to becoming the owner of the Star Bulletin, becoming the president or vice president of 10 companies, building the Ilikai, building 2200 homes in California, building a 166 room hotel in Hong Kong, building a resort in Bora Bora, developing 2000 acres in Makaha (for \$100 million dollars), raising 6 children and buying and living in the Duesenberg estate at the foot of Diamond Head. From his humble beginnings he had become one of Hawaii's most successful, dynamic, and admired men. It is noteworthy that he accomplished all of the above in an era when Chinese were often not accepted into the established upper business circles.

Later in 1987 Westin sold the Ilikai to Heller-White for \$55,000,000 then Jowa bought

into the building for an additional \$19,000,000 and spent \$20,000,000 renovating it. In 1990 another \$40,000,000 was spent on renovations.

In 1991 Nikko started managing the Ilikai. In 1993 Sarento's opened at the top of the building after spending \$2,500,000 on renovations. It would remain one of Honolulu's most popular restaurants until closing in 2017.

In 2004, Shell Vacations purchased 80 units and later expanded their ownership to the current 123 units.

In 2006 local developer Brian Anderson bought the Ilikai for \$218,000,000 with the hope of converting it into a "condo-hotel" a business model where all units would be owned by private individuals but managed by his company as hotel rooms. His efforts failed however when a majority of private owners at the Ilikai voted not to approve his plan.

In 2009 iStar, the mortgage company that had lent Anderson the money to purchase the Ilikai, foreclosed on Anderson.

In 2013 owners voted and granted iStar permission to convert all remaining hotel rooms into private apartments.

In 2016, 57 years after Chinn Ho first envisioned and then embarked on constructing a majestic building with privately owned apartments on the "surface of the sea", where "one could live forever in luxury and comfort", iStar sold the last remaining hotel rooms to private individuals and Chinn Ho's ambitious vision finally became a permanent reality.

~Charles Carroll



Chinn Ho