

# Niihau revisited



Advertiser photo by Jan TenBruggencate

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## Historic flight by Ariyoshi back in time to isolated isle

By Jan TenBruggencate  
Advertiser Kauai Bureau

KII LANDING, Niihau — The men of Niihau swam out Wednesday — as usual in the chilly dawn waters — to set the anchors of the 45-ton Moli, the Niihau Ranch landing craft.

Skipper and Niihau Ranch manager Bruce Robinson, before going ashore, swam out personally to check the critical stern anchor, as usual.

The customary stillness of this isolated island set in when the Moli's four big diesels were turned off. As usual.

But it wasn't a usual day. Boat Day, when the landing craft brings people and supplies across the 13-statute-mile channel from Kauai, only happens about once a week to begin with. Families are reunited. Fresh poi arrives from the Waimea Poi Factory.

But this was a special day. Gov. George Ariyoshi was to visit, the first visit by a governor since William Quinn arrived in 1961. (Gov. John Burns never took up his invitation.)

Ariyoshi arrived by helicopter about 9 a.m., accompanied by his wife, daughter and three aides. The governor and his wife chatted with residents on the beach, then climbed into a jeep with Robinson. The rest clambered onto a big, rusted double-axle truck.

The vehicles bounced through the dust and the sand. Cattle looked over from the green fields. Sheep ran.

"This is one of the wettest winters of this century, and we can use the water," said Keith Robinson, who owns the island with brother Bruce

Niihau has come to be known as the Forbidden Island. Its owners normally shun publicity, and entry to the island is strictly limited.

The Advertiser's Jan TenBruggencate is the first reporter in more than 20 years to be invited to the island. TenBruggencate, the newspaper's Kauai Bureau chief for nearly 14 years, was the only reporter selected by the family to document an historic visit by Gov. George Ariyoshi.

Niihau has gained a mysterious charm in its seclusion. An island apart, its population even speaks its own language. Niihau-spoken Hawaiian is a dialect distinct from the Hawaiian spoken in the rest of the chain, with different words for many objects and a different accent.

The island was acquired by the Kamehameha dynasty when it took control of Kauai from King Kaumualii. King Kamehameha IV offered it to Elizabeth McHutcheson Sinclair, a Scottish widow who was on her way from New Zealand to the West Coast with her family.

The deal was closed for \$10,000 with Kamehameha V in 1864. The widow bought other lands on Kauai, and the family settled in. Niihau passed to the



TenBruggencate

Robinson branch of the family, and eventually to the heirs of Lester Robinson, a great-grandson of Elizabeth Sinclair.

Helen Robinson and sons Bruce and Keith today oversee what they hope will be the restoration of the economy of Niihau. We'll take a closer look at the island's economic side in Sunday's paper.

### on the inside:

Related story and photos on Page A-25.

Two years ago, and in the early 1970s, droughts devastated the island. Water holes today still show the evidence. Each major water hole is surrounded by a boneyard — animals weak from lack of food clustered around and

could only drag the carcasses back so they wouldn't pollute the water.

Without that evidence, a wet winter on Niihau doesn't convey the despair of past droughts. Pheasant wander through the underbrush. Turkeys march in flocks around reservoirs nearly full. Cattle, sheep, horses and donkeys graze contentedly. Sleek wild



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Gov. Ariyoshi, with shovel, plants a native palm during his visit.

## It's aloha, governor, on Niihau

### From page one

whose population rises falls with the mouse and numbers, freeze and stare as you ride by.

The majority of Niihau's residents live in ranch-owned homes in the village of Puu, halfway down the north of the island and on the western shore.

The approach of the village is heralded by a line of poles along the shore linked by a line of drying fish hang from lines, like so many pieces of clothing.

Each residence complex is bounded by stone walls. In some, structures are connected but in others, there are several small independent buildings, with cookhouses, for example, separated from

provide one. Each house has a wood, concrete or metal tank that collects rainwater from the roof. Toilets, in separate structures, aren't of the flush variety.

For times of severe drought, small, shallow wells near the village provide emergency water supplies.

Puuwai's community center is the school-church-meeting house complex. Within a large rock wall are the three schoolhouses, one of them just a year old, the big old church and a new cafeteria-meeting room.

A huge ironwood provides shade fronting the church, and a row of native Niihau palms stands along the entrance. Gov. Ariyoshi added two more young palms to form a second row. The palms are *Pritchardia aylmer*

"I extend the aloha of the people of Hawaii and the state government," he said.

There are places in Hawaii that are highly developed, and there are places, like Niihau, that aren't, that preserve the language, culture and traditions of Hawaii's past. There's a place for each in this state, he said.

Ariyoshi made a tentative gesture, saying the state is prepared to step in and provide services to Niihau; but only what the residents want. The state will not impose itself on Niihau, he said.

"I have a sense and a feeling that in many ways you want to be left alone," Ariyoshi said. The residents applauded.

Ariyoshi shook hands with each of the Niihau School students, and heard a rendi-

ple's homes had priority," Keith Robinson said.

The governor's party left by helicopter in early afternoon.

At the ranch, there was work to be done. Trucks bounced down the dirt paths toward the north end of the island, carrying huge loads of bagged charcoal, one of the island's prime economic products these days, for shipment to Kauai.

Bruce Robinson maneuvered the landing craft onto a north shore beach for the off-loading of most supplies. Workers shouldered the gear and marched off the ramp with Christmas bicycles for kids, cases of soft drinks, bags of poi. They formed lines and passed from man to man the heavy sacks of cement and lime.



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Each residence complex is surrounded by stone walls. In some, structures are connected, but in others, there are several small independent buildings, with cookhouses, for example, separated from sleeping quarters.

Homes are scattered throughout a large area rather than aligned in rows. No urban congestion here.

Most homes are surrounded by flowering plants and fruit trees. Pomegranates and tamarind trees grow wild.

The regular boat brings big bags of poi and other staples. Residents bring in their own supplies or buy them at the ranch store, which the Robinsons operate at a loss.

There's no community water system. There isn't a water source sufficient to

provide one. Each house has a wood, concrete or metal tank that collects rainwater from the roof. Toilets, in separate structures, aren't of the flush variety.

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A huge ironwood provides shade fronting the church, and a row of native Niihau palms stands along the entrance. Gov. Ariyoshi added two more young palms to form a second row. The palms are *Pritchardia aylmer robinsonii*, named by botanist Joseph Rock for the uncle of the Robinson brothers. On Niihau, they're called wahanu, relatives of the native palms called loulou throughout the rest of the state.

Three-quarters of the island population came to see Ariyoshi. They spoke softly, reverently, in a community prayer. And they sang a hymn in wonderful harmony that seemed to make the ground vibrate.

Ariyoshi's brief speech emphasized the apartness of Niihau.

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Ariyoshi shook hands with each of the Niihau School students, and heard a rendition of "Silent Night" from principal Jean Keale's first, second and third grade class.

The governor and his family washed their hands under a faucet from the school water tank, and ate sandwiches brought from Kauai on the boat.

Residents presented prized Niihau shell leis to the state's first family. Then back to the jeep and truck, rolling south past the Robinson family home at Kiekie, still unrepaired after Hurricane Iwa.

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ple's homes had priority," Keith Robinson said.

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Then came the charcoal. The big trucks rolled back down the beach. The Niihau men and the Robinsons formed lines again and handed sack after sack to be stacked in the landing craft. This load was three trucks full, or 500 bags.

By sunset the work was done. Those heading to Kauai climbed aboard, and the rest waved from shore as the landing craft maneuvered past a reef and out to sea. The setting sun caught the flashing waves breaking and painted the clouds orange.