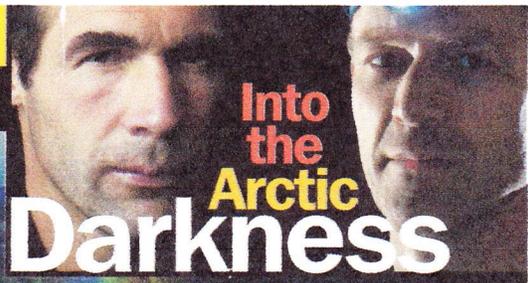


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# Last of the Waimēa Cowboys

Leave the beach behind and saddle up with Big Island paniolos

BY CONSTANCE HALE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE CASIMIRO

**THE BULL**, a half ton of pure muscle, stands firm in a grassy pasture, his brindle hide glistening—the red richer than a tiger's, the black blacker. Menacing two-foot-long horns curve like twin tildes from his brow, and he glares at me as if to say, I'm not going anywhere. Slowly I ride toward him. • Having joined the week's cattle drive at Dahana Ranch, nestled up-country on Hawaii's Big Island, I've been dispatched to collect this straggler. Just moments ago my horse seemed perfectly adequate in size; now she

seems slight. I move to the right, trying to hide my trepidation, while one of the ranch hands, B.J. Hamlin, approaches from the left. Hamlin is a no-nonsense cowboy whose only trace of vanity is an oversize belt buckle that he won at a local rodeo.

The bull eyes us implacably. We close in, turn our mares as we pass his flanks, and trap him between us in a V. "If a bull charges," Hamlin told me earlier, "just turn your horse and run." I'm ready to bolt if need be. But the bull hardly bldges. "Hup," Hamlin calls out, and just like that the beast trudges off to join the herd. We continue driving the cattle through

rolling pastures that stretch for miles into the distance, all the way to where the volcano Mauna Kea rises up, its summit punching through the clouds. Thrilled as I am to have tag-teamed that bull with Hamlin (later I'll learn it wasn't really a bull at all, but a steer), I didn't come to the Big Island to face down longhorns. I came to find *paniolos*, the storied breed of Hawaiian horsemen who were herding cattle on the slopes of island volcanoes decades before American cowboys first wrangled in Texas. In the more than 150 years since they first saddled up, the paniolos have become not just keepers of their own herding and roping styles, but also stewards of native Hawaiian culture. And for this they are revered to this day.

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**MY INFATUATION WITH PANIOLOS** began when I was a teenager on Oahu's North Shore, a quiet district known for big waves and show-off surfers. On Sundays we country kids would sneak over to a beachside polo field to watch

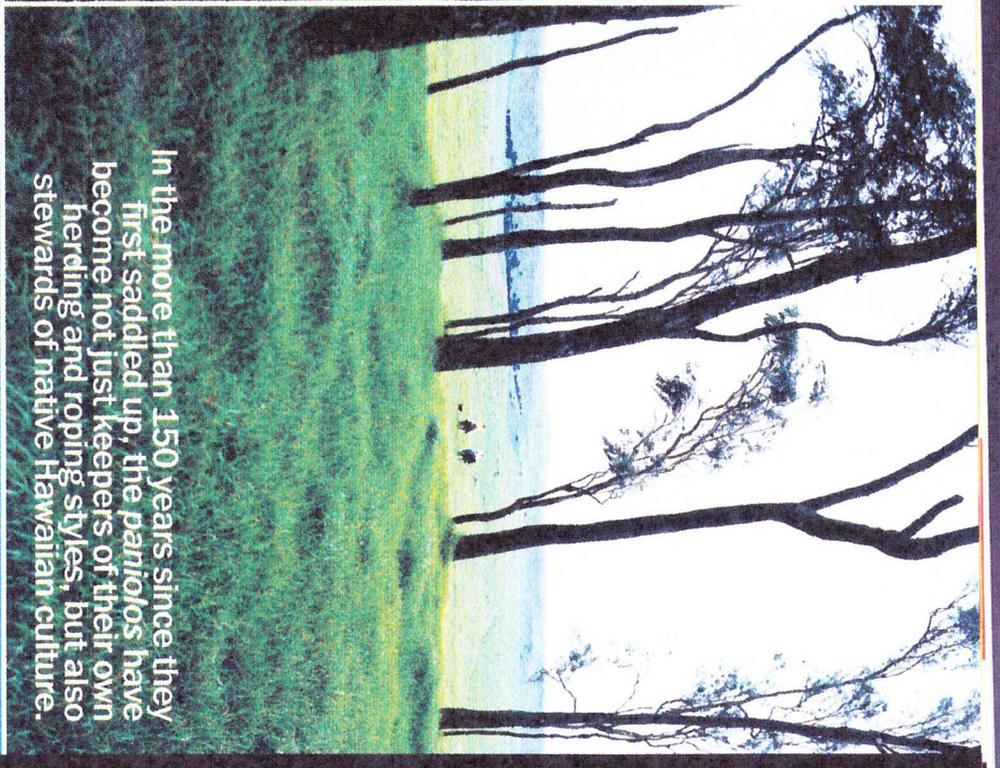
the matches and ogle Honolulu's high society sipping champagne under white tents. Prince Charles played there, as did some jet-setting South Americans; but the polo players we rooted for were paniolos. They came from Maui and the Big Island and wielded their mallets as skillfully as ancient Hawaiians did their spears. Some were descendants of old missionary families or the scions of hotel chains. Others were native Hawaiian horsemen in a class all their own. Our favorite player was Lawrence "Tuna" Sampaio, whose pidgin English cursing once led Prince Charles to dismount, throw down his glove, and stomp off the field.

Like most Americans, Hawaiian kids

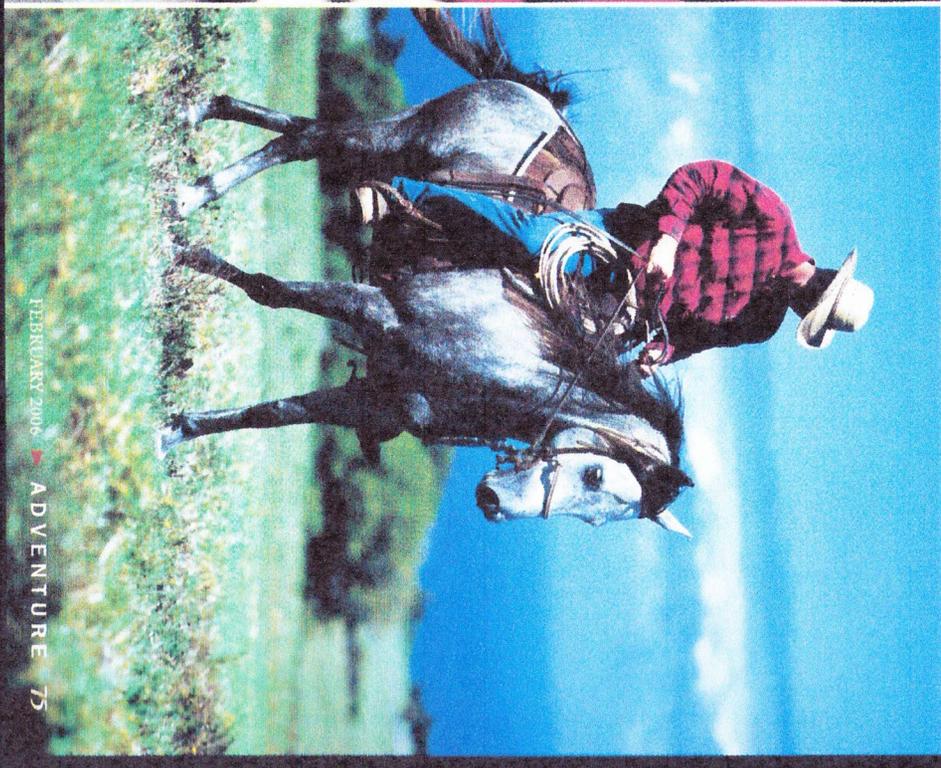
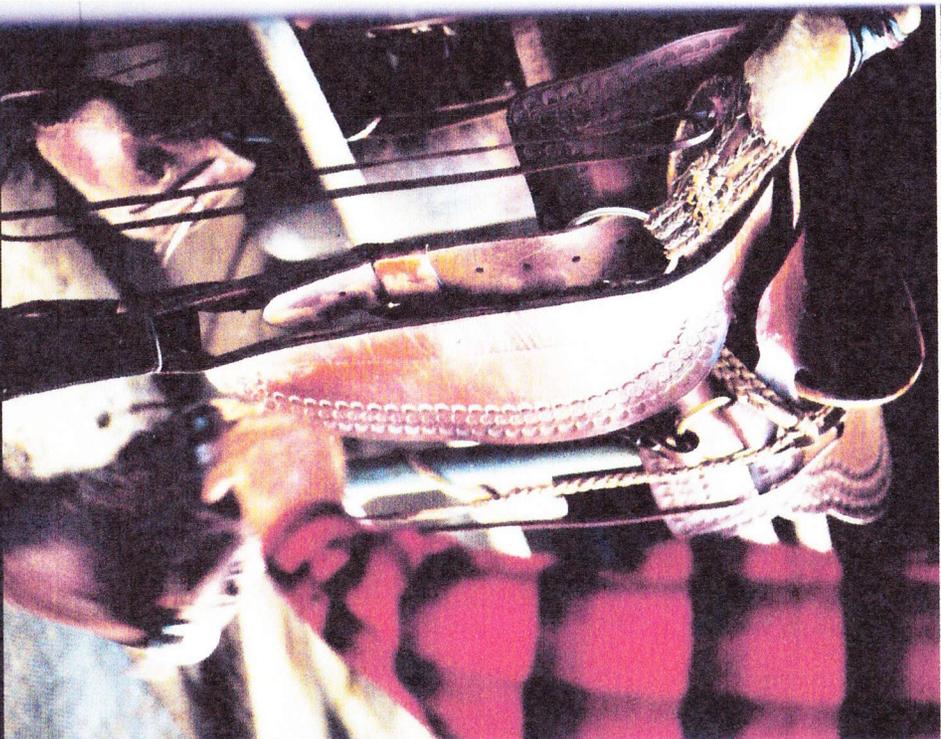
#### COASTAL ROUNDUP:

Keoki Wood (left), a Parker Ranch *paniolo*, moves horses to greener pastures in the Kohala Mountains. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Out for a leisurely ride in Waimēa horse country; Parker Ranch paniolos run some 35,000 head of cattle on 175,000 Big Island acres; Hawaiian horses have to be swift in lava fields as well as in grasslands; a typical paniolo saddle shows signs of its vaquero origins.





In the more than 150 years since they first saddled up, the *pariotos* have become not just keepers of their own herding and roping styles, but also stewards of native Hawaiian culture.



go through a cowboy phase. But where the mythologized Wild West cowboy is all six-shooters and Clint Eastwood swagger, the Hawaiian paniolo is possessed of a gentle soul, an ancient language, and songs that are more soft-and-sweet than “achy-breaky.” The paniolo knows his flower species as well as his cattle breeds and weaves blossoms into leis to adorn his hat. He breaks his horses in the ocean and trains them to pick their way through fields of sharp lava.

Hawaiian cattle is still big business, generating an estimated \$22 million in sales a year, but with tourism driving the Big Island’s economy and golf courses more in demand than grazing land, Hawaiian cowboys are being phased out. Ranches have adapted in order to survive: Some pastures are being planted with crops, and others are being parceled out and sold to developers. Cowboys with strings of up to eight horses (for different terrains and tasks) are being replaced by

**For most of its history, Waimea was a one-company town, and that company was the Parker Ranch. It was once the largest privately owned ranch in the United States.**

smaller crews on ATVs. And entrepreneurs such as Harry Nakoa, the owner of the Dahana Ranch, have had to diversify. A 59-year-old former rodeo champ who is widely known as the “Hawaiian horse whisperer,” Nakoa now breeds American quarter horses. But while he’s moving away from pure paniolo approaches to ranching, he draws upon their mystique to lure travelers like me to his 2,500-acre spread.

“What do *you* think ‘paniolo’ means?” Nakoa counters when I ask him about the term. I offer the textbook explanation: It’s a transliteration of Español, what the first cowboys who arrived in Hawaii from Mexico in 1833 would have called themselves; or that it’s a possible derivative of *pañuelo*, the Mexican vaquero’s neckerchief.

Nakoa listens, nodding politely. He clearly has a different theory. “‘Paniolo’ evolved from the Hawaiian words *pa niolo*,” he says, jumping atop a saddle on a nearby stack of



hay bales. He sits up tall. “Pa niolo means ‘to be sitting there, straight up,’ and if you think about it, that’s how a Hawaiian, in the Hawaiian way of thinking, would have described these vaqueros.”

However they came by their name, the paniolos have faced harder times since I moved to the mainland for college and stayed. Over the years, I had often wondered whether my beloved cowboys have become as endangered as some of Hawaii’s native birds. So, on a long-awaited trip to the Big Island, I gave myself two weeks and a mission: to find paniolos who, like Nakoa, have found a way to survive another century, and to experience Hawaii as best I could through their eyes.

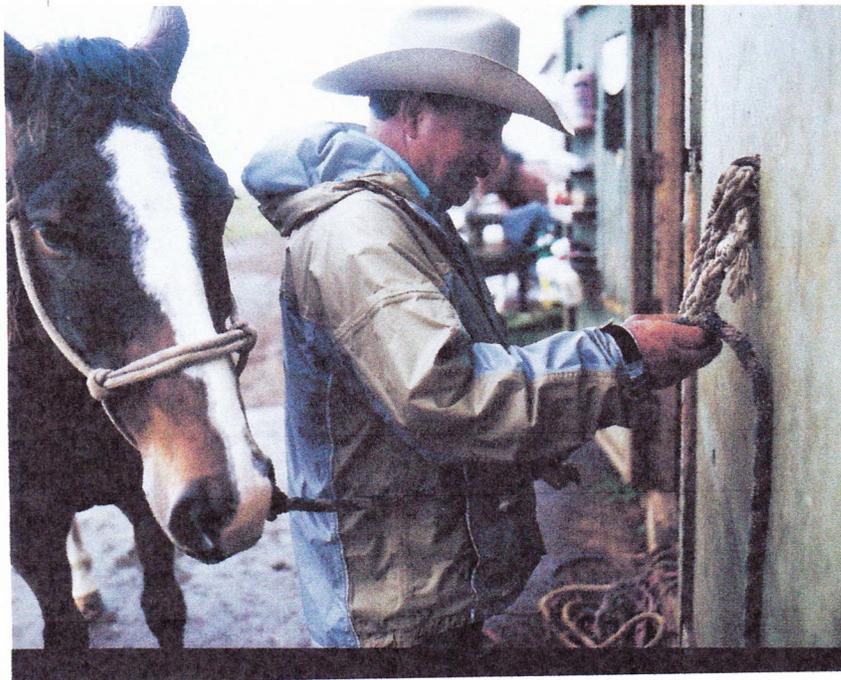
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**THE IDEAL PLACE TO LOOK FOR COWBOYS** is in Honokaa, a coastal village 38 miles northwest of Hilo, so that’s where I start. The buildings in Honokaa date to the 1920s and have Western-style false fronts and covered boardwalks, and today, the start of Memorial Day weekend, the annual Hawaii Saddle Club Rodeo kicks off with a parade down the main drag. Hundreds of spectators have turned out—shirtless surfers in floral shorts, families in cowboy hats banded with ferns and flowers, and curious visitors who, like me, are eager for a taste of this offbeat island spectacle.

The parade’s grand marshal, 81-year-old paniolo Jamie Dowsett, rides by to cheers, flanked by his sons and his wife, Queenie, a renowned hula dancer and former Hawaiian movie star. Two granddaughters in matching chartreuse jackets follow on their mounts. A pickup truck passes by, loaded with hay and even more progeny—children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, in-laws—four generations of living paniolo legacy.

The following day at the rodeo in the Honokaa Arena, Dowsett is sitting in the stands after a respectable showing in the team-roping event. He’s traded his boots for a pair of running shoes. Pointing to the dusty Nikes, he says, “You know why cowboys wear these?” His pencil-thin white mustache dances as he smiles. “So you can tell them from the truckers!”

Having been a working paniolo for most of his life, Dowsett is a man who knows what makes Hawaiian cowboys unique. “We used to train our horses in the seawater,” he tells me. “We would ride them in up to their chests. First, it was easier on the man—the horses wouldn’t be able to buck so much. Second, the horses would tire quicker. Third, it would help train the horses to



**HORSE SENSE:** Harry Nakoa (left), known as the “Hawaiian horse whisperer,” welcomes visitors on weekly cattle drives at his 2,500-acre Dahana Ranch. Top, from left: 81-year-old Jamie Dowsett, a legendary paniolo, rides his 50 acres outside Waimea with his wife, Queenie, a former hula dancer and Hawaiian movie star; the entrance to Parker Ranch, Hawaii’s first and biggest, where the Big Island cowboy tradition began.

ADVENTURE GUIDE:

# Big Island Cattle Country

swim. In the old days, cattle were loaded by water, and paniolos would use big draft horses that had deep chests, which helped them float easier. The cowboys would swim three cattle out at a time, tie them onto longboats, row them out to the ship, and hoist them onto the deck.”

Sensing a captive audience, he begins to reminisce about his time on the Puuwaawaa Ranch, located on the slopes of the volcano Hualalai. “All the guys were Hawaiian,” he says. “That was a different kind of ranch—in the lava fields.” His voice lifts as he remembers. “We’d ride single file up the hill, and all the guys would be singing in Hawaiian.”

Honokaa has always been a place for paniolos to party, but the true capital of cowboy country, it turns out, is 15 miles inland, in Waimea, a town that sits in the saddle between the Kohala Mountains and Mauna Kea. The weekend’s festivities concluded, I make for it.

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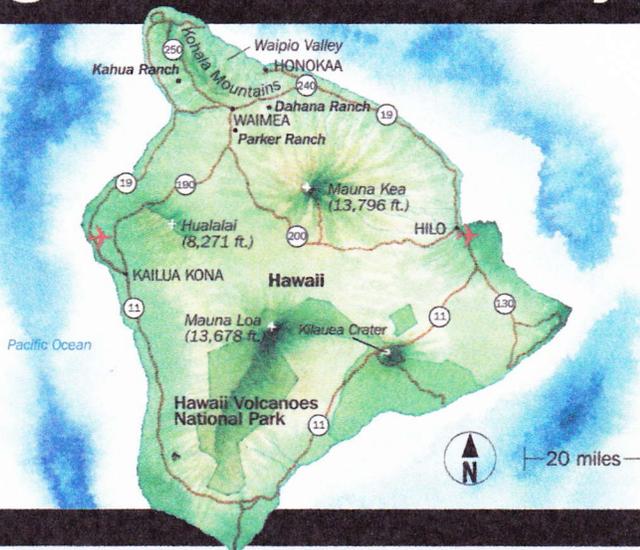
## TO CALL IT A CITY

would be an overstatement, unless you look on it as a paniolo might. Unlike the larger settlements of Kailua Kona and Hilo, Waimea lacks an international airport (it has a strip for smaller aircraft), but it does have a mall and other modern services. Mostly, Waimea makes a great base of operations for exploring the north end of the Big Island.

Within a few minutes of hitting town, I ensconce myself in the Jacaranda Inn, a complex of rambling buildings and elegant gardens

that was originally built as a ranch manager’s home and later served as Laurance Rockefeller’s private retreat for guests such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Henry Kissinger. Now a bed-and-breakfast, the inn is a little worn around the edges, but the silver in the hallway display cases, the chandeliers in every room, and the guest suites joined by long wooden lanais still imbue it with the grandeur of the Parker Ranch oligarchy.

For most of its history, Waimea was a one-company town, and that company was the Parker Ranch. It was once the largest privately owned ranch in the United States. Today, with 175,000 acres and 35,000 head of cattle, it’s still the biggest in Hawaii. It all started in 1793, when British sea captain George Vancouver presented five cows and a bull to King Kamehameha I as a gift. The beasts were suffering from the journey, and the Hawaiian ruler threatened death to anyone who harmed them. Within a few decades, thousands of wild bovines roamed the northern side of the island, endangering lives and wreaking havoc in the fields. In 1809 an ambitious captain’s clerk named John Palmer Parker jumped ship, hid in a Big Island forest, and then commenced a long and cunning climb to power. He learned the Hawaiian language, befriended a member of the court, and persuaded Kamehameha to let him shoot the now problematic cattle and (Continued on page 91)



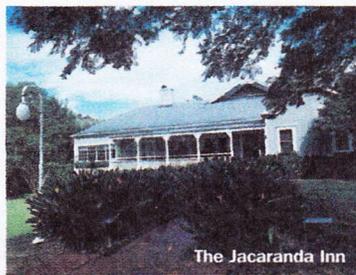
**TRAIL RIDES AND CATTLE DRIVES:** Under the guidance of “Hawaiian horse whisperer” Harry Nakoa, at **Dahana Ranch**, even mainland city slickers can learn to ride, rope, and herd like true paniolos (\$1,500 for a 14-day horsemanship camp; \$130 for a two-and-a-half-hour cattle drive; [www.dahanaranch.com](http://www.dahanaranch.com)). **Na’alapa Stables** offers two-and-a-half-hour trail rides (\$89; [www.naalapa.stables.com](http://www.naalapa.stables.com)) on the Kahua Ranch and through the dramatic Waipio Valley.

**CAMPING AND HIKING:** The guides at **Hawaii Forest & Trail**, the author’s choice, offer an evening Mauna Kea Summit & Stars Adventure (\$159; [www.hawaii-forest.com](http://www.hawaii-forest.com)), complete with a sunset on Hawaii’s highest point and stargazing through high-powered telescopes. For daytime excursions, the author’s outfitter, **Hawaiian Walkways**, leads day-long ecohikes (\$95; [www.hawaiianwalkways.com](http://www.hawaiianwalkways.com)) from Honokaa among the trails and waterfalls of Waipio Valley.

**ANNUAL RODEOS AND ROUNDUPS:** This year’s **Kona Stampede Rodeo** (\$6; 808-323-2388), March 18-19 in the Honaunau Rodeo Arena, along Route 160, features classic events as well as only-in-Hawaii exploits such as double mugging—team calf roping and wrestling. The three-day **Hawaii Saddle Club Memorial Day Weekend Rodeo** (\$7; 808-775-0870) in the Honokaa Arena is the highlight of the town’s annual Western Weekend. The **44th Annual Parker Ranch Horse Races and Rodeo** (admission varies; [www.parkerranch.com](http://www.parkerranch.com)), July 4 at the Parker Ranch Rodeo Arena, pits Parker Ranch cowboys against Big Island rivals. Get tickets at the gate on rodeo day. Those visiting on Labor Day weekend can check out the **32nd Annual Parker Ranch Round-Up Club Rodeo and Horse Races**, September 2-3, in the Parker Ranch Rodeo Arena.

**GETTING THERE:** Hawaiian Airlines flies to Honolulu from several West Coast cities, including Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Diego (\$400; [www.hawaiianair.com](http://www.hawaiianair.com)) and has connections to the Big Island’s Hilo and Kona airports. Rent a vehicle from **Dollar Rent a Car** ([www.dollarcar.com](http://www.dollarcar.com)) for the drive to Waimea.

**LODGING AND DINING:** Waimea’s **Jacaranda Inn** (\$179; [www.jacarandainn.com](http://www.jacarandainn.com))—a storied part of the Parker Ranch and paniolo past—has arty guest suites, canopied beds, and breakfasts in a large sunroom. **Waiuanuhea** (\$195; [www.waiuanuhea.com](http://www.waiuanuhea.com)) blends good taste and high tech, with its Bali-



The Jacaranda Inn

inspired bathhouse and gourmet breakfasts. **Merriman’s Market Cafe** ([www.merrimanshawaii.com](http://www.merrimanshawaii.com)), in Waimea, blends European, Polynesian, and Pacific Rim cuisine in dishes such as Big Island beef with Waimea tomatoes and wasabi butter. **Tex Drive-In** ([www.texdrivein.com](http://www.texdrivein.com)), in Honokaa, is a no-frills grill popular for its signature *malasadas*: hot, holeless doughnuts introduced by Portuguese immigrants. —C.H.

## LAST OF THE WAIMEA COWBOYS

(Continued from page 77)

trade in beef, tallow, and hides. Eventually he married Kamehameha's granddaughter, Kipikane. When the king sent for vaqueros from Mexican California who could teach Hawaiians how to handle horses and herd cattle, Parker capitalized on their know-how. By 1850 Kamehameha had granted two acres to Parker for a home and 640 acres to Kipikane, and these formed the original Parker Ranch.

Cowboys on the Parker Ranch and elsewhere soon modified the vaqueros' tools. Saddles were stamped with Hawaiian quilt patterns, and eel-like lariats were woven to lengths of a hundred feet. Paniolos replaced sombreros with hats made of native grasses and held them in place in fierce winds with elaborate leis of feathers, ferns, shells, and flowers.

Their horses adapted, too, responding to the challenges of the islands. They had to plow into the surf with riders on their backs and struggling cattle roped to them. The horses had to be fast and able to stop on a dime in the *kīpuka*, rich islands of pasture left untouched by lava flows. They had to be sure-footed in a terrain of deep gorges, volcanic crevasses, and deserts tangled with cactuses and thorny Hawaiian mesquite trees, called *kiawe*.

The vaqueros also imparted another tradition that Hawaiians made their own. Slack-key guitar, or *kī hō'alu*, was born on cattle ranches when paniolos modified the vaqueros' instrument to accompany their own style of storytelling. There's something about that gentle music that perfectly suits this soft but dramatic landscape. My longtime favorite is Sonny Chillingworth, who died in 1994, at 62, and was known by the moniker "Waimea Cowboy." His songs are full of bell-like tones and rough-hewn wisdom, such as the classic "Kaula 'Ili," or "The Lariat," which tells of a paniolo who is roping wild cattle when his horse stumbles into a lava tube hidden in tall grass. The cowboy climbs out of the lava tube and gets back on his horse. "Oh, never mind, *ke hina pu ua hiki no*," Chillingworth sang—"If you fall, never mind, you get up and ride again."

Like many legendary cowboys, the hero of "Kaula 'Ili" was a Parker Ranch paniolo. Although their numbers have dwindled (in 2002 the ranch's working cowboys were pared from 25 to 14), Parker Ranch is trying to turn its history into a magnet for mainlanders. On ranch tours, docents recount Larry McMurtry-worthy tales of Parkers past; visitors can ride horses or ATVs through nearby pastures; and, in the most authentic display of this legacy, paniolos from all over the island still gather at the ranch to compete in its two annual rodeos.

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**AFTER A FEW DAYS OF RODEOS** and roundups in Parker country, I take a respite

from dusty corrals, feisty steers, and saddle sores, and drive 15 minutes west of Honokaa to Waipio Valley, a mile-wide, six-mile-long sharply cut gorge bound by 900-foot cliffs and a charcoal black beach. I've hiked and camped throughout Waipio before and am eager to prowl its lush trails again. One of the things I admire most about the paniolos is their knowledge of local lore, and to shore up my own, I sign on for a day hike with Hawaiian Walkways, an outfitter that is licensed to operate on private lands around Waipio and maintains its own system of trails.

The next morning, my guide, Mark Montgomery, picks me up in a van and proceeds to take me and five others on an information-packed drive through forests of eucalyptus, swamp mahogany, and macadamia trees. Then we set off on foot: a four-hour hike, featuring a dip in a waterfall and a picnic with gaping views out over the valley, which looms large in the lore of old Hawaii: This is the reputed birthplace of King Kamehameha I and the backdrop for several slack-key guitar classics.

As we cross a broad meadow, Montgomery, who has a soft-spoken and sentimental narration style, points out an *ōhi'a* tree, with its spiky red blossoms. "In Hawaiian legend," he says, "there was once a young couple—his name was 'Ō'hia and hers, Lehua." Apparently, the fire goddess Pele developed a craving for the strong and handsome man. But when he spurned her advances, she reacted with fury, killing him in a torrent of molten lava.

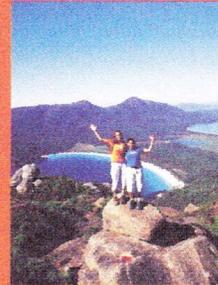
"For Lehua, life without 'Ō'hia was not worth living. She prayed for death, and the gods took pity on her. They transformed her lover's bones into the roots of a tree. Out of the barren black lava pushed the 'ōhi'a tree. They transformed Lehua into a beautiful red blossom and put her on the tree so that the two could always be together." Montgomery absently fiddles with the wedding band on his finger. "Legend tells us that if we pick one of the blossoms, we are separating the lovers," he says. "They will cry for one another, thus causing it to rain."

On our way back into Honokaa, Montgomery points out Mud Lane, a sad-looking dirt road that once served as a major connector between Honokaa and Waimea and is a sponge for 'Ō'hia and Lehua's tears. "It's known for its oatmeal-like mud," Montgomery says. "The horses knew its treacherous path so well that cowboys could come down to the party town of Honokaa, get drunk, and put their horses on cruise control all the way back to Waimea."

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**BACK IN WAIMEA, I MAKE** a pit stop at the mall, the spanking-new Parker Ranch Center, and find that the paniolo aesthetic, if not tradition, is alive and kitschy. The wall of the

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## LAST OF THE WAIMEA COWBOYS

food court is graced by a mural featuring Parker Ranch cowboys in their heyday, and the Foodland supermarket sells *pipikaula*, Hawaiian-style beef jerky. In line in front of me at Starbucks is a lithe woman with flowing black hair, a maroon camisole, silver spurs, and jeans held snug on her hips by a rodeo-champion belt buckle. Out in the parking lot is a 27-foot bronze statue of the greatest paniolo hero of them all: Ikua Purdy, who learned to ride and rope on Parker Ranch and won the Cheyenne Frontier Days World Steer Roping Championship in Wyoming in 1908. Purdy is lionized in many songs of the paniolo canon. One of my favorites is "Waiomina" (Hawaiian for "Wyoming"), which compares Purdy to the towering volcano Mauna Kea. Around the pedestal of the statue are plaques bearing the brands of major Big Island ranches, a robust 84 in all. But my heart sinks when I see that the statue was erected by the Paniolo Preservation Society. You know a tradition is in trouble when the word "preservation" is linked to its name.

"The cattle business is healthy," rancher Freddy Rice declares, "but the cowboy business is over." We are sitting at the dining table in Rice's contemporary Waimea home, overlooking a jumble of rocks in a now dry streambed. "We're raising more beef on fewer acres than ever before," he says, "but the four-wheel-drive jeep, the gooseneck trailer, and the ATV have made the paniolo history."

Rice, 71, whom I remember from his polo-playing days on Oahu, comes from an old Maui haole family, but his speech is sprinkled with the Hawaiian words of the paniolo, which he lauds for their precision and efficiency. Although he concedes that it's better business to replace six cowboys on horses with two on ATVs, he insists that ranches will always need "the guys with cow sense—the ones that get to the gate before the cow."

Rice suggests I pay the Richards family a visit on their Kahua Ranch, and the following day I make the half-hour drive out to their home. As the road ascends, brown grass, scrub, and lava boulders give way to lush fields and rounded hills. Every now and then, a break in the trees reveals green pastures sloping toward a turquoise sea. Then I look in my rearview mirror and am so awestruck that I have to pull over to the side of the road: In the clear of the early morning, the island's three largest volcanic peaks rise in all their majesty, without a single cloud to blur their striking lines—Mauna Kea, Mauna Loa, and Hualalai—forming a massive double M, as if God himself were reminding ranchers that when it comes to branding, they've got nothing on him.

"This isn't God's country," Monty Richards says, when we meet and I tell him about

this cloudless moment. "This is where God comes on vacation."

Richards is a 76-year-old fifth-generation islander who works 8,500 acres on the slopes of the Kohala Mountains with his extended family. I join him in the spacious kitchen of their white wood-frame house, headquarters of Kahua Ranch since 1928. On their land, ranching has also been evolving. "Now we're a cattle ranch, a sheep-farm operation, and an ag-tourism venture," Richards says. "We've practiced new grazing techniques, tried farming, and developed alternative energy."

The cattle operation is overseen by his eldest son, Tim, 46, a practicing veterinarian possessed of striking blue eyes and dressed today in a Kahua Ranch T-shirt and a showy Kahua Ranch 75th-anniversary belt buckle. (Caps, T-shirts, and belts are sold at the ranch store.) His brother, John, 35, develops the tourism side of things. In addition to Evenings at the Ranch barbecues (with their history lectures, lasso lessons, and, of course, local music), you can saddle up at nearby Na'alapa Stables and ride through Kahua's open ranges or along the trails in Waipio Valley.

Like everyone in the family, John is eager to extol the beauty of life at Kahua—its landscape, its history, and its cowboys. Although the number of ranch hands at Kahua has shrunk from 50 in the 1930s to only 12 today, certain paniolo families are as much a part of the ranch as the Richards. Yet it's clear that preserving the ranch's bottom line will always trump preserving its cultural legacy: "We're dedicated to paniolo tradition," John says, "but we're not opposed to innovation."

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**"THIS ROAD OPENS A BOOK** to the Big Island," Rob Pacheco remarks as we head up the notorious Saddle Road, a narrow, winding, pock-marked strip of macadam, which is the only route over the saddle between Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. My rental car company forbids travel up this punishing road, so I'm happy to let Pacheco, 42, do the navigating in a giant 4x4 owned by his nature adventure company, Hawaii Forest & Trail. We head uphill through pastures of waving wheatlike grass. Every now and then he slams on the brakes to show me a *palila* (an endangered bird found only on Mauna Kea) or a *manane* forest that was almost destroyed by grazing. He gestures across a wide plain of green pastures cut by charcoal lava flows toward the ridged pumice mound that Hawaiians such as Dowsett call *Puuwaawaa*, or "furrowed hill."

Halfway up the mountain we pass the Humuula Sheep Station, a motley collection of wooden buildings that was once part of the Parker Ranch, and then a thick fog deprives me of all sense of time and place. We emerge into an

area filled with what geologists consider to be the closest material on Earth to that of Mars. In this glacial moraine, lava once pushed rough and raw from the earth, only to be ground down by glaciers, deprived of rain or vegetation, and subjected to harsh ultraviolet radiation. We continue past sacred Lake Waiau, where ancient Hawaiians deposited the umbilical cords of newborn kings and queens. At 13,020 feet, this is one of the highest-elevation lakes in the U.S., and it sits almost at the top of mighty Mauna Kea, which, when measured from its base on the ocean floor, is the tallest mountain on Earth (31,796 feet). Its name in Hawaiian means "white mountain," and its summit is flecked with snow even in May.

Here the dominion of Poliahu, the Hawaiian goddess of ice, is challenged by modern science. Scattered across the 13,796-foot-high summit are no fewer than 11 observatories, including the "Keck Twins," arguably the world's most powerful telescopes, and Japan's Subaru facility, site of the largest single-mirror optical telescope.

As the apricot sun slips below the horizon, constellations begin to emerge—brighter and more colorful than I've ever seen. This is considered the best stargazing spot on the planet: It stands above 40 percent of the Earth's atmosphere (which distorts viewing of stars) and benefits from an unusual weather condition known as trade wind inversion, which keeps the sky clear 325 days a year. For the first time ever, I see the Southern Cross, the asteroid Ceres, a ring of Saturn, and Hokulea, the "star of gladness" that originally guided the Polynesians to Hawaii.

An hour later, Pacheco drops me off at my rental car at the base of the Saddle Road. As I head back to the Jacaranda Inn, I wonder whether paniolo culture can remain a vital part of the Hawaiian cosmos in the 21st century. Despite the many changes on this island since my youth, I'm encouraged by the people I've encountered who are stubbornly balancing the past and the present: Nakoa, who makes his living raising horses; Nahea Brenneman, a nurse in her 20s who rides in roundups on Saturdays; eight-year-old Ka'ili, who ropes every fence post in sight and vows he'll grow up to be a cowboy; and all those hardy rodeo contestants who would scoff at the notion that they're a doomed breed.

Overhead, the Big Island's obsidian sky throws the stars into brilliant relief. I recall Dowsett that day at the rodeo, reminiscing about life as a paniolo: "We would ride by moonlight sometimes," he said. "It was cooler at night, so the cattle wouldn't get overheated. One morning, we started at 4 a.m., 30 cowboys riding up the mountain. We split into three groups and headed up three different hills. As the sun started to come up, the metal on the spurs caught the light, and all over the mountain you could see the flashes." ▲