

Cunha's Alley—The Anatomy of a Landmark

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(deceased)

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Historians, planners and preservationists working to identify, pedigree and save landmarks find their raw material shrinking in a most disconcerting way. The objects of their affection die suddenly and violently on lots strewn with brick, stone, wood and mortar. Nothing seems sacred. Lucky researchers operate at least two jumps ahead of the bulldozer; the less fortunate merely conduct post mortem studies of the "they went that way" type.

In all this Honolulu shares the experience of most large cities. Since World War II population growth and restricted core areas have inspired frightful carnage among older buildings. Even streets have disappeared. It is hard enough to find worthy isolated specimens; blocks or even portions of blocks with any historical integrity are scarce indeed.

One such microcosm stretches along Merchant Street between Fort and Bethel, and a feature of it is the little world of Cunha's Alley, an unmarked but ancient passage connecting Merchant and King Streets. The part leading off Merchant is oldest; it can be traced back at least 130 years, and even today is paved with Chinese granite blocks reputedly carried in as ballast on sailing ships.

The Land: When Eli Jones' Land Claim No. 16 came up for a hearing in 1846, William French furnished the particulars: John Adams Kuakini—governor of Oahu in 1831—granted what later became the Union Hotel lot to W. S. Hinckley. The new owner started to build, but he ran out of money. French agreed to complete the structure, taking half interest when it was finished. Hinckley, however, couldn't raise his share of expenses, and transferred the whole to French. Some years passed; then, on September 3, 1838,

June, 1968 photographs of Cunha's Alley and the saloon were taken by Mr. Luryier Diamond, whose skilled help the editor gratefully acknowledges.

William French sold to Hung and Tai of Canton, for \$5,000, the lot and house already well known as the "Pagoda". The building itself had 7 rooms, a cellar, and a look-out. To the west a "road" (Cunha's Alley) separated it from the premises of "King Kaukiolo" [sic] (Honolulu Hale, demolished in 1917); south, across another anonymous road (Merchant Street), stood French's store; east of a third road was Thomas Cummins' house; and north lay Hawaiian premises.¹

Some 7 years later Ahung died; George Pelly, his executor, proposed to auction off his house and store. This was approved, and on August 1, 1845 Pelly himself bought the place for \$5,100.² Exactly 2 months later the Hawaiian Treasury Board bought from Pelly in turn for the same price.³ Then, 3 weeks after its purchase, the HTB offered "The well-known store of Messrs. Hung Tai" to the firm of Starkey and Janion for \$6,000.⁴ Included was a good description of the Pagoda: a substantial wooden structure of 2 stories, with stone basement and double veranda front and rear secured by excellent Venetians. Each story had a large central room, 20 × 27, with on each side an oblong chamber 10 × 27. The ground floor was well fitted up with shelves and counters, and the upper story "handsomely arranged" for a suite of counting or lodging rooms. Beneath the sales room lay a good storage room. The rent of the land alone was reckoned at \$150 yearly.

Government was willing to lease for 50 years and allow Starkey and Janion to build at their pleasure. The deal went through on October 27, 1845; a year later the business acquired an adjoining mauka plot, "Lease No. 5," at a cost of \$150 annual rent.⁵

Later, apparently, the partnership of Makee and Anthon took over the whole property—Lease No. 5 and a 50-year lease on the original lot.

This parcel of 8,112 sq.ft. Emanuel S. Cunha bought at public auction on the front steps of Aliiolani Hale on May 31, 1879, at the upset price of \$7,000.⁶

The Business: Enterprises calling themselves "Union Hotel" or some such were disturbingly numerous in early Honolulu. Whalers and merchantmen of those days often represented hardy New England stock; most doubtless shared the patriotic fervor and the bibulous habits of their famous contemporary, Daniel Webster (1782–1852). A business that catered to both bents could hardly fail to appeal.

On January 10, 1846, C. H. Marshall and R. Boyd formed Marshall and Co. This firm operated a Union Hotel but was dissolved in less than 2 months.⁷ Jacob Stuppelbeen appeared as proprietor of a Union Hotel in April and May of the same year.⁸ Their advertisements touted taverns. Ten years later one James Stewart ran a Union House (board, lodging, furnished rooms) on Hotel Street near the French Hotel.⁹ And at the start of 1857 J. Davis advertised his Union, Public House at the corner of Marine and Nuuanu Streets.¹⁰ As late as October, 1860 James Dawson got a liquor license for the Union—no other facts given.¹¹

But it seems that we must look elsewhere for the origins of the saloon that E. S. Cunha eventually took over. By 1854 one W. E. Cutrell was in the retail

liquor business.¹² In February, 1856 he advertised as proprietor of the Merchants' Exchange; then in November, 1858 he received a hotel license for a place on Merchant Street. That this was a lodging house rather than a tavern is attested by the fee—only \$52, as contrasted with the \$1,002 demanded for a bar.¹² The picture, already complicated, now becomes even more so. In 1859 Cutrell again took a retail spirit license. For what? He was still operating the Merchants' Exchange in September, 1860; in November of 1861, however, his business address was listed as Merchant Street.¹³ And 3 years later his enterprise was identified by name as the Union Hotel.¹⁴ Were the Merchants' Exchange and the Union Hotel the same business operating under different names? The evidence indicates otherwise, as we shall see.

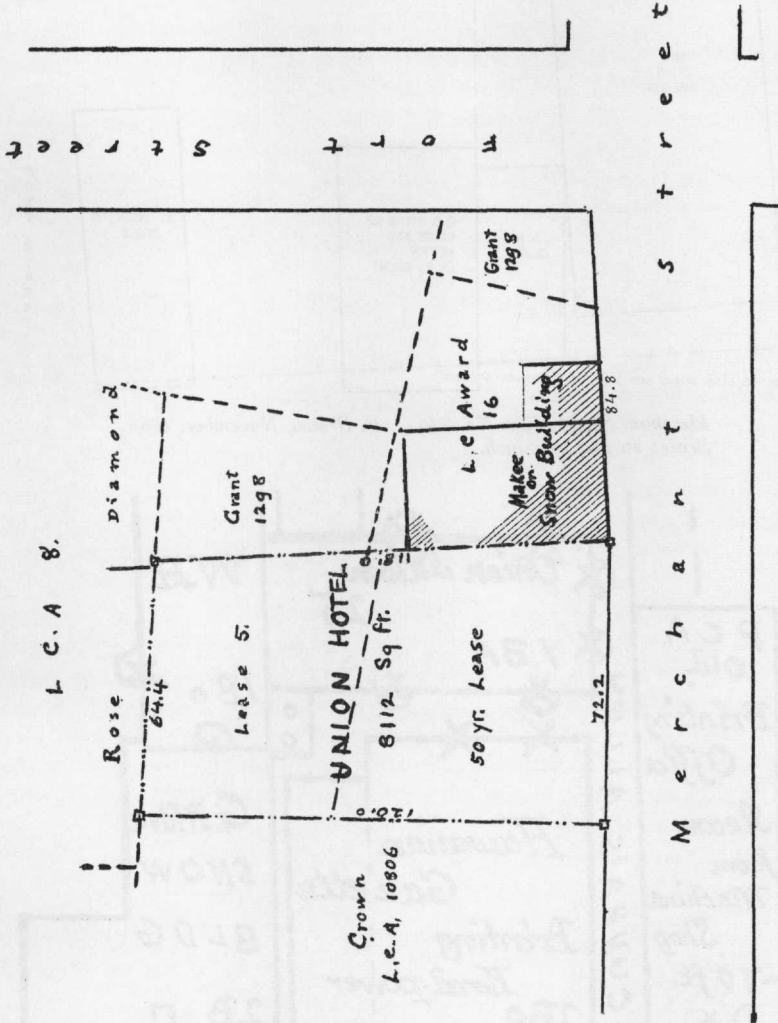
Meanwhile, a Richard Gilliland of Boston had come to town. At the start of 1864, having hired an experienced carriage painter and trimmer, he opened a shop, house, carriage and ornamental sign painting shop in the late John F. Colburn's place on Kaahumanu Street.¹⁵

Fate now drew together the careers of Cutrell and Gilliland. On Tuesday, November 29, 1864—only 8 days after he got his Union Hotel license—Cutrell lost his Nuuanu Valley house, his furniture, and even his clothing in a disastrous fire.¹⁶ This may have forced liquidation of his Merchants' Exchange, for on December 9, 1865, at 11 a.m. it reopened under new auspices—and Richard Gilliland held a license for the Exchange bearing that same date.¹⁷ Possibly Cutrell continued to operate his Union Hotel for a year after his loss; on December 9, 1866, however, Gilliland took out a license for that saloon. He kept it until he died on June 10, 1874 at 48 years, 2 months and 15 days.¹⁸

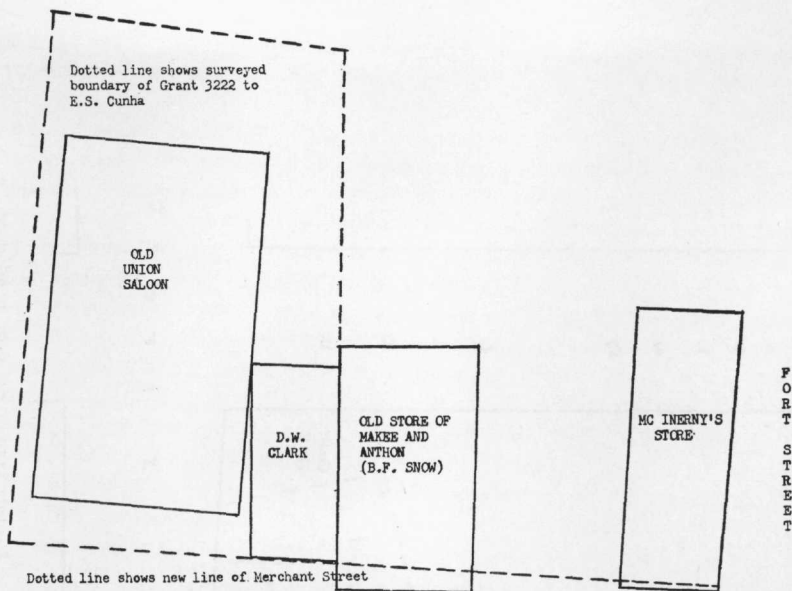
This brings us once more to Cunha, who, as a lad of 14, first saw Honolulu from the deck of the whaleship *New Brunswick* in 1865.¹⁹ In 1867 he came back for a stay of 51 years. Eventually he gravitated to the Union Hotel, became its manager—later owner—and in 1877 married Angela E. Gilliland, his late boss' eldest daughter.²⁰ Cunha got his first license for the Union Hotel on December 9, 1874, at the expiration of Gilliland's last. And like his father-in-law, Cunha stayed with the business until his own demise in January, 1918.

The Buildings: Two threads have now been traced; the third connects the various buildings that have stood on the Merchant Street site. William French's "Pagoda" certainly existed by September, 1838, when it passed to Hung and Tai. Apparently the Chinese merchants made no significant changes, for Judd's letter to Starkey and Janion in the fall of 1845 enumerated the 7 rooms mentioned in French's deed. There is explicit evidence that the building Janion took over later served the Union Hotel:

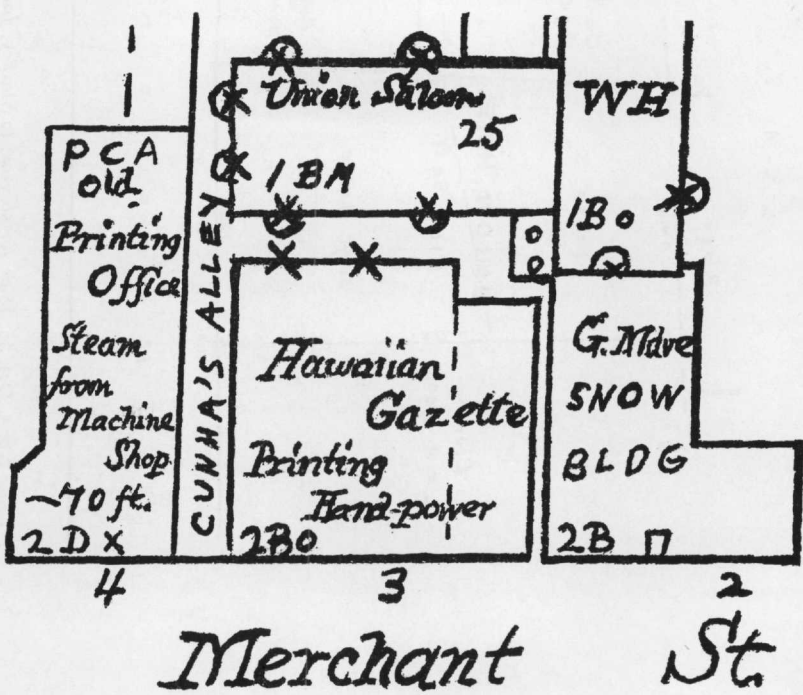
It is a curious coincidence that on the day that the death of the late Mr. R. C. Janion was announced here, notice was given of the sale, for removal, of the building in which his firm carried on business during his residence here. The premises in question are those in Merchant Street, next to the *Advertiser* office, which have for some years past been occupied by Mr. Cunha.²¹



Lease No. 5, Oct. 26, 1846, for 50 years to Starkey, Janion & Co. Rental: \$150.00 per year, in advance.
 Area: 96 fathoms, 2 sq. ft. Source: Book, "Government Leases and Rents, 1846-1882," Archives of Hawaii.
 Scale: 24 feet to 1 inch.



Merchant Street; Reg. No. 820, J. F. Brown, November, 1880.
Scale: 20 feet to 1 inch.



Source: Lion Fire Insurance Co. Map, about 1882.

And again: "While demolishing the building so long used as the Union Saloon, a one-cent coin of the reign of Kamehameha III tumbled out from among the beams."²²

A photograph reproduced for this article shows that the Union of 1881 must have looked very much like the Pagoda of 1838—a wooden structure of 2 stories, with double veranda. Its width was the same, approximately: An 1880 map drawn to scale gives 45 feet (the extra 5 feet could be accounted for by walls and partitions, roof overhang, or both). But the length had grown to nearly 80 feet. A 27-foot room, even with giant verandas front and rear, could hardly measure so long. There must have been one or more additions to the back end, possibly to accommodate the bowling alleys which became a feature of the Union Hotel. Alleys installed in the Merchants' Exchange in 1860 were 75-foot stretches of Italian marble.²³

About the first of October, 1879, D. W. Clark, jeweler and watchmaker, moved into a new brick building 2 stories high, 18 feet wide, and 42 feet deep, which he had sandwiched between the wooden Union Hotel and the adjoining old coral store of B. F. Snow-Makee and Anthon. In accordance with the new line of Merchant Street, its facade sat $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet back of the coral store's front.²⁴

The next development was the raising of a new Union Saloon behind the old one, and end-on to Cunha's Alley. G. W. Lincoln designed and built this brick effort; painter E. C. Rowe added his labors, and decoration fell to a Mr. Jarman, a San Francisco artist brought over to embellish Claus Spreckels' new Honolulu mansion. For Jarman the Union was a timely potboiler, as the Spreckels job was not yet ready for him.²⁵

With the new saloon in business, it was time to tear down the old one. This took place in September, 1881. J. I. Dowsett paid \$110 for the termite-eaten barn on condition that he have it broken up and carted away within 10 days.²⁶ So much for the Union Hotel nee Pagoda.

Cunha's final improvement was the erection in 1881 of what is now known as the Hawaiian Gazette building. Actually, this project consisted of joining a larger ewa section to Clark's 1879 production. This is evident even today in both back and front: The two waikiki upstairs windows are of a different style, and the earlier structure is shorter. Cunha pasted the two together behind a symmetrical facade.²⁷ Tenants were moving in during January, 1882.

But back to the new saloon, our focal point of interest. It opened formally—and appropriately—on July 4, 1881. Outside were a small office and a large and well supplied storeroom; underneath a cellar held stocks of liquor. But the saloon itself was the center of attention. High windows protected by iron shutters lighted Jarman's imitation oak, walnut and laurel panels. Behind the bar the conventional oversized mirror bore a fitting message: "The Union Forever"—a motto which doubtless combined patriotic sentiment with Cunha's own hopes for his business. Two small private "parlors", partitioned off from the main room by Jarman-grained screens, invited more intimate gatherings. The luncheon counter, *de rigeur* in those days, and the bar itself, were of koa. At night 17 lamps made the Union a cheerful off-street oasis.²⁸

And two weeks after the opening, the Hawaiian Bell Telephone Co. installed one of its instruments for a fee of \$6.00 a month. Actually, "one of its instruments" consisted of four separate parts: a transmitter, a bell, a magneto-telephone, and a battery.²⁹

Perhaps no living eyes have seen these grandeurs. During a remodeling in 1938 workmen pulling up the old linoleum found under it a sheathing of 1893 *San Francisco Examiners*, suggesting an earlier refurbishing during that year.³⁰ But there is firsthand testimony to the kind of place the Union Saloon was. Antone Tavares, now 85, started as a bartender in 1900-1901. He found himself working at the Union circa 1905. These are his recollections:

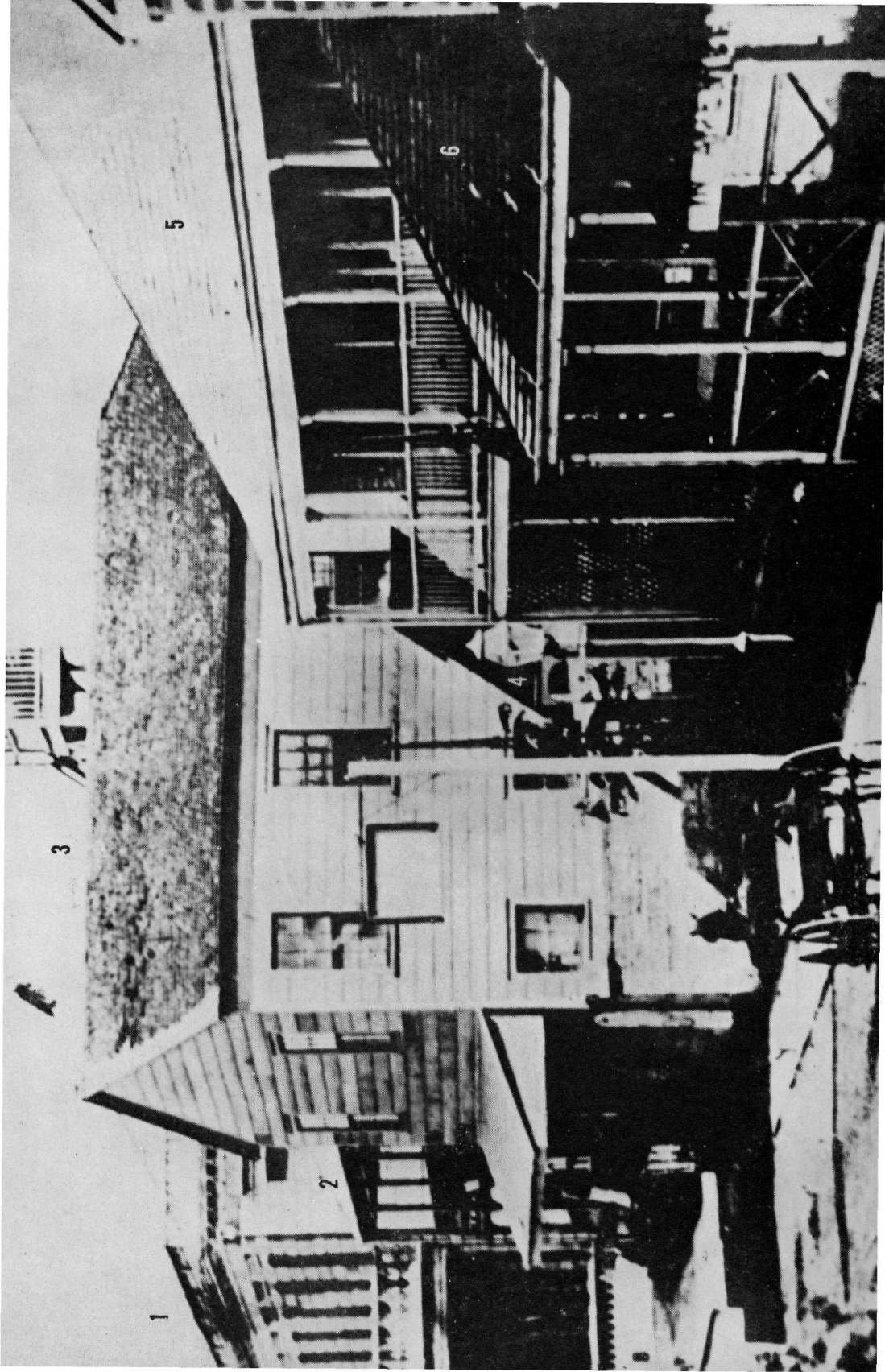
"In those times beginners first handled stock, brought barrels up from the basement, tapped kegs, etc. I remember old man Cunha and his saloon well. It catered to the business and professional elite—bankers, lawyers, brokers, merchants, and so forth. Everything was strict and impersonal. We bartenders never addressed anybody by name—it was always simply 'Good morning, sir'. Everybody was treated courteously, but as a stranger, without any reference to personal or business affairs. I remember an example: In those days the customer poured his own drink, the bartender supplying the bottle called for. One day when a 'regular' came in the bar boy, knowing what was wanted, set out the bottle without being asked. Cunha bawled him out for it.

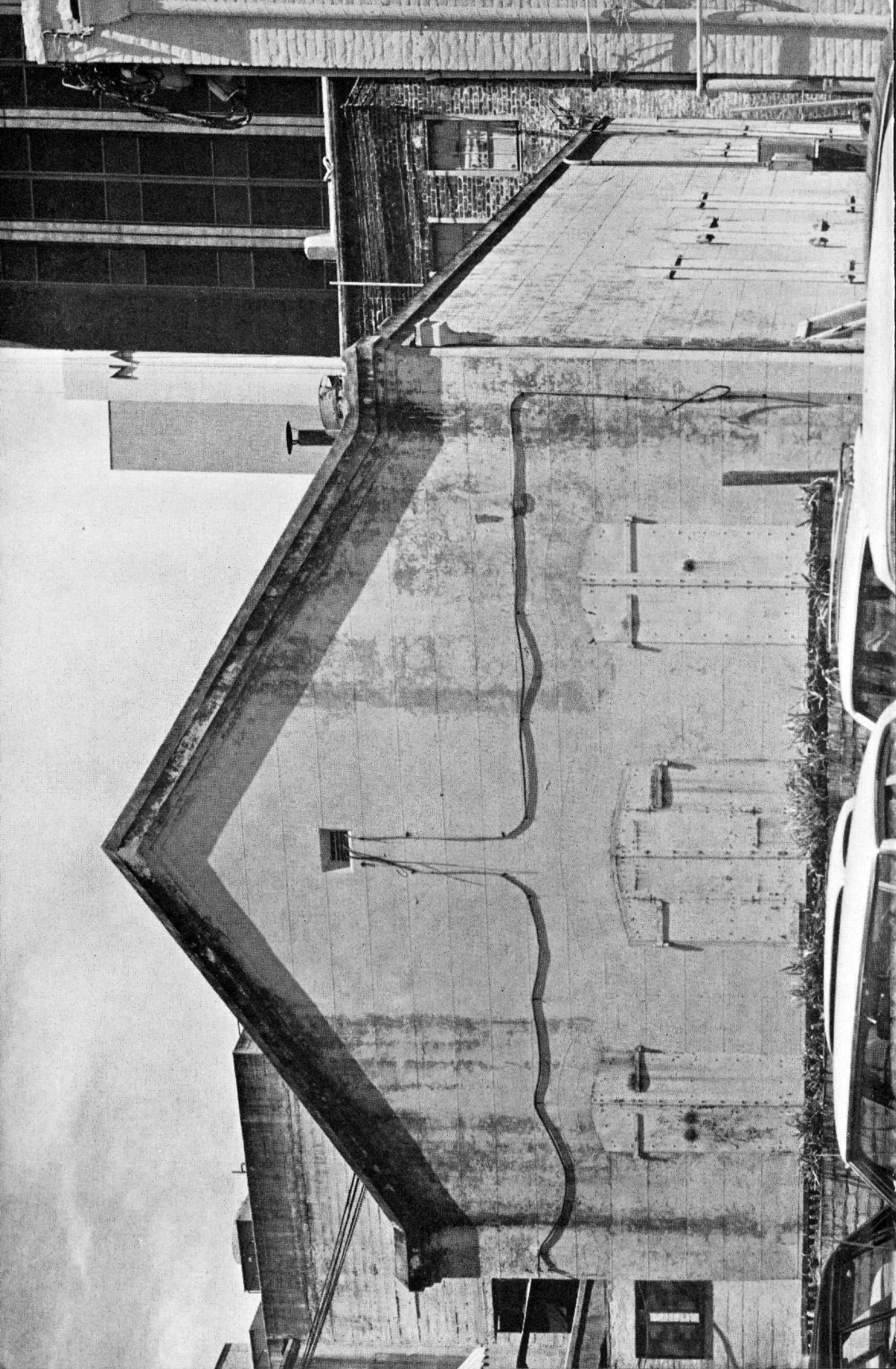
"Strict order was the rule. If anybody, no matter how important, got loud or rowdy, Cunha told him to quiet down; if he didn't, the police get a call. The man off the street was not encouraged to drink in the Union. Casuals who drifted in were got rid of in a nice way. In conjunction with the saloon was a sort of library of mainland newspapers for customers' use. These papers, 4 or 5 weeks old on arrival, were filed for a year or more."

Caesar M. Bettencourt, also 85, although a non-drinker, used to visit Cunha's to see the late A. K. Vierra, an employee. He seconds Tavares' description of a well-run, exclusive place, busy during the day but only sparsely populated evenings.

Naturally, legends accumulated. An industrious recorder of these was the late Joe Andrade, a one-time Union employee who ended his career as a successful stockbroker. According to him, the saloon had its share of two-fisted drinkers at the century's turn. Bourbon, Irish and Scotch whiskies were favorites, as was Square Face gin, so called from the bottle's shape. The demand for these kept Cunha's 3 bartenders hopping.³¹

The photograph opposite shows the mauka side of Merchant Street, between Fort and Bethel Streets, in the 1870s. The viewer is looking ewa. The buildings are: (1) the all-concrete post office—Honolulu's first structure built of this material—erected in 1870 and still standing; (2) Honolulu Hale, first Hawaiian government executive building, erected 1835-1836 and demolished in 1917; (3) the first home of the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, built by Henry M. Whitney in 1856 to house his new paper, and demolished about 1886; (4) the entrance to Cunha's Alley; (5) the old Union Saloon. This building, occupied by R. C. Janion in the 1840's, apparently was the "Pagoda" sold by William French to Hung and Tai in 1838; (6) a small, unidentified building replaced by D. W. Clark's brick erection; (7) the corner of Snow's coral building, torn down in 1887 to make way for the new McInerney block.





Andrade claimed that Cunha's was the birthplace of 2 well-known drinks—one of them, indeed, a standard item in the mixer's repertoire. The cream gin fizz, a result of the constant experimenting that went on behind the bar, was of about 1902–1903 vintage. The old-fashioned came to gladden a thirsty world at some unspecified date. Cunha himself has been credited with its invention, but Andrade maintained—and who can say that it was mere jactitation?—that he himself assisted at the initial concoction.³²

Well, the years of gossip and laughter, of practical jokes and earnest discussion are long gone now. Few steps echo through Cunha's Alley nowadays. Most old-timers begin their reminiscences with something like: "Cunha's Alley? Is it still there? It must be over 30 years since I saw the place." Yes, it is still there. The old saloon, shutters tight closed, is now an appliance warehouse. But solid and sturdy it stands. Will the lights ever go on again? Or will it be another casualty in the fight for revenue?

NOTES

¹ Copy of deed filed with Royal Patent No. 3222 (Pagoda Lot, Union Hotel Lot), to E. S. Cunha. French's comments in *Foreign Testimony Books*, I, 20.

² Pelly to Kekuanaoa, July 24, 1845. Filed with RP 3222.

³ Lease, HTB to Starkey and Janion, Oct. 27, 1845. Filed with RP 3222.

⁴ G. P. Judd to Starkey and Janion, Oct. 22, 1845. IDLB, I, 156–157.

⁵ Book, "Government Leases and Rents, 1846–1882," AH.

⁶ Description filed with RP 3222; PCA, May 31, 1879.

⁷ P, Jan. 10, Feb. 14, Mar. 7, 1846.

⁸ P, April 18, 1846.

⁹ P, Sept. 27, Nov. 29, 1856.

¹⁰ PCA, Jan. 1, 1857.

¹¹ ID License Book, AH.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ P, Feb. 16, 1856; ID License Book.

¹⁴ ID License Book.

¹⁵ PCA, Jan. 7.

¹⁶ PCA, Dec. 3.

¹⁷ ID License Book; HG, Dec. 9, 1865.

¹⁸ ID License Book; HG, June 17, 1874. The whole business of determining who was where and doing what is complicated by the fact that a single business might have several branches, each operating under separate management. Example: On Feb. 16,

Today the Old Cunha Saloon, still structurally sound, stands in a backwater of downtown Honolulu—only a block away from the vast new Financial Plaza of the Pacific.

- 1856, it was advertised that W. E. Cutrell, proprietor of the Merchants' Exchange, had opened a "billiard saloon" which was "attached to his premises." Mr. H. K. Swope was manager (P). And in May, 1858, it was announced that a Mr. Esopp Ali had taken charge of the "dining saloon" in the Merchants' Exchange: Best board at \$5.00 a week; breakfast, dinner and supper for \$1.00 (PCA, May 6).
- ¹⁹ PCA, Jan. 11, 1918, Sec. 2, p. 1.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, F, July 2, 1877, p. 53.
- ²¹ PCA, Sept. 10, 1881.
- ²² HG, Sept. 21, 1881.
- ²³ HG Record of Advertisements, No. 49, Mar. 25, 1869; AH; P, Sept. 15, 1860.
- ²⁴ PCA, Oct. 4, 1879; Registered Map No. 820, Nov., 1880.
- ²⁵ HG, July 6, 1881.
- ²⁶ PCA, Sept. 10 and 17, 1881.
- ²⁷ HG, Sept. 21 and Dec. 21, 1881.
- ²⁸ PCA, July 2; HG, July 6.
- ²⁹ Contract No. 106, now in possession of Mrs. May Cunha Ross.
- ³⁰ Mr. Howard Case in SB, Mar. 23, 1938, p. 4.
- ³¹ Helen Berkey, ed., *Hawaiian Hospitality* (Honolulu: Advertiser Publishing Co., Oct., 1943), pp. 9-10.
- ³² *Ibid.*, P. S. Brown, "The Tempting, Colorful Drinks of Hawaii," *House and Garden*, July, 1964, pp. 100, 110.

In June, 1968, Cunha's Alley still retains a 19th-century flavor. We see: (A) the Cunha Saloon; (B) the Hawaiian Gazette Building; (C) the old, Chinese granite walkway; (D) across Merchant Street, the former Bishop Bank (1877), and (E) the Bishop Estate Building (1896).

