

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM



951

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name MAI-KAI RESTAURANT

other names/site number NA/FMSFBD05104

2. Location

street & number 3599 N. Federal Highway N/A ☐ not for publication

city or town Oakland Park N/A ☐ vicinity

state FLORIDA code FL county Broward code 011 zip code 33308

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Robert F. Bendus  
Signature of certifying official/Title

10/3/14  
Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Division of Historical Resources  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- ☒ entered in the National Register  
☐ See continuation sheet
- ☐ determined eligible for the National Register  
☐ See continuation sheet.
- ☐ determined not eligible for the National Register  
☐ See continuation sheet.
- ☐ removed from the National Register.
- ☐ other, (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

11-18-2014

**5. Classification****Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private  
☐ public-local  
☐ public-State  
☐ public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

- ☒ buildings  
☐ district  
☐ site  
☐ structure  
☐ object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include any previously listed resources in the count)

## Contributing

## Noncontributing

|   |   |            |
|---|---|------------|
| 2 | 0 | buildings  |
| 0 | 0 | sites      |
| 0 | 0 | structures |
| 0 | 0 | objects    |
| 2 | 0 | total      |

**Name of related multiple property listings**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use****Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant

**7. Description****Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER/Polynesian

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone

walls Wood

roof Fiberglass/Thatch

other

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**8. Statement of Significance****Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References****Bibliography**

Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 36) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey  
# \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

**Period of Significance**

1956-1964

**Significant Dates**

1956

**Significant Person**

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Arch: McKirahan, Charles F.

Blder: Reilly, Richard C.

**Primary location of additional data:**

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of Repository

# \_\_\_\_\_

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

### UTM References

(Place additional references on a continuation sheet.)

|      |         |   |   |          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|------|---------|---|---|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1    | 1       | 7 | 5 | 8        | 7 | 9 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 9 | 5 | 0 | 8 | 1 |
| Zone | Easting |   |   | Northing |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2    |         |   |   |          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

|      |         |  |  |          |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|------|---------|--|--|----------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 3    |         |  |  |          |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Zone | Easting |  |  | Northing |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4    |         |  |  |          |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

☐ See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Steven Avdakov, Deborah Griffin, Nathalie Wright/Carl Shiver, Historic Preservationist

organization Bureau of Historic Preservation date October 2014

street & number 500 South Bronough Street telephone (850) 245-6333

city or town Tallahassee state Florida zip code 32399-0250

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

### Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name M.P. Thornton, Mai-Kai, Incorporated

street & number 3599 N. Federal Highway telephone (954) 563-3272

city or town Oakland Park state Florida zip code 33308

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and amend listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 1

MAI-KAI RESTAURANT  
OAKLAND PARK, BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA  
DESCRIPTION

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**SUMMARY**

The Mai-Kai Restaurant is a stylistically intact, still-operating Polynesian style restaurant located on a busy commercial highway that divides Oakland Park from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It comprises two buildings, the restaurant and the Bora Bora Room. It is set amid verdant landscaping with simulated rock formations, waterfalls, ponds, tropical vegetation and Tiki statues. The 1-story main restaurant building features a large A-frame gable roof and two smaller thatched roofs. A thatched porte-cochere visually defines the entrance to the restaurant. The interior is ornately decorated in nautical and South Seas décor with many authentic artifacts from Polynesia. Each room is named for a specific area of the South Seas and is decorated with items from that region. The restaurant features twice-nightly Polynesian shows that are visible from seats in the Tonga, Hawaii, New Guinea and Moorea Rooms. Other areas include the Tahiti and Samoa Rooms, which are exclusively dining rooms, and the Molokai Bar. An outdoor terrace, the Lanai, overlooks the Garden. A secondary building, the Bora Bora Room, was also constructed with Polynesian styling. It originally served as dining space but is not currently being used due to hurricane damage. Overall, the property retains the integrity of its original and distinct South Seas and nautical themes. Alterations to the Mai-Kai have been consistent with the design and feeling of the original construction, and the restaurant has experienced very few changes since 1971.

**SETTING**

The Mai-Kai Restaurant is located at 3599 North Federal Highway (U.S. 1) in the city of Oakland Park, Broward County, Florida. The City of Oakland Park is one of the older municipalities in Broward County. It was originally chartered as the Town of Floranada in December of 1925. This was to be no little village. The boundaries went from the ocean west to what is now U.S. 441, and from the north fork of Middle River north to Cypress Creek. A referendum abolished the Town of Floranada and established the City of Oakland Park. The boundaries were to approximately the west side of U.S. Highway 1 west to N.E. 3rd Avenue and the north fork of Middle River north to what is now Prospect Road. As of the 2010 United States Census, the city's population was 41,363, mainly due to annexation of North Andrews Gardens and Twin Lakes South. It is part of the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach Metropolitan Statistical Area, which was home to 5,564,635 people. Oakland Park is bisected by the Florida East Coast Railway, which runs parallel to Dixie Highway through the city's downtown. The City of Oakland Park has put into place new zoning regulations intended to transform downtown Oakland Park into a mixed-use pedestrian community. One element of the proposal is the creation of a new commuter rail station on the FEC rail line.

**DESCRIPTION**

The restaurant is bounded on the east by Federal Highway (Photos 1, 2), which is the dividing line between Oakland Park and Fort Lauderdale. The property is located in a mixed-use commercial district, with office and

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retail spaces in the immediate area. The rear (west side) of the property is bounded by N.E. 20th Avenue, which is the eastern edge of a residential neighborhood.

The site comprises approximately 1.3 acres and contains three buildings—the contributing main restaurant building and former Bora Bora Room and a noncontributing storage building. The buildings are situated on the eastern portion of the lot, near Federal Highway, with the Bora Bora Room and storage building located north of the main building, which occupies most of the frontage. The primary vehicular access to the site is provided via an entrance drive from Federal Highway that extends between the two buildings. The drive continues west past the buildings to a large open parking lot that abuts N.E. 20th Avenue. Secondary vehicular access is provided from N.E. 20th Avenue via a landscaped driveway at the southwestern corner of the parking lot.

The primary vehicular access from Federal Highway is provided via a two-lane drive that crosses a small contributing bridge that traverses a water feature (Photo 3). Each lane has a separate bridge that is constructed of wood planks and lined with posts connected by rope barriers. Along Federal Highway, the site is heavily landscaped with a series of rock formations, ponds, waterfalls and tropical vegetation (Photo 4). A contributing detached illuminated pole mounted signage, with a background constructed to look like weathered boards, is located at the southern frontage of the property near Federal Highway (Photo 5). South of the sign, a curved bamboo fence encloses the Garden. The southeastern corner of the property features rocks, vegetation, and a large contributing Tiki statue (Photo 6). The water features and landscaping are continued along the eastern elevation of the Bora Bora Room. A large contributing Tiki statue is located at the northeastern corner of the property (Photo 7). A stand of tall trees is located along the driveway between the two buildings.

Originally, the Garden was located between two projecting wings on the eastern side of the structure and extended out to the north and south along Federal Highway. Currently, the easternmost end of the original garden area between the two wings exists as an interior garden. The Garden area along Federal Highway is intact, and a new expanded Garden area has been constructed at the southeastern corner of the site. The expanded Garden is sheltered from Federal Highway by a bamboo fence. It features tropical plants, trees, rock formations, ponds, and waterfalls (Photos 8-9). Tiki statues are visible along the winding concrete paths (Photos 10-12). A wood plank walkway/bridge with wooden posts and chain railing extends from the Garden to the western edge of a covered terrace. Since the landscaped areas of the property are consistent in design, materials, vegetation, and water features, they are being counted as one contributing site.

**Exterior**

**Roof**

The most prominent exterior feature of the Mai-Kai is its roofs (Photos 1-2,4), which includes a large A-frame gable with a ridge that extends in an east-west direction perpendicular to the main (east) facade. The A-frame

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structure is formed by 8 pairs of wooden rafters sitting on concrete piers that divide the roof into seven panels. The eastern portion of the roof projects above the area that was originally a garden area located between two projecting wings of the restaurant. The four easternmost panels of the A-frame roof are clad with a fiberglass screen and are situated under a visible ridge beam. These panels were originally operable to create an open air space. The three panels located to the rear (west) elevation do not have a visible ridge beam and appear to be covered with a mineral surface. This area was originally covered in thatch. The front gable of the A-frame is decorated with a polychromatic Polynesian design. The rear gable is plain and is painted to match the color of the A-frame structural members.

Additionally, there are two smaller raised gabled thatched roof structures located at the southern end of the building atop the 1971 addition (photo 2). The easternmost of these two roof structures is a Polynesian truss design and is located over the Tahiti Room. The thatch of this roof extends over the Lanai at the southern end of the structure. The second thatched area is a gabled roof over the Moorea Room. Both thatched roofs feature extended notched ridge beams. The remainder of the building's roof is very low sloped and appears to be topped with built-up roofing material.

North Facade

The north facade contains the main entrance to the restaurant. The area west of the porte-cochere was originally exposed concrete block between concrete piers. It is now covered with vertical plank siding with horizontal rails to reference nautical features (Photo 13). Matching windows, both with a single light flanked by 3-light casements and board & batten shutters, are located in the western portion of the elevation. A plank wood key locker with front gable roof is mounted east of the windows, and a shed-roofed porch cover extends west from the porte-cochere. The porch cover features a corrugated metal roof, exposed rafter tails, and plain wooden posts. A bench is situated under the porch cover, and a horizontal wood slat planter box is located at the western end of the porch.

East of the porte-cochere, the building is generally not visible from the exterior due to the extensive vegetation and ornamental items in the adjacent planter that extends to the northeast corner of the building (Photo 14). This portion of the elevation was constructed as part of the c.1958 renovation and consists of a concrete block base and angled windows with heavy wood mullions, topped by utilitarian wood panels. The planter is constructed of concrete block and is faced with coral rock with a decorative band near the top. Individual coral rocks are mounted above the band to form a crenellated edge. The planter features extensive vegetation as well as a serpentine bamboo screen with periodic wooden 14-light panels with translucent material instead of glass. Additionally, Tikis and a water feature are integrated into this element. At the east end of the planter is a wooden board fence with a gate that leads to the garden area adjacent Federal Highway.

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Porte-Cochere and Entrance

The porte-cochere was added c. 1958 and was structurally reinforced in 1961. It projects from the north elevation of the restaurant building and covers most of the width of the driveway. To the west of the bridge, the drive is concrete and continues under a porte-cochere to the rear parking lot (Photo 4). The porte-cochere has a prow gable roof and is covered in thatch (Photos 15-16). The roof is supported by a heavy wooden ridge beam and two steel beams. The center beam projects from cover and is notched at the end. Large bamboo rafters and smaller bamboo cross members serve as framing that support the thatch. The outer area of the cover is supported by metal framing and metal posts wrapped with rope. The steel side beams feature a decorative pattern visible from the underside of the porte-cochere. Other decorative items under the canopy include part of a wooden balustrade, wicker baskets, and an outrigger canoe. The main entrance is situated under the southern end of the porte-cochere (Photo 17). The entrance consists of three hammered metal doors with porthole windows and set in a wood paneled frame. Located adjacent the doors are several items with a nautical-theme, including ropes, lanterns, floats, and a block and tackle.

East Elevation

The eastern elevation is almost completely obscured by water features and landscaping (Photo 3). It sits atop a concrete base with a coral stone façade. The walls are clad with utilitarian wood panels. The northernmost section of the elevation was enclosed under an existing roofline to create the current bar space c.1958. Windows were incorporated into the existing triangular-shaped wood framing members that supported the roof. Two other windows have been added to the northern portion of the elevation, one of which is angled to fit inside the large gable framing member. All the windows have fixed lights.

Within the A-frame gable, a low-pitched gable roof covers a projecting bay that encloses the former interior garden. Two windows exist under the northern half of the gable. To the south of the main gable, a stucco-clad wall has been incorporated with the rock formations to the east. A single-light door is located in the stucco wall and provides access from the interior garden area to a walkway that leads to the Lanai.

The covered walkway extends from the interior garden along the southern end of the eastern elevation. The walkway is topped with a Chattahoochee paving finish consisting of small pebbles set in epoxy. The ceiling above the walkway is woven rattan and corrugated metal, and the roof is supported by tiki posts. The building's facade along the walkway is covered in flat bamboo and grass and is divided into panels by bamboo trim. The walls are decorated with tools and masks. On this façade, trapezoidal fixed-light windows are surrounded by wood molding. Utility areas are sheltered with bamboo screens. To the east, the path is lined with rock formations and open garden areas with vegetation, water features, bamboo fence, and tikis. Three steps connect the southern end of the walkway with the Lanai.

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Ell Addition – East and South

An irregularly-shaped ell addition abuts the southwestern corner of the original building, returns at the intersection of the kitchen/service addition, and extends south along the eastern elevation of the kitchen wing. On the southern elevation, the ell is inset with a narrower space at the southeastern interior corner. Along the eastern elevation of the addition is an angled bay that contains a Chinese oven (Photo 18). The eastern wall of the addition continues south of the angled bay but terminates to the north of the southern wall of the kitchen wing. A board and batten shed structure has been added at the southern end of this wall. Adjacent the southern end of the original structure, the ell contains two additional South Seas themed dining rooms – the Moorea Room at the western side of the southern addition and the Tahiti Room at the eastern side.

The addition sits on a reinforced concrete slab foundation and is constructed of stucco-faced concrete block situated between concrete piers. The roof, which is primarily low-pitched, appears to be covered with built-up roofing material and has two raised thatched sections (Photo 19). A thatched gable roof featuring an extended ridge beam with notched ends covers the Moorea Room. A thatched Polynesian truss roof featuring an extended ridge beam with notched end covers the Tahiti Room and extends to the south over the Lanai.

The southern façade of the ell addition adjacent the Tahiti Room features bamboo trim that divides the wall into panels that are faced with flat bamboo and grass covering (Photo 20). Large windows punctuate the wall and feature diagonal bamboo screens on the interior. The wall adjacent the southern corridor along the Moorea Room is also divided into panels with bamboo trim. The upper section of this wall features a band of windows separated by bamboo moldings. The panels below the windows are covered with grass strands.

The Lanai extends along the eastern and southern elevations of the Tahiti Room and along the southern elevation of the Moorea Room (Photo 21). It is accessed from the east by the covered walkway along the eastern elevation as well as from a pair of doors that access the side corridor along the southern edge of the Moorea Room. The Lanai is framed with square wood members and is covered by the thatched roof that extends from the roof structure over the Tahiti Room. The ceiling consists of corrugated metal between the open wood beams. Large tiki poles support the roof, and the porch is delineated by smaller tiki posts connected by bamboo rails (Photo 22). A paved area that extends from the Lanai to an outdoor seating area is paved with a Chattahoochee finish. The Lanai is furnished with teak-topped tables with metal post bases and metal chairs with cushions. Electric fans, paper lanterns, baskets, and fishnets are suspended from the ceiling of the Lanai, and masks decorate the adjacent walls. The Garden is located adjacent the southern side of the ell and is visible from the Lanai, the Tahiti Room, and the Moorea Room.

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South Elevation

The original southern elevation has been completely obscured by the 1971 additions. The southern elevation is utilitarian in nature and has no fenestration. It is constructed of concrete piers filled with concrete block and covered with textured stucco. A shed roof shelters waste bins located at the southwestern corner.

West Elevation

The 1971 kitchen/service wing is located on the southern end of this elevation and is slightly greater in height than the northern end of the facade, which is part of the original construction (Photo 23). The facade is constructed of cast concrete piers with concrete block infill, all covered with textured stucco. A stucco-clad mechanical penthouse with louvered vents rises from the southern end of this elevation. A recessed receiving area sheltered by a vertical board fence is located in the southern portion of the facade. Two recessed doors and one flush door are located in the northern portion of the elevation. Several louvered openings are also situated on this façade.

**Interior**

The general areas of the interior, including corridors, restrooms, and bar, are decorated to resemble a sailing ship. This nautical theme is expressed with heavy wood timber beams and knees (brackets), wood paneling, and ceilings finished with either wood slats or corrugated metal. Decorative nautical items include ropes, harpoons, glass floats, fishnets, block and tackles, and ship's wheels. Hanging lanterns and hanging lamps with rattan shades provide lighting. Built in display cases with ships and other nautical artifacts are situated in various locations throughout the corridors.

The rooms in the restaurant are named for various South Sea locations. Although the décor in the "destination" theme rooms follows certain patterns, the details vary to match the locale being portrayed by the specific room. Both interior and exterior walls are divided into panels by lengths of half-round bamboo, and the areas within the panels are filled with either thin slats of bamboo, woven rattan, or strands of grass. Wall decorations include masks, tools and weapons associated with the specific theme of each room. Railings and balustrades consist of short tiki posts connected with bamboo poles. Screens are comprised of bamboo poles with sculpted ceramic medallions lashed between the bamboo pieces. Huts within the interior spaces have bamboo-framed thatched roofs supported by tiki poles. Tikis vary in appearance based on the culture being represented in the room. Ceiling light fixtures usually have cloth or rattan shades, although some lights are enclosed by puffer fish. Drums, baskets and fishnets with floats are suspended from the ceilings.

Guests of the Mai-Kai enter a vestibule at the northern end of the restaurant through one of the three doors located under the adjacent porte-cochere (Photo 24). Extending south from the vestibule is the main circulation

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corridor that extends to the Lanai on the southern end of the building. Smaller side corridors intersect the main circulation corridor. The majority of the public spaces are to the east of the main corridor, with the exception of the restrooms and the upper seating area in the showroom (Tonga Room). Private administrative and "back of house" spaces are located in the westernmost portion of the original building and in the kitchen/service wing located at the southwestern side of the building.

Vestibule

The vestibule is located immediately to the south of the main entrance doors (Photo 25). It is decorated in a nautical theme and has a floor that is finished with irregularly shaped slate. At the western side of the vestibule is an alcove with a bench supported by chains. A short corridor extends from the northern end of the alcove to the west along the northern end of the building. Located along the corridor are doors to the restrooms and an alcove that formerly contained pay phones and a cigarette machine. The entrance to the Molokai Bar is located at the eastern side of the vestibule and features a built-out entrance portico with a thatched roof and nautical décor. A greeter desk located at the southern edge of the vestibule delineates the entrance area from the main circulation corridor to the south. A side corridor extends from the greeter station to the west providing access to the Tonga Room, Gift Shop, and Restrooms. The side corridor terminates at the western end with a door that provides access to the private administrative area at the western side of the building.

Restrooms

The Men's and Women's Restrooms are accessed from the side corridor that extends west along the northern wall of the building and also from the side corridor that extends west from the greeter station. The Men's Restroom is decorated in nautical style and has a ceramic tile floor. It features rough wood paneling and a corrugated metal ceiling. The Women's Restroom is ornately decorated in a Thai style (Photo 26). It features carved wood paneling, decorative molding, decorative floor tile, and recessed arches in the sink and dressing table areas.

Molokai Bar

The nautically-themed Molokai Bar is an L-shaped room situated east of the entrance vestibule at the northeastern corner of the building. It has a floor finished with irregularly-shaped slate, and the ceiling is finished with tongue and groove wood panels with heavy beams. The northern wall features a continuous band of slanted windows with heavy wood brackets to resemble a ship (Photo 27). Posts decorated to resemble masts are located throughout the room (Photo 28). The angled bar is covered by a tiki hut structure with a thatched roof. The walls and the face of the bar are clad in tongue and groove wood paneling (Photo 29). A wooden masthead is located on the eastern wall. Beyond the masthead to the south is a slightly elevated area accessed with a short ramp. The elevated area is finished with a wood floor, railings, and several block and tackle

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systems (Photo 30). Beyond this area is another raised area that is accessed by two steps. This area is also delineated by block and tackle systems and has a wood floor. The walls are divided into panels by half-round strips of bamboo, and the panels are filled with grass on the lower portion and woven rattan in the upper portion and on the ceiling. A window overlooking the interior garden is located at the southern end of the elevated areas of the bar, which were originally part of an earlier dining room. The stools at the bar have padded seats and bamboo legs. Chairs in the room are bamboo with padded backs and seats. Regular-height and bar-height tables have thick teak tops on metal pole bases.

Tonga Room

The Tonga Room is situated under the A-frame roof and is bisected by the main circulation corridor. The western (rear) portion of the room features two levels of elevated seating (Photo 31). The eastern portion of the room is open at the sides so that the stage at the eastern end of the room is visible to guests seated in the adjacent rooms.

The raised seating areas at the western end of the Tonga Room are accessed from the northern side corridor adjacent the greeter's station with steps via a screened tiki hut portico. A secondary set of steps accesses the seating area from a short side corridor at the southern end of the room. The upper seating area is elevated by about 2½ feet and sits on a rock-faced base. The top level seating is one step above the second level, and both levels have wood floors. The walls feature woven rattan in the lower panels and decorative panels with masks, tools, and weapons in the upper portion. Windows on the west (rear) wall overlook the Gift Shop to the west. Tiki hut shelters extend from the northern and southern sides of both upper levels of the Tonga Room. A shallow thatched roof extends from the rear wall and extends to the thatched roofs at both side walls. Seating in the center of the room is not covered. Bamboo railings with medallions separate the upper seating from the level below (Photo 32).

The lowest seating level in Tonga lies east of the main circulation corridor. This section is not as deep as the upper seating area and is delineated by bamboo railings with rectangular decorative panels that align with the edges of the stage. The floor in this area is finished with irregularly-shaped slate. The tables in the Tonga Room have thick teak tops and metal pole bases. The chairs are bamboo with fixed backs and seat cushions. The Stage is located at the eastern end of the Tonga Room (Photo 33). It is elevated on a 28-inch decorated wooden riser. A tall tiki hut on a short riser comprises the bandstand. The floor is wood parquet. Several small tiki statues decorate the stage area.

The South Seas décor extends overhead within the interior volume of space of the central A-frame gable. Drums, baskets, glass floats, and other decorative items are suspended from the ceiling (Photo 34). The western gable end wall is covered with strips of bamboo and woven rattan panels flanking a central portrait, and the uppermost section of the gable is painted black. The tiki hut shelters on each side of the upper seating area are

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topped by built-out walls with woven rattan panels framed by bamboo strips. Some panels are slightly recessed and contain displays of Polynesian artifacts (Photo 35). Paddles, tools and tikis decorate the side wall panels. A large wooden cross beam with an open bamboo screen is located at the gable enclosure that is above the central corridor. Woven rattan covers the roof panels between each gable in the Tonga Room.

New Guinea Room

The New Guinea Room is located to the north of the lower level of the Tonga Room. It is separated from the Tonga Room by tiki poles and bamboo rails with diagonal bracing and is covered by a thatched structure with bamboo trusses on the interior (Photo 36). The interior roof has a rounded gable with a notched projecting ridge beam and is covered in wide thatch. The floor is finished with irregularly-shaped slate. Wall panels are covered with woven grass and patterned murals (Photo 37). The tables and chairs in this room are the same as in the Tonga Room.

Hawaii Room

The Hawaii Room is located to the south of the lower seating area of the Tonga Room. Like the New Guinea Room, it is separated from the Tonga Room by tiki poles and dark bamboo rails with diagonal cross bracing (Photo 38). The Hawaii Room is covered by a thatched structure with a pointed prow gable and notched ridge beam. Bamboo pieces project from the gable frame, and the structure is thatched with thin blades of grass. The floor is the same irregular slate found in the New Guinea and Tonga Rooms. The walls have narrow grass in the lower panels and herringbone weave in the upper panels (Photo 39). The tables and chairs are the same as in the Tonga Room.

Southern Corridor

Along the main circulation corridor (Photo 40). to the west of the Hawaii Room, a doorway leads south into the 1971 addition (Photo 41). The floor of the corridor in this section is finished with wood plank, and the ceiling is corrugated metal. The treatments on the eastern wall of the corridor, which is adjacent additional themed dining rooms, are South Seas related, while the western wall of the corridor has a nautical theme and includes an aquarium. This hallway continues to the south to a window overlooking the Chinese oven adjacent the kitchen wing. The window is covered with "spear" bars that match the window treatment on the exterior of the Chinese oven bay.

Moorea Room

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The Moorea Room is located in the 1971 addition to the south of the Hawaii Room, and it is accessed from the central corridor (Photo 42). The space is slightly elevated to allow guests to view performances on the stage in the Tonga Room by looking through the adjacent Hawaii Room. Since this room is located under one of the two thatched roofs on the exterior, the volume of the interior space has a high ceiling framed in bamboo with woven rattan infill (Photo 43). A canoe and large baskets are suspended from the ceiling. The room is characterized by carved wooden decorative banding around doorways, on posts, and at the crown molding. The floor is finished with wood planks, and the walls feature painted bamboo sections with flat bamboo strips in the bottom panels and woven rattan in the upper panels. Walls are decorated with masks, tools and weapons. The southern wall contains window openings that overlook the side hall that leads to the Tahiti Room. The windows have grilles of bamboo railings with ceramic medallions. The chairs in the Moorea Room are the same type as in the other rooms, but the tables have wood plank tops on metal posts.

Southern Side Corridor

To the south of the Moorea Room, a short side corridor runs east from the main corridor. This side corridor has a corrugated metal ceiling and wood plank flooring. The southern wall has a band of windows that overlook the Lanai. Walls in the side corridor are decorated in the same manner as the other theme rooms, with bamboo strips dividing panels finished with grass and woven rattan. The eastern end of the side corridor contains steps up to the Tahiti Room and also a pair of exterior doors that leads to the Lanai.

Tahiti Room

The Tahiti Room is located in the 1971 addition, at the southeastern corner of the building, under the Polynesian-truss thatched roof that is visible from the exterior. It features a high ceiling with wooden crown molding carved with a floral motif. Baskets, drums and fishnet floats are suspended from the ceiling. The walls have flat bamboo strips in the lower panels and woven rattan in a herringbone pattern in the upper panels. Windows line the southern and eastern walls along the Lanai (Photo 44). Some of the windows have diagonal bamboo grilles. Spears and tools decorate the walls, and partial height walls topped with bamboo and medallion screens separate seating areas. This room and the Samoa Room are exclusively dining rooms with no view of the stage area. The décor in these rooms is slightly more elegant than in the remainder of the restaurant. A thatched tiki structure is located at the center of the room with four curved banquettes that form a square in plan (Photo 45). The bamboo chairs have padded seats and backs and are of a different style than in other parts of the restaurant. The tables are covered with linens.

Samoa Room

The Samoa Room is located in the original portion of the building, directly east of the Hawaii Room (Photo 46). It is accessed by two steps up from the Tahiti Room to the south. It has an irregular slate floor and a ceiling of

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woven rattan. Drums, baskets, and other decorations are suspended from the ceiling. A raised section is situated under a thatched roof tiki structure in the middle of the space (Photo 47). This section has a wood plank floor and is lined with tiki posts and bamboo railings with ceramic medallions. The walls are divided into panels by bamboo strips with flat bamboo in the lower panels and woven rattan in the upper panels. Several recessed display areas feature shrunken heads and other artifacts (Photo 48). Tools, weapons, and masks adorn the walls. On the eastern wall, angled windows with bamboo grilles overlook the exterior walkway that leads to the southern terrace. On the northern wall, windows overlook the interior garden. A door to the garden is situated in the northeastern corner of the room. The tables and chairs are the same type as found in the Tahiti Room.

Interior Garden

The Interior Garden is located to the east of the Tonga Room stage between the Molokai Bar on the north and the Samoa Room on the south (Photo 49s). The garden was originally much larger and included the area that is now the stage and the lower seating area of the Tonga Room. It is accessed by steps down from the Samoa Room and also by steps down from a walkway that runs to the south of the stage in the Tonga Room. Both entrances lead to a multi-level path paved with rocks and wooden slats that extends along the northern side of the Samoa Room. The eastern end of the path terminates at the exterior door that leads to the covered walkway on the eastern side of the building. To the north of the path are thatched buildings that are utilized to store stage equipment. The garden is landscaped with rock formations, waterfalls, tropical vegetation, and tiki statues. Large baskets and fishnet floats are suspended from the ceiling.

Gift Shop

The Mai-Kai Trading Post is located to the west of the Tonga Room and is accessed via steps from the northern side corridor adjacent the greeter's station. This room was part of an earlier dining area known as the Bangkok Room, and it retains the Thai décor. The western portion of the room contains a raised alcove delineated by an elaborate arcade. (Photo 50). The Gift Shop is located under the western portion of the A-frame gable. The upper portions of the A-frame are covered with woven grass matting, and the lower portions are covered with decorative panels. Ornate pendant light fixtures are suspended from the ceiling (Photo 51). The room has a wood plank floor. Merchandise shelves are mounted on the walls, and a sales counter is located on the eastern wall.

Support Spaces – Kitchen & Office Area

Support spaces are located west of the Restrooms and Gift Shop and in the area west of the main corridor to the south of the Tonga Room. These support spaces include offices, food preparation areas, and employee locker rooms. They are utilitarian in their architectural character both on the interior and exterior.

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**Bora Bora Room**

**Exterior**

The Bora Bora Room, situated north of the main restaurant building, was constructed as a separate banquet room c.1960. At one point, the gift shop was located in this building. The structure was damaged by Hurricane Wilma and is currently used for storage. The building is constructed of concrete block and is faced with coral stone. It has a low-pitched roof with raised narrow gables along the eastern and northern elevations. The gables are metal clad and have notched ridge beams. Wooden eaves project from beneath the metal gables. A covered walkway connects the Bora Bora Room with the porte-cochere to the south.

The water features to the east of the main restaurant building are continued on the eastern and southern elevations of the Bora Bora Room. A wood plank walkway with simple wood railing extends along the eastern elevation and partly along the southern elevation. The walkway is supported in the water by stone piers. A plank bridge with wooden posts and chains extended from the walkway to the driveway, but this section has been damaged and is currently unusable.

The southern elevation has a large open-framed Polynesian-style front gabled porch cover (Photo 52). Bamboo-framed panels with bamboo rounds and woven rattan decorate the exterior walls. The main entrance is through a pair of recessed storefront doors. The eastern elevation features the same wall treatment as the southern elevation. A pair of full length windows and a pair of sliding glass doors are located in the center of the elevation. The walkway is expanded in this area to create an outdoor terrace. A framing for a Polynesian-style gable with notched ridge beam projects from the roof of the eastern elevation. This frame was originally covered in thatch but has not been restored since the hurricane (Photo 53). The northern and western elevations are utilitarian and are not designed to be seen by the public. These elevations are characterized by corrugated metal and plywood walls and utility service connections.

**Interior**

The interior of the Bora Bora Room is divided into a large open area and several smaller rooms. The open area (Banquet Room) is L-shaped and extends along most of the south wall and along the entire eastern wall (Photo 54). A bar is located in the southeastern corner. A storage room is located at the southwestern corner. Extending from the center of the western wall is another storage room with a separate roof. Another storage room is situated at the northwestern corner, and a restroom block is located to the east of this room.

The walls are clad with wood paneling painted to simulate weathered wood. Panels of bamboo and woven grass are located throughout the space. The floor is slate tile. The ceiling appears to have been comprised of wood tiles, but almost all is missing. A shallow awning covered in thatch extends around the outside walls.

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The middle storage room has a separate, lower flat roof with thatch extending from the edges. The interior of this room is utilitarian and undecorated. Despite the fact that the Bora Bora Room has suffered damage, it retains its historical integrity and could be restored to its earlier appearance.

**ALTERATIONS**

**Main Restaurant Building**

**1956 – Original Construction**

Although the Mai-Kai has undergone some modification over the decades, it retains the integrity of its original and distinct South Seas and nautical themes that contribute to both its significant architectural character and its role in Mid-Century “Tiki” popular culture. These themes are expressed on both the exterior and interior of the Mai-Kai.

The Mai-Kai was constructed in 1956 in an undeveloped area of Oakland Park on U.S Highway 1. At the time, there were no other buildings in the vicinity, and many of the nearby roads were unpaved. The building sat much further west of Federal Highway than it does currently. The tourist industry began developing in nearby Fort Lauderdale in the late 1950s, and soon other businesses were locating in the area. The road has since been widened twice and a sidewalk added, reducing the landscaped area along Federal Highway.

The 1-story Mai-Kai originally had a plan footprint that was roughly square in configuration with a cut at the northeastern corner that contained the main entrance. Two equally sized wings projected to the east, and a garden area was located between the wings. The garden extended to the east toward Federal Highway. A large A-frame roof with a ridge that was perpendicular to Federal Highway rose from the center of the complex over the garden area and continued to the west where it terminated approximately twenty three feet to the east of the western elevation. The remainder of the building’s roof was very low pitched. The eastern portion of the A-frame had fiberglass panels that could be raised and lowered. The western portion of the A-frame roof was covered with thatch. The main entrance on the north elevation was covered by wide, flat canopy with an upturned notched ridge beam at the eastern end.

**c.1958 – Remodeling**

Around 1958, the northernmost projecting wing of the original structure was expanded approximately twenty feet to the north in order to accommodate a larger bar facility. Additionally, a large porte-cochere was added to the northern entrance, and several modifications were made to the interior.

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1960 – 1970

In the period between 1960 and 1970, several smaller modifications were made to the property. Because the Mai-Kai was so successful, the interior was reconfigured to accommodate more patrons and the stage show that began in 1962. The separate Bora Bora Room was added at the northern end of the site, and the porte-cochere was structurally reinforced. The original garden area that existed between the two projecting wings was enclosed, and the roof was modified to remain permanently closed.

1971 – Major Expansion

In 1971, a kitchen/service wing and an ell-shaped addition were constructed. The kitchen wing was added to the south and was utilitarian in its architectural character, with its location away from the primary facades. The ell was added to the southern and eastern ends the restaurant building and abutted the new kitchen wing. The ell included the Tahiti and Moorea Rooms as well as a covered terrace, the Lanai, along the southern elevation. Additionally at this time, some of the interior service and administration areas were reconfigured.

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**SUMMARY**

The Mai-Kai Restaurant is locally significant under Criteria A in the areas of Commerce and Entertainment/Recreation. It is significant as an intact, still operating, Polynesian-themed restaurant. The period of significance is from 1956 to 1964 when it largely achieved its present appearance. The Mai-Kai reflects national broad patterns of entertainment that began in the 1920s and thrived in the mid-20th century. The Mai-Kai is one of the few remaining Polynesian themed restaurants in Florida. The building, landscaped garden, interior decor, and the operational elements make the Mai-Kai an exemplary of an exotic themed restaurant and tourist destination. In addition to its decor, the Mai-Kai maintains a Polynesian-Asian influenced menu, as well as the mandatory cocktail menu. While the Mai-Kai's food menu has adapted to changing culinary tastes, its drink menu, including the quality ingredients, has not changed since 1956. As a result, the restaurant is renowned for its expert tropical drinks. A review of the Mai-Kai's drink menu indicates over a dozen registered trademark cocktails. The Mai-Kai has a permanent place in a holy trio of old-school holdouts dedicated to the careful construction of their libations."

**HISTORIC CONTEXT**

The roots of Polynesian restaurants can be traced to the 1920s. The Congo Room in New York City is noted for featuring hula dancers during that time. Magazines and cookbooks highlighted Hawaiian food, both authentic and pseudo, much in the same way that they would promote luaus 30 years later. Don the Beachcomber in Hollywood is credited as being the first Polynesian themed restaurant, established in the 1930s. The restaurant featured Hawaiian food on the menu, potent alcoholic drinks (the Zombie was created there) and tropical decorations.

Victor Bergeron, (later known as Trader Vic), inspired by his 1937 visit to Don the Beachcomber, founded the concept of Polynesian restaurants as they are known today. Following his visit, he reorganized his Oakland, California bar, Hinky Dink's, reopening it as Trader Vic's in 1938. "He tore down the old deer horns and moose heads and covered the walls with green, grassy fabric and bamboo."<sup>1</sup> He created an exuberant South Seas atmosphere and expanded upon Don the Beachcomber's mind-numbing drink menu, including invention of the Mai Tai. He traveled to Cuba, Florida, and Polynesia looking for new drink and food ideas, as well as additional artifacts for Trader Vic's. In the end he settled on Chinese food with pineapple, coconut and bananas added to give a "Polynesian" flare. His opinion was that Americans would not like real Polynesian food, therefore, he compromised with food that would be considered exotic, but not too foreign.

Trader Vic's Polynesian concept met with great success. He followed his original restaurant with others, creating the Trader Vic's chain. By the 1950s Trader Vic's were located around the world. The restaurants

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<sup>1</sup> Stern, The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste, p.250.

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were typically contained within Hilton and Weston hotels. Just as Victor Bergeron was inspired by Don the Beachcomber, others were inspired by him. Many independent restaurateurs opened Polynesian establishments. "Polynesian restaurants-which usually meant restaurants that served the same sort of food and drink as Trader Vic's-opened by the score around the country."<sup>2</sup>

A second, smaller chain of Polynesian restaurants was founded by Steven Crane Associates in the late 1950s. Crane purchased the name Kon Tiki from author Thor Heyerdahl and used it for his restaurants. He also made use of Trader Vic's strategy of linking the restaurants with hotels, forming a partnership with the Sheraton chain. He had establishments in Montreal, Cleveland (now demolished), and Portland, Oregon. The Portland location received the most recognition because it directly rivaled Trader Vic's restaurant in that city.

As with most trends, Polynesian restaurants began to lose their glamour and popularity. Dining tastes shifted by the late sixties and Polynesian restaurants began to be viewed as kitsch and not the sophisticated dining experience that they once were associated with. Many have closed throughout the country in places like Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York and California. "Now, it seems, they are dying out, disappearing like thatched huts in a hurricane.....Trader Vic's the General Motors of Polynesian restaurants, has six locations left in the United States, down from a peak of nineteen in the early '70s."<sup>3</sup> Even the ones located in Hawaii itself, where one would expect a heavy tourist trade to keep the concept alive, have gone out of business.

### Evolution of Polynesian Pop

Since the late 1990s, more comprehensive research and documentation related to the mid-20th century Polynesian Pop era has been completed. Several books have been published, websites are devoted to Tiki culture, and organizations celebrating the phase have flourished. All have served to create a revival of interest in the Polynesian craze, as well as providing a deeper understanding of the period. Sven Kirsten<sup>4</sup>, author of The Book of Tiki, defines the Polynesia fad as two distinct eras: Pre-Tiki and Tiki. The Pre-Tiki era dated to the early 20th century and reflected the general imagery of Polynesia. The Tiki era incorporated the iconography of Tiki into statuary, architecture, business logos, and advertising ephemera.

Beginning c.1900, the Pre-Tiki era progressed from an interest in primitive art associated with colonial territories. Europe's modern artists, such as Paul Gauguin, Joan Miro, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, and Max Ernst, were inspired by indigenous art, whether African or Oceanic, in opposition to more staid academic artistic

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<sup>2</sup> Lovegren, *Fashionable Food: Seven Decades of Food Fads*, p.279.

<sup>3</sup> Richman, 'The Long Aloha,' *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, p.114.

<sup>4</sup> Photographer, author, cinematographer, and Polynesian Pop historian, Sven Kirsten is widely considered an expert on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Tiki culture. He is a frequent speaker on the topic, including interviews for documentaries and a Polynesian Pop segment aired on CBS Sunday Morning.

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traditions. Picasso had a Marquesan Tiki, which he acquired c.1910 and kept in his studio.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, interest in primitive art was a diversion of the avant-garde during the 1920s and 1930s and not a large factor in everyday popular culture.

In addition to the primitive art of the avant-garde, the first wave of Polynesian Pop also included adventure books set in Polynesia, and the occasional Tiki or zombie. However, hula girls and the native island wahine were the primary images of early Polynesian Pop. Sometimes, the hula girls or wahines were depicted topless on advertisements, evoking an essence of native “free love” and an uninhibited paradise.

Hawaiian music also contributed greatly to the early popularity of Polynesian restaurants. In the early decades of the 20th century, Hawaiian music was popularized through recordings and touring musicians. Continuing through the 1920s, the Hawaiian steel guitar, ukulele, and the slack-key playing style became a genuine music frenzy during the nascent days of recorded music. The 1915 Pan-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco helped spread Hawaiian music to an even larger mainland American audience.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1920s and 30s, Pre-Tiki Polynesia was expressed architecturally through supper club interiors. The décor of early 20th century Polynesian-themed supper clubs incorporated exotic imagery. “...the clubs themselves began to emulate the tropical theme. Floor-to-ceiling bamboo and rattan, lush tropical plants, and murals of the Islands were the ingredients these early urban getaways used to create the illusion of having escaped to the South Seas.”<sup>7</sup> Murals illustrated island life, depicting outrigger canoes, native huts, nature, and most importantly the idealized wahine. Hawaiian musicians were a big draw in the nightclub circuit and contributed to the ambiance of the early Polynesian restaurants.

Opened about 1928, the Seven Seas in Los Angeles was one of the most well-known of the Pre-Tiki supper clubs. While having an exotic atmosphere with palm trees and paintings by Leetag, it was a subdued Polynesian restaurant. Located on Hollywood Blvd., it was across the street from Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. The Seven Seas was opened to “meet the demand for Hawaiian music, spurred on by the craze that had been sweeping the nation for a decade at the time.”<sup>8</sup> It operated until at least the late 1960s, continuing to feature Hawaiian music and Tahitian dancers.

As discussed in the Early History of Polynesian Pop section, Don the Beachcomber and Trader Vic’s were the progenitors of the soon to come explosion of Polynesian restaurants. While both of these establishments sought to create an expressive paradise experience, they still belong to the Pre-Tiki era. Opening bars in 1934 and

<sup>5</sup> Kirsten, The Book of Tiki, p.26.

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_of\\_Hawaii](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Hawaii)

<sup>7</sup> Kirsten, The Book of Tiki, p.37.

<sup>8</sup> Teitelbaum, Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America, p.91.

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1937 respectively, Donn Beach and Trader Vic both capitalized on the post-Prohibition eagerness for cocktails.<sup>9</sup> Both men were creative mixologists, creating a cocktail culture that would become forever synonymous with Polynesian restaurants. Rum barrels, in conjunction with island motifs, figured prominently in both their advertisements.

Trader Vic utilized the Tiki idol and other native artifacts as part of his overall ambiance, but Stephen Crane, owner of The Luau, is credited with making the Tiki idol a more prominent part of the décor. Trader Vic's former San Francisco bar manager, Bob Bryant, is credited with further expanding upon the Tiki motif. Opening his own restaurant, Tiki Bob's, in 1955, Bryant commissioned a Tiki sculpture for the exterior of the business. "For the first time, a Tiki was employed as a logo, serving as an entrance guardian, appearing as an icon on the menu and matchbooks, and assuming the form of mugs and salt and pepper shakers."<sup>10</sup> Together, The Luau and Tiki Bob's mark the beginning the Tiki era of Polynesian Pop.

While the tropical island and nautical imagery remained a mainstay of Polynesian restaurants, the native wahine was replaced by the Tiki as the signifying emblem of the fad. In some Polynesian mythologies, Tiki simply means 'man,' or specifically the first man created. In Maori tradition, Tiki was a demi-god. Tiki could also symbolize procreative power. Another definition found Tiki to be the god of artists. "Although neither the Hawaiian nor the Tahitian idiom contains the term 'Tiki,' in Polynesian pop all graven images, from Easter Island to Fiji, became members one happy family: The Tikis."<sup>11</sup> The Tiki was playful and came to represent leisure and relaxation in the 1950s.

Across the country, all ensuing Polynesian-themed restaurants proudly and dominantly displayed a multitude of Tikis. "The pan-Oceanic décor of most subsequent Tiki bars recognized no boundaries, and diverse art from Hawai'i, New Guinea, the Cook Islands, Samoa, New Zealand, the Marquesas, and Rapa Nui was fused together into a new mainland hybrid that was simply called Tiki. It wasn't about authenticity, it was about escapism. As long as it was exotic, it fit."<sup>12</sup> Even Disneyland jumped on the band wagon, with the 1963 Enchanted Tiki Room, created because of Walt Disney's fondness for Polynesian restaurants.

Aside from the wahine versus Tiki representations, there are other differences between the two eras of Polynesian Pop. One key difference is the proliferation of Polynesian restaurants in the Tiki era. The earlier, Pre-Tiki, era was more limited. Polynesian themed establishments of the 1920s and 30s were predominantly located in large cities. They were supper clubs, serving a wealthy urban clientele. This same clientele

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Beaumont-Gantt legally changed his name to Donn Beach, as he increasingly identified with his concocted beachcomber persona. Victor Bergeron adopted the Trader Vic nickname to enhance his island businessman vibe.

<sup>10</sup> Kirsten, *The Book of Tiki*, p.47.

<sup>11</sup> Kirsten, *The Book of Tiki*, p.22.

<sup>12</sup> Teitelbaum, *Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America*, p.12.

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potentially would have had the means to sail to Hawaii for vacation. For example, during the 1920s, cruise ships departed weekly from Los Angeles for Hawaii. The charm of an island themed restaurant, complete with Hawaiian musicians, to keep the holiday spirit alive is obvious.

After WWII, as the Tiki era took hold, Polynesian restaurants had a much broader appeal. Now such businesses were luring former soldiers and the middle class. Polynesian palaces were more egalitarian, no longer only for the urban elite, as with the 1920s. Additionally, they were no longer only located in major cities. Polynesian restaurants could be found in large, medium, and small cities across the United States.

Architecturally, another difference between the two defined Polynesian Pop eras is the exterior expression of buildings. In the early 20th century, the Polynesian theme was relegated to interior decoration. In the latter, Tiki era, Polynesian restaurants were increasingly housed in buildings that often matched the interior grandeur. The A-frame was an important device in conveying the Polynesian Pop aesthetic. It could be employed as an individual freestanding building or via a projecting entrance bay attached to a more traditional façade. This was seen particularly at Polynesian restaurants established within extant hotels or on older Chinese restaurants wishing to take advantage of the fad. Here, an A-frame entrance would jut out from the building, enticing customers to partake in the Polynesian splendor on the inside.

The A-frame building type had become popular by the 1950s for a variety of reasons and was especially favored for recreational related buildings. Exaggerated A-frames were used for motels, gas stations, restaurants, movie theaters, bowling alleys, stores, and even churches. While this building type was utilized to great effect for the commercial roadside, it also, conveniently enough, was the traditional building form of many Polynesian cultures.

Buildings of the Tiki era of Polynesian Pop were “a conglomeration of different architectural traditions from varying Polynesian island cultures, as well as, the neighboring island cultures of Micronesia and Melanesia.”<sup>13</sup> The A-frame building form could be found in the young men’s houses of the Yap Islands, Micronesia, and the men’s ceremonial houses of New Guinea, Melanesia. More modest in appearance, the grass huts of traditional Hawaiian villages were a key feature of individual dining huts inside larger Polynesian restaurants or for small huts, such as an exterior bar, in a landscaped garden. In Polynesian Pop buildings, the apex of the A-frame typically featured a protruding outrigger canoe beam for island emphasis.

Certainly, not every Polynesian restaurant featured a soaring A-frame. A few were located within more ordinary building types, relying on exterior decorative treatment to convey its exoticism. And, a few utilized other distinctive shapes, such as the hyperbolic paraboloid. The Tahitian Lanai bar at the Waikikian Hotel, in Honolulu, was a well-known Polynesian Pop building that inflated the A-frame to a Modernistic conclusion.

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<sup>13</sup> Wright, The Kahiki National Register Nomination, p.8.8.

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In addition to the A-frame, other Tiki era architectural characteristics included windowless buildings, elaborate interior decoration, and, occasionally, landscaped gardens. Only when the establishment was located in a picturesque setting were windows to be present. Otherwise, a respectable Tiki restaurant was windowless, shutting out the mundane harsh world, allowing patrons to be enveloped in the fantasy of the created Polynesia. "A certain level of decorative elements had to be present in order to carry the diner's imagination to the South Seas. Tiki statues, shells, glass fishing weights, fountains, and aquariums were always used for creating atmosphere."<sup>14</sup> A menagerie of nautical items, reflecting an oceanic existence, and cultural objects were pre-requisites for a Tiki establishment. Some restaurateurs collected authentic artifacts from indigenous island cultures. This could be expensive, though, and an industry of Tiki companies sprouted up, creating replica artifacts.<sup>15</sup> Many entrepreneurs purchased their island relics and Tikis from the various artisans of artifacts.

Some of the grander Polynesian Pop restaurants also included landscaped gardens. Landscapes usually contained large water features, such as waterfalls, streams, moats, or lagoons. Plants, creating a jungle effect, and flowers comprised the garden flora. Tikis sculptures playfully hid in the garden (or fiercely protected it, depending on the characterization of the Tiki).

A final difference between the Pre-Tiki and Tiki eras of Polynesian Pop is that the style extended to other building types during the Tiki era. As Tiki documentarian James Teitelbaum put it, "Tiki then left the bar, and permeated motels, apartment buildings, strip clubs, bowling alleys, massage parlors, mini golf courses, nurseries, and Laundromats."<sup>16</sup> From the dozens of Tiki motels and apartment buildings in California to a theater in Michigan to mini golf in Alabama and Rhode Island to a theater and a bowling alley in Ohio to a vacation resort in South Carolina, Polynesian Pop in all its forms was well represented throughout the country.

#### Polynesian Pop Movement in Florida

It is of benefit to briefly define the Polynesian Pop movement in Florida. "As we will see often, one of the most popular themes for Florida motels, and especially for restaurants, was the Polynesian look."<sup>17</sup> Outside of California, Florida had one of the largest concentrations of Tiki establishments. Both states catered to tourists, and having an agreeable climate made them ideal locales for showcasing a replica Polynesia to a recreation-minded population. Constructed from the early 1950s through the late 1970s, all manner of Polynesian Pop was built across the state. From the panhandle to the Atlantic Coast to the central part of the state to southern

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<sup>14</sup> Wright, *The Kahiki National Register Nomination*, p.8.8.

<sup>15</sup> Witco, Orchids of Hawaii, and Oceanic Arts are the most commonly known fabricators of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century primitive art. Of the three, Oceanic Arts is the only one still operating. Individual artists and carvers, such as Barney West, Eli Hedley, Milan Guanko, Edgar Leeteg, and Andres Bumatay, also provided Tiki artifacts to businesses.

<sup>16</sup> Teitelbaum, *Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America*, p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Hollis, *Wish You Were Here: Classic Florida Motel and Restaurant Advertising*, p.53.

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Florida, hotels, motels, apartments, bowling alleys, mini-golf, gardens, resorts and restaurants were prolific. Of course, Disney World had an Enchanted Tiki Room too.

Among Florida's most well-known Tiki establishments<sup>18</sup> were the 1954 Bahi Hut in Sarasota, which still uses some of its secret drink recipes, the 1960s Hawaiian Inn in Daytona Beach, the late 1960s Volcano Polynesian Restaurant in Winter Haven (demolished), and the 1964 Tiki Gardens in Indian Rocks Beach (demolished). The twelve-acre Tiki Gardens contained gift shops, a restaurant, lounge, and Polynesian adventure trail. Aside from the Mai-Kai, perhaps the most famous of the Florida Polynesian Pop venues was the Castaways. Located on a man-made island in Miami Beach, a 1957 addition to The Castaways resort gave the Polynesian Pop world a glass-enclosed and gold foil, double hyper-parabolic roof on a teahouse lobby. The hotel building itself featured Polynesian inspired gables and fretwork balcony railings. The lobby pagoda contained the Tahitian Cocktail Lounge, the Shinto Temple Dining Room, and an underwater shipwreck-themed bar. Less than 30 years old, it was all demolished in 1984.

"The Polynesian theme spread its Tiki torches all over the state, but at least it looked a bit more at home in the subtropical atmosphere of southern Florida. The Mai-Kai Restaurant and Trader Jack's in Fort Lauderdale were not nearly as out of place as they would have been, say, along the Miracle Strip."<sup>19</sup> Dating to the 1920s, Tahiti Beach is an interesting early, and tenacious, example of such Polynesian-themed placement. Billed as 'a bit of the South Seas in Coral Gables,' Tahiti Beach was restored after hurricanes in 1928, 1935, and 1945. A 1960 advertisement calls the private beach 'world famous' with the following description. "A trip to Tahiti Beach will take you out of the hemisphere into the lulling charm of the South Seas, complete with palm trees, thatched huts, white sands, and a blue-green sea that stretches out as far as the eye can see."<sup>20</sup> The Tiki phenomenon was another device to sell the holiday image of Florida. The use of A-frames, unusual angles, and hyperbolic paraboloid roofs, often found in Polynesian Pop structures, allowed for an architecturally expressive streetscape. Polynesian Pop fit the state and was another manifestation of roadside commercial architecture, beckoning to the passing motorist.

The Polynesian Pop rage lasted for thirty years, even surviving the World War II years. As far as popular culture goes, a thirty-year fad is a long time, but like any trend it faded. "By the mid-1970s, Tiki bars were closing at an alarming rate. Someone had figured out that the whole thing was rather rude, and perhaps the burning huts in Viet Nam seen on television at the time were just a little too much like the thatched roofed bars at the local Kon-Tiki Ports."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, youth culture had changed by the 1960s. Supper club music was

<sup>18</sup> James Teitelbaum's Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America is an excellent resource for locating past and present Tiki sites.

<sup>19</sup> Hollis, Wish You Were Here: Classic Florida Motel and Restaurant Advertising, p.206.

<sup>20</sup> Coconut Grove: Village Within A City, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> Teitelbaum, Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America, p.13.

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passé and the whole concept viewed as bourgeois. Accordingly, young adults wanted nothing to do with Polynesian restaurants - that's where their parents went for fun.

Despite the abundant loss of Polynesian Pop businesses and buildings, including historically designated ones, a few stalwart examples remain. The 1945 Tonga Room, located within the Fairmont Hotel, in San Francisco is alive and well. The 1976 Atlanta Trader Vic's, located within the Hilton Hotel maintains its historic integrity. The enormous 1950 Kowloon in Saugus, Massachusetts still contains its Tiki lagoon, although the restaurant appears to have taken on an overall pan-Asian feel. The 1966 Hala Kahiki, near Chicago, remains a favorite lounge of Tiki fans. Standing with these selected examples is the Mai-Kai, which has kept the Tiki torches lit for nearly 60 years. It managed to thrive, even in the 1980s, the lowest point of interest in Polynesian restaurants. In 1988, among U.S. restaurants, it was ranked the 12th most successful.<sup>22</sup> In some respects, the Mai-Kai's high level of historic integrity and celebrated Polynesian Pop majesty have served as an ambassador for a growing Tiki resurgence.

Since the mid-to-late 1990s, there has been a revival of interest in Polynesian Pop. A look at the bibliography alone shows how many books have been written on this niche fad since then. Miami's PBS affiliate produced a documentary about Polynesian Pop, called Plastic Paradise, in 2013.<sup>23</sup> A new generation of Tiki carvers and graphic artists, such as Bosko, Shag and Wayne Coombs, have kept the visual Tiki tradition alive. Some new Polynesian Pop restaurants have even been built, proof that the Tiki spirit is strong. The Tiki Lounge was built in Pittsburgh, opening in 2002. On a small scale and with its own individuality, the Grass Skirt, opened in 2012 in Columbus, pays homage to the Kahiki. Beginning in 2005, owners of the Alibi Lounge, in Portland, Oregon, undertook restoration of the classic 1947 Tiki lounge. Similarly, the Kon-Tiki, in Tucson, Arizona, has been restored and is celebrating its 50 year anniversary. Coming full circle recreationally, hula hoops are popular again, but now posing as exercise classes, and an updated version of Hawaii Five-O is airing on TV. And, just as in the heyday, celebrities can still be spotted at Tiki hotspots, such as the Mai-Kai. The Mai-Kai has hosted many celebrity guests over the years, and current figures, including Keith Richards, Jimmy Buffett, Adam Sandler, and The Rock, to name a few, are frequent visitors.

Not all Polynesian restaurants were created equally. Designers were working with the same ingredients, but imagination made the difference. Ultimately, escapism is what the Polynesian Pop movement was about. It was a safe way to experience something daring, but the entrepreneurs had to be daring in order to create the illusion. It is evident from an opening day advertisement what Bob and Jack Thornton's goal was, to create

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<sup>22</sup> Lynch, 'Robert Thornton, Owner of Mai-Kai Restaurant,' Sun Sentinel.

<sup>23</sup> Premiering on Miami's WLRN, September 18, 2013, the documentary is summarized with "Plastic Paradise explores this fascinating, little known, and surprisingly enduring subculture. Making stops in Los Angeles, New York City, and South Florida, the film culminates with a visit to Hukilau, the largest gathering of Tikiphiles on the East Coast, held every year at Fort Lauderdale's famed Mai-Kai Restaurant." <http://wlrn.org/plastic-paradise>

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“Polynesian Perfection – where Mai-Kai truly means ‘The Finest.’”<sup>24</sup> From its opening, the Mai-Kai was viewed as a model, as a quintessential Tiki establishment to be emulated across the country. The Mai-Kai was nationally significant in its prime and it remains nationally significant today, still an authentic, magical representative of Polynesian Pop.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Mai-Kai Restaurant is locally significant under Criteria A in the areas of Commerce and Entertainment/Recreation. It is significant as an intact, still operating, Polynesian-themed restaurant. The Mai-Kai reflects national broad patterns of entertainment that began in the 1920s and thrived in the mid-20th century. The Mai-Kai is one of the few remaining Polynesian themed restaurants in Florida. The building, landscaped garden, interior decor, and the operational elements make the Mai-Kai an exemplary of an exotic themed restaurant and tourist destination.

Chicago natives Robert and Jack Thornton were fascinated by the Polynesian style Don the Beachcomber restaurant, which had been transplanted from the original Hollywood restaurant. During high school while on spring break in southern Florida, the two brothers decided to one day pursue their dream of owning a Polynesian restaurant.

The Polynesia dream had been with them for a long time. In a 1988 Sun Sentinel interview, Bob Thornton said “From the time I was 8 years old, when my folks took me and my brother to eat at Don the Beachcomber in Chicago, I’ve loved all things Polynesian. While other kids dreamed of becoming firemen, my brother and I dreamed of opening a South Seas restaurant. We didn’t know a thing about food, but the bridges and the torches and the funny masks were irresistible.”<sup>25</sup>

After finishing college and before embarking on their Mai-Kai journey, the Thornton brothers both did stints in the armed forces, although neither served in the South Pacific. Jack Thornton graduated from Stanford University. Bob Thornton studied psychology in college, first at Stanford University and then at Lake Forest College, Lake Forest, Illinois. While at Stanford, the brothers frequented Trader Vic’s in San Francisco. Bob relocated to Fort Lauderdale in 1955, upon discharge from the Army. He started a tourist boat charter business with friends and bartended in Fort Lauderdale, including for business owner Walter Burgess.<sup>26</sup> Having been stationed in Stuttgart, Germany, Jack soon joined Bob after his discharge in 1955. As they began planning in earnest for the Mai-Kai, the brothers traveled to Hawaii, searching for authentic artifacts for the restaurant, and scrutinized Polynesian style restaurants there and in California.

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<sup>24</sup> 1956 advertisement.

<sup>25</sup> Sallee, ‘The Sensory Experience that is the Mai-Kai,’ Broward Legacy, p.34.

<sup>26</sup> Correspondence with Pia Dahlquist, September 2013.

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Once they made the decision to build a Polynesian restaurant, the Thorntons chose an undeveloped area outside Fort Lauderdale on U.S. Route 1, located in the municipality of Oakland Park.<sup>27</sup> The choice was good with respect to the inexpensive land, but also risky with respect to the somewhat remote site. Some nearby roads were still dirt and cows could be seen in nearby pastures. Neither Oakland Park nor Fort Lauderdale were heavily developed in the early 1950s. The calculated gamble paid off, though. Oakland Park grew steadily as the 20th century progressed, and a tourist industry sprung up in Fort Lauderdale beginning in the 1950s. The growth of both aided the Mai-Kai.

Chartered in 1925 and initially called Floranada, Oakland Park today contains roughly 8.6 square miles and approximately 42,000 residents. When chartered, it included a much larger area than the present boundaries, stretching all the way to the ocean. The village suffered greatly during the 1926 hurricane, resulting in bankruptcy. In June 1929, the town was reincorporated, adopting the name Oakland Park. At that time the boundaries were significantly reduced, which made the community land-locked, no longer connecting to the ocean. Containing a church and elementary school, Oakland Park predominantly served as a center for area farmers in its early years.

Incorporated as a city in 1911, Fort Lauderdale's European settlement grew from a series of forts established during the early-19th century Second Seminole War. A convergence of developments in the 1890s served to foster Fort Lauderdale's growth from a sparse pioneer community to a county seat: establishment of Stranahan's Trading Post, new road construction, and the arrival of the Florida East Coast Railway. Fort Lauderdale was part of the 1920s land boom of southern Florida. However, the subsequent land bust, 1926 hurricane, and the Great Depression all slowed the young city's development. During World War II, the U.S. Navy established a Naval Air Station in Fort Lauderdale, which brought thousands of service members to the area. Many of them returned after the war, making Fort Lauderdale their home and creating a population explosion. The city's population more than doubled from 1940 (17,996) to 1950 (36,328) and made a bigger jump in the next decade to 83,648 in 1960.<sup>28</sup>

Residential expansion of both cities provided a local customer base for the Mai-Kai. The burgeoning tourist trade in adjacent Fort Lauderdale also helped. The Mai-Kai was situated on U.S. Route 1, also known as Federal Highway. Created in 1926 as part of the U.S. Highway System, U.S. Highway 1 traverses the length of the eastern seaboard. The Mai-Kai is also just under a mile away from the Dixie Highway. The Dixie Highway was a privately established route to take Midwesterners to southern Florida. It became U.S. 25 during the 1926 structuring of the highway system. Both Federal Highway 1 and the Dixie Highway were major transportation arteries in the early-mid 20th century, bringing northern sun-seekers south. The western leg of the Dixie

<sup>27</sup> The Mai-Kai is advertised as being in and associated with Fort Lauderdale. However, it is actually in the municipality of Oakland Park.

<sup>28</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort\\_Lauderdale,\\_Florida](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Lauderdale,_Florida)

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Highway terminated in Chicago, and it is entirely likely that the Thorntons traveled that tourist route to southern Florida on their inspirational spring break.

Borrowing \$100,000 from the Pan American bank and \$300,000 from their mother,<sup>29</sup> Bob and Jack were able to break ground in 1956. The restaurant opened December 28th that same year and cost nearly a million dollars to complete.<sup>30</sup> The term Mai-Kai is said to mean “the finest.”<sup>31</sup> Originally, the building was much smaller than the present configuration. It was also quite a bit further away from the road than it is now. When built, numerous palm trees buffered the Mai-Kai from U.S. Route 1. The road has since been widened twice, with a sidewalk added, removing 30 ft. of frontage.

The original 1956 Mai-Kai building was designed by architect Charles F. McKirahan, Sr.<sup>32</sup> and Wayne Davidson is credited as the decorator. McKirahan was also the architect for the small c.1958 addition. Lucile W. McKirahan, Charles’ wife, was also an architect. She was instrumental in founding his firm Charles F. McKirahan, Sr. died in 1964, at the age of 45. Richard C. Reilly joined Charles F. McKirahan’s firm, as an associate architect, in 1956. In 1961, updates were made to the Mai-Kai. Drawings dated May, 1961 have McKirahan’s name on them, but drawings from September have Reilly’s name. Reilly, having started his own firm that year, may have taken the Mai-Kai account with him. According to blueprint stamps, he was involved with the Mai-Kai through at least 1990. For the 1971 expansion of the Mai-Kai, Bob Thornton worked with Richard C. Reilly as the architect of record. Florian E. Gabriel and George Nakashima were brought in from California to guide the enhanced Tiki design details. Gabriel and Nakashima were experienced, well-known Tiki designers.

The Mai-Kai had a small lounge and five dining rooms with a seating capacity of 225. A 1956 article identifies the dining rooms as the Samoa, Hawaii, Oahu, Tahiti, and the Fiji, each with a slightly different décor loosely representing the intended location. The Mai-Kai Lounge was open to the sky, covered only by a screen, through the building’s soaring A-frame structure.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, there was the Surfboard Bar, which had a bar constructed of three Hawaiian surfboards and pineapple-shaped bar stools.

In Jack Thornton’s obituary, his ex-wife Diane Thornton described the novelty and first impressions of the Mai-Kai for the Sun Sentinel. “If there was no moon, you felt like you were in a black hole. Then you saw a light ahead. It got brighter and brighter and – remember in those days there was no Disney World, no theme parks –

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<sup>29</sup> Correspondence with Pia Dahlquist, September 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Teitelbaum, Tiki Road Trip, p. 110

<sup>31</sup> 1956 advertisement

<sup>32</sup> A 1956 article in Addition News notes Wayne Davidson as the decorator. The only other information uncovered about Davidson’s involvement is a 1988 Sun Sentinel article that reports, “Davidson, the chapter’s [Safari Club] co-founder, designed and built the Mai-Kai.” (Gross, ‘Ducking the Rain At Ducks Unlimited’) It is a possibility that he was employed by or sub-contracted to McKirahan.

<sup>33</sup> Addition News

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you were suddenly in these lush exotic gardens and there were rushing waterfalls and sumptuous dishes that only world travelers had ever tasted.”<sup>34</sup>

Though not yet thirty years old, Bob and Jack Thornton had an immediate hit. The Mai-Kai grossed \$1,000,000 in its first year and was already in need of a new entrance and bar addition, completed c.1958. The quick success of the Mai-Kai was partly due to the attention to detail. Decorative artifacts were Hawaiian made and imported via California. Attention to detail also included inspection of the girls’ weight, grooming, and costumes by Bob Thornton. The requisite “Polynesian” rum cocktails were created by a Don the Beachcomber veteran, Mariano Licudine. Within three years of opening, the restaurant was profiled in Esquire magazine, which noted that a thousand or more customers were served per night.<sup>35</sup> Soon, the “Mai-Kai was the most swinging joint in town, one of the top-grossing restaurants in the United States and the largest consumer of rum in Florida.”<sup>36</sup>

The Mai-Kai was no mere tourist trap – it was an upscale supper club, but it is still demonstrative of Florida’s abundant over-the-top commercial endeavors. Practically since its completion, the Mai-Kai has been a nationally known restaurant. It was featured in prominent magazines of the day. The Mai-Kai was a Holiday magazine award winner, which was added to its advertisements. Holiday magazine was a stylish and influential travel magazine published during the mid-twentieth century, featuring contributions by well-known writers, photographers, and artists. Steinbeck and Hemingway were among its famous contributing writers. In a recent interview one photographer noted that, “if you were in Holiday or Esquire or Look, it was an incredible thing.”<sup>37</sup> Not only had the Mai-Kai been recognized by Holiday magazine, but it won the magazine’s award three years in a row: 1961, 1962, and 1963.

Just as the Mai-Kai had been celebrated in Holiday, it was acknowledged in another ‘it’ magazine. In 1959, Esquire published a short article about the Mai-Kai extolling its Polynesian ambiance, food, and drink. The article colorfully begins with, “Although U.S. Route 1 is reputedly an artery hardened by mustard-smeared comestibles, two gentlemen arrived in Fort Lauderdale three years ago with a satchel full of money and created a dining emporium in the near geographical center of Florida’s Gold Coast. Les frères Jack and Robert Thornton, not yet aged thirty, indulged themselves in a million-dollar project which would have made Henry Flagler take pause. Equally removed from Worth Avenue and Key Biscayne, the Mai-Kai may well have been built in Polynesia – a sensation which the owners cherish. However, no small part of the current Fleetwood migration is triggered by atmospheric conditions as subtle as a tightly wrapped sarong.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Malernee, Jamie. ‘Mai-Kai co-founder Jack Thornton,’ Sun Sentinel.

<sup>35</sup> Esquire, 1959

<sup>36</sup> Malernee, ‘Mai-Kai co-founder Jack Thornton,’ Sun Sentinel.

<sup>37</sup> Callahan, ‘A Holiday for the Jet Set,’ Vanity Fair, May 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Esquire, 1959. Article can be found in the online archive of Tim ‘Swanky’ Glazner.  
<http://www.swankpad.org/blather/category/polynesian-pop/>

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Another example of the Mai-Kai's wide-spread reputation includes a 1967 blurb in the "Things to See & Do" section of a National Airlines magazine. The tourist magazine praised the virtues of the Mai-Kai, calling it "one of America's favorite restaurants."<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, The Gourmet published its own theory of the Mai-Kai's appeal, writing "the Mai-Kai has maidens of extraordinary shapeliness and beauty to serve drinks and to distract the idle eye."<sup>40</sup> Gentlemen's Quarterly seconded that notion in 1969 with "the famed Mai-Kai, where the exotic Polynesian food is superb and the saronged, tanned waitresses are gorgeous!"<sup>41</sup>

Even more prominent than national print publications, the Mai-Kai was featured on late night television. Just before Johnny Carson's takeover of the Tonight Show in 1962, he and sidekick Ed McMahon spent ten days in Fort Lauderdale planning the format for the revamped show. This working respite resulted in numerous returns to the city over subsequent decades, including vacations and business investment trips. Telling America about their exploits, Carson and McMahon frequently mentioned their trips to Fort Lauderdale and excursions to the Mai-Kai. They were enamored enough with the Mai-Kai's glamour that "the 'Mystery Girl' from the Mai Kai delivered the mystery drink twice to Carson on the show. He told his viewing audience he ordered the drink 'to go.'"<sup>42</sup> While many Polynesian Pop restaurants could boast of celebrity diners, an on-air plug by Johnny Carson was a big deal and undoubtedly contributed to the Mai-Kai's success.

Remaining a vintage supper club venue, the Mai-Kai features Polynesian dancers and musicians in two nightly shows. A few floor shows still exist at Polynesian restaurants, but they are scarce. The Hawaiian Inn in Daytona Beach has a weekend luau show in the restaurant, and the Polynesian Village at Walt Disney World has a two-hour show. However, the Mai-Kai's Islanders Revue is the longest running Polynesian show in the United States, including Hawaii.<sup>43</sup>

Today, the Mai-Kai hosts the annual Hukilau event, which it has done since 2003. The first Hukilau, in 2002, was held at Trader Vic's in Atlanta, but relocated the next year to honor the Mai-Kai. Gathering up to 1,200 attendees from around the world, the multi-day festival bills itself as "the most authentic Tiki experience you'll find in the world!"<sup>44</sup> While the Hukilau could be staged at other locations, the organizer's dedication to the Mai-Kai reflects the importance placed upon this classic Polynesian Pop establishment.

In addition to its decor, the Mai-Kai maintains a Polynesian-Asian influenced menu, as well as the mandatory cocktail menu. Drinks were a very important component of a Polynesian restaurant's composition, second only

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.Tikiroom.com/Tikicentral/bb/viewtopic.php?topic=10334&forum=2&start=105>

<sup>40</sup> The Gourmet, March 1967. From the Mai-Kai archives.

<sup>41</sup> Bacharach, Bert. 'Bert's-Eye View,' Gentlemen's Quarterly.

<sup>42</sup> Drury, Fort Lauderdale: Playground of the Stars, p.21.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Dave Levy, 01/24/2013.

<sup>44</sup> <http://thehukilau.com/2013/>

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to the atmosphere. Fresh fruit juice and quality rum are the mainstays of a Tiki bar. Having evocative names, like Tahitian Breeze and Moonkist Coconut, tropical drinks are frequently served aflame, in pineapples, or souvenir glasses. "Master mid-century restaurateurs Don the Beachcomber, Trader Vic, and the competition they spawned created some of the most spectacularly flavorful cocktails in American culinary history...A place lived or died on the reputation of its exotic drinks, and the bartenders who knew them were valued employees."<sup>45</sup>

Mariano Licudine was the Mai-Kai's original mixologist, who concocted numerous drink recipes for the restaurant, which contributed to its allure. The Mai-Kai is still known for its cocktails, using most of its secret recipes nearly sixty years later. Only the head mixologist knows a drink's ingredients in its entirety. Another unusual aspect of the lounge was that alcohol bottles were not visible. Drinks were made in a separate room and appeared like magic, served by a sarong-clad maiden to the patron. The Gold Coast Sun Spots publication credited him with being "one of the world's top experts on rum-based drinks."<sup>46</sup> The custom of top-shelf, superior cocktails continues today. Because of the importance placed upon Tiki cocktails, many of the top Polynesian restaurants utilized a code of secrecy regarding drink recipes. The practice of the drink recipes remaining a secret is still the case at the Mai-Kai, as it always has been. While the Mai-Kai's food menu has adapted to changing culinary tastes, its drink menu, including the quality ingredients, has not changed since 1956.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the restaurant is renowned for its expert tropical drinks. A review of the Mai-Kai's drink menu indicates over a dozen registered trademark cocktails.<sup>48</sup>

The Island Revue was added to the Mai-Kai in January 1962, then making the establishment a true supper club, with dinner and a performance. Originally named the "Kids from Tahiti," the Polynesian dance show debuted on January 2nd. The ensemble was later renamed the Mai-Kai Islanders. The Polynesian show was suggested to Bob by a friend as a way to further expand the business. Bob and Jack traveled and recruited musicians and dancers from all parts of Polynesia. "From Navy officers on liberty to Saudi kings, the show kept a full house every night."<sup>49</sup> Two shows a night were, and still are, performed.

By the 1960s, Fort Lauderdale was the "playground of the stars." Many celebrities came to south Florida for vacation, many choosing to stay in inconspicuous Fort Lauderdale, rather than Miami. Among the famous to leisurely visit were Jayne Mansfield, George Hamilton, Joe Namath, Bob Hope, Cary Grant, Yul Brynner, Omar Sharif, and Vincent Price. Legendarily, Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon came to Fort Lauderdale in August 1962 to plan for Carson's takeover of the Tonight Show. They enjoyed the experience so much that

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<sup>45</sup> Berry, Beachbum Berry's Grog Log, p.2.

<sup>46</sup> Gold Coast Sun Spots, April 23-29, 1961.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Dave Levy, 01/24/2013.

<sup>48</sup> Teitelbaum, Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America, p.111.

<sup>49</sup> Sallee, 'The Sensory Experience that is the Mai-Kai,' Broward Legacy, p.35.

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they returned year after year and “mentioned on the air their many trips to Fort Lauderdale, which let millions of people know about the city.” Carson and McMahon were among the Mai-Kai’s celebrity diners. “One of their favorite stops every visit was the world-famous Mai Kai Restaurant...”<sup>50</sup>

Increasingly, the Mai-Kai began cropping up in national publications. The Mai-Kai was a Holiday magazine award winner in 1961, 1962, and 1963, which the Thorntons used prominently in newspaper ads.<sup>51</sup> In March 1962, the magazine displayed a full-page color photo of the Mai-Kai with the caption, “Mai-Kai, Fort Lauderdale. Fun amid lush, South Pacific décor, complete with Jungle greenery, Tiki idols and waterfalls.”<sup>52</sup> The image also shows that the screened, open portion of the ceiling had been covered in glass by this point. The glass ceiling could slide open in good weather.

In 1964, Argosy magazine featured the Mai-Kai, leading with an homage to the restaurant’s Polynesian maidens, “If you’ve got a yen to be waited on hand and foot by a gorgeous south sea siren, don’t catch that slow boat to Bora Bora, just jump in the family buggy and head for sunny Fort Lauderdale, home of the Mai-Kai Girls.”<sup>53</sup>

By the late 1960’s, the Mai-Kai was massively popular and outgrowing its confines. Bob and Jack also were outgrowing their business relationship, having differences of opinion on the operations of the restaurant. Additionally, Jack had suffered health problems with a brain aneurysm in 1969. Bob bought out Jack’s share that year. Now the sole owner, Bob Thornton was free to expand the business to his liking. Utilizing known Tiki designers George Nakashima and Florian Gabriel, Bob significantly added to the building, more than doubling the dining capacity to 489 seats in seven distinct rooms.

The rooms, or huts, represent different Polynesian islands, including Samoa, Lanai, Tahiti, Tonga, Hawaii, New Guinea, and Moorea. The nautical-themed Molokai Bar was also expanded to seat an additional 50. Continuing as he had started, attention to decorative detail was an important consideration for Bob Thornton. For example, the ropes throughout the restaurant, especially prominent in the Molokai Bar and the owner’s office, were created by the same craftsman that did the ropes for the 1962 movie Mutiny on the Bounty.<sup>54</sup>

The enlarged Mai-Kai was completed in 1971, under the direction of architect Richard C. Reilly for the price tag of \$1 million. The additions took a year to complete and were done while the restaurant remained open. The contractors, Fisher-Payne Construction Co., started work at 4:30 a.m. in order to have construction debris

<sup>50</sup> Drury, Fort Lauderdale: Playground of the Stars, p.21

<sup>51</sup> The Miami News, p.7B.

<sup>52</sup> Holiday photo, 1962.

<sup>53</sup> Argosy, p. 52: Argosy was a monthly magazine aimed at male readers, which featured short story fiction and true adventure stories

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Dave Levy, 01/24/2013.

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covered, hidden from view of the customers who arrived at 5:00 p.m. Everything was concealed with panels and matting.<sup>55</sup>

The Mai-Kai Islanders Revue gained greater prominence in the reconfigured restaurant. The dancers and musicians now enjoyed a larger stage. An early dancer, Mirielle, eventually married Bob Thornton. At the time of the restaurant's additions, Mirielle was the costume designer, choreographer, and in charge of developing talent. Dancers and musicians are recruited from all the Polynesian islands, in order to provide a genuine experience. The dances and costumes are periodically changed to keep the show fresh.

Mirielle, a native Tahitian, was also instrumental in the enhanced South Seas decorating scheme and the acquisition of artifacts. She and Bob Thornton travelled to Polynesia acquiring art, sculptures, bamboo, thatch, and tapas (tree bark paper) from native artisans. The bamboo came from Hawaii and Tahiti and had to be cured before use in the Mai-Kai. The handmade artifacts were chosen for their placement in the respective island rooms, accurately representing the native objects found on that particular Polynesian island.<sup>56</sup> Although outside Polynesia, the restaurant's chairs came from the Philippines.

The 1971 version of the restaurant also included a large gift shop, an extensive tropical garden, and a Chinese oven. Bob Wells has been associated with the landscaped Tiki garden. The Mai-Kai is the home of one of only four known Chinese-style brick ovens in the United States.<sup>57</sup> Although expanded as the Polynesian Pop craze was beginning to wind down, the Mai-Kai managed to remain true to the Thorntons' vision.

Today, the Mai-Kai is not much different than it was in 1971, when the expansion of the restaurant was complete. Bob Thornton passed away in 1989, but the business is still family run. Although she long ago retired from daily operations of the Mai-Kai, Mirielle continues to oversee all aspects of the Revue. David Levy, Mirielle's son, is the General Manager and CEO, while his sister Kulani Thornton Gelardi is the CFO. The large staff consists of 200 employees.

"Mai-Kai is not only Florida's most spectacular destination for Tiki lovers, but is perhaps the last remaining establishment of its kind anywhere. No other Tiki restaurant can boast of the sheer size of Mai-Kai, the quality of the floor show, or the spectacular collection of Oceanic artifacts, many of which were actually collected in the Pacific Islands."<sup>58</sup> In keeping with this sentiment, in 2007, the Broward Trust for Historic Preservation Inc. listed the Mai-Kai on its list of significant Broward County architecture.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> 'Mai-Kai Expansion An Oriental Puzzle Solved By Builders,' Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Dave Levy, 01/24/2013.

<sup>57</sup> Mai-Kai calendar, 2007

<sup>58</sup> Teitelbaum, Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America, p.110

<sup>59</sup> Mai-Kai Restaurant Historic Designation Application. Support letter, dated 01/03/2007, from Diane Smart, President Broward Trust.

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For anyone interested in mid-20th century popular culture, the Mai-Kai expresses the splendor of a bygone era. For those interested in mid-20th century architecture, the Mai-Kai represents the mainland interpretation of Polynesia and the adventure of the commercial roadside. The Mai-Kai is a beacon for Florida tourists searching for a unique experience, it is a haven for locals searching for an escape from the ordinary of everyday life, and for Tiki aficionados it is a mecca, the last of the great Polynesian supper clubs.

During the mid-20th century, Polynesian restaurants, as well as bowling alleys, apartment buildings, and motels, were part of an American popular culture trend that played out from coast to coast. "After the Second World War, the full-on Tiki invasion of the United States. began and by the 1950s, was a national phenomenon."<sup>60</sup>

The Mai-Kai exhibits the complete Polynesian Pop package. Built in 1956 and greatly expanded in the 1960s and early 1970s, it is one of the best surviving example of the Polynesian style in America. The décor and interior design still original, but the great Tiki supper club practices of flaming food, expert mixology, ritual drink presentations and live Polynesian floor shows can still be witnessed in their historic environs."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Teitelbaum, Tiki Road Trip: A Guide to Tiki Culture in North America, p.12.

<sup>61</sup> Sven Kirsten, "Mai-Kai," in Classic Dining: Discovering America's Finest Mid-Century Restaurants, Peter Moruzzi, p.90.

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**Interviews**

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MAI-KAI RESTAURANT  
OAKLAND PARK, BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA  
GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

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**Verbal Boundary Description**

Broward County Parcel # 494224160010  
MANTRAY SUBDIVISION 70-11 B PARCEL A & POR OF VAC NE 36 CT LYING WITHIN MANTRAY  
SUBDIVISION PER CITY RES R-79-3

Broward County Parcel # 494224160010, with the western boundary modified as follows:  
From the southwestern corner of the parcel, proceed north in a straight line approximately 302 feet to the  
southern line of parcel # 494224050140 (excluding the parking lot to the west).

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary includes the main restaurant building, separate dining room building (Bora Bora Room), entrance  
drive, porte-cochere, and gardens historically associated with the Mai-Kai Restaurant.

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1. Mai-Kai Restaurant
2. 3599 North Federal Highway, Oakland Park (Broward County), FL
3. Steven Avdakov
4. October 2012-February 2014
5. Heritage Architectural Associates, Miami Beach, FL
6. View of Mai-Kai Restaurant and site along Federal Highway, looking northwest
7. Photo 1 of 53

**Items 1-5 are the same for the remaining photos except where indicated.**

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6. View of vegetation along Federal Highway, looking northwest
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6. View of tiki statue at northeastern corner of property, looking southwest
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6. View of simulated rock formation and canoe in Garden, looking south
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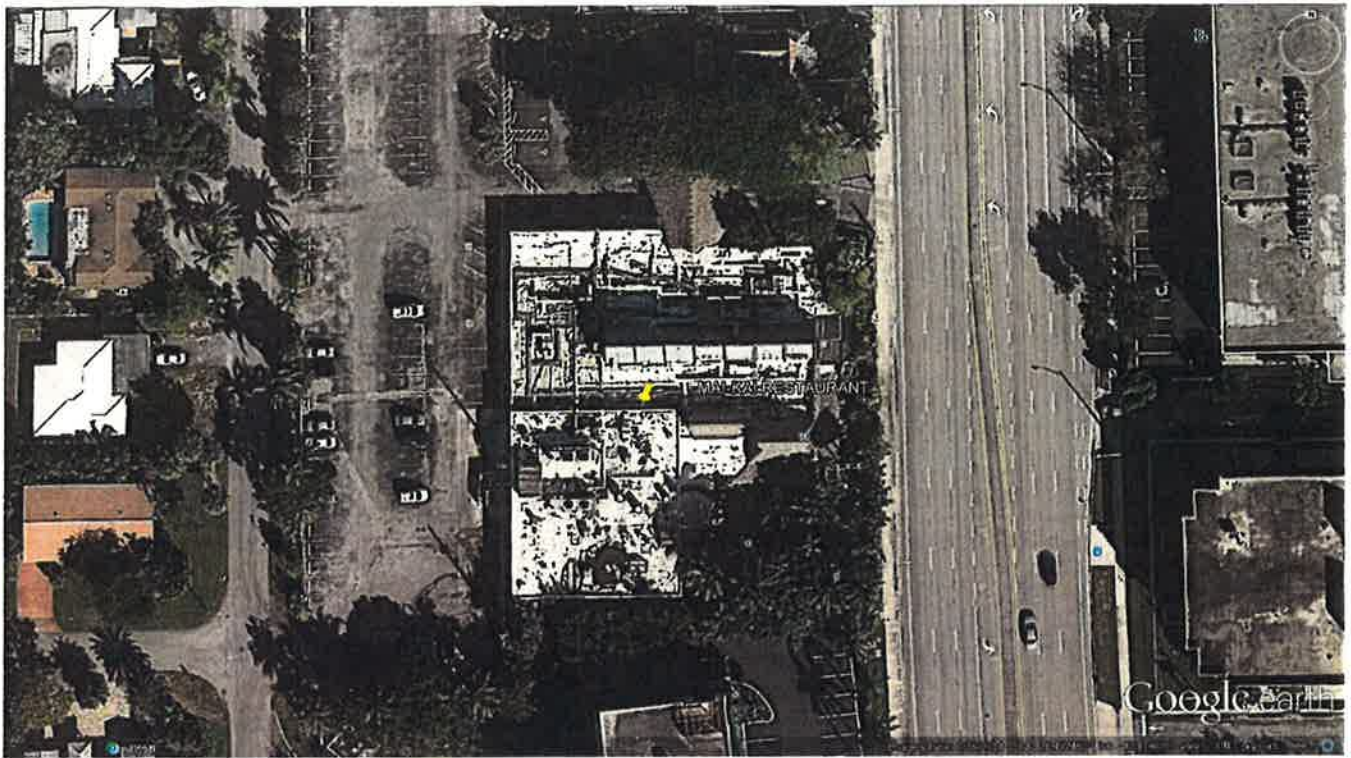
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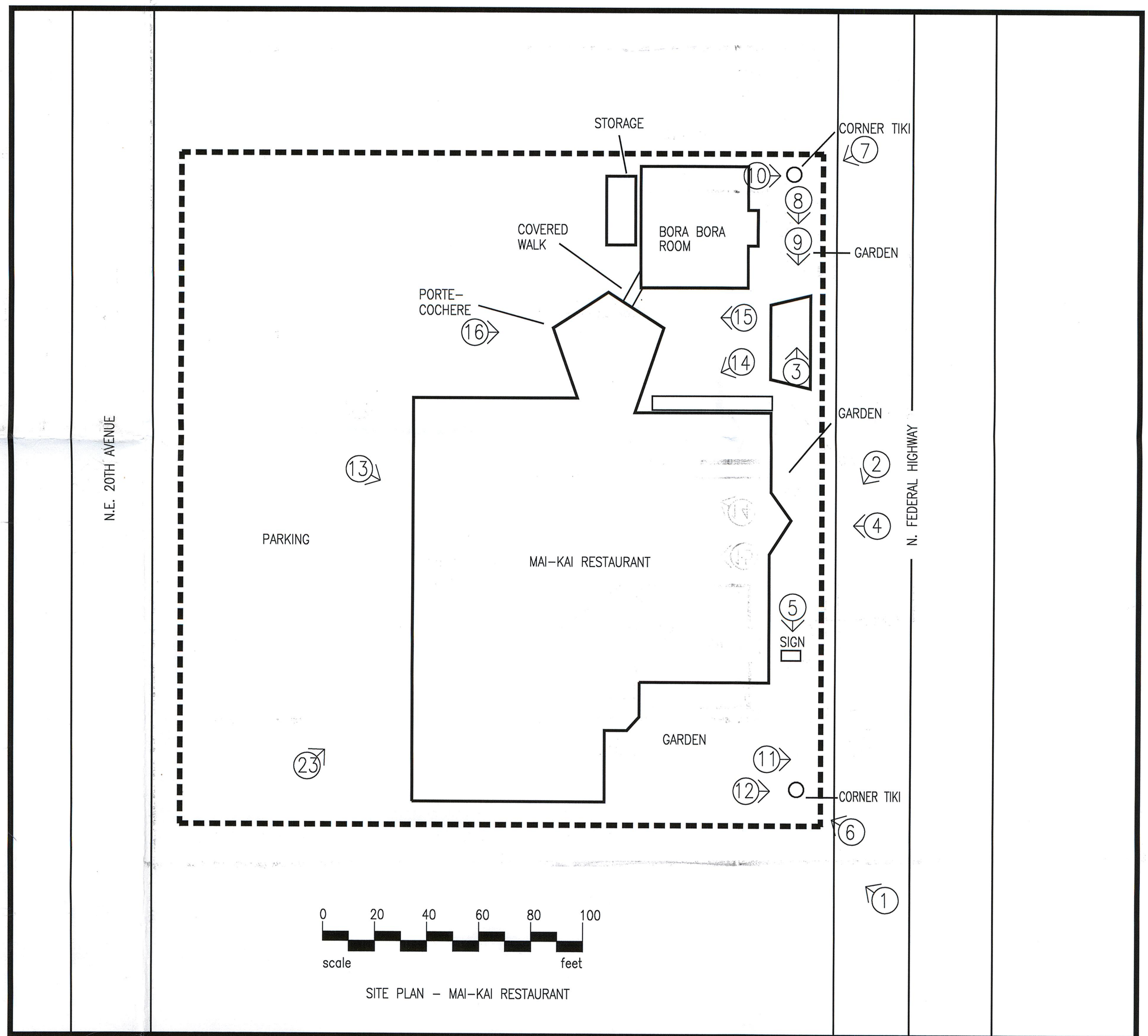
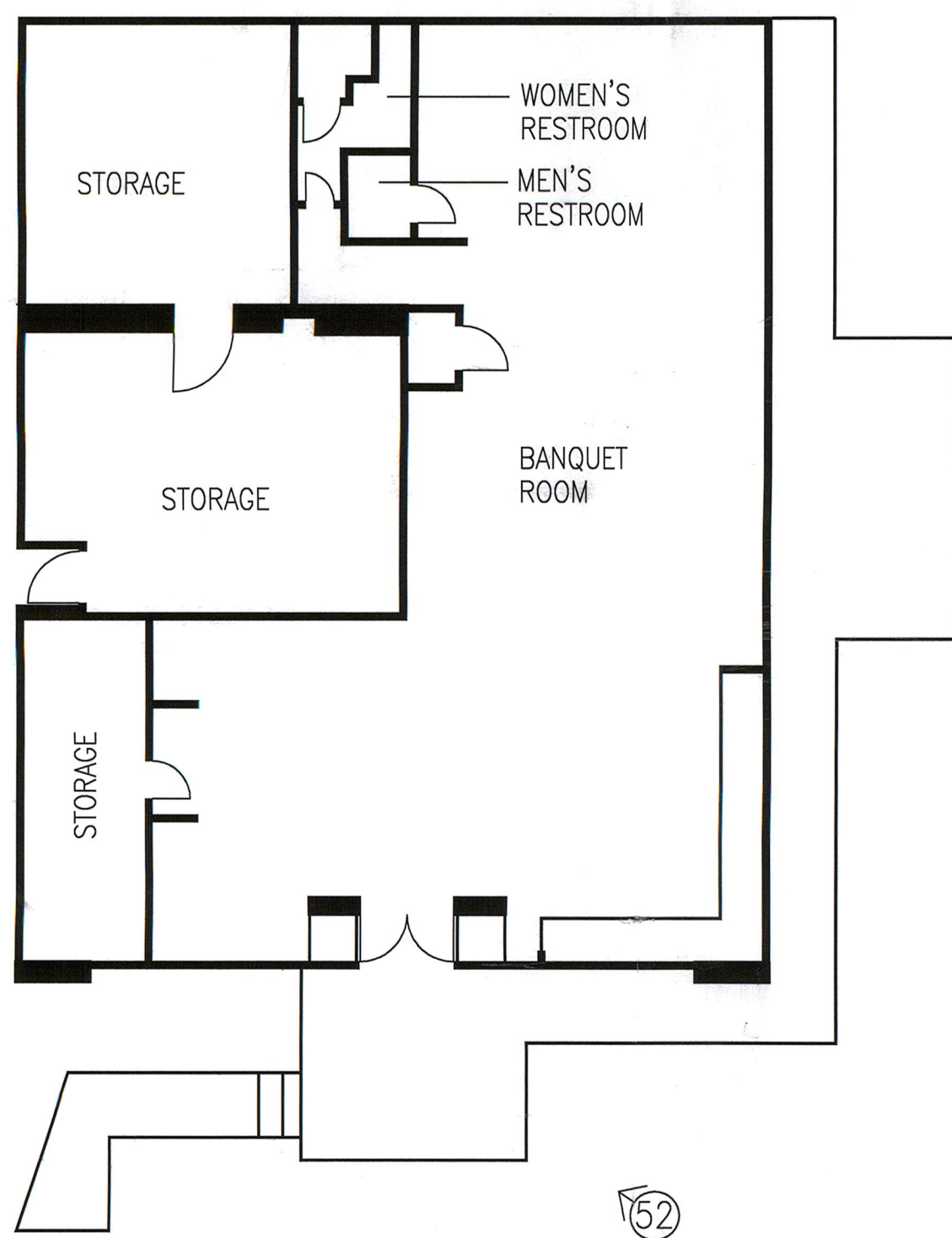
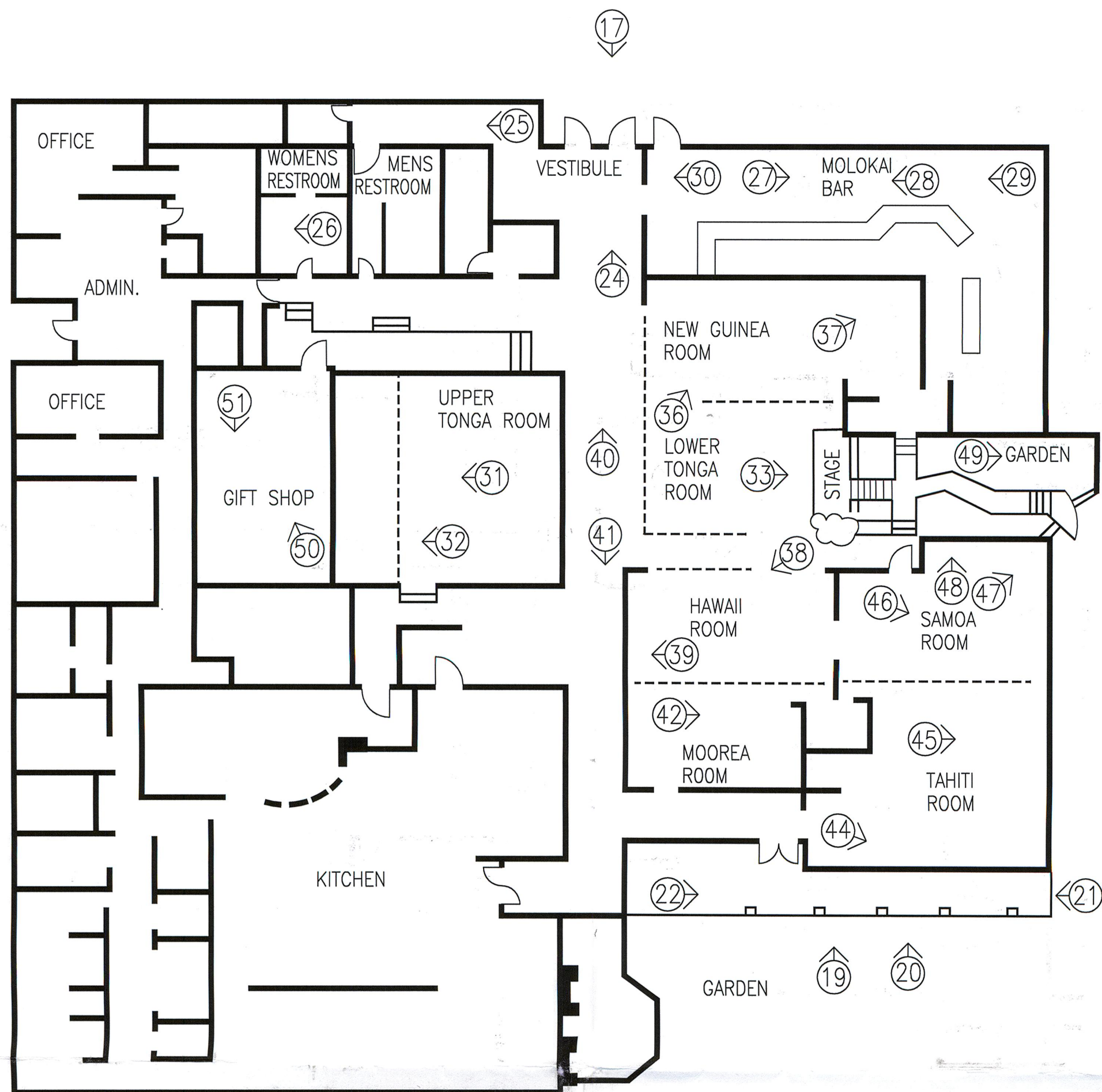
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Oakland Park, Florida

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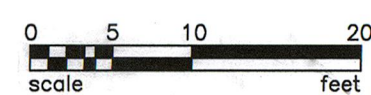
#### UTM REFERENCES

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| 17   | 587964  | 2895081  |





MAI-KAI RESTURANT  
3599 NORTH FEDERAL HIGHWAY  
OAKLAND PARK BROWARD COUNTY), FLORIDA



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DRAWN BY: W. Carl Shiver  
DRAWING DATE: SEPT-OCT 2014

THE SITE & FLOOR PLANS WERE DRAWN USING DRAFT SITE AND FLOOR PLANS PROVIDED BY HERITAGE ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATES. THE PLANS HAVE BEEN DRAWN TO APPROXIMATE SCALE BUT VARIATIONS WERE ALLOWED FOR THE PURPOSE OF CLARITY. THE MAP WAS PREPARED USING THE AUTOCAD COMPUTER DRAWING PROGRAM.

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HISTORIC BOUNDARY  
PHOTO NUMBERS

SITE & FLOOR PLANS

15









# MAI-KAI RESTAURANT

*Olynesian Shows*



























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