

Swains Island, U. S. A.

By E. H. BRYAN, JR.



Along the "Belt Road," Swains Island—Photograph by Author

TWO hundred miles north of Samoa lies a tiny coral atoll. It is a flat ring of land, a mile and a half long by a mile wide, and nowhere more than 20 feet high, surrounding a brackish lagoon. Most of the land, from the crest of the narrow ocean beach to the very edge of the lagoon, is thickly covered with vegetation, about 800 acres of coconut palms, and various trees and shrubs found widespread in the Pacific. From the sea the island appears as a long, low ridge on the horizon, somewhat roughened along its crest, as if one were looking at the edge of a fiber doormat. An aviator would see a pale jade pupil in a dark green eye, separated by a narrow line of white and gray from the great expanse of deep blue sea.

On charts this atoll is labeled Swains Island. By the natives of the three Tokelau Islands, which lie a hundred miles and more to the north and northwest, it is called Olosega (pronounced O-lo-seng'-ah). Copra traders familiarly refer to it as Jennings' Island. And on the list of islands claimed in 1856 by American guano companies it is recorded as Quiros Island.

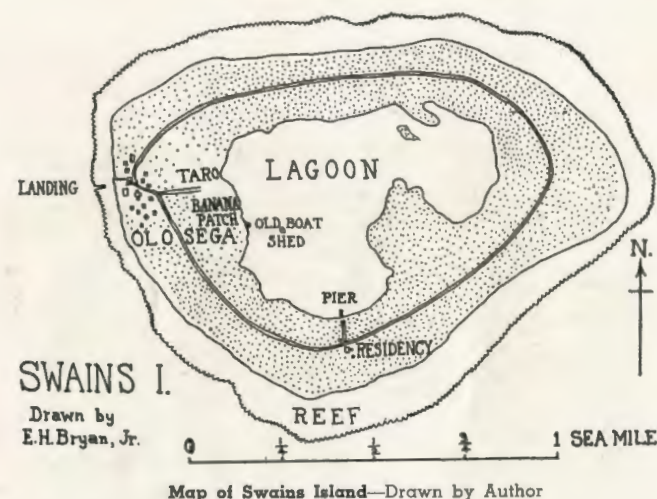
On March 2, 1606, the famous Portuguese navigator of Spanish vessels, Pedro Fernandes de Quiros, discovered an island somewhere in this general region, which, because of the brave and handsome men and unusually beautiful women who inhabited it, he called Isle de la Gente Hermosa (the island of handsome people). Quiros did not locate the island with any accuracy, stating only that it was about ten degrees south of the equator, but similarity of size and description has given rise to the belief that this is the island. There is also a possibility that Swains Island was one of the islands sighted by Mendana in 1595.

Captain Hudson of the *Peacock*, one of the vessels of the United States Exploring Expedition, learned of the position of this island from Captain Swain of the Ameri-

can whale ship *Swain*. Knowing also of the story of Quiros' discovery, he thought that he would try to verify both records while he was in the region. After a day's search, land was sighted on February 1, 1841. The weather was so bad during the four days spent in the vicinity that no landing could be made, a boat being smashed on the reef during one attempt. However, the position of the island was determined and a survey of part of its shore line made. As no sign of inhabitants was seen, and as the island's position differed by a whole degree from the position given by Quiros, Captain Hudson called it Swain's Island, and that has been its official name ever since.

On October 13, 1856, Eli Hutchinson Jennings, an American, born November 14, 1814, at Southampton, Long Island, New York, landed on "Olosega" (Swains Island) and founded a unique little community which has remained a strictly family affair for three generations. He had acquired title to the island from Captain Turnbull an Englishman, who claimed that he had discovered it. Mr. Jennings married a native Samoan woman of rank, from Upolu, Malia by name. When he died, December 4, 1878, at the age of 62, he left Malia all of his property, including title to the island, by a will which was recorded in the American consulate at Apia.

Eli Hutchinson Jennings, Jr., was born on the island January 1, 1863. He inherited it upon the death of Malia, October 25, 1891. Under his management the plantation prospered. Coconut palms, which had been abundant on the island at the time of Quiros' visit in 1606, had been set out in rows around most of the ring, and many tons of copra were produced annually. In September, 1909, the Resident Commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellice Colony visited Swains Island and collected a tax of about \$85.00 for the British Government. Eli Jennings appealed to the American consul at Apia, who



in turn communicated with the State Department. On November 9, 1910, the State Department instructed the consul that Jennings should file a diplomatic claim against the British Government for recovery of the taxes. At the same time the State Department expressed doubt to the consul as to whether they could back up the claim to sovereignty over the island, since it had been occupied without any arrangement for American jurisdiction. Fortunately no such proceedings had to be tried, for the British high commissioner for the Western Pacific informed the American consul at Apia that the British government considered Swains Island to be American territory, and the taxes collected from Mr. Jennings were returned.

This was the first of several episodes in which Swains

Island thrust itself into international affairs. The second occurred during 1917-1919. On Swains Island the senior Jennings was virtually king. In addition to members of his family there were generally a number of laborers brought from Samoa or the Tokelau Islands to work the copra plantation. The natives of the three Tokelau atolls were especially glad to come, for Swains Island was much more luxuriant and progressive, and danger of famine there was not nearly so imminent. It appeared that Jennings had ejected a few of the Samoan laborers and sent them back to Samoa. Not being pleased with this treatment, they had filed charges of cruelty against Jennings in the native court of Western Samoa. On January 30, 1918, the British Embassy in Washington relaxed from war routine long enough to inform the State Department that His Majesty's Government understood that Swains Island was American territory, so perhaps they would like to settle this little row. A copy of the evidence presented in support of the charges was thereupon transmitted. This was referred to the Navy Department, who investigated the complaints and found that they were not justified. The State Department so advised the British Embassy on January 20, 1919, and the world war being over, this second crisis was passed.

Eli Hutchinson Jennings, Jr., died October 24, 1920, at the age of 57. In his will he left his property, including Swains Island, jointly to his daughter Anne Eliza and his son Alexander. The daughter had married Irving Hetherington Carruthers, a British subject, and lived in Apia. Mr. Carruthers was named sole executor and trustee of the estate. In 1921 he tried to probate the will of his late father-in-law, but no court could be found which

would consider it. The American consul at Apia had ceased to exercise extra-territorial jurisdiction on December 2, 1899, and had no authority to probate the will, as he had done in the cases of the two previously presented. To make matters worse, Mrs. Carruthers died intestate in August, 1921. The British High Court of Western Samoa granted letters of administration to Mr. Carruthers, who was appointed guardian of the five minor children; but his administration applied only to property in Samoa, and not to Swains Island, over which the court still declined to exercise jurisdiction.

Both Alexander Jennings and Mr. Carruthers wanted the U.S. Navy Department to help out the situation; but that department, on March 30, 1921, stated that they did not see that the island came within their authority, and declined to probate the will. And so another plea was made to the State Department, and finally to the President of the United States, to do something which would fix the status of Swains Island. This was finally accomplished when on March 4, 1925, a joint resolution of the House and Senate of the United States Congress was passed and signed, extending American sovereignty over the island and placing it under the jurisdiction of the government of American Samoa. In 1924 the property had been incorporated for joint benefit of the family. The legal difficulties have been straightened out, and prospects are bright for the future, despite the comparatively low price of copra. The new arrangement makes it possible to market the copra at Pago Pago, instead of Apia, and thus to take advantage of the favorable price maintained by the U. S. Naval government.

Alexander Jennings, present owner, is a robust, kindly man of middle age, quite well educated, and capable. He is half Caucasian American and half Samoan. He married Margaret Pedro, a quiet, attractive, intelligent woman, who was born on Fakaofu, the southeastern of the Tokelau Islands. She is a member of one of the wealthiest and most influential families of that atoll, and has Spanish and Portuguese blood as well as native Tokelau. Unfortunately her health has not been good of recent years. Both parents being half Polynesian and half Caucasian, their children retain this same proportion of race mixture.

The village, which is called Taulaga, and also the copra drying sheds are located at the western end of the island, where a small passage has been blasted through the narrow fringing reef to aid landing, which must be made in canoes or small-boats. In this village live from 20 to 25 families, most of them young married couples with one or two children each. The usual population of the island is about 100 to 120, counting children. Here also is the church, with its native pastor, and the large general meeting house. Most of these buildings are built in native style, thatched with coconut leaves.

The Jennings family lives in a substantial, homelike frame building on the south curve of the atoll, about midway between ocean and lagoon. They call the spot "Etena" (Eden), but it is generally referred to as "the Residency." Here a power driven generator furnishes electricity for light and radio. A short pier extending into the lagoon provides a fine place for swimming. The water of the lagoon although too brackish to be drunk with enthusiasm, is by no means salt. The rainfall is moderately heavy,



The Jennings in 1935—Photograph by Author

possibly in excess of 100 inches a year, at least some years; and the lagoon is without channels to the sea, although there must be underground connection as there is a very small tide; so during the centuries the water has gradually lost its saltiness. The lagoon reaches a greatest depth of about 8 fathoms (48 feet).

The only commercial activity on the island is copra making. Five days a week the men of the village go out into the groves to harvest coconuts and do other necessary work on the plantation. The nuts are husked and piled along the "belt road" which circles the atoll, about midway between ocean and lagoon. An ancient Ford truck plies this road, gathering nuts and conveying them to the village. Here they are split, the kernels removed by the women and spread out on racks in the sun to dry. When thoroughly dry, the white, translucent, somewhat rancid smelling product becomes the copra of commerce, shipped to far-away manufacturing centers, where it is made into soap, vegetable substitute for butter, and even high explosives.

On Saturdays the natives may work for themselves, either harvesting or cultivating taro, bananas, and other food crops, or going fishing. Fishing is generally done from canoes at sea, where tuna and other larger fish are caught. Some reef fishing also may be done, and there is one portion of reef which is reserved against the time when it is too rough to put to sea or fish elsewhere. There are about 500 pigs and numerous chickens on the island, most of which run wild. The pigs may be killed only by permission of Mr. Jennings or his representative. Certain supplies, such as flour, tea, sugar, and the like are dispensed by the owner, especially when there is shortage of other



Lagoon at Swains Island—Photograph by Author



American Flag over Swains Island

foods. Only rain water is considered good to drink, but one can always quench ones thirst from a coconut. After emptying the nut it is a rule that the husk must be split in half and thrown out, so that pigs and chickens may finish whatever remains of the uneaten kernel.

Sunday is a day of rest, with at least two church services. Pastor Peni is also the school teacher, and both church and school are conducted in Samoan. The great sport on the island is cricket. This may be played in the afternoons after work, or on Saturdays and Sundays. The two teams are usually composed of the men and boys who live north of the church, at Taulaga village, in close and spirited competition against those who live to the south of it.

The problem of transportation is one which concerns Mr. Jennings. When last the writer saw him, in August, 1938, he was trying to obtain a schooner which he could use to connect Swains Island with Pago Pago. Even if he does obtain a satisfactory vessel, his difficulties will not end, for there is no anchorage at Swains Island. During the days when copra was shipped to Apia, the Burns-Philp schooner made periodic visits to the island, two or three times a year. Before that, Captain Allen's vessel, *Dawn*, of the Samoan Shipping and Trading Company, collected the copra and brought supplies. The only regular shipping between Pago Pago and Swains Island is the official visit of the U.S. Naval station ship *Ontario*. The U.S. Coast Guard cutters *Itasca* and *Taney* called there when their periodic visits to the American Equatorial Islands were extended to Samoa. All three visits of the writer to Swains Island were made aboard these vessels.

On one trip of the *Itasca*, two of the returning Hawaiian colonists, Abraham Piianaia and Killarney Opiopio, were dropped off at Swains Island on January 24, 1936, and picked up again a month later, on February 23, in order that they might collect specimens for Bernice P. Bishop Museum. During this stay, these two Kamehameha School boys endeared themselves very much to the people of the island. Arriving just after a serious hurricane, which did much damage to food crops on the island, they took ashore food supplied from the *Itasca*, doctored injuries, and entered wholeheartedly into the everyday life of the people. Their diaries are filled with a running commentary of how they were entertained, and how they entertained in return. These notes are of considerable value to museum scientists, for they present a clear picture of every day happenings in this isolated and interesting com-

munity, from the standpoint of persons taking part in these events and comparing them with another native culture. They contain the only reference which the writer has seen to ancient ruins of a former village on the Temafa Peninsula, which juts out into the lagoon from the south side of the ring.

Besides producing 150 to 200 tons of copra a year and providing a home for an American family and a hundred natives, one might ask, "What is the island good for?" The soil is very sandy, poor and shallow. It is only the heavy rainfall, falling all year around, but principally from December to April, which keeps the vegetation fresh and green. In comparison with the Equatorial Islands, such as Howland, Baker, Jarvis, Canton, and Enderbury, the island is a verdant paradise; but it is quite incapable of producing varied and extensive food crops. Its main value lies in its lagoon. This measures about three-quarters of a mile east and west, by two-thirds of a mile north and south; plenty of room for seaplanes, even with its thick surrounding wall of vegetation. This is the air age. Sheltered water landing fields, as stepping stones across the mighty Pacific are as essential to trans-oceanic flying as smooth, level airports across the continent. The American Samoan islands of Tutuila and the Manua group lack desirable seaplane ports. Rose Atoll is a long ways to the east, and not much in the way of land when you get there. Swains Island, with its fine lagoon and its ring of shaded land should some day become a busy airport and vacation spot on the sky-road to the Antipodes.

GARDEN MANNERS

By DOREEN BRYANT

From my window I can see
The loveliest little rockery,
Against its blackened rocks are spread
Splashes of colour—lavender, pink and red.
The violet smiles in its mossy bed
While the pale begonia hangs its head,
And white jasmine wafts its pale perfume
In competition with the yellow broom.
The gay rosalia waves a hand
To the proud lilies in the bed beyond,
And the tall pink hollyhock stands aloof
And curtsies to the Rambler on the roof.



Swains Island

Paradise of the Pacific

HAWAII'S ILLUSTRATED

MONTHLY MAGAZINE

CABLE ADDRESS
"PARADISE"

P. O. BOX 80



E. A. LANGTON-BOYLE
Managing Editor and Proprietor

Established
January 1888

EDWIN NORTH McCLELLAN
Editor

Entered as second class matter July 1, 1903, at the Postoffice at Honolulu, Hawaii, under the Act of March 3, 1879
Subscription price, \$4.00 per year.

VOL. 51

HONOLULU, HAWAII, U.S.A., JULY, 1939

No. 7

Aloha! U.S.S. *Honolulu*!

* * *

We trust that (see suggestion April 1, 1939 of this magazine) the invitation from the Pasadena Tournament of Roses, received last month by Honolulu Chamber of Commerce, will be accepted.

* * *

Long flights may make Midway Island unnecessary as a base for civilian aviation but it always will be an essential National Defense base.

* * *

Hirsute male bosoms scare people off the beach at Waikiki, and the Desha Law should be amended to exclude them from that Snooty Spot. Hair in its place is OK but it should be kept in its own baliwick—or clipped or removed. A hirsute chin is bad enough, but ugh! a mannish hair chest!

* * *

Like it or not, Oahu some day may be a military-naval-aviation garrisoned fort-island. Maybe commercial interests should start developing the Island of Hawaii as a substitute for Oahu.

* * *

Paradise of the Pacific enthusiastically applauds the *Star-Bulletin* editorial of June 3, 1939, calling for a frequent "shuttle-service between Honolulu and San Francisco" by the PAA for have we not often invited attention to this necessity.

* * *

Since Hawaii is the West Coast of the United States we may expect the Spy Hunt to reach here soon. Often has this magazine warned against espionage in Hawaii despite efforts to "laugh it off."

* * *

It is impossible to believe that Admiral Leahy, Chief of Naval Operations, was correctly quoted when a columnist had him telling a Congressional Committee that he was not disturbed over the above-ground status of the Pearl Harbor oil-tanks.

* * *

Kamehameha Day is not the birthday of Kamehameha I.

Kamehameha Day, with its Holoku and Calico Balls, Parades, addresses, and ceremonies, was a splendid success.

* * *

A National Defense Section in the Library of Hawaii would please Uncle Sam's land, sea and air regulars. In such a section would be found histories, biographies, technical works, and many other books on the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard activities.

* * *

In 1880, Joseph O. Carter served as Commercial Agent for the Empire of Japan in Honolulu.

* * *

Our Constitution should be amended so that no law could be constitutionally created that would discriminate against any American citizen who happens to reside in an organized territory.

* * *

Secretary of State Cordell Hull is urged to create some machinery, to operate in all parts of the United States, that will aid all our dual citizens to divest themselves of the claims of foreign governments.

* * *

Hear you ever of the Kahakai Hui the members of which loll and relax daily at Waikiki Beach?

* * *

Construction of the new drydock at Pearl Harbor should be rushed—Congress should hasten the execution of its part.

* * *

This magazine is pleased with the initial and successful air-transportation of troops in Hawaii (on June 13, 1939) for, more than once and particularly on May 1, 1939 (page 20), it was advocated.

* * *

Foreign-owned newspapers throughout the United States should be brought under the same statute-requirements regarding stock ownership that apply to radio broadcasting stations.

* * *

Uncle Sam could use some coconut shell charcoal from American Christmas Island, for gasmasks.