

**1881 – NORWEGIANS IN HAWAI'I: CONFLICT IN PLANTATION SOCIETY**  
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**OVERVIEW**

(The complete paper is available on the Internet at <http://www.satrum.net/>)

**CONDITIONS IN HAWAI'I**

As a result of the 1875-1876 reciprocity treaty between The Kingdom of Hawai'i and the United States, the Kingdom gained tariff-free access to U.S. markets for sugar, creating further demand for labor. This need for more workers occurred at the same time the Hawai'ian population was in serious decline and had dropped to approximately 300,000 people. Without enough workers, sugar cane was left rotting in the fields

**CONDITIONS IN NORWAY**

In 1881, Norway was suffering from an industrial depression with high unemployment and much poverty. Thousands were leaving for other lands. This occurred at a time when there was actually a local demand for more farm laborers. These circumstances partially determined who would be in the mix of people signing contracts as Hawai'ian plantation workers.

**IMPACT OF NORWEGIANS ALREADY IN HAWAI'I**

\***Valdemar Emil Knudsen** arrived in Kekaha, Kaua'i, Hawai'i, in 1856 where he managed the Grove Farm Plantation. He became one of the largest land holders on the island of Kaua'i and his family a member of Hawai'i's most prominent Caucasian families. Seeing great opportunity in growing sugar after the signing of the reciprocity treaty, Knudsen convinced several of his nephews and Captain Henrik Christian L'Orange, who would later marry his niece, to come to Hawai'i. Known to the Hawai'ians as "Kanuka", Knudsen had a significant connection to the Kingdom of Hawai'i. Fluently speaking three Hawai'ian languages, Knudsen served as a member of the House of Representatives under the Monarchy and joined the Provisional Government after Queen Liliuokalani was deposed in 1893.

\***Captain Henrik Christian L'Orange** left Kaua'i in 1880 when he sold his interests on Kaua'i and moved to Maui to start a sugar plantation.

In 1878, even before he was established on the island of Maui, L'Orange recognized the need for more plantation workers and proposed that the Kingdom of Hawai'i import them from Scandinavia. King David Kalākaua agreed and commissioned Captain L'Orange to travel to Norway for this purpose. In 1880 he received a letter of appointment from the Bureau of Immigration of the Hawai'ian Islands and a letter of credit for \$20,000 from the firm of Castle and Cook for expenses and advances to go to Norway to recruit not more than 400 adult workers, in a ratio of 35 to 40 women to each 100 men. These people were to be of "proper class" and good workers, and no family was to bring more than two children.

Recruiting in Drammen, Norway, L'Orange was unable to find the "proper class" of good workers he was seeking. Farm laborers, the very workers he needed, were needed locally. Under pressure of time to secure workers and return to Hawai'i, L'Orange contracted with storekeepers, artisans, craftsmen, office workers, and as was later alleged, "the bums of the breweries of Christiana".

### **CONFLICT, AWARENESS, AND RESOLUTION**

L'Orange's ship the Beta and later the ship Musca initially brought approximately 630 Norwegians to Hawai'i. Arriving in a land other than what had been described to them, they labored under harsh working conditions for which they were not prepared. Adding to their problems, they had signed two versions of their contracts, one in Norwegian and one in English. The two did not match. They were also unwilling to be obedient, subservient, and accept the physical abuse suffered by prior laborers brought from different parts of the world. One set of descriptions used to describe the Norwegian gives you a sense of how they were viewed by the local population: "Lacked the ability to submit with passive obedience", "Would not put up with conditions of which they disapproved", and "Too individualistic".

Protesting through the legal process, strikes, and extensive letter writing to Norway and the U.S. mainland, they created an environment where the Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway had to dispatch an investigator to Hawai'i. The investigation was delayed on hearing Valdemar Knudsen's assurances that the complaints were groundless. Finally, Foreign Minister Anton Grip began his investigation. He started in Christiana with interviews of friends and relatives of those in Hawai'i before sailing there.

Staying ten weeks in Hawai'i, Grip investigated all aspects of the emigrant's lives, visiting nearly every plantation employing Swedes or Norwegians. When he was done, he had interviewed 256 emigrant men and some of the women, as well as government officials and physicians.

Grip's findings were not the resolution the emigrants had hoped for. Grip, like many diplomats from other countries who investigated workers' complaints, found them to be largely ill-founded. He was amazed at the amount of meat available to the workers compared to the scanty meat ration of the Norwegian and Swedish soldiers. Declaring their working conditions, food, and housing all acceptable, he concluded that the immigrants were townspeople and artisans unsuited for agriculture.

Some in the Hawai'ian Kingdom saw the value of independent, self-reliant people and how they might actually help Hawai'ian society as it already had some Anglo-Saxon aspects, but the pressure for cheap and permanent labor won the day. Except for several shipments of Germans brought in largely for Lihue Plantation on the island of Kaua'i, there were no more mass importations of North Europeans.