

Sonny Kaniho

Homesteader • Leader • Hawaiian

*“We all need a little Sonny Kaniho
in our work and in our lives...
we must remember...”*

*Robin Puanani Danner, CNHA
Hawaiian Community Assets Luncheon
Housing a Nation
Hawaii Convention Center
August 24, 2009*



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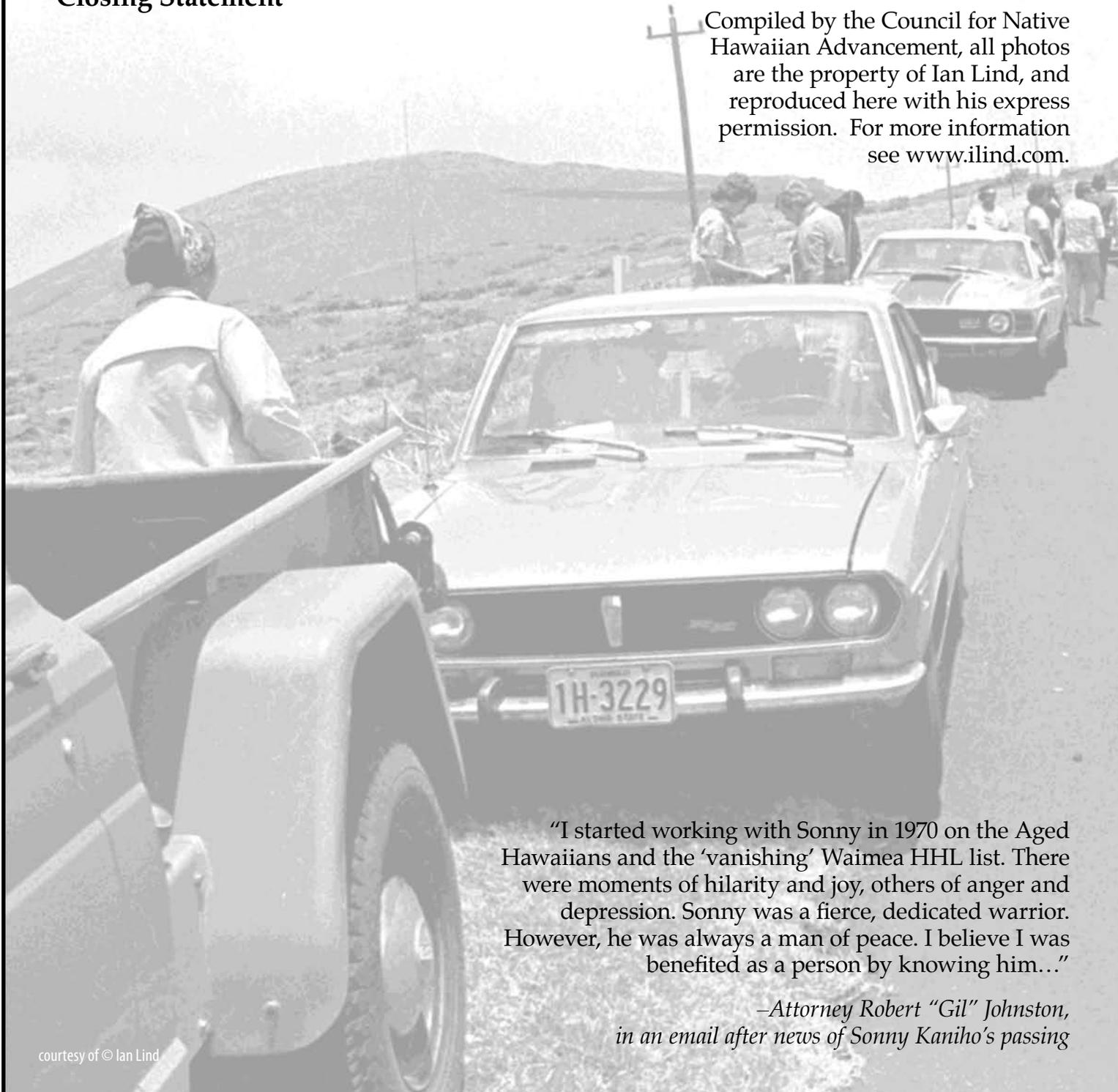
**Broken Promise (Sonny) Lyrics
By Henry Kapono Kaaihue**

Closing Statement

Mahalo Ian Lind

Presented here is the story of Sonny Kaniho's most famous protest, a symbolic occupation of a DHHL pasture in 1974 on Hawaii Island, as captured through the memories and camera lens of Ian Lind. Mahalo to Ian Lind, for his generosity in sharing the Sonny Kaniho story, as he witnessed it in May 1974.

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"I started working with Sonny in 1970 on the Aged Hawaiians and the 'vanishing' Waimea HHL list. There were moments of hilarity and joy, others of anger and depression. Sonny was a fierce, dedicated warrior. However, he was always a man of peace. I believe I was benefited as a person by knowing him..."

*–Attorney Robert "Gil" Johnston,
in an email after news of Sonny Kaniho's passing*



Introduction

By Ian Lind

Sonny Kaniho was one of the giants in the modern Hawaiian rights movement who gained fame by quietly, and then not-so-quietly, protesting the failures of the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands to make land available to Native Hawaiians.

May 1974. Two years before the first protest landing on Kahoolawe. George Ariyoshi was serving as governor but would not face election until later in the year. Hawaiians and part-Hawaiians were becoming increasingly restive and politically active, with long-term problems of the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands becoming key issues for many.

And then there was Sonny Kaniho, veteran and retired Pearl Harbor shipyard worker. Kaniho had been on the Hawaiian Homes waiting list for nearly two decades without being awarded any land, while watching large parcels being leased to some of the state's largest landowners.

Perhaps an unlikely activist, Kaniho began a campaign of civil disobedience. In April 1974, Kaniho issued a public statement claiming land that had been leased to Parker Ranch. That lease had lapsed, and Kaniho stepped up to oppose and used direct action to block its extension.

Sonny Speaks

Printed in the **Another Voice**, Volume 3, Number 1 May 9, 1974

FOR THE HAWAIIAN PEOPLE... *Homestead Land is Claimed*

The following statement was released by Sonny Kaniho last month as he "illegally" squatted on Hawaiian Homestead land on the Big Island's Parker Ranch. His words give evidenced of the growing frustration among many Hawaiians who feel they are the victims of years of exploitation and now want positive action upon their grievances.

"E HAWAII MAKOU"

I'M AN APPLICANT for Hawaiian Homes land (pastoral lot). I qualify under the provisions of the Hawaiian Homes Act of 1920. I've been an applicant for near twenty years now.

I first applied in 1955. In 1966 I investigated the status of my application. I was told by Abraham Piianaia (Director of the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands at the time) that my application had been discarded as I had failed to keep it current. I had to reapply (1966).

I've since been on a so-called "waiting list." My circumstance is nothing unique. Many other Hawaiians are waiting also. Some much longer than I. Some have died waiting. I've waited too long. Patience is a virtue many have said. But I'm sick and tired of waiting. I've tried to work within the system. I never dreamed it would be this difficult. I've tried to convince the bureaucrats who administrate and manage (Present Director William Among, the Hawaiian Homes Commission, department staff) the program to make the aina (land) available to WE THE HAWAIIAN PEOPLE.

But history continues to repeat itself in that the institution known as the DHHL continues to betray our wishes. Instead of making lands (for housing, ranching, farming) available to HAWAIIANS who need it (indigent HAWAIIANS) the lands are leased instead to the "well born," the "well able," the "well to do." Those with economic stability and political strength. I went seeking. I went begging for justice.

In December 1972 many of the leases transacted twenty years ago (with the Parker Ranch, Kahua Ranch, etc.) on lands within the DHHL

jurisdiction expired. I along with many other Hawaiians requested that these lands be made available to us. The DHHL is dogmatic and continues to lease these lands to corporate interests on a month-to-month basis. There is talk of renewing the old leases (long term again) with the old lessees. Hence, WE THE HAWAIIAN PEOPLE continue to remain 'landless strangers in our own lands.'

I went seeking redress thru the system. My throat is parched. My voice is faint. I have run short of legitimate options. The DHHL refuses to hear the call of the people. And so now I must defy the system.

Effective this date (April 8, 1974) I am occupying and claiming for the HAWAIIAN PEOPLE these lands known as Pauahi (TMK 6-2-01-04) now leased by the DHHL to the Parker Ranch under the terms of Revocable Permit S-4907. These lands are located mauka of Hamakua Gulch on the Kohala Mountain Road (a half mile Hamakaua of Puu Kawaiwai). I have already hauled in materials for fencing. I will paddock the area. I intend to homestead and graze this land. The Governor's Office is aware of my actions. So is Mr. Richard Smart of Parker Ranch.

WE THE HAWAIIAN PEOPLE have waited too long. What good is filling out an application when land is not made available for homesteading. The time has come for the occupation. Time has come for we as HAWAIIANS to rise to the occasion and pursue that which is ours thru sovereignty. I must defy the law and I trust in doing so I will expose the foibles and failings of an institution which for too long has been a slave to big money and big business and seemingly forgotten who its real beneficiaries are.

I only ask "Must we have a 'Wounded Knee' if we are to regain some of that paradise we have lost?"

With Aloha to all Hawaii I remain,

Sonny A. Kaniho / Kamuela, Hawaii / Phone 885-4427



May 18, 1974 • A Photo Essay by Ian Lind



At the invitation of then-Honolulu attorney **Robert G. "Gil" Johnston**, I flew to the Big Island to support **Sonny Kaniho's** planned protest. The group from Oahu were members of **The Hawaiians**, an early Hawaiian activist group. Johnston and his partner, **Clayton Ikei**, represented The Hawaiians and Kaniho. First stop for us was in Puako to talk to **Bob Lindsey**, who later served in the legislature and became a Kamehameha Schools representative on the Big Island.



Sonny and Gil outside of **Lindsey's** home.

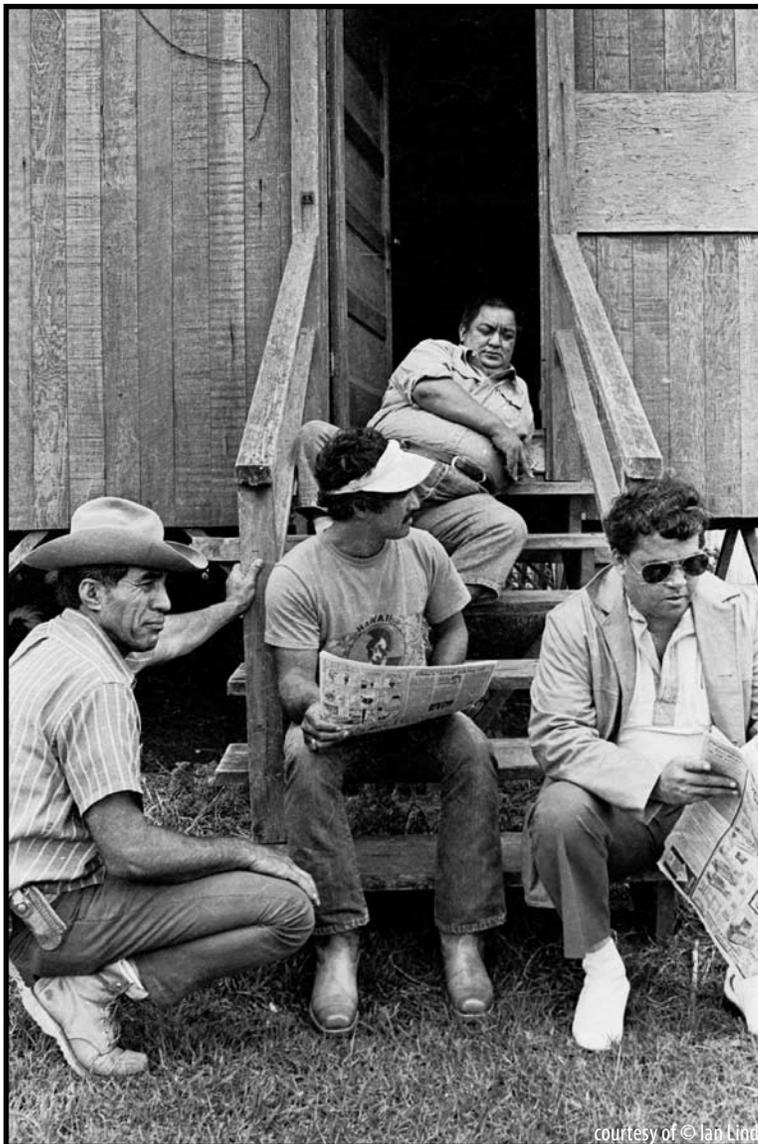


I think that **Bob** had been planning to join the protest but at the last minute decided that he couldn't. He wasn't alone. There was a flutter of last minute discussions after we learned that **Parker Ranch** had hired guards from **Hawaii Protective Association**, owned by Big Islander **Larry Mehau**, to provide security at the site of the planned protest. At least one of the key protest organizers had been "advised" to stay away.



Next stop, Waimea, where other supporters from Hilo and Kona gathered at **Sonny's** place.

Facing the camera are **Pae Galdeira**, leader of **The Hawaiians**; **Kaniho**, in the hat; and **Gil Johnston**, far right.



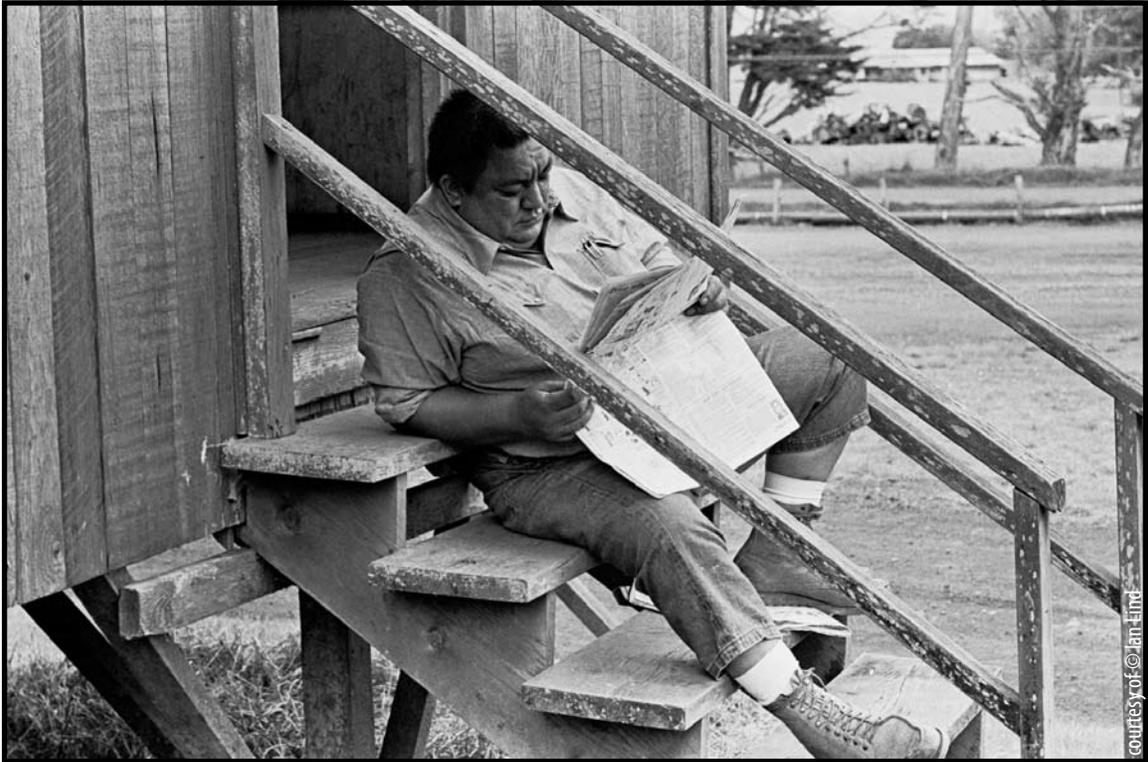
Things proceeded at, well, Hawaiian Time. Pictured are (left to right) **Kaniho**, **Francis Kauhane**, **Roland Mahiai**, and **Pae Galdeira**



Kaniho in a moment alone. Sonny, who was still waiting to be awarded a homestead nearly 20 years after first applying, had publicly challenged the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands intention to renew a pasture lease with Parker Ranch. Now he planned to go, with all of us in tow, and begin fencing off his pasture.

I can't remember who belonged to this dog...I think it might have been **Francis Kauhane**. In any case, the dog remained right at the center of the day's events. You'll see him (or her) in a number of the photographs that follow.

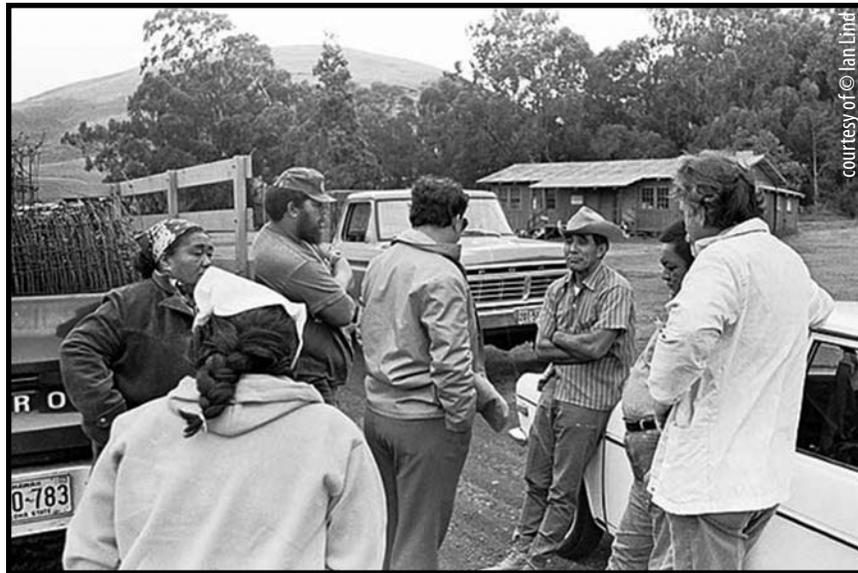




Roland Mahiai



Pae Galdeira gives the first of many updates on the situation and plans for the day.



Notice the barbed wire fencing in the back of **Sonny's** truck. Then it was on to the pasture gate.



The group of supporters grew modestly as we gathered in front of the pasture gate, and we were joined by several reporters, some observers, and those folks from **HPA**.

Standing in the center of this photo with crutches is **Jim Leatherer**, who made the 50 mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, with **Martin Luther King** in 1965. I never did hear how **Leatherer** came to be part of this protest in Waimea.



courtesy of © Ian Lind



courtesy of © Ian Lind

There was a lot of waiting as we prepared to break open the gate and move onto the land.

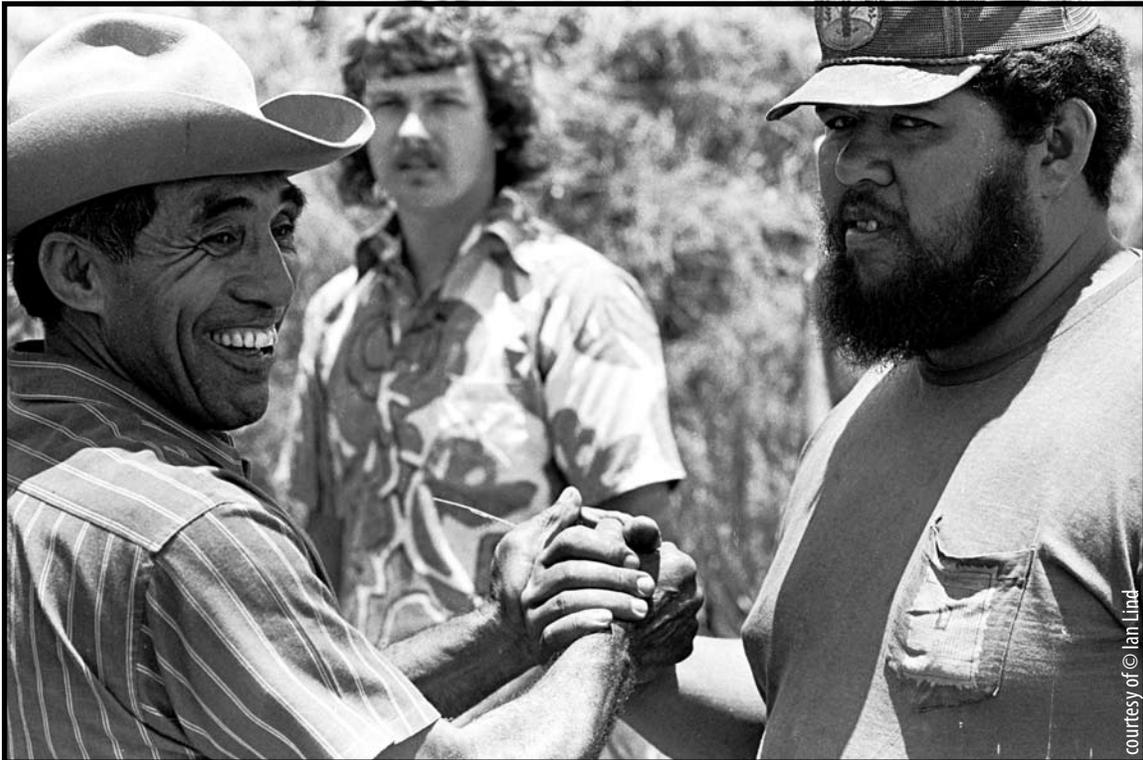
From left, **Delores Kahue**, **Roland Mahiai**, an unidentified reporter, **Moanikeala Akaka** (with hat), **Pae Galdeira** (back to the camera) and **Sonny Kaniho**.



courtesy of © Ian Lind



Pae has a few words in private with **Sonny**, with the beautiful hills of Waimea in the background.

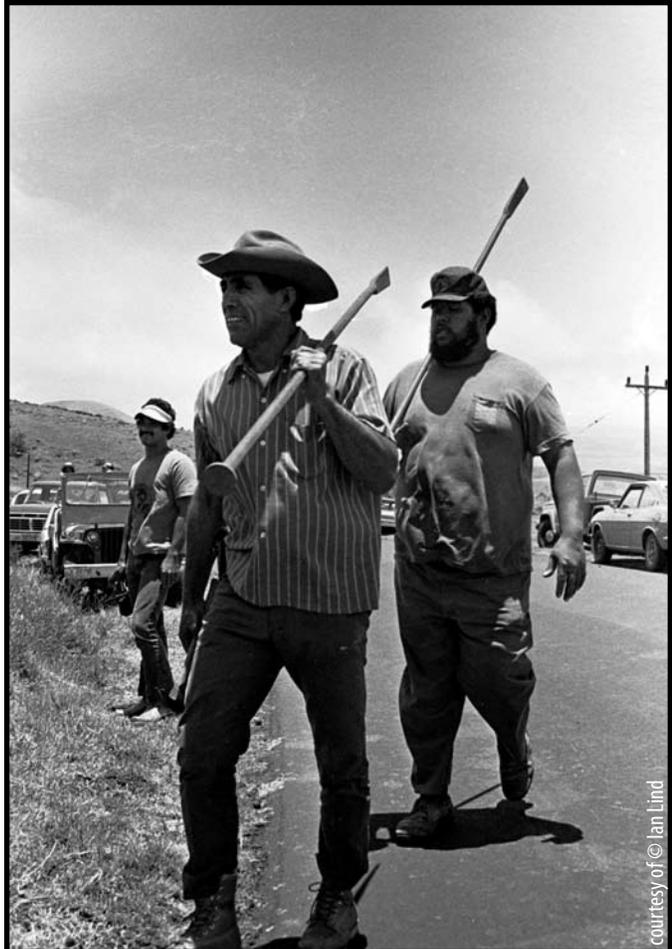


Sonny greets **Andy Akau** with his killer smile.



Sonny poses at just outside the pasture gate with **Mary-Mae Unea**, chaplain for **The Hawaiians**, who died in June 2003.

Sonny Kaniho and **Andy Akau** prepare to open the gate, with **Francis Kauhane** in the background.





With cameras snapping in all directions and the Hawaiian flag flying, **Sonny** removes the hinges and lifts the gate out of the way. This avoided potential “property damage” charges that could have resulted from breaking the locks. There’s the activist dog at the far right.



The gate is carried out of the way and the protest moves into the **Parker Ranch** pasture.



Pae Galdeira meets Mary-Mae and Sonny as they move forward onto the land, followed by Jim Leatherer.



A classic image from Hawaiian political history. From left to right, Moanikeala Akaka, Pae Galdeira, Mary-Mae Unea, Sonny Kaniho, Jim Leatherer, dog, Chris Yuen.



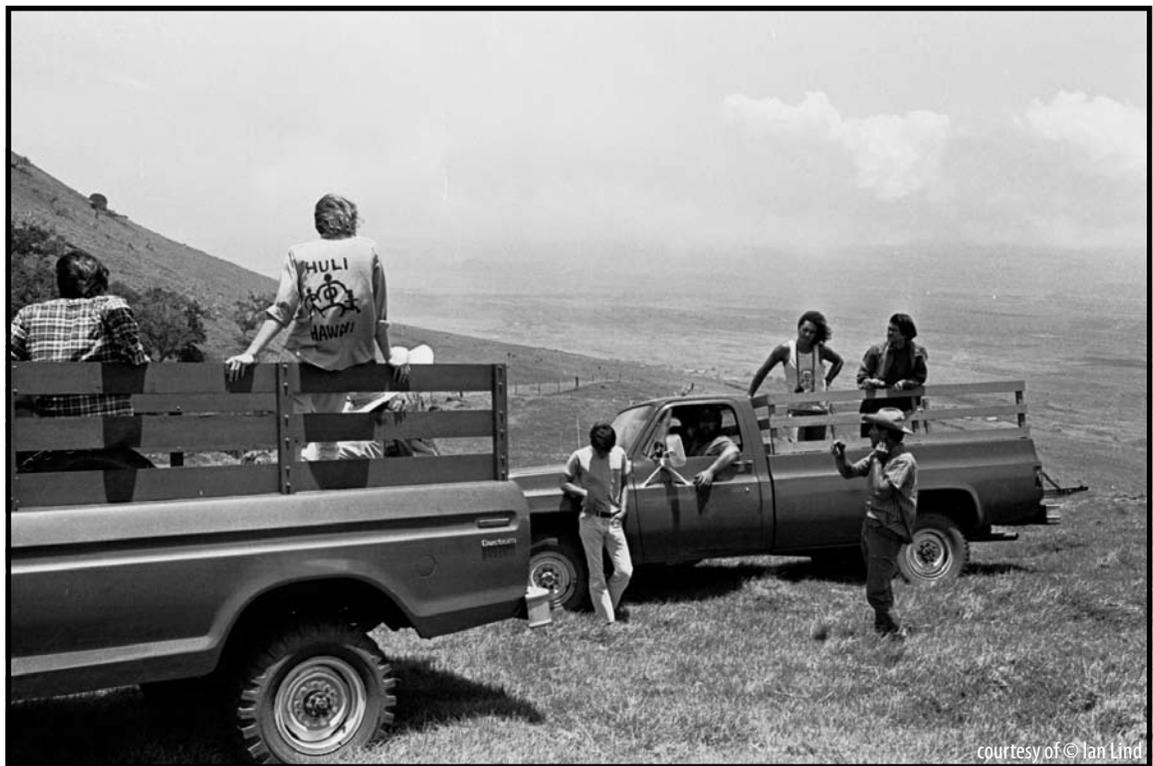
Mary-Mae led the group in prayer beneath her Hawaiian flag.



Mary-Mae Unea assisted by **Chris Yuen**, who would, much later, serve as Hawaii County planning director.



Somehow I ended up in **Sonny's** truck for the drive to the upper pasture.



It felt like we were at the top of the world.

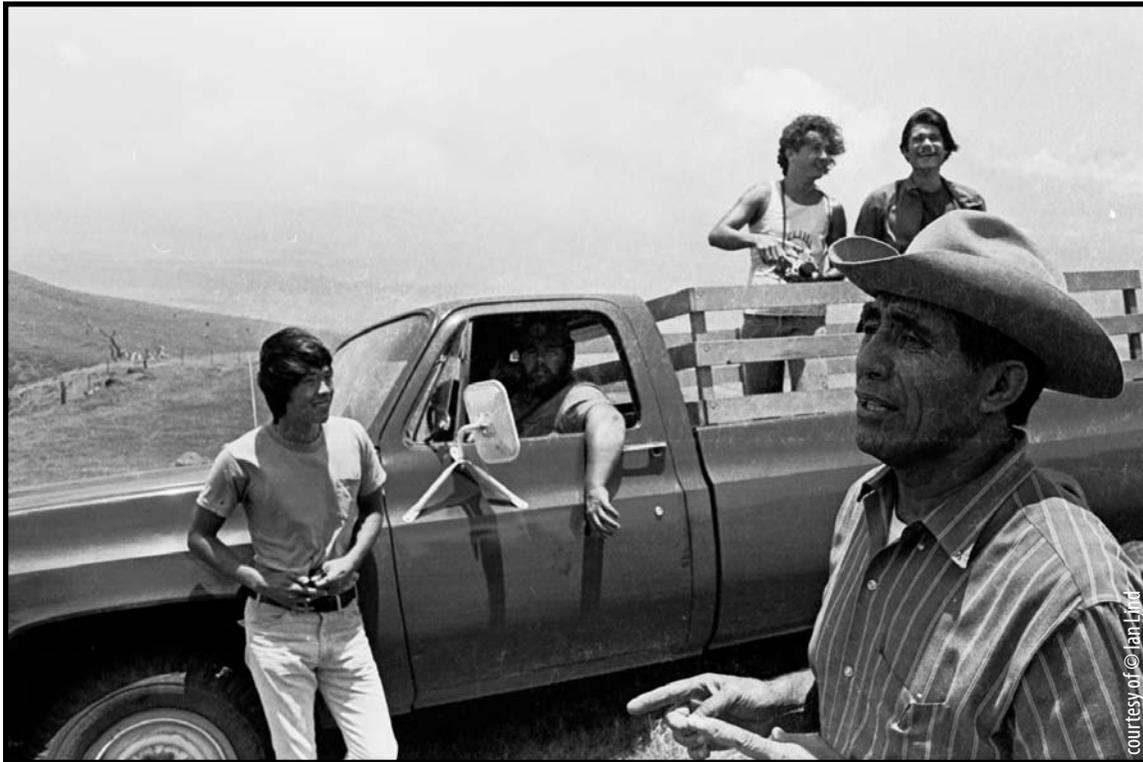


courtesy of © Ian Lind

The hot Kona coast seemed a very long way from the cool winds of Waimea.



courtesy of © Ian Lind



As I recall, **Sonny** was pointing out the boundaries of the disputed pasture that he was trying to claim.

By the time, though, the forces of "law and order" were on the way.





courtesy of © Ian Lind

If you're going to be arrested during a political protest, this was the way to go. **Sonny's** cousin and Hawaii County police officer **Leningrad Elarionoff** arrived on the scene and warned us that we were trespassing. The message was simple: Leave now or face arrest.



courtesy of © Ian Lind

We didn't leave, so **Leningrad** started taking down names. You couldn't make this up--being arrested at the top of the world by a Hawaiian cop named Leningrad. After retiring from the police department, Elarionoff later was elected to the Hawaii County Council.



Joe Tassil, in front with the knit cap, was a youth worker from the Kona side of the Big Island. He later spent a number of years as the tour director at the State Capitol in Honolulu. I don't have a full list of those arrested, but they included myself, **Kaniho**, Tassil, Galdeira, Moanikeala Akaka, Loren Akaka, Jim Leatherer, Joe Hekekoa, Delores Kahue, Chris Yuen, Dixon Enos, Francis Kauhane, Andrew Akau, Mark Atkinson, and Anita Heen. I'm proud of the criminal complaint and penal summons that is now framed and on the wall of my office.



Attorney **Gil Johnston** and **Sonny Kaniho** on the flight back to Honolulu at the end of the day. This wasn't the end of the saga. We went to trial in Waimea on criminal trespass charges and won after the judge determined that the lease had expired and that **Parker Ranch** therefore had no right to have us arrested, prompting us to later sue the ranch for false arrest. But that's another tale.

Broken Promise (Sonny) By Henry Kaponu Kaaihue

Look what's happened
Look around
Look who's running this crazy crazy crazy town
Look who's making all the laws
Look who winds up with it all

Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's been waiting his turn in line
Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's gonna wait till he dies

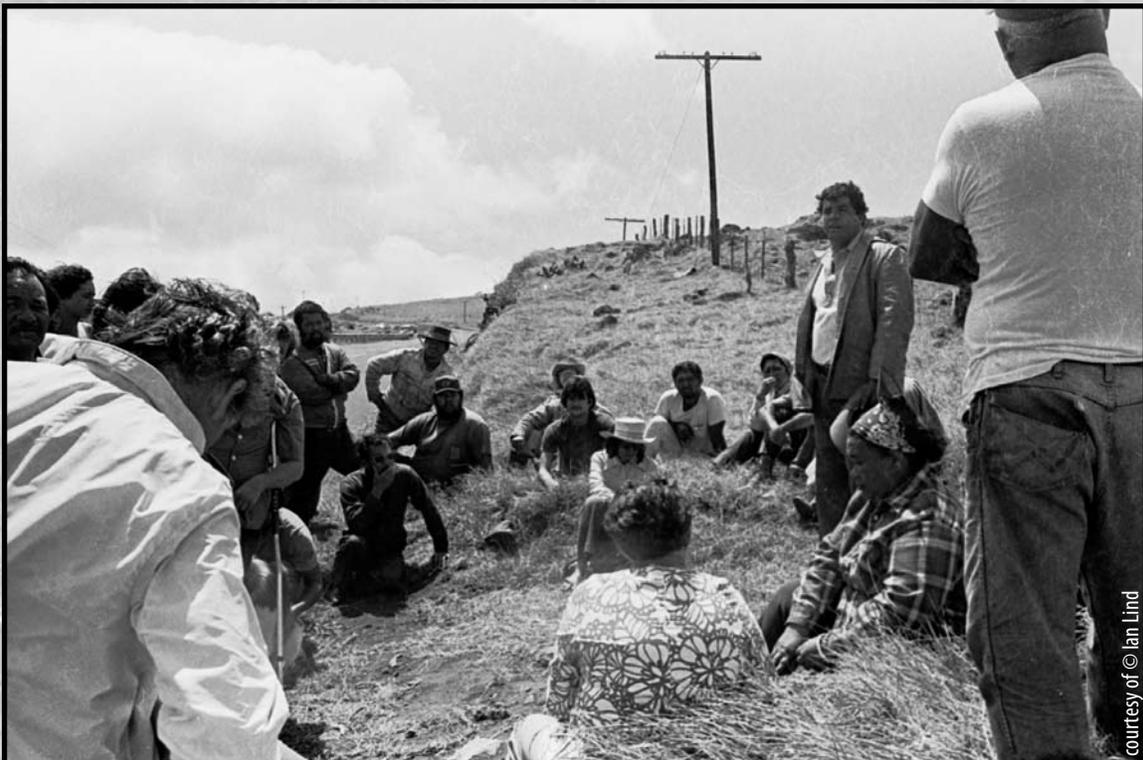
How would you work it out and tell me
What would you do
How much do you take
If it were you
I don't wanna fight (I don't wanna fight)
I don't wanna die (I don't wanna die)
I don't wanna live with all the lies

Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's been waiting his turn in line
Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's gonna wait until he dies

It's all about money
Power and greed
America pointed
In trust by our Queen
We stood up to the changes that come with time
Now we look to the source
To the new nation's rights

Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's been waiting for a change to come
Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's been waiting with an open heart
Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's been waiting his turn in line
Sonny's been waiting
Sonny's gonna wait until he dies
Oh, Sonny's been waiting

Why should he wait till he dies



Closing Statement

by Robin Danner

Sonny Kaniho was a hard working man, a homesteader, a leader, a Hawaiian. One of the many reminders I take from his story and legacy, is that the Hawaiian home land trust is the people's trust. It exists for the people, and we must never abandon it under any circumstance.

Sonny showed us patience, but also responsibility and thoughtful activism. He respected and went through the processes and the systems of the day. And when it did not work, when it left him waiting for decades while his trust lands served non-beneficiary interests, he did not abandon the trust. He stood up for it, he worked to change the trust to serve the people. No matter how long, no matter the effort – Sonny taught us that we must stand up for our trust, and make it work for us.

This task is far from easy, but Sonny Kaniho's life and legacy serves as an inspiration for us all. He was a man of

peace, of principle. Sonny's activism was not rooted in anger or irrationalism, but was instead imbued with a deep love and respect for justice for Hawaiians. Sonny Kaniho's legacy exhorts each of us to develop the same enduring warrior strength, to engage with deliberate, conscientious, and committed activism. Anyone at DHHL with the privilege of serving the trust, should not want it any other way.

I am reminded by Sonny's life, we must not be passive, expecting the fulfillment of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act to be left only to the short term relay races framed by the term of a Governor or a Commissioner, or a civil servant employee. As Hawaiians, as homesteaders, we must take on the much more arduous task of a marathon runner, in the enduring race of taking responsibility for the condition of the trust, guiding the policies at the trust, and most importantly, ensuring that the



Sonny Kaniho
and his dad.

trust uphold the values of our people. Expect much from the trust. And expect much from ourselves. Hawaiians must engage and bring what works for our people to the trust, no matter what may come our way.

Every homesteader, every DHHL employee should be reminded, and carry a little Sonny Kaniho in all that is done at the Hawaiian home land trust.





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