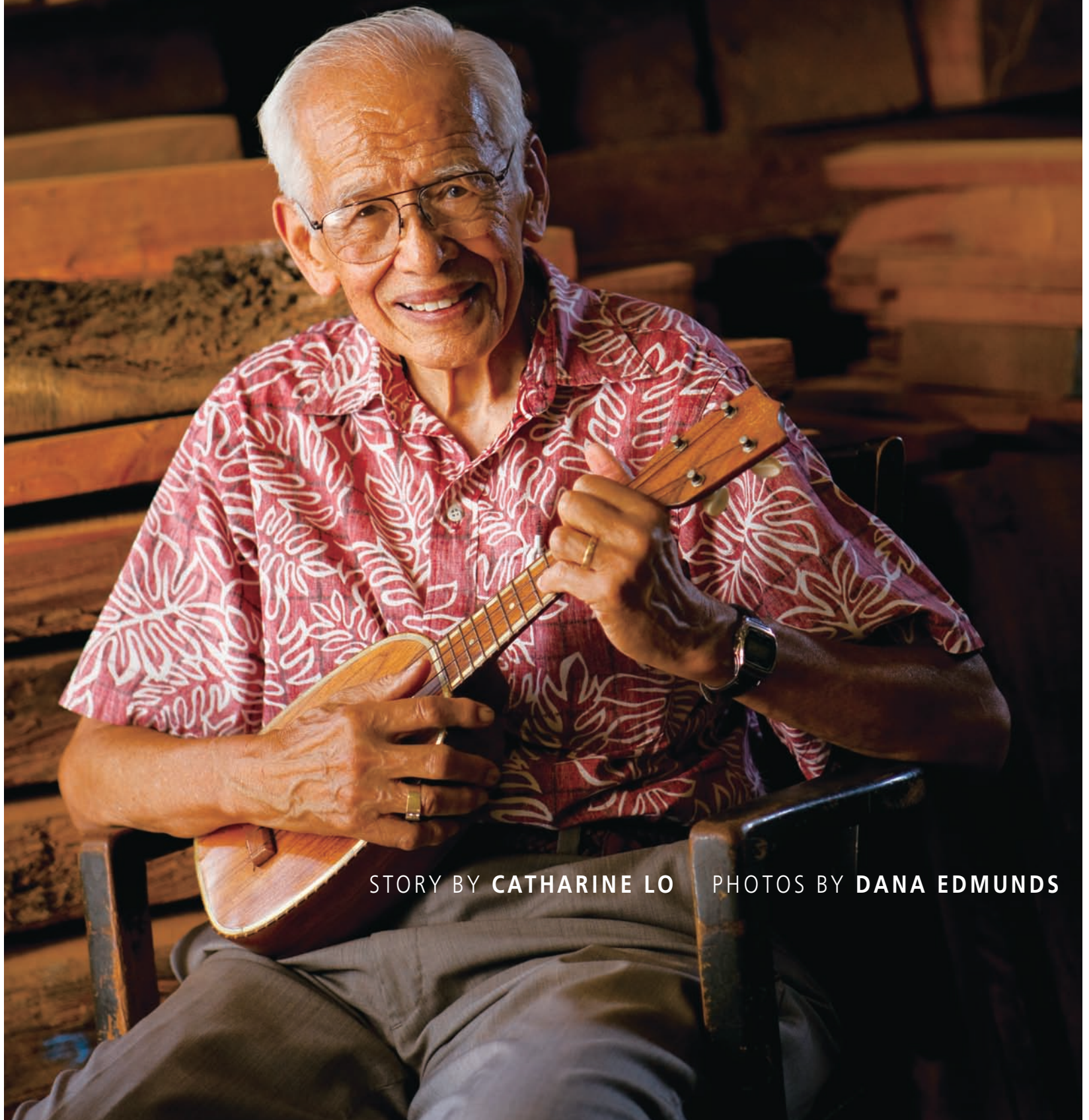


# The Ukulele Dynasty

Three generations of Kamakas have shaped the sound of Hawaii's favorite instrument



STORY BY CATHARINE LO PHOTOS BY DANA EDMUNDS

Quality was so important to Samuel Kamaka that on his deathbed in 1953, he admonished his sons, “Don’t you dare ruin the family name by making junk.”

In 1879, three cabinetmakers from Madeira — Manuel Nunes, Augusto Dias and Jose do Espirito — boarded the Danish ship *Ravenscrag*, bound for the faraway shores of Oahu. They came to work on the sugar plantations, where other Portuguese immigrants had introduced a smaller version of a guitar, the *machete de braca*, to fellow laborers. To the joy of those who had learned to play it, Nunes, Dias and Espirito were able to replicate the instrument. From their adaptations evolved the modern Hawaiian ukulele.



Among Nunes’ protégés was Samuel Kaiakaliili Kamaka, one of the first Hawaiians to become proficient at playing the strings. Sam played not only ukulele but also guitar, upright bass and violin. In 1910, he traveled to New York City to play music and then continued east across the Atlantic. In Spain, Portugal and Italy, he made a careful study of guitar making, and when he returned to Honolulu, he opened his own guitar shop in the basement of his Kaimuki home. His creations were masterful — but he couldn’t sell any. At the time, everyone was fussing over the ukulele.

“Sam, you better start making ukuleles,” his friends insisted. “You gonna starve.”

Kamaka conceded. Applying his guitar-making knowledge to create a bigger sound,

he built an ukulele with an oval-shaped body, a departure from the standard figure eight. “It looks like a pineapple,” an artist friend told Sam. “I’ll paint it.”

That was in 1926. Two years later, the patented “pineapple ukulele” became Kamaka’s signature model and the cornerstone of the Kamaka legacy. By the late ’30s, Kamaka was the only Hawaiian ukulele maker still in business.

PLUNG, PLONG, PLING. In 2010, the 1926 pineapple ukulele still delivers the mellow tone and distinct resonance it did eighty-four years ago. Fred Kamaka, the younger of Sam’s two sons (who is pictured overleaf), plucks the strings of the priceless instrument, which he uses as a prop for the Kamaka factory tours he leads at 550 South Street four days a week.

He pulls out a photo of himself at age 5 in his father’s shop, where he and his brother Samuel, Jr. worked after school each day. Back then, Fred recalls, ukuleles went for \$5 a pop. Today they start at \$650, and retailers wait four months for their orders to be filled.

Samuel Kamaka’s craft was all about giving form to function. His designs produced the *sound* people identify with the Hawaiian ukulele: Acoustic clarity is what validates the Kamaka name. “We heard the word ‘junk’ thirty times a day,” Fred says, remembering his father’s blunt opinion of sub-standard workmanship. Quality was so important to the patriarch that on his deathbed in 1953, he admonished his sons, “Don’t you dare ruin the family name by making junk.”

Sam, Jr. and Fred incorporated Kamaka Hawaii in 1968 and perpetuated the good name of their father, who was inducted posthumously into the Ukulele Hall of Fame in 2000. Today, the company is run by a third generation of Kamakas: Sam, Jr.’s sons Chris and Casey; and Fred’s son, Fred, Jr. The grandsons continue to adhere to Samuel’s exacting standards, and a Kamaka family member personally inspects each instrument before it’s considered “finished.” The company produces approximately 4,000 ukuleles a year, which are shipped all over the world.

As Fred, who is now 85, tells it, their sons weren’t forced but rather found their own way into the trade. “Girls, they gravitated to boys playing music,” he explains, chuckling. “Our sons asked, ‘Dad, can we have an ukulele?’ And we said, ‘No, but you can make one.’” 🌸