

# From the King's Peaceful Copenhagen

## The Work of Danish Amateur Photographer Christian Hedemann in the Hawaiian Islands

*Lynn Ann Davis*

An adventuresome spirit brought Christian Hedemann and his wife Meta to the Hawaiian Islands in 1878. Though intending to stay only a few years to fulfill his contract as a sugar mill engineer, he made the islands his home, returning to Denmark only to visit until his death in Honolulu in 1932. He made a visual record of his experience in the islands, photographing the family's exotic surroundings and providing evidence of its well being, that could be kept for posterity and shared with his relatives in Denmark. He created a virtually unrivalled view of 19th century Hawaii, highlighting change and industrial development in the islands.

Though a Danish expedition visited the Hawaiian Islands in 1846, and Commander Steen Bille's literate description had been published<sup>1</sup>, Danes knew little about conditions in this group of Pacific Islands located 2,500 miles from the coast of California. In 1878 the steamship and locomotive had made it possible to travel from Denmark to Hawaii in less than six weeks. However, the islands remained culturally remote from »the King's peaceful Copenhagen.«<sup>2</sup> As Meta Hedemann told an interviewer many

years later, »neither we, nor other Danes knew much about the Pacific Islands ... not even the Hawaiian Consul in Denmark, Sven Hoffmeyer.«<sup>3</sup>

A friend of his father, August Unna, a Danish sugar plantation owner on Hana, Maui an isolated part of the islands, offered Christian Hedemann a position as chief engineer. At 25 years old, Hedemann had studied both mechanical and marine engineering and was employed as a draftsman and designer of sugar-processing equipment at Burmeister & Wain, Denmark's foremost engineering firm. Instead of returning to Denmark upon the completion of his work at Hana Plantation, Hedemann became the head of the drafting department for Honolulu Iron Works, the largest foundry and manufacturer of sugar mill machinery in the islands. He made his family home in the capital city of Honolulu, raising eight children.

The Hedemanns left for Hawaii intending to establish a proper Danish home and maintain Danish customs so that the family could slip easily back into Copenhagen society when the three-year contract expired. Before departing in May of 1878, they arranged shipping for a piano



*Christian Hedemann:*  
Hedemann House, Hana,  
2. February 1880.  
Wet plate collodion negative  
(5x6 1/2 inches).

and other household items considered essential for civilized living.

Hedemann carried a camera with him,<sup>4</sup> having taken up photography as a natural extension of his fascination with mechanical developments. A few years earlier, he had been so stirred by the technological advances displayed at the World Exposition in Vienna that he remembered it to the end of his days as »a great event« in his life.<sup>5</sup> Many of the exhibits in Vienna had featured photography. Subsequently he joined a growing number of amateurs who spent their leisure time learning the cumber, some process of making images on glass plate negatives, using the wet plate collo-

dion process. It may have been his and Meta's impending move to the islands that prompted the young engineer to acquire his own camera, for only one photograph remains from the period before they left for Hana, a view of the Copenhagen skyline that Hedemann took from Burmeister & Wain, showing the spire of Frelasers Kirke.

Hedemann made very few photographs during his first year and a half in Hana, or perhaps he made more but discarded them because of technical failures in preparing the wet plate collodion negatives. Hedemann's first dated photograph, a view of his house with a Danish flag flying gaily overhead was taken February 1,

*Christian Hedemann:*  
The Big Photo Studio in  
Hana, The Sandwich Islands,  
20 September 1882.  
Wet plate collodion negative  
(3 3/8×4 3/8 inches).



1880.<sup>6</sup> Though marred by irregularities in the coating of the plate, this early picture sets a pattern for Hedemann's photography during the Hana years, a period in which he trained his camera on the people and places closest to him, producing fresh, informal portraits of his growing family and home, as well as of the sugar mill, co-workers, and friends. Though slow and tedious, the collodion wet plate process was a good way to learn the fundamentals of photography. Since Hedemann had to develop his negatives immediately upon exposure, he could see promptly whether he had been successful, make adjustments, and try again. As Meta noted, »When there was nothing else to do, he took to photographing and made pictu-

res of everybody and everything.«<sup>7</sup> Excitement about the medium and his inborn tenacity sustained Hedemann through the frustrations of trial-and-error learning, enabling him to learn from his failures and swiftly achieve technical competence.

Early in 1883 Hedemann went to considerable trouble to convert his carriage shed into a small studio where he could take portraits. To illuminate the room, he made sections of the roof removable, creating a makeshift skylight. Using plans from early photo journals, he had a portable reflector and head rests made in the blacksmith and carpenter shops at the mill. The circular reflector redirected light to areas in a subject's face that would otherwise have been



*Christian Hedemann:*  
Old Hawaiian Woman,  
Hana, September 1883.  
Wet plate collodion negative  
(3 3/8×4 3/8 inches).

formal relationship with unfamiliar sitters. Before starting the studio, Hedemann's portraits were limited to family members and fellow Danes; now he proceeded to produce a remarkable visual inventory of the growing ethnic diversity in Hana. Photographs he took there, as Meta noted later, depict »the many different people who came around to work in the fields from time to time ... Southern Islanders, Chinese, Portuguese, and even a small colony of Scandinavians.«<sup>8</sup>

This part of Hedemann's work parallels photographic studies of indigenous, non-white peoples that were made during the later part of the 19th century, and were reproduced in pictorial newspapers and popular texts, and providing many Westerners with their first glimpse of Polynesians, Asians and Africans.<sup>9</sup> These photographic studies concentrated on identifying physical types, using straightforward frontal and profile views as the standard means of inventorying features. Hedemann's pictures of Hana residents, especially his profile portrait of a Hawaiian woman, suggest familiarity with this photographic genre.

Within the frame of his photographs he also created a visual order that transformed an often unsettling encounter with island life into familiar and comprehensible images of his home, and family. His photographs of his growing family seem calculated to show what proper young Danes his offspring were. The children

lost in shadow, while the head rests, their stands carefully hidden behind chairs and in folds of clothing, braced sitters to ensure that they did not move during the exposure. As a finishing touch, Hedemann covered the shed's dirt floor with a *lauhala* (pandanus) mat.

In this »Big Photo Studio in Hana, Sandwich Islands«, as he jokingly called it, Hedemann executed a body of work of lasting importance. Opening the studio not only enhanced his ability to control the photographic environment but also created a neutral location where the *haole* (Caucasian) photographer could establish a

*Christian Hedemann:*  
Hedemann's 4 Boys,  
The Hedemann house,  
Nu'uuanu Avenue, Honolulu,  
April 1885.  
Dry plate negative  
(5x7 inches).  
From left to right:  
Howard, Ferdinand, Carl and  
Johannes Hedemann.



were raised »in the same manner as if we lived in a city community«, Hedemann wrote in his autobiography,<sup>10</sup> the boys always look as if the Hedemann's had regular access to a European haberdashery; clad in outfits decorated with ribbons, white collars, and lace, well groomed and impeccably shod, they posed for their father's camera.

Hedemann took his camera inside sugar mills, and the Honolulu Iron Works. His photographs of the mills reflect personal pride in his accomplishments as well as the prevailing fervor of the steam age and Hedemann's love of »beautiful things for the sake of their perfection of design and intricate workmanship.«<sup>11</sup> The gleaming sugar mill machinery of Hana Plantation provided forms pleasing to the photographer's eye but also emblems of the industrial era.

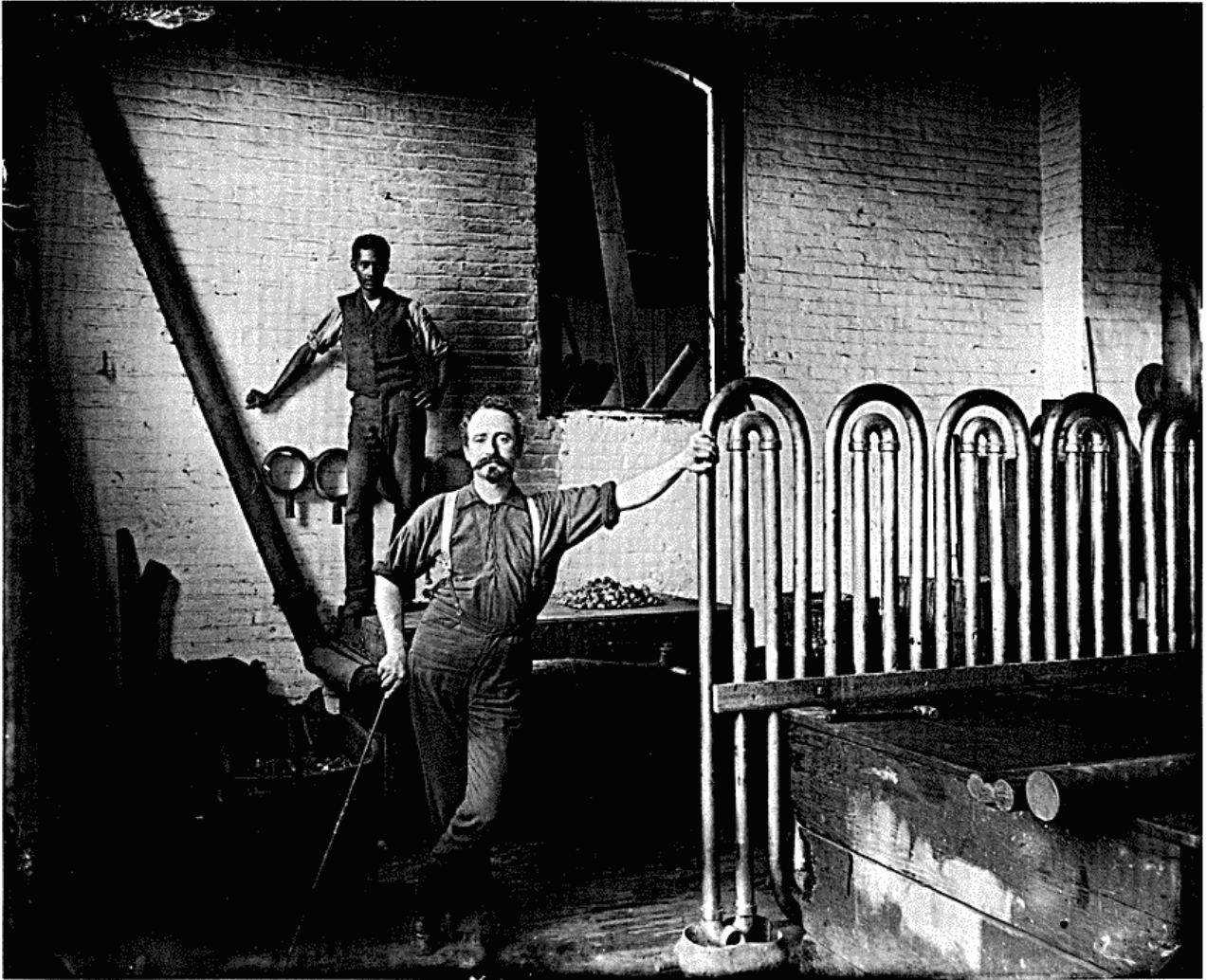
Like the photographs he took of Hana Plantation, Hedemann's images of the Honolulu Iron Works focus on the place itself and on the men who worked there. Hedemann's pictures had value in publicizing the size, nature, and technological capabilities of the Iron Works. A series of his photographs of the foundry and shops, exhibited in the Hawaiian Government Exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1889,<sup>12</sup> demonstrated for visitors from around the world not only the progress of the plant, but also the industrial transformation of remote, romantic Hawaii. The dynamics between the Iron Works' Hawaiian and *haole* (Caucasian) workers are exemplified in Hedemann's photograph of its coppersmiths, Andrew Brown and Louis Phelps. Brown's cocky stance conveys pride in himself and in his work, as well as his authority over his Hawaiian apprentice. Phelps, a

Hawaiian who worked at the Iron Works for more than 30 years and eventually became head coppersmith, has yielded center stage to his Scottish boss yet exudes a quiet confidence as he stands above him, neither defiant nor deferential.

Hedemann helped organize the *Hawaiian Camera Club*, drawing amateur photographers he knew in Honolulu together with others he had met during his travels around the islands on Iron Works business. His own past isolation as the islands' only amateur photographer undoubtedly stirred his interest in establishing a fraternity of camera enthusiasts. An informal network had begun a few years earlier<sup>13</sup> and expanded as dry plate negatives encouraged amateurs to try their luck. By 1889 enough amateur photographers were working in the islands to warrant the formation of a club.

When the *Hawaiian Camera Club* was formally founded in early January, 1889, Hedemann was elected its first president.<sup>14</sup> Word of the new association swiftly reached London, and the February issue of the *British Journal of Photography* greeted its emergence as an indication that civilization was dawning in Hawaii:

»It is not such a number of years since the natives of the Hawaiian Islands in the Pacific were not quite so far advanced in social, commercial, or any other kind of culture as we know them to be at present. For at least a decade the inhabitants of Honolulu have rejoiced in the possession of a daily newspaper, and evolution has been carried a stage further by the formation of a camera club there. We learn from official sources that there are 50 amateurs in these islands, which ought to be enough material to



*Christian Hedemann:*

The Honolulu Iron Works' Coppersmiths, Honolulu, c. 1888.

Dry Plate negative (8×10 inches).

Chief coppersmith Andrew Brown (foreground) and apprentice Louis Phelps.

make the organization prosperous and useful.«<sup>15</sup>

Lacking a strong artistic bent, the scientific-minded men and women of the *Hawaiian Camera Club* fixed their attention on the mechanics of the new photo technology, periodically calling on fellow members to give lessons or lectures to fulfill the club's goal of »mutual improvement in the photographic art.«<sup>16</sup> Hedemann, avid in his interest and generous with his knowledge, taught many of the fledgling photographers how to use the camera and develop plates,<sup>17</sup> and he often led experiments with new advances in photography, including making interior photographs with flash, and photographic enlargements for exhibitions.

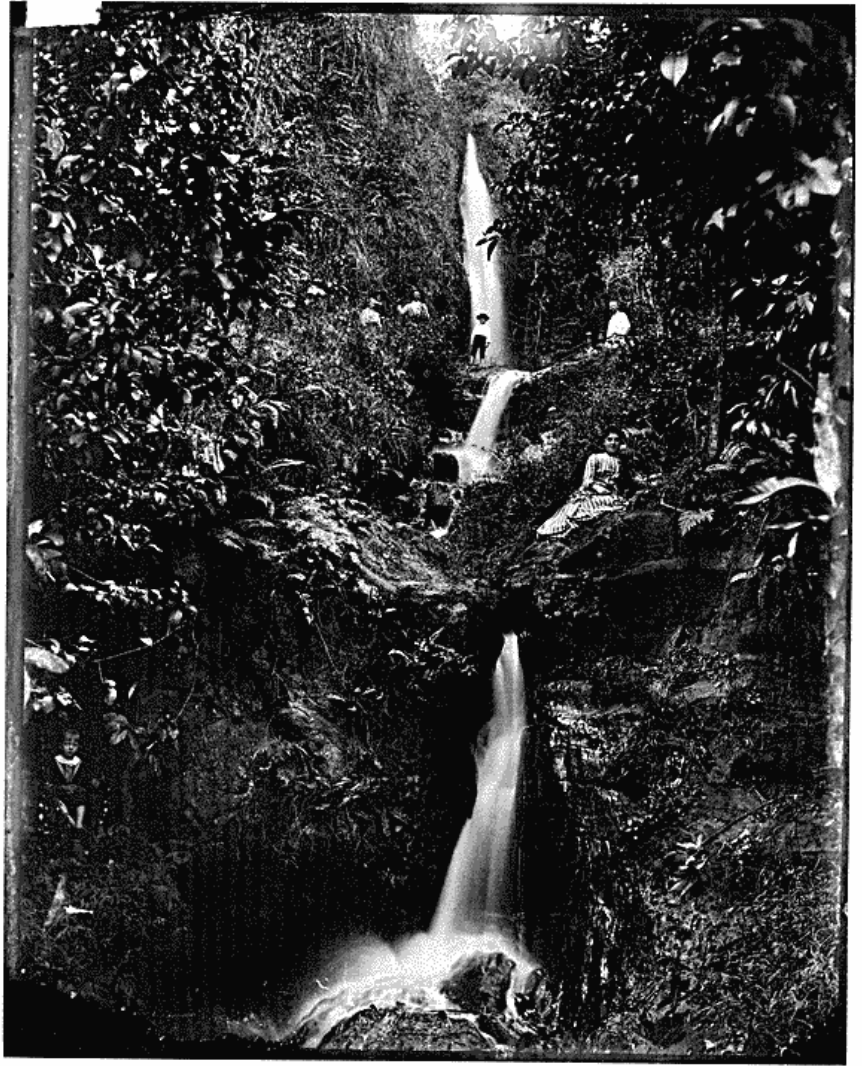
Keeping pace with the latest trends, in 1889 *Hawaiian Camera Club* members posed for group portraits using magnesium flash. Buoyed by success at the club, Hedemann soon brought flash paraphernalia into his parlor for a family portrait that caught several of the children peering to the left of the camera, where Hedemann ignited the magnesium powder. When the club held its first show in November, 1889, Hedemann exhibited ten pictures, including a bromide enlargement of a family picnic at Makiki falls.<sup>18</sup>

The Camera Club introduced Honolulu society to the thrill of large projected images with the club's first lantern slide show in November 1890. An enthralled reviewer noted that it was a

»rare opportunity of making a tour of the Hawaiian Islands without the fatigue of a journey ...«<sup>19</sup>. Operating the »magic lantern«, no simple trick, was left to Christian Hedemann, the club president. Besides loading the large glass slides into the carrier and slipping them into the projector, Hedemann had to check the burning lime every few minutes to ensure sufficient brightness. A good operator also learned to anticipate the speaker's cues for the next slide so that there were smooth, well-timed transitions from scene to scene. Evidently Hedemann quickly became adept at projection, for when the club presented a second show the following month, a reviewer noted, »The different views were seen in the clearest manner by the audience who showed their appreciation by frequent applause.«<sup>20</sup> On his first visit to Denmark in 1902, Hedemann brought along his lantern slide projector to give his family and friends a view of his adopted island home.

Although Hedemann lived his life in the islands he was »Danish in mind and heart.«<sup>21</sup> The values of his native culture, generation, and class were reflected in his close-knit family, class allegiance, sense of privacy and orderliness, and faith in the promise of the industrial age. As one might expect, these values were reflected in Hedemann's photographs. The photographic he made of the islands has no equal, they provide a remarkable visual record of the Hawaiian Islands in the 19th century.





*Christian Hedemann:*  
Makiki Falls,  
Honolulu, c. 1889.  
Dry plate negative  
(8×10 inches).