Rock wall building is not the type of employment that draws lines at job fairs, not a career where you whistle while you work—unless you know Sam Cooke’s ditty about working on the chain gang. Rock wall building is one of the hardest of hard jobs, and I’d never associated it with an air of tranquility until today as I sit in a Waipahu backyard watching a crew of seven guys calmly finish up a retaining wall. Not a murmur is heard as Moli hands a soccer ball-sized rock to Aaron, who wedges the rock’s jagged edge against another already set on the unfinished wall. Aaron leans in to make sure the new addition is level; then, on a signal invisible to me, Moli pours in dark cement to flood the puka. Every move I’m watching is calculated to lock the rocks into an instant puzzle that will stump the force of a bad storm, even the weathering of time itself.

“We like to concentrate,” Aaron says when I ask him about the quietude. Everyone’s on a lunch break now, eating helpings of curried beef stew so plentiful they’re overflowing the edges of takeout containers. “There’s plenty of time for joking when the job is done, but while we’re working, what is there to talk about? Except making the work look nice so others will want to hire us.”

The crew I’m with today works for Mataele Masonry, founded by Aaron’s uncles forty years ago. All seven masons are Tongan—news that won’t come as a surprise if you’re from O’ahu, where burly men from the South Pacific nation are known to dominate the rock wall, or pa pohaku, building trade. But while their passports may be foreign, their skill is pure Polynesian. After all, the raw material they use is the stuff Polynesia is made of: balsatic rock provided courtesy of eons of volcanic eruptions. Whether for house foundations, kitchen implements or weaponry, lava rock was the material of convenience in island cultures of old. Sitting with the Tongan group, I mention one of their country’s most compelling stone structures, the Ha’amanga, a colossal lava stone perfectly balanced on two pillars; it appears to gauge the solstice, a la Stonehenge. One of the workers, Monie, says that even more remarkably, the Ha’amanga is situated on an island that is more coral than lava. Slipping into their Tongan language, they are all laughing, then stopping to translate: “Impossible, yeah? But the islanders long ago had a way of doing it.”

Beef stew almost finished, Aaron introduces two workers as “real newcomers,” and there’s more laughing: The wiry-looking pair are each well into their seventies and between them share more than a century of experience with Mataele Masonry.

As these seven are with stone, so they are with each other: at ease sharing the workload of an arduous job. You might say this, too, is a Polynesian tradition that goes a long way in explaining the prevalence of stone walls in the region. It follows then that a mortar of family and fellowship is enshrined in these structures—which is perhaps one reason why stone walls leave a pleasing mark on daily life in the Islands.

Lest you doubt this, look around at our rock walls—from majestic grids in downtown Honolulu to rambling paths across pastureland, even to remote ruins in rainforests where only the most intrepid hikers are rewarded by the sight of human industry so far off the beaten path. Now, in your mind’s eye, change those walls to fences. Oops, sorry! Last winter’s tropical storm pretty much ravaged all that wood. Better fabricate some blocky concrete walls. They serve the purpose of etching form onto the local landscape, but...ughh. How at home in Hawai‘i do you feel?
When I visit with Kauasi Mataele, proprietor of Mataele Masonry, in front of the company’s monumental 400-foot-long wall leading to the Mormon Temple in La’ie, he sums up the secret of his success as a stone builder like this: “Find the talent God gave you, because God gives everyone a talent. Then do everything you can to use it, and use it honestly!”

Ancient Hawaiians had rock wall building talent to spare—a fact in special evidence on the Big Island’s Kona side, perhaps the rock wall capital of all Polynesia. Everywhere you look here, there is pohaku, or rock, much of it crafted into human structures. Historians believe that many of the sites around Kona have their origin in a building boom that took place in the twelfth century under the command of the very martial-minded Chief Pa’ao, who arrived from Tahiti and exerted a dual dominion: as an engineer of public works projects and of community life, where he instituted the worship of Ku, god of war and ruling spirit of architecture.

The remains of this era range from the windswept Mo’okini heiau to the sanctuary-conferring walls of the City of Refuge at Honaunau. No less evocative are the chants that have been handed down for generations, which tell how commoners shouldered the load of building, passing stones in long relay lines. Belief in the generative power of the heavy material may have been buoyed by the presence of at least three active Big Island volcanoes—province of the powerful goddess Pele. “Ancient Hawaiians may not have worshipped stone per se, but they saw fit to imbue certain stones with sacredness by making them into occupational deities—let’s say for prosperity in fishing,” says Nathan Napoka, a Hawaiian cultural specialist with the state’s Historic Preservation Division.

When Gino Bergman first came to Kona in 1958, it was as if he saw the region through the lens of its pohaku-infused history. “I mean, in this five-mile corridor between Keauhou and Kailua, you could see the archeological remains of stone platforms with specific purposes—one a canoe shed, the other a women’s shed,” he remembers. “You could tell it had been a thriving community. And you could see what it was to take a pile of rock—not so nice-looking—and orchestrate it so that it was beautiful.” He pauses, then emphasizes, “Beautiful is the word.”

The Laguna Beach native who was destined to become one of Kona’s most prominent stone builders and artists was hanaied (adopted) by Aunty Jo Roy, who shared her knowledge of the area as well as her aloha. “We would drive around in this old Model T of Aunty’s and deliver fish from the ocean, fruit from the trees,” Gino recalls. It wasn’t long before he was gaining insight into the methods of ancient Hawaiian masonry. And then he was recruited to help rebuild an aging seawall fronting the ocean on Ali‘i Drive. “I had to dismantle the structure, and that’s always the best way to learn how it was put together,” he notes.

What Gino learned was the ingenuity of uhau humu pohaku, or dry stacking. As the name implies, it is masonry without mortar or metal joinery. “Each layer is locked into place by the one below,” he says, describing other gravity-resistant touches such as inwardly tilting facades and adjacent stones that clench together like upper and lower jaws of teeth. “You can jump on it and it won’t move!” Gino marvels. To do this work, he says, requires one primary virtue: patience. “You have to be able to connect with the stone and get enjoyment out of it—in the same way you connect with your animals.”

Gino combined dry stack techniques with his artistic vision to evolve a style that uses rock of all different textures and hues. When we visit one of his many walls in Kona, he launches into stories about how he acquired the individual rocks: Smooth water-washed stones came from down at the beach. A scarlet boulder was a gift. “Once people saw what I was trying to do, a lot started bringing me stones because they knew they would get a good home,” says Gino. He points out a rock dimpled with rounded craters, the imprints of sea urchins. “Gathering stones and having a palette as vast as Hawai‘i is where the fun is,”
he says, adding that he has carted rocks back to Hawai‘i from Rapa Nui to India while always “walking the talk of stone masonry”: Never disturb the integrity of ancient sites.

Talking of the decades he has spent building rock walls, Gino laughs that, if put in one long line, his walls might reach all the way to the Mainland. So perhaps, he muses, he has done enough at age seventy-three.

Though he looks young for his age—like so many others in the wall-building trade—I can’t help but ask what he gets out of such an arduous job. After reflecting a moment, he answers that as a child he changed schools more than twenty times; now, at last, he has found a profession where he can leave his mark. As proof of this, he tells me about the ultimate compliment paid to him by a passing truckload of local masons: “I’m working on the other side of my wall in the trench, and I hear some guys saying, ‘Look at how the edges all natural. Look how it’s like one painting in a museum. Like Gino’s work.’ Then they see me and go, ‘What you doing here?’ before realizing it is Gino’s work!”

**Just above Kona town** behind Border’s Bookstore sit remnants of the five-mile-long King’s Wall built by the subjects of Big Island Governor Kuakini in the early 1800s to contain herds of wandering livestock. Napoka, who wrote about this era in the book Pohaku, says masonry skills were widespread by this time: “For the average paniolo, the ability to quickly repair a puka in a dry stack wall was as essential as knowing how to ride a horse.” In the absence of any guild to teach stone building skill, it was expected that sons would observe and absorb the talents of their fathers. At the same time, Napoka notes, builders who really distinguished themselves might find themselves fast-tracked for royal recognition—a kupuna (expert) status was given to those who planned and placed stone architecture.

With the introduction of mortar and metal as early as the eighteenth century, Hawaiian stone builders found themselves in a busy new job market. Immigrants were eager to import their own buildings styles, which explains the kaleidoscopic touches on public buildings around Honolulu, from the Tudor-style eaves of the city’s first pumping station in Kaka‘ako to the fretted medieval gun turrets atop the gateways to Diamond Head’s Fort Ruger. But in all this activity, the demand for stone remained constant.

Missing from the picture was the cultural context. Like many things Hawaiian, it was eclipsed until Hawaiian identity reasserted itself in the 1970s during a period simply referred to as the Renaissance. If many are adjusting their vision to see rock wall building as indigenous architecture, then the credit largely goes to Billy Fields, who, it seems, still has a hard time believing that he has succeeded as both a commercial stone mason and a cultural avatar. This later part of his reputation stems from his extensive restoration work on more than 100 historic sites, including heiau and fishponds; his roster of commercial clients is even lengthier. About sixty percent of his projects are modern mortar-based, the rest are dry-stack—a style in which he is so masterful, he was chosen to represent Hawai‘i in a Folk Builders of America Festival sponsored by the Smithsonian. He shakes his head laughingly at the memory of doing a demo in D.C. next to Italian marble carvers. “A lot of local people came by, and they were so happy to see what I do. Just the sight of rock walls brought back memories. And I was ready for them with all the macadamia candy I brought along.”

Billy radiates energy. Tomorrow he’s off to Haleakala on Maui, where the National Park Service has hired him to oversee some wall renovations. It seems a stroke of sheer luck I am able to locate him in his hometown of Kona. It’s pau hana time on a weekday afternoon, and as we head up the road in his huge truck, it’s not long before he’s slowing down to trade shakas with some of the men making their way home from any of his six concurrent jobsites. “My men are tough. This is a tough job. Everyone sleeps well after a day of work,” he says.
Their sense of accomplishment, he hopes, comes not just from their physical labor. “At just about every jobsite, we make it a habit to pule,” he says, using the Hawaiian word for prayer. This is part of the protocol he has instituted; it also includes reciting chants and genealogies connected to the sites the workmen are about to enter. “Discipline is important because this is what it takes to get to the jobsite everyday and work your butt off,” he says. “It’s through this hard work that you find your way to the spirituality of the culture.”

Billy’s own turning point in his career came in 1989 when the Daughters of Hawai‘i, the caretakers of Hulihe‘e Palace in Kona, asked Fields to restore the aging dry stack palace wall. He drives me to the site and describes the sense of reverence he felt for the stones themselves. “These might have passed through the hands of my own ancestors,” he says, with amazement in his voice. The palace job so inspired Fields that he went through masonry training and did everything he had to to pass the state licensing boards, including joining the union, racking up apprentice hours and learning the state’s building code. Nowadays in his commercial work, he takes on jobs that he doesn’t hesitate to describe as “real monstrosities for all the red tape involved: getting permits, addressing archeological concerns, working with contractors, suppliers, workmen’s comp, medical”—all the while never losing sight of his all-Hawaiian crew’s spiritual needs. Sometimes this has included the need to pointedly lecture on Hawaiian values. “Once, when things got out of hand, I had to sit some of the men down and give them Hawaiian terms to think about. One is kaumaha. This is the personal burden each of us carries. It is meant to be left at the gate when you come into a place where cooperation is everything. I mean, when you practice wall-building, it’s nothing less than practicing life.”

In addition to pa pohaku, the Hawaiian landscape houses kuapa, seawalls that enclose manmade fishponds known as loko i’a. Peter Keka is too modest to come out and say it, but he must have known he was the right guy for the job when he was hired to help restore Kaloko-Honokahau National Park’s massive loko i’a, which was originally constructed some 800 years ago at the behest of the ali‘i. Old-timers in Kona have told me that it’s highly possible Peter’s forebears were on the original crew.

In the last century, Peter’s grandfather—a skilled stone worker—assumed responsibility for maintaining the loko i’a’s walls. Peter worked by his side until a ranching business bought the area and let the fishpond fall into disuse. Peter moved to Honolulu and parlayed all that he’d learned into a life as a union mason. He never stopped thinking about Kaloko, though, where his family not only worked and fished but also camped, played slack key guitar and talked story through the night by the fire. And he remembered his grandfather’s prediction that he would someday return to malama—care for—the fishpond kuapa.

But neither these wonderful memories nor the pleasantness of today’s rare vogless weather can offset how backbreaking the task at hand is for Keka and his men. In two years, they have rebuilt about one-third of the entire structure, which they intend to complete and make entirely functional using little more than the same bare hands used by their forebears.

Ted Garduque, an enthusiastic visitor to the Kaloko site, says he is impressed by the “stasis and dynamics” of the dry stack masonry here. Translation: This is real architecture, thoughtfully designed to be flexible enough to withstand the stress of water and wind and still retain its discreet shape. Ted points out how the puka are purposely created to absorb wave energy from outside as well as to filter and oxygenate the pond.

I can’t resist asking the wiry sixty-seven-year-old Keka what he thinks his ancestors would make of the admiring reviews directed at their building skills. He agrees they knew how to use what was at hand and they were, as many modern observers have intimated, so aware of building material in their environment that the bond could be termed spiritual. “But nowadays, we’re different. Our society is too much in a rush.
We want productivity, not spirituality,” he says. I am curious to know if his grandfather left him with words of wisdom about his chosen profession. A wry smile spreads across Peter’s face as he answers: “He just always said, ‘Son, in this life you gotta work like hell, or you might starve.’”

He taps his fingers on his temple. “You just have to put mind over matter and work from in here,” he says. I point out that he’s talking about metric tons of matter piled around us in an intimidating heap. “How do you know which rock to put where?” I venture.

“Same as you, when you write,” he says breaking into a necessarily raspy laugh, evidence of the cancer he was diagnosed with some twelve years ago but managed to overcome. He continues his explanation: “When I read what you’ve written, I’m going to be asking, ‘Just how did she know which word to use and where to put it?’ But you did it, because it’s what’s inside your imagination. Same with me. This is what I imagine. This is in my blood.” HH