



The Honolulu Advertiser

HAWAII'S NEWSPAPER

SUNDAY | July 2, 2006

SESQUICENTENNIAL EDITION

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Posted on: Sunday, July 2, 2006

Alfred Shaheen

By **Mike Gordon**
Advertiser Staff Writer

People who knew garment-maker Alfred Shaheen told him he was crazy in 1952 when he took a pile of scrap lumber, bailing wire and junkyard motors and built the equipment needed to print his own tropical designs on the cloth used for his aloha shirts.

But fortune follows the brave, and Shaheen built a Hawai'i-based empire that earned him millions and put his unique aloha shirts on the backs of people all over the world. He brought mass production of textile printing and clothing manufacturing to the Islands and employed hundreds of workers.

By statehood, it was said that Shaheen was "the kingpin of Hawai'i's sprouting garment manufacturing industry." His tropical designs and business decisions were credited with taking an industry with less than \$1 million in sales in 1947 to roughly \$15 million by 1959.

Shaheen initially did not want a career in the garment business, even though his father and grandfather owned fabric mills and a chain of stores on the Mainland.

Shaheen was born in New Jersey in 1922. He was an All-American football player at Whittier College, where he received an engineering degree. During World War II, Shaheen was a fighter pilot who flew 85 missions over Europe.

After the war, he moved to Honolulu, where his family had been since 1938 after opening a custom dress-making business. In 1948, Shaheen decided to open his own aloha shirt manufacturing company — Shaheen's of Honolulu. He had only four sewing machines and four seamstresses, each one taught by his mother.

At the time, Island companies would import textiles, then cut and sew them into their own designs. But the unpredictability of shipping to Hawai'i forced them to keep a five-month inventory of fabric. So Shaheen decided to create his own printing factory in 1952 — Surf 'n Sand Hand Prints — in a rented Quonset hut.



Alfred Shaheen, seen here around 1960, turned the aloha shirt industry into a multimillion-dollar enterprise by starting his own textile printing factory in Hawai'i in 1952.

Advertiser library photo



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Shaheen wanted a look that was different, and his designs quickly gained widespread popularity.

All screening was done by hand, and workers were told to force more ink into the shirt fabric to enrich the colors. Shaheen fabric usually had three- to five-color designs, which were part of a library of more than 1,000 dye colors.

His upscale clothing was sold in major Mainland stores and also in London, France, Hong Kong, Tahiti and Cuba, among other places. He would later open a successful chain of seven stores in Hawai'i.



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