



BOB
SIGALL
REARVIEW MIRROR

Plantations workers lost their names to numbers

When sugar was transforming Hawaii 120 years ago, the plantation leaders had a problem. Their workers were from many different countries, spoke different languages and had unusual names. How could the plantations keep them straight so the right person would be paid accurately?

The solution for them was bango. Bango means "number" in Japanese. Each worker would be assigned one. It's pronounced "bong go."

"As the laborers arrived in Hawaii, an official from the plantation assigned a number to each person coming off the ship," said Edwin Kaukali in his book with Wayne A. Subica, "Hawaii Plantation Pay System & History About the Old Days." They were each given a tag made by the plantation, usually of brass or aluminum.

The tags came in circles, squares, octagons, triangles

and ovals in various sizes. Each represented a different ethnic group.

"The assigned number was his identification for everything: pay, charging purchases at the plantation store, history of the individual, deductions for infractions, overtime pay and laundry services were logged in the company records by their 'bango.'

"ON PAYDAY, employees had to present their 'bango' tag to the payroll clerk to receive their pay. No 'bango tag, no pay' was the policy," Kaukali said.

Even local stores used laborer's bango in extending credit.

The idea began in the 1890s, decades before the Social Security Administration came up with a similar numbering system for workers. It spread to all 60 or so plantations, who all developed their own bango. Workers usually wore them on a chain

around their necks.

The bango system helped managers run the plantations, but many workers felt slighted by it. Ronald Takaki in the book "Pau Hana" quoted one who said, "They

never call a man by his name. Always the bango, 7209 or 6508 in that manner. And that was the thing I objected to. I wanted my name, not the number."

Most plantations phased

out bango tags and just used numbers by World War II.

Today the tags command \$30 to \$75 on eBay.

Bob Sigall, author of the

"Companies We Keep" books, looks through his collection of old photos to tell stories each Friday of Hawaii people, places and companies. Email him at Sigall@Yahoo.com.



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COURTESY

Workers were issued bango tags at Hawaii plantations because managers had trouble with their names.