



PEPE HALECK  
PIONEER NURSE

One of the most beautiful and popular love songs of Samoa is entitled "Le Foma'i e, O le Taumanu Sa Lupepe" ("A Bird That Flutters Like a Butterfly"). It was composed over 60 years ago by a Samoan theological student about his unrequited love for Pepe, a pioneer nurse of American Samoa. The words and music of this love song are inspiring and thought-provoking whenever it is sung, by both old and young, as is often done at festive gatherings of the Samoan people, at home and abroad.

Pepe (pronounced Pepe as in "blend" or "bless") was born on January 11, 1894, to the Reverend Iosefa Malemo of Olosega, Manu'a, and his wife, Malamaisaua Tufele, of a renowned family also of the Manu'a islands; she had three sisters and two brothers. Although from the family of a religious minister, as a child Pepe was raised by her grandmother Toeolesigano in the Manu'a islands.

In 1906, at age 12 she was taken under the sponsorship of Governor Moore (then Commandant and chief administrator of American Samoa) to attend the Church girls' school on Tutuila; in 1913 she completed her studies and in 1914 Pepe and two other girls from the same school became the first Samoan women to enter nurses' training. They graduated in 1916 and became the first American Samoan qualified nurses.

One of the unmistakable qualities of a true pioneer and leader is humility coupled with a determination to succeed. Pepe was always conscious of what she wanted to do in life; at the same time she was haunted by the fact that she might make a mistake and thereby bring disgrace to her parents and family in the eyes of the socially highly structured Samoan society. To allow her to run her life the way she wanted without causing improper reflection on her parents and relatives, she decided that she was only to be known as Pepe, without a family name.

Pepe in Samoan is a general name for "butterfly"; and like a butterfly she was delicate in build, not more than 5 feet tall and weighed not more than 100 pounds at any one time in her life. Yet she was extremely alert in her nature, versatile and effervescent.

She was a lady of strong will and charisma. She relates with meticulous detail how after an hour of briefing by the health authorities for a new job as a Samoan District Nurse she went on strike and stayed home until the authorities found out what had happened. Given a chance to air her grievances, she pointed out that the conditions for carrying out her duties were ill-defined and it was irresponsible of the health officials to send nurses out into the villages without prior arrangements for proper escort and appropriate places to stay. The authorities rectified the situation, and Pepe's grievances being duly met, off she went to do her job as she was assigned.

During the early days of her work in the villages, elephantiasis, yaws and sore eyes were common diseases among the villagers. Her clinics started early in the morning and continued until all the patients were served. She bathed and rubbed with medicinal ointment vast numbers of village children. Pepe's determination to be the best at what she did and her deep sense of service to her people caused her to work long days without even thinking of taking a coffee break.

As is the case today, a nurse in those days was highly regarded in the villages. At night the taulele'a -- the untitled men of the village -- came with food to feast with the District Nurse in the religious minister's house where she always stayed. On days when the work was light she took advantage of opportunities to join the taulele'a on their fishing expeditions; she never hesitated when an opportunity presented itself to learn more about her traditional Samoan way of life. She received endless proposals for marriage, but viewed them then as an occupational hazard and a diversion in her normal routine.

Pepe worked long and hard, treating large numbers of children and adults in the villages. There were hazardous trips in outrigger canoes to get to some of the villages on the north shore, but she insisted on getting there to treat the children and the sick. "The work was difficult," she said, "walking alone between villages on hilly roads, and it was tiring; but I never thought of it in that way because to be able to provide nursing services to the people was paramount and exciting."

In 1919, Pepe was the first Samoan nurse to be sent on scholarship for training to the mainland United States, first in the Naval Hospital on Mare Island, California, and then at the Children's Hospital in San Francisco. Upon her return to American Samoa a year later, she had without doubt the most advanced training among her colleagues and she became an effective champion of the Samoan nurses' cause for fair treatment in health policies. In 1926, Pepe became the first Samoan to be Chief Nurse in American Samoa.

One of the early events that tested Pepe's adherence to the principle of fairness involved one of her relatives who was a nurse. The woman went to Hawaii and on her return demanded to be promoted above other student nurses. Although there was some merit in the demand, it was not sufficient to justify a promotion; Pepe ruled for her to stay in the same class as those who worked in Samoa.

Because of her dynamic leadership qualities, Pepe was sent by the American Samoa Government in 1928 as Samoa's delegate to the first conference of the Pan Pacific Women's Association held in Hawaii. She became one of the four original founders and charter members of the Pan Pacific Southeast Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA), the Pacific region's first independent international women's organization. It is noteworthy that the founding of the PPSEAWA, it is said, was instrumental in formally establishing organized women's activities in the Pacific Basin. It was, so far as can be determined, the first women's group anywhere to be founded upon transcultural premises (Paul F. Hooper). Pepe played a major role in the foundation and continued existence of this distinguished organization.

In the days when it was fashionable for the best of girls in Samoa to marry a potential minister of religion, Pepe sent back the engagement ring of her theologian suitor and calmly explained that she was not ready to get married. This unorthodox behavior inspired the love song mentioned earlier. Ten years later on January 11, 1936, Pepe was married to Max Haleck, a well-to-do businessman of German descent in Pago Pago. She became known from then on as Pepe Haleck.

Pepe's formal career as an American Samoa Government nurse ended with her marriage. Her interest in nursing work continued to haunt her, however, and in 1937 she founded the Nurse's Alumni Association and became its first president; also, health authorities still looked to her as having a strong influence on matters related to nurses, even though she was out of the hospital.

In 1957, when American Samoa nurses went on strike it was Pepe Haleck to whom the Governor turned for help. She went to the village where the nurses had gathered and brought them all back to work. She is a firm believer in presenting grievances to the proper authorities and she is a fighter to improve nurses' benefits and working conditions, but she would not approve of striking before a proper approach was made. This hardly seems the advice of a person who went on strike before she actually started to work; but considering her life of dedication to nursing services in all aspects, she is perhaps one of the very few persons in American Samoa, even today, to whom the nurses of American Samoa would listen.

Pepe organized and founded many women's organizations in American Samoa to enhance and improve services (health and other types) to the people of American Samoa, and she was widely and adoringly recognized for her devotion to minister to her people's needs.

At age 80 while still active in being a nurse to her bedridden husband, she was also still visiting the prisoners in their cells every week, saying prayers for them and on special occasions giving them gifts. Today at age 91 she has remained healthy and alert in the intimate warmth of her children's loving care and devotion.

"'If music be the food of Love, play on,' said Shakespeare, and the dedicated life of Pepe Haleck to the establishment and advancement of nursing services in American Samoa is indeed music and must play on" (Palauni Tuiasosopo).