

Kanawa Point



Is there where it happened? Photo taken on Kanawa Point in 1989. Photo courtesy Tom King

EVER SINCE THE DISCOVERY OF THE TARAWA FILE (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 13, Nos. 1&2) in the late spring of 1997, we have thought that the site described by Cadet Officer Gerald B. Gallagher was most likely the same site where we found the shoe parts in 1991 and the campfire (with can label fragment) earlier in 1997. This did not require a great leap of faith. Gallagher said that the site was near the lagoon shore on the “southeastern corner” of the island. Depending upon how loosely you define “corner”, our site fit that description. Gallagher said that it was an area scheduled for clearing. We know that our site was cleared about that time. Gallagher described finding part of the sole of a woman’s “stoutish walking shoe.” We found the same thing. Gallagher said there was a fire there. We found a fire.

But if this was, indeed, the castaway’s campsite, why have we not found more artifacts or bones despite intensive searching? And isn’t it perhaps just too much of a coincidence that we should have stumbled upon the campsite in the course of an investigation of a feature (the baby grave) which turned out to have nothing to do with the Earhart case? And what if Gallagher was speaking specifically instead of generally when he said “southeastern corner?”

Our doubts that the site was the same place where Gallagher found the bones became stronger when, at the Amelia Earhart Search Conference in San Carlos, California in July, Walt Holm (TIGHAR

#0980C) noticed the similarity of features on a torn corner of the can label fragment to a commercial barcode. Walt’s further research confirmed that the markings were entirely consistent with the European barcode system. His findings were later independently confirmed by McCrone Associates, a noted forensic laboratory whose help was recruited through the good offices of Bob Perry (TIGHAR #2021).

By late August, with our initial hypothesis that the fire was the same one mentioned by Gallagher disproved (there was no indication of repeated or “stacked” fires in that spot) we were ready to rethink our initial hypothesis about where Gallagher had found the bones. Tom King, our Senior Archeologist, pointed out that Nikumaroro is actually an atoll made up of two islands separated by narrow passages into the central lagoon. He wondered if Gallagher may have been referring to the



The presence of a barcode on the fragment of a paper can label recovered from the campfire found in 1997 effectively dates the fire to the 1970s or later.

southeast side of the westernmost of the two islands. Tom also noted that a small promontory in that area is associated in island folklore with an encounter with Nei Manganibuka, the Gilbertese ancestor/spirit who is the guardian of Nikumaroro. As described in an article entitled “Nikumaroro” published in the journal of the Polynesian Society and written by Paul B. Laxton, the post-war District Commissioner who spent several months on Niku in 1949:

The wife of Teng Koata, the first island leader, had been walking one afternoon and saw a great and perfect maneaba, and sitting under its high thatched roof, Nei Manganibuka, a tall fair woman with long dark hair falling to the ground about her, with two children: she conversed with three ancients, talking of her island of Nikumaroro, and its happy future when it would surely grow to support thousands of inhabitants.

(A maneaba is a communal meeting house and is the central feature of a Gilbertese village.)

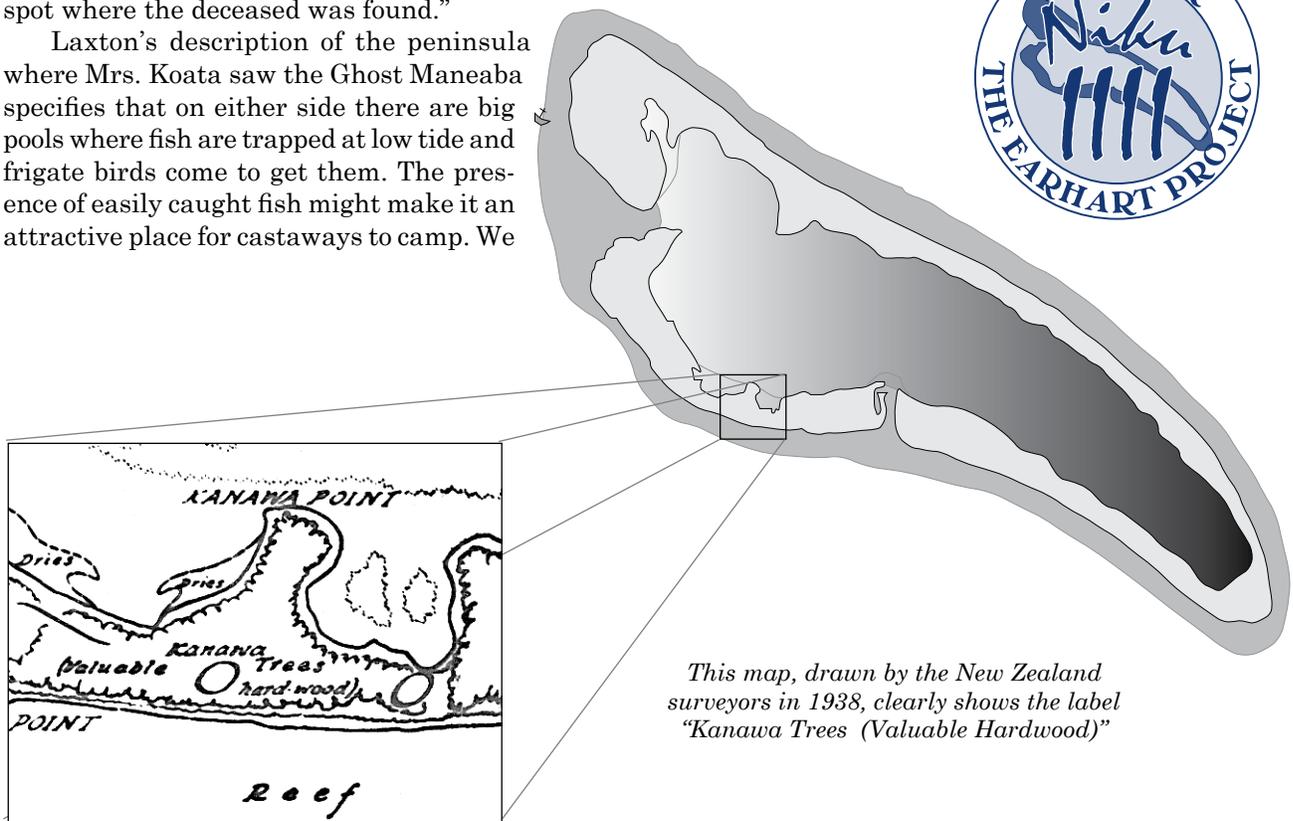
Further research led to the observation that, on the map produced by the New Zealand survey of early 1939, that same promontory is labeled “Kanawa Point.” This rather clearly implies that there was a Kanawa tree or trees at that location in late ’38/early ’39. Kanawa is rare and valuable wood. Gallagher, on 27 December 1940, says that the coffin built to convey the bones to Fiji “is made from a local wood known as ‘kanawa’ and the tree was, until a year ago, growing on the edge of the lagoon, not very far from the spot where the deceased was found.”

Laxton’s description of the peninsula where Mrs. Koata saw the Ghost Maneaba specifies that on either side there are big pools where fish are trapped at low tide and frigate birds come to get them. The presence of easily caught fish might make it an attractive place for castaways to camp. We

also know from our interviews with former residents of Nikumaroro that there is a place on the island known to them as “Niurabo” which is sacred to Nei Manganibuka and is the place where Mrs. Koata had her encounter. It would seem safe to conclude that Kanawa Point is Niurabo and may well be the spot where the bones were found. (Tempting as it may be to speculate that what Mrs. Koata saw was actually a ’round-the-bend Amelia Earhart, it is more likely that her encounter was a spiritual experience perhaps prompted by the association of that place with the discovery of human remains.)

Kanawa Point was visited briefly by a small TIGHAR team led by Tom King in the last days of the 1989 expedition (Niku I). A cursory look turned up nothing of particular interest except a place nearby along the shoreline where a scatter of opened clamshells indicated former human presence (only people eat clams by prying open the shell). Because the shells had been there long enough to be cemented into the coral, Tom regarded them to be possible evidence of prehistoric habitation. Recently, however, we’ve learned that such cementation can occur in a matter of decades rather than centuries.

Needless to say, an intensive search of Kanawa Point is high on our agenda for the Niku III expedition.



This map, drawn by the New Zealand surveyors in 1938, clearly shows the label “Kanawa Trees (Valuable Hardwood)”