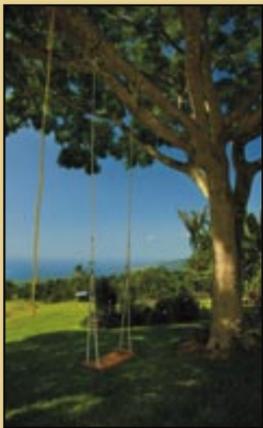




South Kona residents Jerry and Leinaala Benson built their dream “green” home in the 1970s, powered by solar electric. Jerry’s woodworking talents are evident throughout the two-story residence.

Off the Grid in Honaunau



By Kristina Anderson
Photography by Giselle Thompson

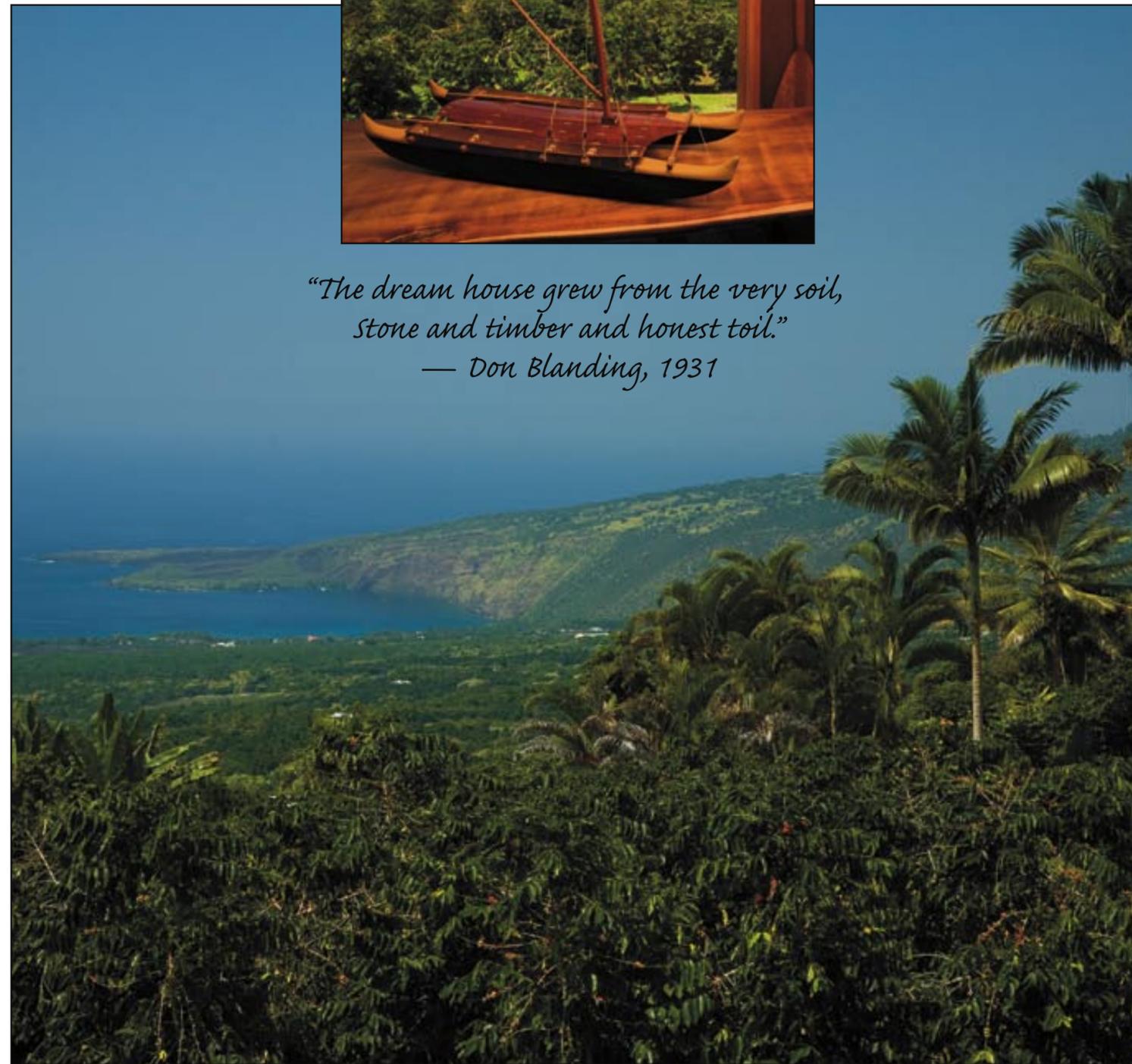
“Have a swing,” says Leinaala Benson, happily directing visitors to a tempting tree swing in the front yard of her four-acre, Honaunau coffee farm. “Everyone who visits our place is required to swing on it when they get here — isn’t it fun?” In addition to bringing out the inner child in you, it’s also the perfect vantage to view the startling sight of the beautiful South Kona coastline rising off the horizon from 1,500 feet up.

On the property for 30 years and living in the house they built themselves, Leinaala and her husband Jerry Benson, a master canoe builder, decided to go off the grid in the 1970s — long before it was fashionable. They have solar-powered electricity and a self-sustaining (a.k.a. rain catchment) water system.

“We’re never aware when there’s a HELCO outage, since our electricity is always on,” notes Leinaala. “But sometimes we’ll notice the power is out when we look out on the mountain and see not one light on except for us, which always ►



*“The dream house grew from the very soil,
Stone and timber and honest toil.”
— Don Blanding, 1931*



The view of Kealakekua Bay from the Benson’s four-acre coffee and macadamia farm in Honaunau. (Above inset): Made of koa, Jerry’s scale model of a double-hulled canoe is true to the ancient Polynesian design. It sits atop a koa table built by Jerry.

makes us smile. Living off the grid is perfectly fine and a lifestyle we love. We can run a skill saw, washing machine, fridge, microwave, vacuum cleaner and everything we need. We never have an electric bill and there's never a power pole in our line of sight."

Jerry constructed the three-bedroom home himself. For building materials, Jerry proudly says he used the time-honored methods well known to those who are resourceful but who don't necessarily have lots of monetary resources: "scrounging," "recycling," and "bartering."

"I worked for a ranch with lumber on it," recounts Jerry. "So all the main pieces of this house — the floor, the beams, everything — were lumber that I got in trade for work." Designing the original 22-square-foot home around the size of the beams, Jerry gradually added onto the house as the family grew. The house features finely crafted woods of fir, Alaskan yellow cedar, ohia and koa.

Jerry points to the front windows that were given to him by the Manago family when they remodeled the nearby hotel, noting that the tiny bubbles are evidence of hand-blown glass dating from the early 1900s. And speaking of glass, Jerry is an avid bottle collector, finding many of the bottles in his collection in old dumps, as well as in dive spots in Lahaina ▶



A koa fishing canoe crafted by Jerry hangs in the kitchen, a Christmas present to Leinaala. The kitchen counter is koa, while some of the kitchen tiles came from the historic Kawaiaha'o Church in Oahu that Leinaala attended in her youth.

TEAK GARDEN ; 57p11.02; 5.5 in; Black plus one; 390566



Another one of Jerry's creations, this beautiful koa chest of drawers was a gift to his wife.

HWN SOLAR SV; 57p11.02; 5.5 in; Black plus one; 390752

where old whaling ships dropped debris. The fireplace bricks, originally part of the old Kohala sugar mill, were foraged from a friend. About the fine art of being resourceful, Jerry says, "When you don't have money, you learn how to improvise by necessity. And actually, that's half the fun of it."

College sweethearts, the Bensons have been married since 1965 and have two children, son Kaponu, a mason and owner of Hawaii Rocks, now 36, and daughter Iwalani, a Hawaiian language teacher, 33. When the kids were growing up, they did their homework by kerosene lamp, "just like Abraham Lincoln," according to their dad.

Today they have a renewed appreciation for their parents' lifestyle, and know that being raised off the grid when very few families did it was special indeed. They are now enjoying every opportunity to share it with their own children.

"They are grateful for all the natural resources they were raised with," Leinaala says. "They grew up connected with the stars, the ocean, and the magic of this aina."

Leinaala is an artist at heart whose Hawaiian genealogy is rooted here in South Kona and Hilo. Tracing her deep Hawaiian heritage is also a passion. "It goes way back," Leinaala said. ▶



Likewise, Jerry is a consummate artist (and koa furniture maker) who also builds canoes of fiberglass or koa for area canoe clubs. He says his good friend, painter Herb Kane, taught him everything he knows about canoe building and is like an older brother to him.

A longtime member of the Daughters of Hawaii, Leinaala started the splendid Hawaiian quilt now adorning the master bedroom when she was pregnant with her first child, then finished it three years later when she became pregnant with the second. She learned her quilting skills from local fabric-store owner Mrs. Kimura and through adult education classes at Konawaena High School. She also created the many ►



With brass lamp and portal window, the bathroom evokes the feeling of being on a boat. Redwood paneling was fashioned with lumber from an old water tank. (Above left): Jerry displays a collection of Polynesian weapons from various travels.