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HAWAII ISLAND

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Presents From The Past

Actor Dick Hershberger brings to life the legacy of Hawaiian Volcano Observatory founder Thomas Jaggar in period piece "A Walk Into The Past - A Living History," which runs Tuesdays at Kilauea Visitor Center.

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HAWAII ISLAND MIDWEEK | COVER STORY

BY KRISTINA ANDERSON

Walking Into The Past

The life of noted volcanologist and professor Thomas Jaggar comes alive every Tuesday at Kilauea Visitor Center, thanks to tour guide Dick Hershberger.

When Ocean View resident Dick Hershberger steps into the shoes of Hawaiian Volcano Observatory founder Thomas Jaggar, there's more at play than an actor simply taking on a role. There's a deep connection to the subject character himself, including eerily similar family backgrounds and histories. It's almost as though Hershberger is channeling the authentic spirit of the great professor himself.

Presented through Kilauea Drama and Entertainment Network, Hershberger's snapshot of Jaggar, titled "A Walk Into The Past - A Living History," takes place at Whitney Vault in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park every Tuesday. The vault still houses the professor's original seismograph equipment in a small underground laboratory near the caldera side of the Volcano House.

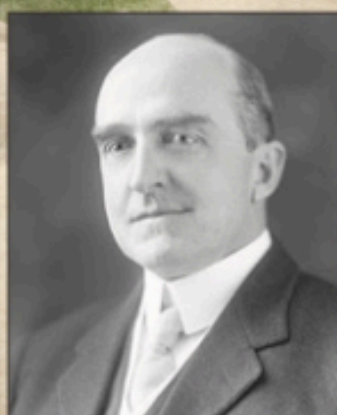
Jaggar: The Man And His Mission

"Thomas Jaggar was a very special man who left tenured professorships at both Harvard and MIT and moved to the top of a mountain in the middle of the Pacific Ocean to study volcanoes," Hershberger relates. "In the process, he made many personal sacrifices, such as losing his marriage and children. His first wife was a society woman who wasn't a fit with Hawai'i. She later made his life difficult by trashing his reputation with Harvard and MIT, and they eventually cut funding for his research."

But Jaggar was not to be thwarted. After he traveled with colleagues to Martinique in 1902 to study the pyroclastic eruption of Mount Pelée, he found himself extremely moved by the devastating events that killed 29,000 residents.

"Jaggar wanted to learn all he could about the hows, whens and whys of volcanic eruptions so that local populations could receive enough warning to move out of the way and stay safe," says Hershberger. "He spent the rest of his life in Hawai'i studying the active volcanoes Kilauea and Mauna Loa."

After his divorce, Jaggar married Isabel Maydwell, and together they worked side by side on Jaggar's projects. Hershberger says that the famed Buffalo soldiers built the trail to the summit of Mauna Loa (from the park side) so that Jaggar and his wife could ride mules to the top to conduct their research and observations.



(Top) Dick Hershberger (dressed as Thomas Jaggar) poses for a photo with Hawaiian Volcano Observatory staff. PHOTO COURTESY DICK HERSHBERGER
(Above left) Thomas Jaggar stands by a 12-ton boulder ejected from Halema'uma'u Crater in 1924. TAI SING LOO PHOTO, COURTESY OF THE TSUCHIYA FAMILY
(Above right) Thomas Jaggar was director of Hawaiian Volcano Observatory from 1912 to 1940. PHOTO COURTESY PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
(Facing page) Actor Dick Hershberger as Tevye in a production of *Fiddler On The Roof*. PHOTO COURTESY DICK HERSHBERGER

For 28 years, from 1912 to 1940, he served as director of the observatory, finally retiring to O'ahu to work as a faculty member at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa until his death in 1953.

A Walk In The Park

Hershberger delights in bringing Jaggar to life for park visitors. Escorted by park staff, the group runs into Jaggar (Hershberger dressed in period costume) on the trail, and he introduces himself and discusses the importance of volcanology. He then leads them to the vault, an 18-by-18-foot room situated over a steam vent that can accommodate 20 people at a time. He shows them the equipment, tells them how it works and discusses the projects he's directing.

"We chose April 12, 1912, as the timeframe for our walk back into history, as that is the day before the Titanic sinking, making it a date that people can grasp and one that is historically relevant," says Hershberger. "Over its seven-year run, our walk has become so popular that we changed it to a weekly event from a biweekly. It's free, but you do have to have a ticket because nearly every hourlong performance is sold out."

Hershberger says the performances are very well received, and folks have commented that it's one of the best national park living history presentations they've ever seen.

Parallel Lives

Maintaining the Jaggar character comes naturally to Hershberger, who marvels at the almost spooky parallels in their lives.

"We were both born in Pennsylvania; both our fathers were clergy; our fathers were both stationed in Naples during our childhoods; we both developed a fascination for Vesuvius," Hershberger shares. "We were both married a couple of times. We both moved to Hawai'i. It certainly makes it easier to relate to him and his life."

Hershberger originally came to the islands after a stint with the merchant marines and a tour in Vietnam. Jumping on board with a 1977 transpacific yacht race, he worked as a cook on the 50-foot vessel. He decided to stay in Honolulu, building and managing a kite store.

Finally moving to Kona in 1979, Hershberger tried a few different things before settling on acting. Now a seasoned actor, voiceover artist, screenwriter (he's written 13 screenplays) and producer, Hershberger spent three decades in the Screen Actors Guild. He's performed in nearly every movie filmed on the Big Island and was involved with both Waimea Community Theatre and Aloha Theatre.

His third wife Arlene Araki is also an actor, and they have two children, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He also has three children from a previous marriage.

"Playing Jaggar in a recurring role is the culmination of my dreams of being an actor," says Hershberger. "With a continually running program, there's always the challenge to keep it fresh and new. But I love it. I get to evolve and shape the character and make him more authentic and real and into a work of art with each performance. He's a real person to me — and hopefully to the world."



"A Walk Into The Past - A Living History" performances are presented at 10 a.m., noon and 2 p.m. every Tuesday at Kilauea Visitor Center in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park.

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