A = Narrator, B = Dr. Higgins, C = Dr. Rooks

A: Today, the islands of Hawaii are a popular tourist destination. Visitors from the United States, Europe, and all over the world come here for the beautiful weather, the perfect beaches, and the fascinating culture. Americans come to Hawaii for honeymoons and exotic destinations. But many people forget that Hawaii is part of the United States. It became the 50th state in 1959.

However, Hawaii doesn’t look or feel like part of the United States. The people, language, stories, and culture of Hawaii reveal a mysterious history of immigration and settlement. We’ll investigate this history tonight.

The first stop on our trip is at the University of Hawaii. Dr. Emily Higgins is an expert on immigration to Hawaii. So, Dr. Higgins, who are the native people of these islands?

B: The one thing we know about native Hawaiians is that they’re not really native to Hawaii. They came from somewhere else.

A: Where did they come from?

B: That’s an interesting question. The first European to find Hawaii was the famous English explorer, Captain James Cook. He arrived in Hawaii in 1778, and he noticed that the native people were similar to other people he’d seen in the other islands of Polynesia.

A: And Polynesia refers to a number of islands in the South Pacific Ocean.

B: Right, including the islands of Hawaii, as well as New Zealand, Tahiti, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and the Cook Islands... which were named after Captain Cook.

A: So, what do Hawaiians have in common with other Polynesians?

B: Well, one way to find the origins of an immigrant group is to look at their language. Languages exist in families—just like people. So, if you find two languages that are related—brother and sister, for example—you can guess that they have the same parent.

Although most Hawaiians today speak English, there is a native Hawaiian language. Cook noticed, and modern linguists have confirmed, that the Hawaiian language is related to other Polynesian languages. This suggests that the languages come from the same place, and that the Hawaiian people came from another Polynesian island. We don’t know exactly where, but one idea is that they came from Tahiti. Of course, there’s only one problem with that theory: Tahiti is 2000 miles from Hawaii, by sea!

A: The story of the settlement of Hawaii is truly remarkable. According to some experts, the first immigrants to Hawaii from Tahiti and other islands arrived around the year 400. That’s 1300 years before the first known European contact with Hawaii. Those first Polynesian fisherman and explorers built canoes—simple boats—with the most basic materials. To find out more about these people, we spoke with John Rooks, the director of the Hawaiian History Museum.

C: The Polynesians probably built their boats from tree trunks. We think that they would chop down a tree and then cut a canoe from the center of the tree. Then, they used coconut fibers and tree sap to fill holes. The brilliant part of the construction was the idea to tie two trees together to form a double canoe—again, with wood and coconuts. This made the boats more stable so that they could travel these huge distances.

A: But how did these earlier migrants navigate? How did they find their way to Hawaii without getting lost?

C: These explorers had amazing knowledge of navigation. They used the sun, the stars, and the winds. They memorized distances and directions. They sailed across thousands of miles of empty sea. It’s an amazing achievement.

A: There is another source of information about the first people of Hawaii: the stories, myths, and legends of the Hawaiian people themselves. According to Hawaiian tradition, the father of the Hawaiian Islands was a man called Hawai’i Loa. He was born on an island far from what we now know as Hawaii. But Hawai’i Loa was a famous fisherman, and he traveled far across the sea. One day, he discovered an island with many trees, fruits, and vegetables. He gave the island his name—Hawaii—and brought his wife and children to live with him. To this day some of the other islands in the Hawaiian group of islands carry the names of Hawai’i Loa’s family members.

Coming up on Mass Migrations, we’ll look at some research that may lead to new theories of how the Hawaiian Islands were populated.