



# “First Ladies” of Surfing

## Santa Cruz’s original women surfers earned respect in the water

By Jennifer Squires

**T**he five women sitting down for coffee and pancakes could be old schoolmates, neighbors, or sisters. They’ve been friends for nearly six decades, having met before most of them even finished school. Before marriage. Before the kids and grandkids came along. Their hair has grayed. There’s a cane leaned against the wall. And they are legends. These are some of the first women who rode waves in Santa Cruz.

“We were just drawn to the beach,” said Sheila Ralston (née Anater). At 72, she’s the baby of the group. “There were just a few girls who went out to surf.”

Betty Van Dyke, Earlyne Myers Colfer, her cousin, Sharlyne Mottus, and Rosemarie Cross (at 85, the oldest in the group), are there at the table with Ralston. Back then, Ralston’s sister Sharon Anater-Hansen, and



(Above) Gretchen Van Dyke-Gallagher, who lost her leg in a sports related incident, still continued to ride waves.

Van Dyke’s sister-in-law Gretchen Van Dyke-Gallagher got out in the water too.

“And that was it,” said Colfer, 73. “We can’t remember anyone else.”

Van Dyke, who grew up in Cupertino,

saw a photo of a surfer in *Sunset Magazine* in 1939 and knew she had to surf one day. At San Jose State University, her friend Alonzo Weimers offered to take her to Santa Cruz to surf. She got a board from Gene Van Dyke, who would become her husband, and paddled out.

“Once I caught the first wave, I knew I needed a board,” said Van Dyke, 82. Her first board was made by Ted Pearson (no relation to Bob Pearson of Arrow Surfboards) and shaped by Dale Velzy. It was 18 inches wide and four inches thick, and she caught waves — and people’s attention — on it.

(Top) A group of surfer girls relaxing on the beach in Waikiki, Hawaii in 1954, (R-L) Rosemarie Cross, Betty Van Dyke, Mary Ann Furtado, Fran McIntyre, and Pat Peace.

Photos: © Betty Van Dyke Collection



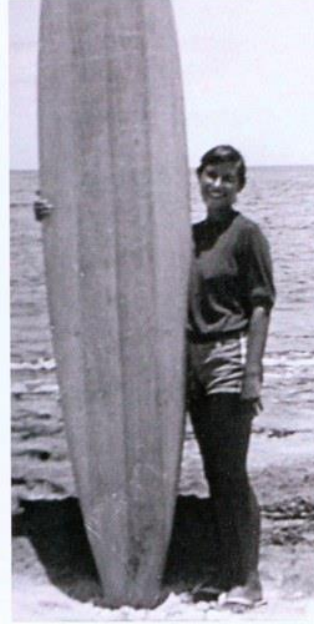
A Girl and Her Board



(Above) Rosemarie Cross with her balsa board shaped by Ted Johnson from balsa wood Navy life rafts.



(Above) Earlyne Myers Colfer, in 1958 with her balsa wood board built by Jack O'Neill.



(Above) Betty Van Dyke stands with her balsa wood board in Hawaii in 1954.

Photo: (L-R) © Vester Dick, © Earlyne Myers Colfer Collection, © Betty Van Dyke Collection

couple weeks later with a prototype. It was the first O'Neill's women's wetsuit.

"It was very, very cumbersome and uncomfortable," Colfer said. Van Dyke chuckled in agreement. O'Neill had given her a wetsuit too. It lacked darts for the chest.

Before wetsuits, the women would go to Goodwill and each would buy two old wool sweaters. One was worn the normal way. The other was pulled on like shorts, with their legs going through the armholes. They could stay out in the water for about 45 minutes wearing those sweaters.

The wetsuits, as uncomfortable as they may have been, "made a huge difference," Colfer admitted. Van Dyke agreed. She surfed for two and a half hours the first time she wore one.

Braving cold water without wetsuits, carrying heavy boards, and surfing without leashes — meaning they had to swim after their boards after every wipe out — didn't feel like a big deal to these women when they began catching waves.

"If you were going to surf, you were expected to hold your own in every aspect," Colfer explained.

Back then, surfers climbed a fire hose to access Steamer Lane because the stairs



Photo: Mickey Carroll

(Above) Having not lost their love for beach and the surf, (L-R) Sheila Ralston, Earlyne Myers Colfer, Betty Van Dyke, Rosemarie Cross, and Sharlyne Mottus frequently meet at the Santa Cruz Harbor for breakfast



Photo: © Betty Van Dyke Collection

(Above) Betty Van Dyke surfing at Pleasure Point, before Jack O'Neill gave her a prototype of his new wetsuit.

"Betty Van Dyke was the first woman surfer that I can recall, for years, before I can think of another woman surfer," recalled wetsuit pioneer Jack O'Neill. "She was able to get the respect she earned. The surfers did not always take turns."

Earning respect from the guys in the lineup was an ongoing battle for female surfers in the 1950s and '60s. Mottus recalled guys at Cowell's yelling at her to leave the water.

"They were like that for a month, until they found out I really could surf," she said, laughing at the memory.

Mottus and Colfer grew up on the Westside of Santa Cruz, spending childhood

afternoons teaching themselves to dog-paddle at Cowells Beach. They both learned to surf in 1956, and Colfer surfed Steamer Lane when she was a high school junior.

"I did get some nice waves, 10-foot-plus waves," Colfer said, her eyes sparkling at the memory.

"We wanted to do it," Mottus said. "None of the guys were going to outdo us."

Cross, who graduated high school in 1947, started surfing in middle school.

"I owned Cowells Beach," she said, her face breaking into a sly smile.

Her balsa board with a redwood stringer was shaped by Ted Johnson and weighed 56

pounds. Mottus bought her first board, a balsa board shaped by Al Nelson, for \$50 when she was 14. She paid in installments.

"I didn't go to my senior year here. I went surfing instead," said Mottus, who would have graduated from Santa Cruz High in 1957.

Colfer's first board — also balsa — came from O'Neill in 1958. He also gave her a wetsuit, using her to test his new invention. She recalled standing at the cliff above the Rivermouth and "here comes Jack, flying in" to take measurements. He came back a



Photo: © Earlyne Colfer Collection

(Above) (L-R) Earlyne and Jerry Colfer after surfing in Pleasure Point in 1962.



Photo: © Betty Van Dyke Collection

(Above) The uncrowded waves in the 1950s made surfing Cowells Beach a favorite for many of the girls.



Photo: © Sheila Ralston Collection

(Above) (L-R) Rich Novak, Sheila Ralston, and Denny Johnson on the cliffs after surfing at Inside Pleasure.



hadn't been built yet. Or, when the tide was right, they just threw their boards into the water and jumped in after them. Surf racks hadn't yet been invented, so the women just put their boards on the roof of their car wrapped ropes around them and through the car windows.

When some of the women started having babies in the early '60s, Van Dyke and Colfer shared a duplex in Pleasure Point. They would spend the whole day at the beach together, taking turns surfing and watching the children.

Some of the surf spots remained the same over the years, like Cowells and Steamer Lane on the Westside. The River-mouth doesn't go off like it used to, and back then 38th was "Inside Pleasure." Colfer pointed out one big difference, though.

"There were no crowds," she said.

Sidelined by injuries and age, most of the women don't surf anymore. Ralston stopped after a broken wrist and two dislocated shoulders, injuries she is proud to say occurred out in the water. But their nostalgia for the sport and the lifestyle they pioneered doesn't ebb.

"I still believe it's the sport of kings and queens," said Colfer, who paddled out and caught a few waves the last time she was in Hawaii. "It makes you feel good." ♣

Photo: © Sheila Ralston Collection



(Above) Sheila Ralston drops in on a wave at the peak in Capitola during the Woman on Waves surf contest in 2002.

WOMEN