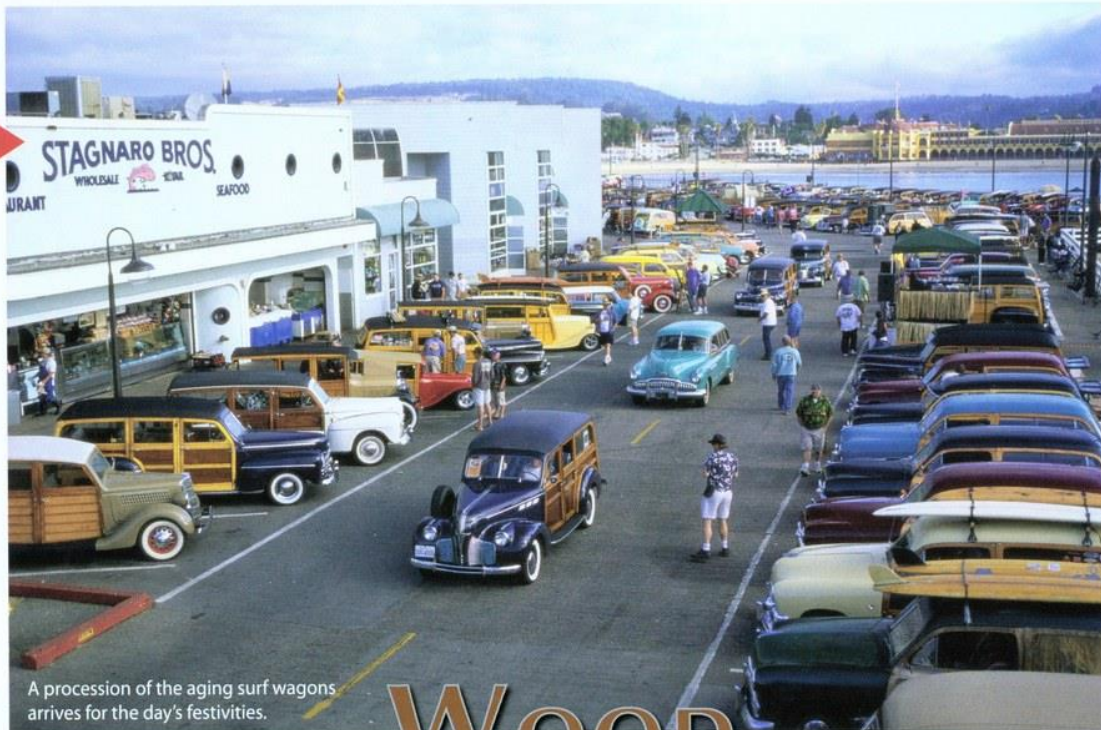


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A procession of the aging surf wagons arrives for the day's festivities.

## WOOD ON WHEELS

A group of Santa Cruz car enthusiasts have helped make the lowly woodie into a West Coast cultural icon

By Wallace Baine

**H**oward Benfield's first car cost his father \$300. And even that was pricey back in 1964, when similar vehicles, many of them unwanted and neglected, could be found for as low as \$75.

Today, however, cars like Benfield's – popularly known then and now as "woodies" – can fetch prices well north of \$100,000.

The road from two figures to six figures is a steep climb – if average new car prices of the time had appreciated as much, a new hybrid SUV just off the lot today would cost around \$5 million.

The woodie made that steep climb, because it has become something more than another used car. The wood-paneled station wagons made by a number of manufacturers mostly in the 1930s and '40s, but perhaps most famously by Ford, have become icons of a lost era, particularly on the West Coast where the woodie has become symbolic of the Golden Age of Surfing.

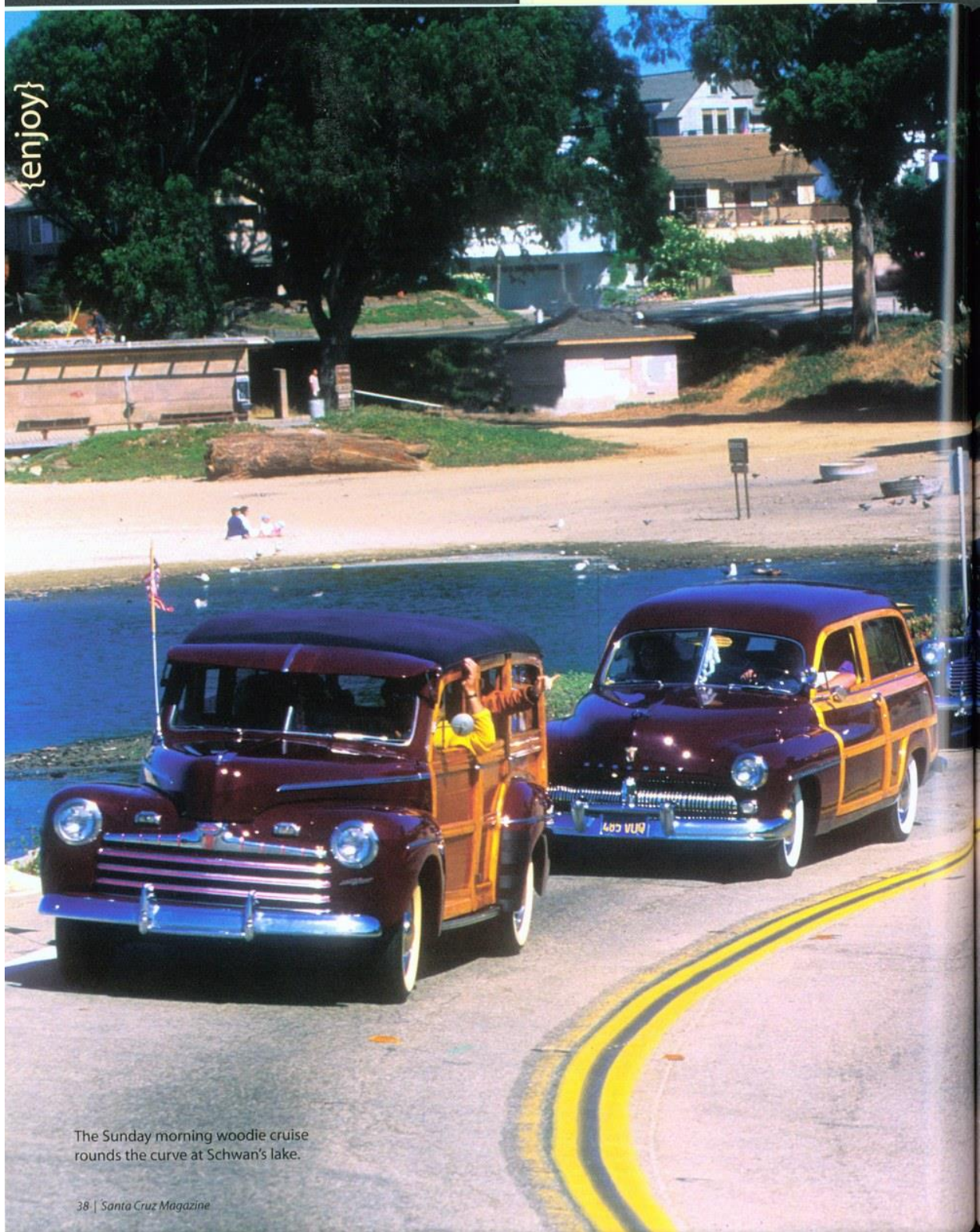
Today, collectors of woodies have preserved the model's



Surf legend Duke Kahanamoku graces the radiator of a Model A Ford station wagon.



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The Sunday morning woodie cruise rounds the curve at Schwan's lake.





unique cultural appeal, and nowhere are woodies more beloved than in Santa Cruz, home of a thriving chapter of the National Woodie Club, which hosts one of the coolest events on the Santa Cruz calendar.

Each June, the Woodies on the Wharf event attracts scores of gorgeous old woodies to the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf to present the beloved old car in its most favorable setting, against a backdrop of the Pacific Ocean.

Woodies on the Wharf isn't the largest woodie show in the world – that title probably belongs to Wavecrest, a September event in Encinitas in San Diego County. But the Santa Cruz event is certainly the top date for woodie lovers in Northern California, and it has gone a long way in establishing Santa Cruz's image as a surf-culture mecca.

Santa Cruz Woodies was founded back in 1993, and the first "WOW" event took place in '95. On June 27, on its 15th anniversary, the event expects to attract more than 200 cars from all over Califor-

nia and the greater U.S. to the Wharf. It's a celebration of what used to be commonplace on Santa Cruz roadways, but is now a treasured rarity.

At one time, the woodie was a prestige vehicle. But they were often expensive to maintain – the wood had to be varnished regularly – and, by the 1950s, the cars had fallen in value enough that they became popular with low-income surfers.

"You could take out the seats in the back and throw down a mattress, if you wanted to," said Benfield, a former president of Santa Cruz Woodies. "You can throw your wet suits and beach towels and such in there." Benfield was an East Bay native who would spend every summer in Santa Cruz surfing as a kid and adolescent. He was 16 when he found the beach wagon of his dreams – a 1940 Ford – and became one of many local kids driving woodies to their favorite surf spot.

"You would see them around town occasionally, down at Pleasure Point and out at the (Steamer) Lane."



{enjoy}



The morning fog hangs over the wharf as visitors and participants alike examine the cars.

Many of the woodies were abused and neglected, and only a few survived intact. Benfield's Ford is one of the rare woodies around today still with all its original parts. At Woodies at the Wharf, he said, other woodie aficionados will often examine his car to learn how the cars were equipped in their original state.

Woodies on the Wharf today attracts car lovers from as far as away as Europe and Japan. Though the core group from Santa Cruz Woodies have been part of the proceedings from the beginning, no one is growing bored with showing off their cars.

"Every year, we see the same cars show up, along with lots of new ones," said Benfield. "And every year, never fail, we always discover something new." ❖

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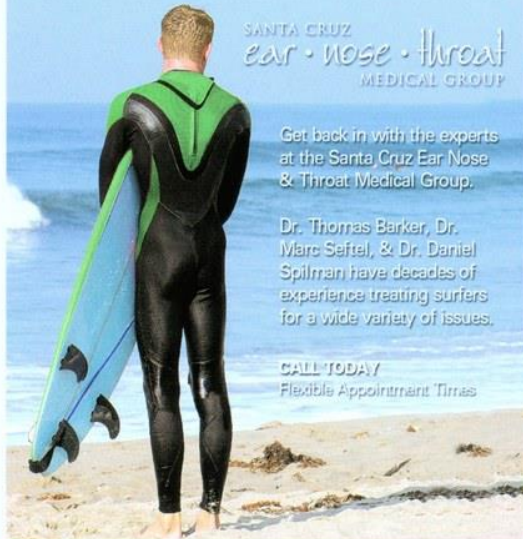
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