

A trip back to surfing's heyday

BY JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel Correspondent

Remove the rip-rap that crowds the cliffs along Steamer Lane. Take away the Dream Inn, the yacht harbor, the university, the freeways and two-thirds of the population. Remove even the lighthouse and you begin to have Santa Cruz in the late 1930s and early '40s

Add a beach shack on Cowell's Beach and across the street where the Dream Inn parking lot is, substitute a field with a barn full of surfboards. Add a dozen or more close friends sitting in the line-up and you begin to complete the picture of the initial heyday of surfing in Santa Cruz.

Surfing in Santa Cruz goes back farther than most people realize.

By the mid '40s there was a sizable population of hardcore surfers presiding at Cowell's Beach, whose activities were centered around members of the Santa Cruz Surfing Club. Many of these early surfers are still around, some still surfing.

A definitive history of surfing in Santa Cruz, if there is such a thing, would revolve around these people. This week begins a series that tells

'Everybody cut class when the surf was good ... We survived on french fries.'

— *Jim Allembaugh*

their stories, the way it was, the way it will never be again, and the way it will always remain.

The first surfing of record in Santa Cruz was by Duke Kahanamoko, the olympic swimming champion and father of modern surfing. According to the late Skip Littlefield, who often embellished his stories for the benefit of tourists, Kahanamoko gave three surfing demonstrations — in 1912, 1920 and 1938.

"The first local kid to surf here was Skorp Evans back in 1926 to 1930," recalls Wes Reed, one of the early pioneers.

It wasn't, however, until the arrival of Duke Horan that surfing in Santa Cruz became popular. Horan hailed from Hawaii and was attending the teachers college at San

Jose State. "Why aren't you surfing these waves," Horan reportedly exclaimed upon seeing the surf wrap around the point at Cowell's.

It wasn't long until there was a legion of now legendary characters centering their surfing lives around the waves at Steamer Lane and Cowell's. Aside from the possibility of Kahanamoko, it was Horan who was probably the first to surf Steamer Lane and who is responsible for giving the Lane its name.

As the story goes, there was a group of surfers who were sitting on their boards while an enormous set broke. "Hey look, they're breaking out in the steamer lanes," Horan is reported to have said. And, with that, Steamer Lane was named.

"There was a gang of us in town, maybe 20 to 30 kids who surfed," Wes Reed recalls.

Photos of the period reveal a group of young men who were exceptionally fit and broad shouldered. They look like surfers of all eras, tan and smiling, sitting with their boards in the sand, but what stands out is that on the average they are much thicker and more muscular than today's surfers. The second impression that comes through the photos is one of

comradery a group feeling.

"You have to remember that surfing in those days was a different thing," Sam Maugeri remembers. "We didn't have wetsuits."

For warmth the surfers wore old wool sweaters culled from the Goodwill. "The tighter they fit the better," Maugeri said.

Surfboards of the period commonly weighed over 100 pounds. The earliest boards were hollow and made of laminated plywood fitted over a wood frame. They invariably leaked and had drain plugs in the tail to empty the water. Later the boards switched to solid redwood and cedar slabs before the advent of balsa wood and fiberglass resin. There also weren't any cords. When you lost your board you swam, which could be a long way without a wetsuit from outside Steamer Lane.

The early days at Cowell's featured such stalwart surfers as Boscoe Patterson, Horan, Andy Anderson, David 'Buster' Steward, Wes Reed, Sam Reid, all of the people in the accompanying picture and a host of others.

Patterson was perhaps one of the

earliest purests. When the switch came from the unwieldy 14-foot, 140-pound hollow boards, to the lightweight short boards, (10 feet, 90 pounds), Patterson refused to switch preferring the old boards.

Reid, who was a Hawaiian surfing and swimming champion, rode a long redwood plank without a skeg that he used in Hawaii. "Sam never turned," Reed remembers. "He picked his angle and went straight. It didn't matter if you were in the way."

The surfing lifestyle was much the same as it is today. "Everybody cut class when the surf was good," Jim Allembaugh said. "We survived on french fries. You could get a huge bag for a quarter at the Ideal Fish Company."

The action on the beach was centered at the shack on Cowell's Beach where they stored their boards. "Women weren't allowed inside," recalled Sue Groff, one of the first women surfers in Santa Cruz. "We had to wait outside. Of course, I ran in there when ever possible."

Years later when the property the beach house was on was offered for sale, a group of surfers led by Bob Rittenhouse attempted to buy the property. They failed and the Dream Inn was built.

Other pearls of the area slowly eroded away. "People forget how good the point was for getting abalones," Groff said.

"We used to go out in the shallow water and stick them to our boards," Doug Thorne recalled. "I don't know if there are anymore out here anymore."

The biggest changes to the beaches came with the yacht harbor. "It just doesn't break the way it used to," Reed said of Cowell's.

The harbor also enlarged Castle Beach. "When the surf was big the waves used to roll all the way to the cliffs," Reed said. "The pinnacle rock used to be in the middle of the wave. I used to have to decide whether I was going to the right or the left of it while I was riding."

What hasn't eroded over the years is the spirit of the surfers. The camaraderie and the good times are still there. The Santa Cruz Surf Club still meets, though not as often as it used to.



John Robinson/Sentinel

The early days of surfing at Cowell's Beach featured such stalwarts as—top row, from left—Sam Maugeri, Alexander Pedemonte, Hal Goody, Doug Thorne, Bob Rittenhouse, Sue Groff, Mike Scroggins—bottom row, from left—Bob Gillies, Bill Grace, Wes Reed and Jim Allembaugh.