



Photo: © Bob Barbour

Surfing into the Sunset

Santa Cruz bids farewell to our legendary surf pioneer

If ever there was an appropriate home for the overused word “iconic,” it’s snuggled up close to the name Jack O’Neill. This pilot, diver, skier, surfer, sailor, balloonist, windsurfer, businessman, innovator, marketer ... well, he changed our world. Before Jack, you didn’t see many surfers north of Point Conception, but when he created the neoprene wetsuit for surfing, back in the mid 1950s, well, that changed.

Jack was a presence at Santa Cruz beaches since the early 1950s, when he and his wife Marge would come down from San Francisco on weekends; but he really became a presence when he opened his first surf shop down at Cowell’s Beach in 1959, and then his enduring shop and wetsuit factory on 41st Avenue, about a mile from his unique home at Pleasure Point, on the water side of East Cliff Drive.

Since the 1970s Jack made a home there, watching the surface of Monterey Bay rage and go calm, ripple with the wind and turn slick as glass, glow with morning sunrises, and evening sunsets, and brood under clouds and disappear altogether in muffling fog. Meanwhile his wetsuits, in untold numbers, opened the world’s oceans to divers and sailors and swimmers, and surfers, too. In the process, the O’Neill brand became one of the most well known on the planet, from Norway to Tasmania, from Japan to South Africa, from Chile to Canada. But the heart of it all was here in Santa Cruz.

Jack has left the scene now. His home is still there on East Cliff Drive, but Jack’s not in there, gazing at the waves, the surfers, the boats out on the bay. But his influence continues, especially with the O’Neill Sea Odyssey program, which has already shown thousands of kids that the ocean isn’t just water, it’s alive with brilliant little organisms that are key to life on earth and the air we all breathe. Making sure that the next generation understood that enormous truth was the pinnacle of Jack’s work on behalf of the oceans. That, above all, is his living legacy.

— Drew Kampion



(Above) A view from the clouds of Jack O'Neill's memorial paddle out near his Pleasure Point home, which was held on July 9 of this year. An estimated 2000 paddlers, combined, with sailboats, kayaks, and miscellaneous watercraft honored the passing of one of surfing's greatest innovators.