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From Rails to Rockers

A tribute for Santa Cruz surfers who shaped surfboards for local waves

By Terri Morgan

Two longtime Santa Cruz surfers are leading a campaign to honor the craftsmen who began shaping surfboards for local riders in the pre-wetsuit era.

Doug Haut of Haut Surfboards, who has been shaping surfboards for over 40 years and Rosemari Reimers Rice, the widow of longtime shaper Johnny Rice, would like to erect a plaque honoring surfboard shapers who plied their craft in Santa Cruz between 1940 and 1969. The two are working with other members of the Santa Cruz Surfing Club Preservation Society to honor the contributions the early surfboard builders who helped evolve surfing. Along with helping the sport progress, the early board builders helped make Santa Cruz a surfing Mecca known by surfers around the globe.

"The surfboard industry and the skate board industry has put this town on the map," said Haut. "We think it's a great idea to pay tribute" to the people who helped establish the industry.

Santa Cruz's reputation as a world-renowned surfing area was enhanced in 2012 when the Save the Waves Coalition designated the city as a World Surfing Reserve. The honor, shared by a handful of regions in Portugal, Brazil, Australia, Peru, Chile and Mexico, recognizes Santa Cruz as a coastal area with

(Top) The Santa Cruz surf club pose with their hand-crafted wooden surfboards on Cowell Beach in 1941.

Santa Cruz native **Johnny Rice** began surfing in the 1940s and soon was taught to shape by master shaper Dale Velzy. During his lifetime Rice worked on both U.S. coasts and Brazil sharing his innovative designs with local surfers.

PHOTOGRAPHS DAN COYRO

outstanding surf breaks and world-class waves. The designation also honors the city as a surfing region with key environmental, cultural, economic, and community attributes.

In an era where many surfboards are molded out of foam and sold cheaply at Costco and other discount stores, the proposed tribute to local surfboard shapers would celebrate the labor-intensive way good quality surfboards were and are hand-built. While many shapers still handcraft boards, more and more are using computer programs to shape surfboard blanks.

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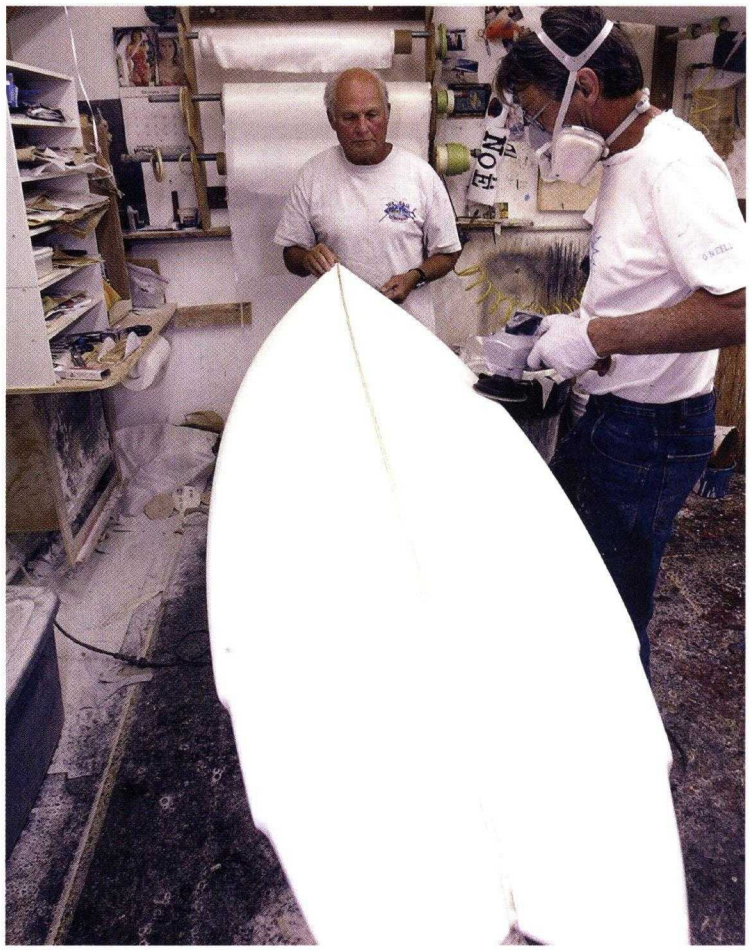
"Unfortunately I think the craft part of surfboard building is getting lost," Rice said. "We want to create a tribute to the shapers who have had a big influence here in Santa Cruz."

For years, early surfers built their own surfboards. The first documented surfers in California were three Hawaiian princes who paddled out at the San Lorenzo river mouth in 1885. They laboriously carved their own surfboards out of redwood. For decades, other surfers followed suit, with many building their own boards in the wood shop at Santa Cruz High School. For those surfers who lacked dexterity, skill, patience, and a place to work, the opportunity to purchase board hand-crafted by a skilled shaper was a boon.

Hand-crafting surfboards is both an art and a science, and good shapers spend years perfecting their techniques to sculpt a 3-dimensional wave-riding vehicle out of surfboard foam. The board building industry has undergone numerous changes over the years, with early surfboards made out of hardwoods, like koa, redwood, or cedar. In the 1930s builders began incorporating lightweight balsa wood into the surfboards to reduce the weight. Today, most of the handcrafted surfboards are carved out of either polyurethane or polystyrene foam. New materials like Kevlar and carbon fiber are also used on occasion, as is wood.

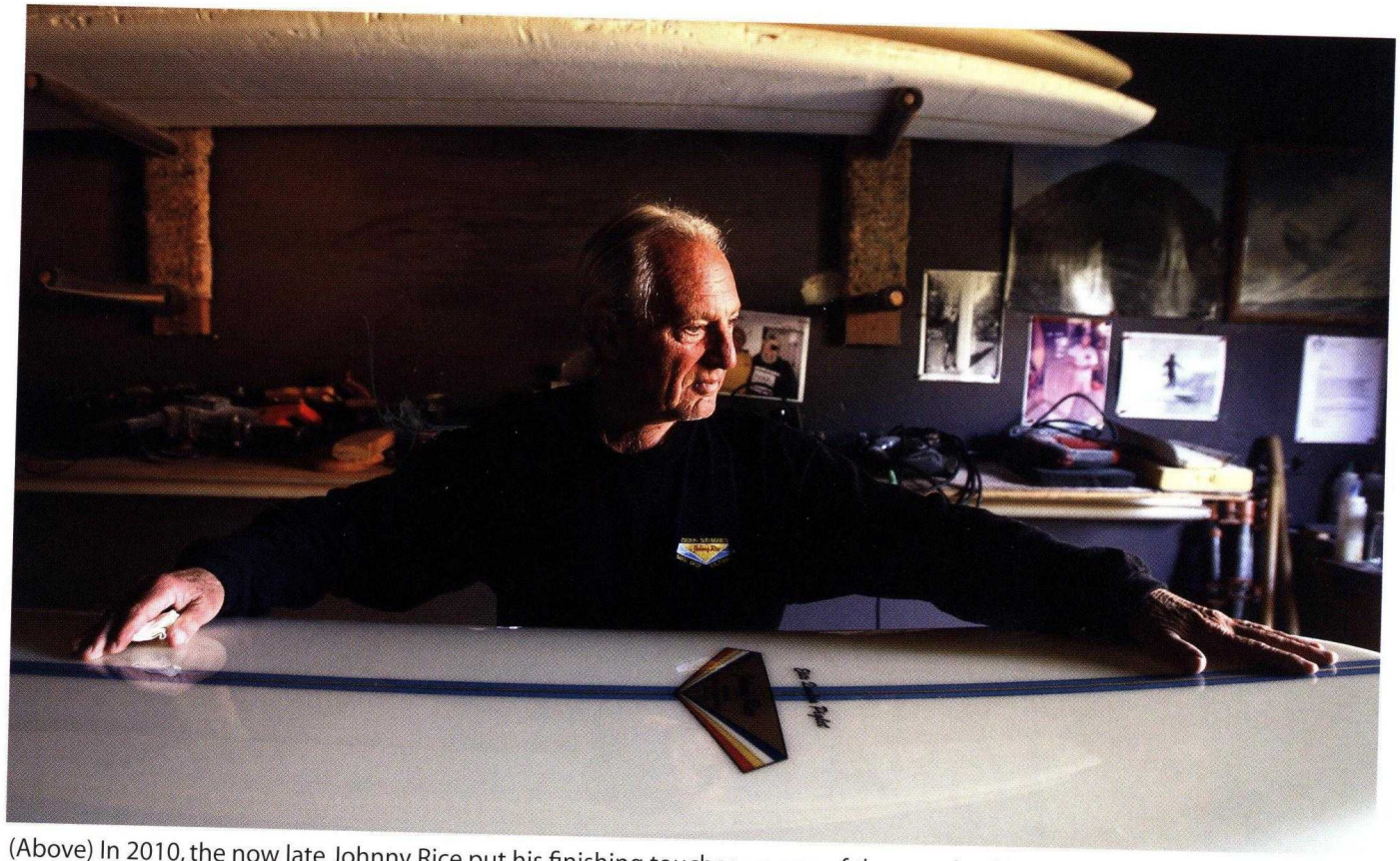


(Above) Surfer and shaper, Doug Haut (center) examines the lines of a recently shaped blank in his on Santa Cruz's westside.

Jack O'Neill's Surf Shop was a virtual launching pad for Santa Cruz shapers. Those who worked there included Jim Foley Joel Woods, and Mike Winterburn. Legendary shapers Phil Edwards and Don Hansen also helped O'Neill in his early days.

Doug Haut, who began his career with Olson Surfboards in the 1960s, remains one of the area's most significant shapers.

George Olson began shaping for Jack O'Neill in the 1950s. Olson then created his own brand of surfboards. Olson went on to design sailboats, including pioneering the ultra light displacement boat.



(Above) In 2010, the now late Johnny Rice put his finishing touches on one of thousands of boards he created during his lifetime.

Designing a custom board for an individual surfer requires a shaper to take into account a rider's weight, ability, their preferred surf breaks, and the size of the waves they intend to ride. A wide, stable surfboard designed for a beginner to ride at Cowells, for example, is far different than the long, sleek, narrow boards experts use to tackle the enormous waves at Mavericks or third peak at Steamer Lane.

Each shaper develops their own templates to create their signature designs; the type of boards they specialize in and have perfected. While most, if not all, top shapers are skilled enough to be versatile and able to shape a surfboard to meet any surfer's demands and style of surfing. Many shapers learned their craft from other shapers and through trial and error. Jack O'Neill's Surf Shop turned out a wealth of shapers, which included, Jim Foley, Joel Woods, Mike Winterburn, and Tom Hoye. Later, when George Olson opened his own shop a similar occurrence transpired. The early surfboard shapers constantly tinkered with their designs, helping to progress the sport by continually improving their boards. Along with helping to advance the sport, the early shapers helped contribute to the burgeoning surfing industry, and added to the city's tax base.

Rice envisions a plaque mounted near the iconic surfer statue on the cliffs above Indicators honoring the early board builders.

Bob Pearson's Pearson Arrow surfboards have remained popular in Santa Cruz for more than three decades. A wide range of top surfers have ridden Arrow surfboards including the late Jay Moriarty when he made history riding Mavericks.

Santa Cruz shaper **Tom Hoye** began his career at O'Neill's. A true innovator, Hoye left for Australia in early 70s and introduced the continent to the twin fin, which was the hottest board of the era. Hoye continues shaping there today.

Steve Scofield was a top surfer who created boards in Santa Cruz in the 1960s. Unfortunately, due to a series of misfortunes, which included a dramatic fire at his shop, his success was short lived.

"I think it would be pretty cool to put a big rock by the statue and put a plaque on it with all the names of shapers from that era who stayed in Santa Cruz," Rice said. "A lot of them are well known up and down the coast, and even on the East Coast."

The plan was to honor the board-building pioneers, and keep the tradition going throughout time. "In another 10 years we could add the name of shapers who built boards through the 1970s," Haut said.

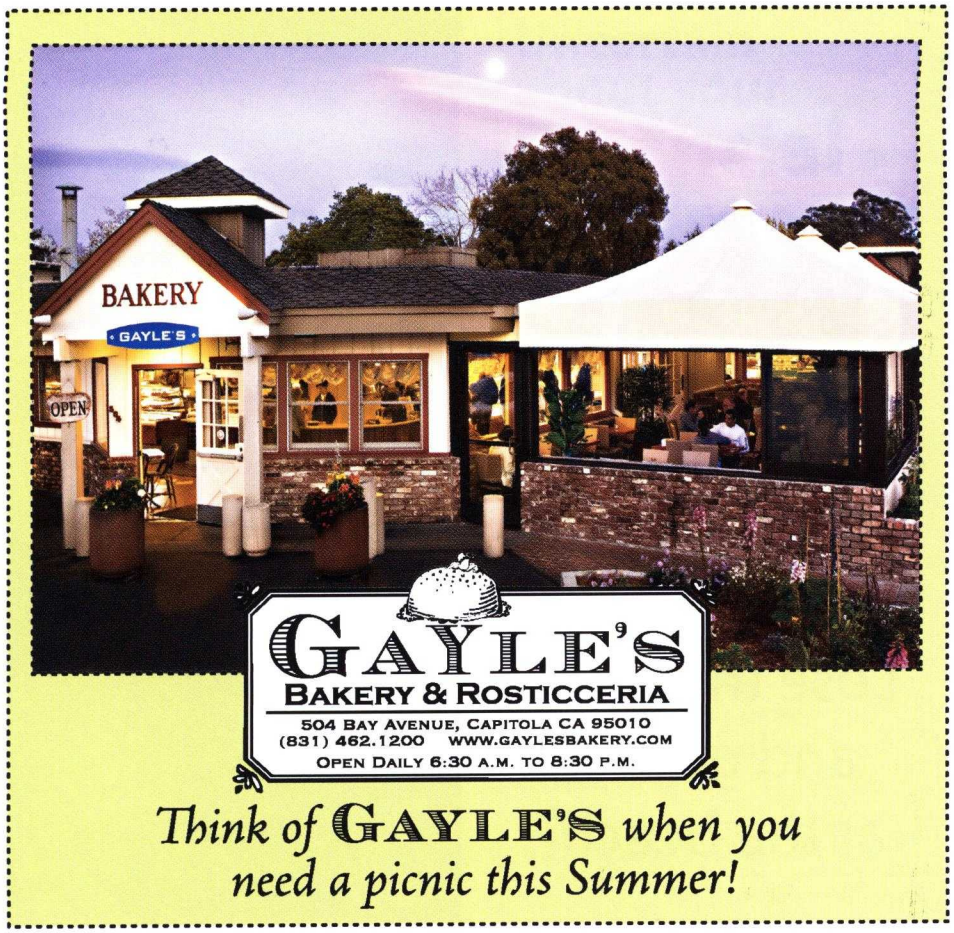
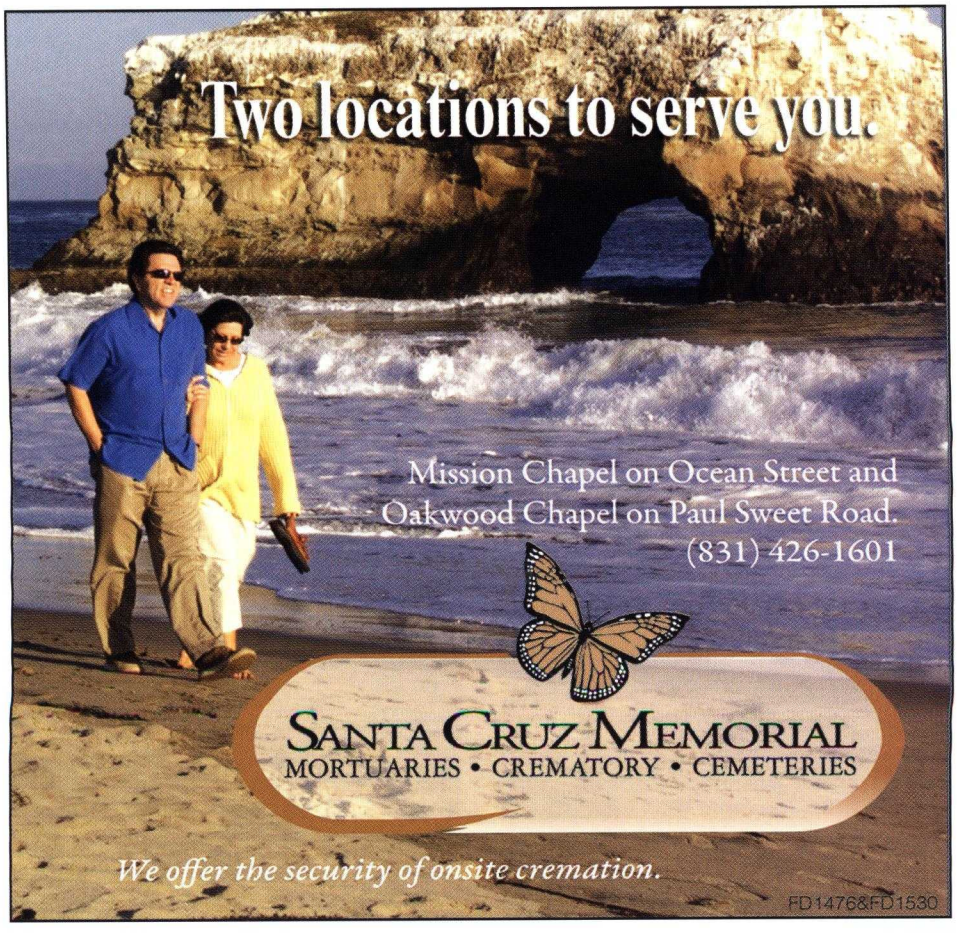
The two conceived the project more than two years ago, and have been seeking city approval. Initially, Rice said, their idea was met with enthusiasm. However, they have yet to secure permission from the city to install the proposed tribute.

The plaque would include the names of the following shapers

1940s
Bill Grace
Ted Pearson

1950s
Mitchell Brothers
George Doolittle
Jim Foley
Richard Novak
George Olson
Jack O'Neill
Johnny Rice
Al Wiemers
Mike Winterburn

1960s
Mark Angell
Gary Benson
Jerry Benson
Doug Haut
Tom Hoye
Tom Keinholz
Phil Langman
John Mel
Tom Overlin
Bob Pearson
Steve Scofield
Dave Sweet
Kenny Tilton
Joel Woods
Gale Yount

SURFBOARDS BY YOUNT SANTA CRUZ

One of the most popular and talented early surfboard shapers in Santa was **Gale Yount**, a 1962 graduate of Santa Cruz High, who began shaping boards in his parents' Eastside home when he was just 15. Yount closed his shops when in 1965 he joined the U.S. Coast Guard.