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Surf City Writer

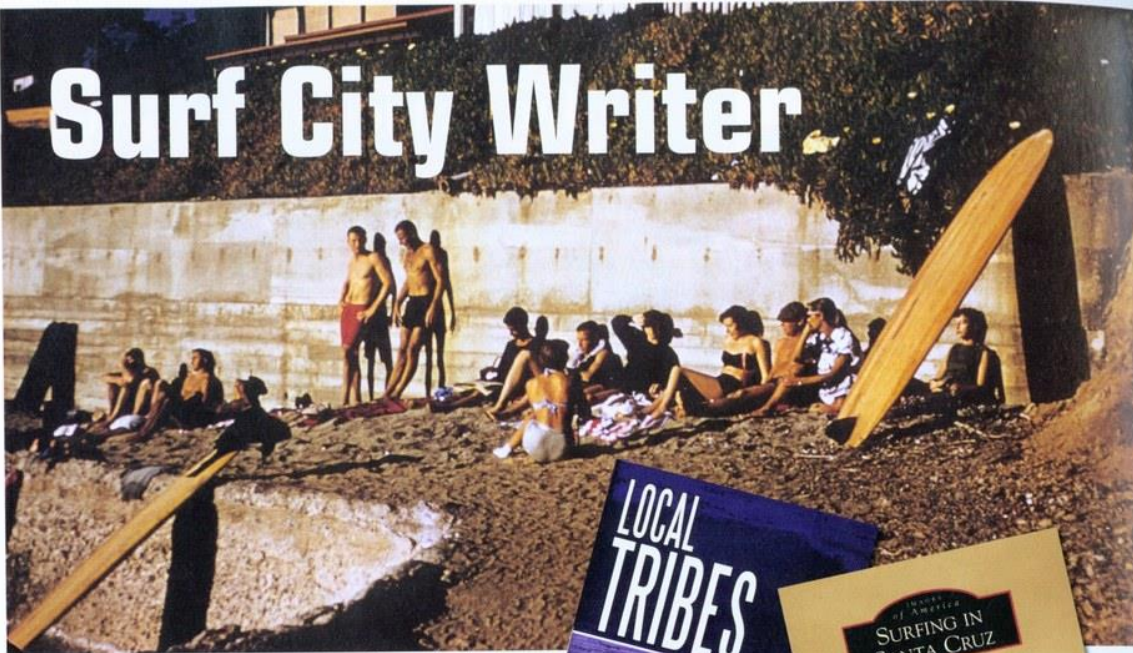
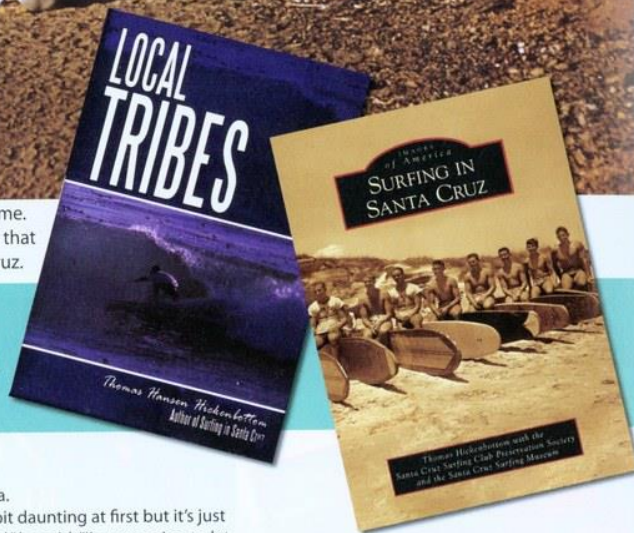


Photo: Van Dyke Archives

A classic laid back scene at Pleasure Point reflects a simpler time. Hickenbottom's novel "Local Tribes" allows you step back into that era, experiencing the lifestyle and thrills of surfing in Santa Cruz.

Local novelist and historian Thomas Hickenbottom captures Santa Cruz stoke

By Isaiah Guzman



Throughout his life, changed early by war and recently by laryngeal cancer, Thomas Hickenbottom has found stability in two constants: surfing and writing.

The cancer, for now, has altered Hickenbottom's voice and kept him from getting in the water, but his literary voice and surfing's influence on it are as strong as they've ever been.

Over the past two years, the 63-year-old who was once one of the top pro surfers in Northern California has put out both a novel and the only pictorial history book of surfing in Santa Cruz.

Sitting in the living room of the same Westside home in which he was raised, Hickenbottom talked about his years as a young vagabond surfer, his two tours of duty in Vietnam as an Army medic and about how the cancer has only strengthened his resolve. He speaks now through a voice prosthesis, his larynx removed last year to kill the tumor. He can't surf because the device would let water

into his trachea.

"It was a bit daunting at first but it's just my new normal," he said. "I'm not going to let anything get in my way and keep me from my big vision."

Hickenbottom is working on part of that vision, the sequel to his 2010 novel "Local Tribes." The book is set in 1960s Santa Cruz and follows Marco D'Giorgio, a 19-year-old surfer who receives a draft notice from the Army. In many ways, the story parallels Hickenbottom's.

He was drafted into the Army in 1967 and fought in the Tet Offensive, one of the most notorious battles of Vietnam.

"It was bad," he said. "I was there for the worst of it. I'll never forget January 30, 1968."

The war interrupted Hickenbottom's budding surfing career. As a senior in high school in 1966, he was on the O'Neill Surf Team and ranked the fifth-best competition surfer in Northern California.

"He was one of the top surfers in those

days," 87-year-old O'Neill founder Jack O'Neill said. "He was a crucial figure."

After returning from the war, Hickenbottom managed to pick up where he left off, at least as far as surfing was concerned. He surfed pro through the '70s and into the '80s, making the transition from the longboard era to the short.

"It's interesting because when I went into the army surfing was about long boards and short hair," he said. "But when I got back it had switched around to short boards and long hair."

After a decade of travel, Hickenbottom returned to Santa Cruz in the early '80s. He ran a house painting business before going back to school and getting his bachelor's of literature and creative writing from UC Santa Cruz in 1992. While there, he studied under the late Jim Houston, the beloved novelist of the Pacific Rim and Hawaii.

In 2009, Hickenbottom, a member of the Santa Cruz Surfing Club Preservation Society,



Photo: Dave Singelary

(Above) A legendary photo that helped put Steamer Lane on the surfing map, from Thomas Hickenbottom's *Surfing in Santa Cruz*. (Right) Jim Foley, one of the first to abandon the long board for shorter models rides backside at the Lane, *Surfing in Santa Cruz* is a who's who of Santa Cruz surfing legends.



Photo: Bob Richardson, courtesy Rich Novak

book that chronicles the history of county surfing. Believe it or not, there had been no such comprehensive record published before then.

"It was really 99.9 percent accurate," said Dan Young, a longtime friend and co-member of the preservation society. "And it really portrayed the era that it covered."

Hickenbottom said he talked to at least 50 people for the book. And the process, he said, served as a reuniting force for the old surf community.

The release party at the Museum of Art and History was what Hickenbottom called a "love fest" for people who hadn't seen each other in decades.

"In a way, I was like a magnet," Hickenbottom said. "When I was doing this book, I got to go into the living rooms of tons of old Santa Cruz surfers and beach people and they opened up their photo albums for me."

In the book is a shot of a cool, young Hickenbottom leaning against the doorway of the old Pleasure Point Surf Shop, mammoth longboards surrounding him. The photo was taken in the fall of 1966, years before he would face down cancer but just months before he would face the Vietcong.

"One of the things that really kept me from going crazy over there was writing," he said. "I could write my feelings down in a journal and constructively deal with them." ❁

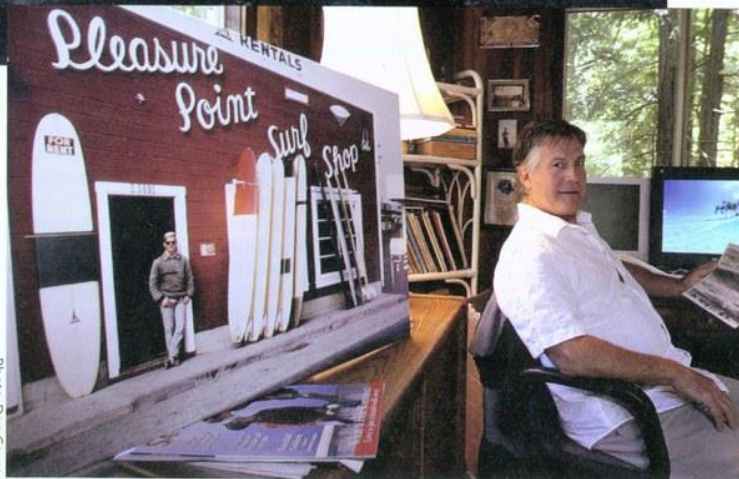


Photo: Dan Coyro

With his 1966 portrait in Pleasure Point as a backdrop, writer Tommy Hickenbottom works on the sequel to his surfing novel *Local Tribes*.