

COLDWATER WARRIOR

The amazing life of
Jack O'Neill,
the man who changed surfing

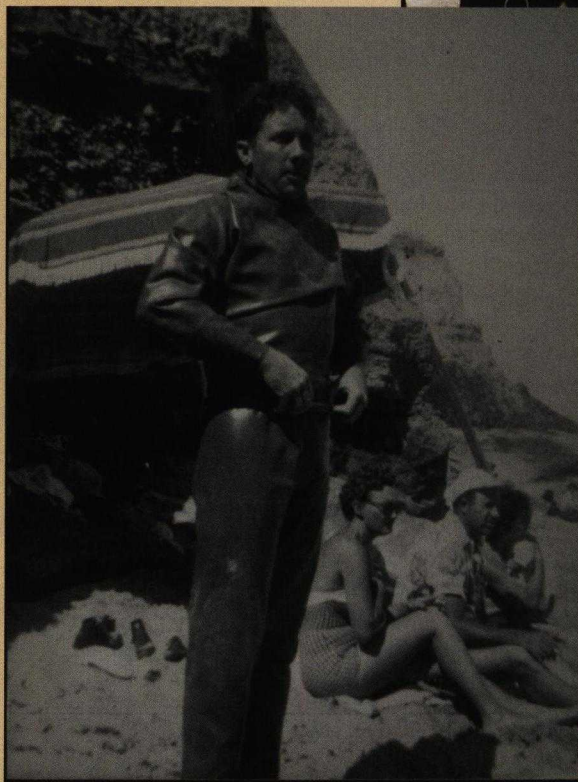
By Drew Kampion

Editor's note:

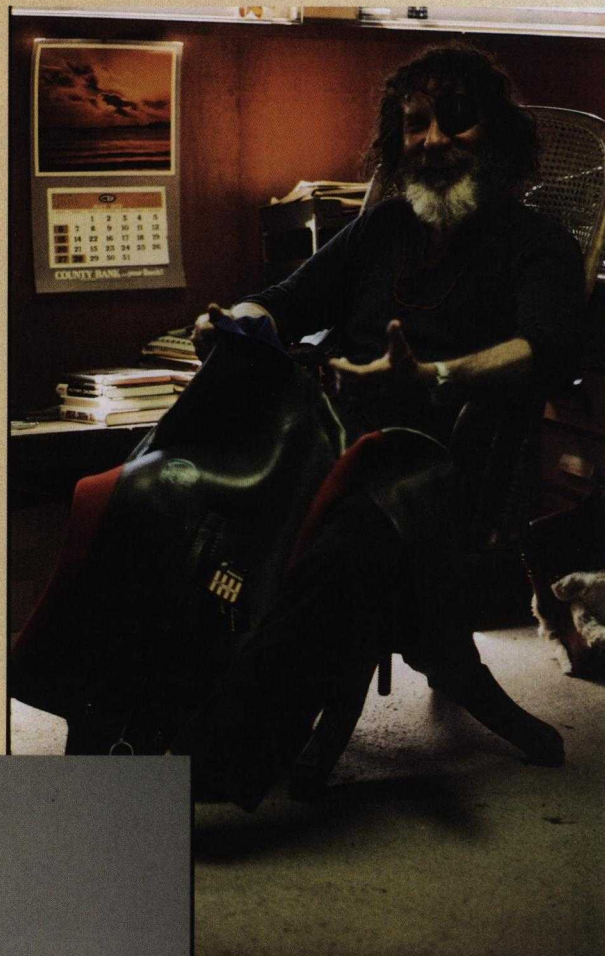
Drew Kampion was asked to write this story on Jack O'Neill for our premier issue. Jack was 83 at the time. O'Neill appeared in our magazine several times afterward, concluding with an article, also written by Drew, honoring his death and the memorial paddle out which was held a month after his death on July 9, 2017. O'Neill's Pleasure Point paddle out consisted of thousands of surfers and numerous vessels.

Standing in the acrid, black smoke of a driftwood-and-tire bonfire back in 1950, what surfer could have imagined today's high-tech neoprene wetsuits? Shivering in wool sweaters, bathing caps, and "bun-hugger" swimsuits rented from the nearby Sutro Baths pool for 25 cents, their faces red, lips blue, fingers and toes dead numb, the concept of a second skin that would allow full freedom of movement while enveloping them in a benign microclimate, even in the middle of the harshest water and air temperatures, was as far off for the guys who bodysurfed San Francisco's Ocean Beach as a trip to the moon. Who could have known that in their midst was the man who would bring the concept of "innerspace" to the world of surfing? Not even Jack O'Neill, the name behind world-famous O'Neill wetsuits, the man who would coin the phrase, "It's always summer on the inside," a concept that has defined his life's work while redefining his sport

When I first came to Santa Cruz in the fall of 1959, this was a wild and woolly corner of the Monterey Bay, where surf culture was already well established in the community. Classic woodies and hot-rods with surfboards strapped on top or sticking out the back cruised West Cliff Drive all weekend long, and there were a half dozen other popular surf spots in town. But the only place where I could find out about trying the sport was at a hot-dog-stand-sized "Surf Shop" situated in the parking lot between the mu-



(Top) CEO of O'Neill, Inc., Jack holds a new-technology SealSuit Jacket, circa 1979. (Above) O'Neill slips into a typical pre-neoprene "dry suit." They worked OK with clothes underneath—until they leaked and filled with water.



nicipal wharf and the waves of Cowell Beach and Steamer Lane. That's where I rented a board, waxed the wrong side, and paddled out into the Pacific Ocean for the first time.

The thing that immediately got my attention was the coldness of the water in Santa Cruz; the next thing I noticed was that some of the surfers catching the small waves that curled along the edge of the bluff were wearing black rubber suits. These, I learned, were wetsuits which could be rented or purchased at the little shop where I'd rented my surfboard. The owner of the shop was Jack O'Neill.

I didn't know it at the time, but Jack O'Neill didn't beat me into town by much. In fact, that summer was the first for his Santa Cruz shop. Before that, he'd lived in San Francisco where he and his friends bodysurfed the chill waters with nothing more than a pair of bun-huggers and maybe an old bathing cap from the second-hand store. Some of the guys tried to stay warm with wool sweaters – even soaked them in oil so they'd repel water – but the comfort level was not

high, and after a half hour or so in the surf, they'd gather around a driftwood-and-tire fire and listen to their teeth rattle. Living history.

Born in Denver in 1923, Jack spent his early youth in Southern California (North Hollywood, West Hollywood, and Long Beach), where he acquired a taste for the ocean and bodysurfing. But the family moved north and inland (to Portland, Oregon) for his high school years and it wasn't until after graduation that he found himself spending time back at the coast, working as a lifeguard in Seaside, Ore.

But then came World War II, and Jack dutifully enlisted in the Navy Air Corps, got into the V-5 program, and ended up flying Waco 220-hp biplanes at Navy teaching schools in Northfield, Minn. and Yankton, S.D. "I joined the Navy and they shipped me out to the middle of the country," he jokes, "as far away from the ocean as you could get!"

After the war, he bought a Stearman biplane and went into aerial advertising, but business wasn't too brisk, so he moved to San Francisco where he earned a living by commercial fishing, then selling architectural aluminum, fire extinguishers, windows and skylights. During those sales years in the late '40s and early '50s, Jack developed the habit of fleeing the city on his lunch breaks and heading to the beach where he would refresh himself in the bone-chilling water. It was that chill California ocean that launched him on his quest for warmth.

He was a regular at all the surplus stores, searching out UDT skin-diver suits from the war. "You had to wear long underwear underneath," he explains. "There were two pieces and they rolled together at the waist and it was hard to get a good seal, and if it filled up with water, you were in a lot of trouble."

He experimented with a flexible, buoyant unicellular foam (one of many technological developments to emerge from World War II), stuffing the material down his trunks. Voila! At least that part of him stayed warm. Then he tried polyvinylchloride (PVC) foam; the material had good insulating properties but lacked tensile strength, so he glued a thin sheet of plastic to one side and made a vest, his first wetsuit.

PVC was hard to work with, but the plastic coating allowed water to run off the



(Above) O'Neill takes the helm of the old gaff-rigged schooner, the *Marie Celine*. Designed by Murray Peterson and modeled after the old coastal schooners, the boat was started before World War II and finished in 1947.

surface, which reduced "cooling by evaporation." So, he was encouraged and intrigued, and when he discovered neoprene (used for insulation, carpet padding, car door seals, etc.), he knew he was in business. "Rubatex was the best supplier," Jack recalls. Neoprene was a closed-cell foam and, although it was still rather fragile in those days, it had a smooth side that shed water. It was also an excellent insulator, it was buoyant, and pieces of the material could be readily bonded together with a liquid cement.

Around about 1952, Jack formalized his relationship with the ocean by opening a small retail operation in a garage across the Great Highway from his favorite bone-crushing bodysurfing break. He sold accessories like paraffin wax and a few of those neoprene vests he was making. He bought a pile of balsa and started shaping surfboards, but when the vests started selling, Jack decided to quit his job and go into the wetsuit business. His friends laughed. They asked him what he planned to do after the handful of surfers in the area had bought one. Jack said he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. "I got a federal registration on the name 'Surf Shop,'"

he says. "I think we were the first to use it. Down south, Dale Velzy and Hobie Alter had surfboard shops under their own names, but we were doing the wetsuits and accessories, too, so I called it Surf Shop."

The Surf Shop became a gathering place and the number of surfers began to grow. O'Neill flew in the great Phil Edwards to shape boards, and wetsuit sales climbed. He developed designs for the "shorty," "long john," and long-sleeved "beaver-tail jacket" wetsuits. With sales and marketing in his blood (his dad was a fire-engine salesman) and looking to expand his market beyond a few cold-water eccentrics, Jack took his wetsuits to some of the major boat shows in the 1950s. "That was back when people would ask, 'What's a wetsuit?' and 'What's a surfboard?'" he remembers. He'd get large tubs, fill them with blocks of ice, and have his three kids (soon to be six kids, and now seven) sit around on them all day. The point got across: Wetsuits keep you warm.

Always summer

In 1959, Jack opened a second Surf Shop 75 miles down the coast on the warmer, sunnier shores of Monterey Bay at Santa Cruz, where there were more surfers and better waves. By then surfboards, too, were being made out of foam (covered with fiberglass and resin), and Gidget had just hit theaters nationwide. Suddenly, hundreds of young people wanted to learn to surf and, in the Bay Area, O'Neill's strategically located Surf Shop was where they came.

Jack had first visited Santa Cruz back in the '50s. "I used to come down here and sleep at Pleasure Point or New Brighton," he recalls. "Surf was a dirty word back then. I remember surfing in San Francisco with Tom Marketello and when he interviewed for the police force, the chief saw the surfboard on his car and said, 'Policemen don't surf.' He had to quit to be a cop," Jack says with a laugh. "Now we're sponsoring the police department surf team!"

O'Neill's surfboard business was going well when he made the decision to expand south. New polyurethane foam technology had become available in the late '50s, and Jack was one of the first to start "blowing" surfboard "blanks" from the stuff, at first in the city, and then when he moved to Santa Cruz. "That was in our secret chicken coop," Jack

says and laughs.

About the same time, new developments at Rubatex, Jack's neoprene supplier, solved two of his biggest problems – how to keep the neoprene from tearing and how to make wetsuits easier to slip on and off – with one simple solution: laminating elastic nylon jersey to the surface of the closed-cell neoprene foam. That development, combined with the introduction of the zig-zag stitch, was a huge leap forward for O'Neill and the thriving wetsuit industry.

As his business grew, Jack changed the sign to O'Neill's Surf Shop and relocated to 41st Avenue where there was room for a modest manufacturing plant. Being a pragmatic father who understood that the best way to keep tabs on your kids is to keep them around, he put all six of them to work in the company. Mike helped dad design suits, Kathy got into bookkeeping and later got the whole operation computerized, Pat worked in promotion and organized Team O'Neill (eventually acquiring the top talents in a range of water-sports), Bridget moved into design and helped launch a new sportswear division, Shawne tested and multi-tasked (and became a world windsurfing champion), and Tim eventually captained the family fleet and ran support crews for product-testing expeditions and promotions, as O'Neill began to sponsor major competitions around the world. (Jack's youngest son, Jack "JJ" Lucano O'Neill Sandibal, divides his time between Santa Cruz and Mexico.)

As O'Neill improved his wetsuits, introducing new styles, features, and accessories (along with steadily improving materials), surfers' territories expanded. Northern California became a year-round surf zone, and guys were surfing New Hampshire and Rhode Island in January! Explorers and transplants opened up Oregon, Washington, and Canada. Meanwhile, divers, waterskiers, windsurfers, and even snow-skiers and climbers (yes, it's true) were wearing wetsuits.

By 1980, Jack O'Neill's Surf Shop had morphed into a thriving international company, dominating the world's wetsuit market while becoming one of the leaders in beach lifestyle sportswear in the U.S., Japan, Australia, and Europe. In 1985, having run

Team O'Neill for years and effectively coordinated the company's operations in Europe and Japan, Pat became CEO as Jack moved to chairman of the board, a.k.a. The Cheese.

"Santa Cruz is our roots," says Pat, who was one of the kids chillin' on those ice blocks back in the day. Now president and CEO of O'Neill, Inc., Pat says, "Santa Cruz is the reason we build great wetsuits. This is an incredible testing grounds. We've got very cold water here, so we can build a suit and run right down and test it, then come back to the office and

he was pretty sure he was going to go pro; he surfed in a few contests and did well. Then, competing in Japan one time, he was the sole surfer who made it a point to personally thank the owner of Marui Department Stores (the event sponsor) for his kindness and hospitality, and there began a close relationship that continues to this day.

"I really ended up loving the business end of it," Pat confesses, "from designing wetsuits to the marketing of them, doing all that stuff. So I actually went on the road intending

to surf in contests and ended up selling wetsuits. It was kind of a natural thing."

As the years progressed, Pat played a continuing active role in his father's company, most visibly as the man behind Team O'Neill which began with Shaun Tomson, Reno Abellira, Dane Kealoha, Joey Buran, and others traveling with Pat, surfing and making guest appearances around the world. Accruing experience and maturity as he went, Pat has emerged as an excellent businessman, manager, and marketing strategist. But through it all, one characteristic has been steadfast in Jack's

second son – absolute loyalty to his father and the company.

"Jack was God," Pat says of their relationship. "To this day, he's my best friend. There's one thing you gotta understand, all the way through to today, Jack knows what's goin' on. I mean, he might not be there every day, he might not be designin' everything, he might not be talkin' to the bank, doin' the finance, but he knows everything that's goin' on. He and I get together a couple times a week and go over everything. The success of this company has been myself being able to transfer the knowledge Jack had for so many years into myself – to be able to take it from there and into the next generation."

Today, O'Neill International has licensees and distributorships around the world with gross annual sales over \$200 million – the best-selling wetsuits in the world and one of the top sportswear brands — and all out of little old Santa Cruz.

(Above) The O'Neill boys, Pat and Mike, tandem skate the sidewalk at O'Neill's Surf Shop location near the wharf and Cowell Beach, circa 1960.



make any adjustments we need."

Out of that symbiosis of enterprise and location, has come more than a half century of innovation and problem-solving. "Santa Cruz has such great charisma all over the world," Pat explains, "and O'Neill helped create that, certainly in the surf community. O'Neill is now distributed to 80 countries, and in each of those areas, we market Santa Cruz as the place where the modern wetsuit was developed and perfected."

Passing the torch

"Pat has a good handle on it," Jack says, characterizing Pat's now 20-year performance at the helm of the family business. "I don't think there's anybody as experienced in the surf industry as Pat. He's got a really good feel for the business and he has especially good rapport with Japan. I think Pat could lecture at a graduate school at Stanford on how to work with Japan."

A fiery little lad, Pat O'Neill started off like any kid born in a toy shop – he went wild. Like his father, he loved the ocean and became an excellent competitive surfer. By the mid-1970s

A bay in the life

With the company's day-to-day operations in good hands, Jack was freed up to surf, sail, and work at a variety of environmental projects. Besides a strong interest in saving the great white shark from extinction, he also developed the O'Neill Sea Odyssey program – free educational cruises on Monterey Bay aboard the Team O'Neill catamaran which acquaint kids with the microbiology of the Monterey Bay Marine Sanctuary and the reality of a living (and threatened) sea.

"As I see it, we've gotten a lot from the ocean, in more ways than one," says Jack. "I mean, the ocean has been very comforting to me through the years. When you get all screwed up and you jump in the ocean, everything's all right again. And economically we've gotten an awful lot and I think we have the facilities to put something back."

Jack's favorite way to give back is through the Sea Odyssey program, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in October. The Odyssey's chairman of the board is daughter Bridget (also O'Neill's executive vice president, international design), who has fully embraced her father's vision of the program.

"Bridget is doing a fantastic job!" says Jack, who then marvels: "Jeez! Can you believe it? We've taken about 35,000 kids out there so far!"

"Because O'Neill Sea Odyssey does not charge the schools or the families it serves, we are able to serve kids who would otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in this quality, ocean-going program," Bridget explains. "The program rewards fourth, fifth, and sixth graders who have made some environmental effort through their schools with an exploration into the bay, which includes a mind-expanding look at plankton under a microscope, proving that the ocean is literally alive."

That living sea – Monterey Bay and the Pacific Ocean – begins right out of the port-holes in the bottom story of Jack's Pleasure Point home. There, he stays in touch with the business, entertains international visitors, and functions as the family Kahuna and Grandpa. "I never dreamed the company would become what it is today," he admits. "It still amazes me. We have worked hard, but we have also been very fortunate."

Inducted into the Surfboard Industry Manufacturers' Association Hall of Fame in 1998, Jack's face (looking rakishly piratical with a patch over his left eye) is one of the most recognized and iconic images in surfing.

"That happened right here at a surf spot called The Hook," Jack says, explaining the eye patch. "That was in the early '70s, and I'm not actually sure what happened. I didn't think much of it at the time. I got



(Above) O'Neill proudly displays his latest air ship during the 1980s. If the wind didn't switch on cue, son Tim had to get the Whaler under him before the whole rig sank.

hit with a surfboard – mine or somebody else's, I never did figure it out – and I kind of saw stars, and I thought, 'Oh shit, I'm gonna have a black eye.' But what happened is that the iris rolled over on itself, and they took out the lens and laid the iris back, and they sewed it open, so I'm very light sensitive, and if I don't wear this (the patch), I squint too much and then my jaw gets real tight. I can see light and dark with that eye, but I can't see anything else."

Jack, now 83, has been one of this town's most beloved characters for many years – easily identified by the patch, or by the various hot-air balloons he's launched from Lighthouse Point, or the silver '57 Jags he used to drive around town, or just his big smile and thumbs-up as he saw you in passing.

It's true that Santa Cruz has been almost utterly transformed since the O'Neills showed up there in 1959. In the 1960s, the University of California campus was established in the foothills north of town, and that contributed to a population rise and

demographic change. Then there was the '89 earthquake that remade the downtown. And then, as Silicon Valley filled to the brim with humanity, the overflow came over the mountains to settle in and around "Cruise." Add in Santa Cruz's strategic location and resulting role as a tourist town for over 100 years, and you get the picture. This once-sleepy town seldom shuts an eye nowadays. Meanwhile, wetsuits have transformed ocean sports, making it possible for this chilly northern outpost to become a

global center of the ancient Hawaiian sport of surfing (which was first demonstrated here by three Hawaiian princes back in 1885).

So it is that Jack O'Neill, his family, and his company have done much to stoke surf fever in Santa Cruz. So much so that, for many years, the town was in contention for the name "Surf City USA." But after years of lobbying, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office awarded the trademark to Huntington Beach in May. But who cares? asks Pat O'Neill.

"Without getting into the whole 'Surf City' thing, Santa Cruz is all about the surf," he says. "We've got some of the best waves in the world here. I

think we should call Santa Cruz the Surf Village. Let them have Surf City, we'll take Surf Village! People come from all around the world to surf here," he says and grins, "and when they do, they need a good wetsuit."

Before Jack O'Neill, surfing in Northern California's chill waters was a rugged sport practiced by a few hardy men. It was Jack who kept searching for a practical way to keep warm, and it was Jack who worked persistently to develop the modern neoprene wetsuit, one of the most important innovations in water-sports history. Other individuals have also contributed to the evolution of the wetsuit, but Jack is the man perhaps most responsible for surfing's endless summer. 🌊

Several times a resident of Santa Cruz County, Drew Kampion is a former editor of *Surfer*, *Surfing*, *Wind Surf*, and *New Age Journal* magazines. Check out Kampion's biography on "Jack O'Neill: It's Always Summer on the Inside."