

Harry Mayo: Santa Cruz Surf Pioneer

[Sherrie Murphy interviewed Harry Mayo on December 10, 1995; the interview appeared in *Ocean Life Magazine* (OLM), Winter 1996 issue.]

Harry Mayo was born in Pacific Grove, California in November of 1923. When he was two years old his family moved to Santa Cruz, and at the age of 13 he became one of Santa Cruz' first local surfers. In wood shop class at Mission Hill Junior High he and his friends made their first surfboards, or paddleboards as they were called in the '30s. They cost about \$13 to make.

During my interview with Harry I gained a new perspective on surfing. As he described life without wetsuits or leashes, I realized how much we take these luxuries for granted in the '90s. When he talked about the lack of crowds in the water I wished the clock could be turned back 60 years.

Nevertheless, times change and fortunately Harry is here to tell us about the good ol' days.



Teenage Harry Mayo Surfing at Cowells

OLM:

Can you describe what it was like surfing in Santa Cruz in the 1930s and '40s?

Harry:

A group of us started surfing in 1936, and started a formal surf club in 1938. We started by keeping our boards in a barn behind Buster Steward's house about one block up Bay Avenue from West Cliff Drive. In 1938 the Junior Chamber of Commerce helped us to build a board-house. We kept our boards right down there on the beach. This was down at the foot of where the Dream Inn is now.



Santa Cruz Surfing Club, June 1941

Left to right: Don "Bosco" Patterson, Harry "Little Harry" Murray, Rich Thompson, Alex Hokamp, Blake "Tom Blake" Turner, Bill Grace, Dave "Buster" Steward, Fred Hunt, Harry Mayo, Alex "Pinky" Pedemonte, Tommy "Butter Cup" Roussel.

OLM:

What kind of equipment did you use?

Harry:

We made our own paddleboards, there were no commercial boardmakers at that time. They were called paddleboards because they paddled very nicely; they stayed on top of the water. They paddled better than the boards that you see now. We called them paddleboards but that's what we surfed on.

Inside they had a hollow construction with ribs going across either notches or holes in the ribs. You needed this because they all leaked and you had a drain plug in order to drain them. We made them in a shop at school. Most of them were made out of redwood sides that could be bent a little bit, a pine nose and tail block, and three-ply tops and bottoms of plywood. We made some odd-ball ones at Mission Junior High.



Surfers headed back to the board house, June 1941 - Photograph taken by Ed Webber

Then when we were at Santa Cruz High there were some guys that came over from San Jose State (originally from Southern California) and they brought over some boards that were better and we started making them like that.

OLM:

Did anything dangerous ever happen to you or anyone else with such a large board?

Harry:

Yes, I got hit one time right near the shore and it caught me across my chest and before I could swim ashore my chest muscles were already tightening up. Some of the ladies that tried to surf in those days would get hit once in a while and get black and blue marks. Their mother and fathers would get on them and that's why there weren't too many women surfing. Plus they couldn't pack the boards like they can now because of the weight. We'd put them in the water for them and they'd stay in at Cowells and surf.



Pat Collings (left), Shirley Templeman (right)

OLM:

Did you use anything comparable to a wetsuit before they came out?

Harry:

Wetsuits came out around 1952. The closest thing to a wetsuit is what Buster Steward and another guy Bill Grace used to wear. They were old sweaters with the arms cut off. I didn't like to wear them. They got them at the Salvation Army and Goodwill and cut the sleeves off and wore them like a vest.

OLM:

How often would you be able to surf?

Harry:

We would go for an early surf then go to Father Devine's on Front and Laurel Streets for a 15 cent breakfast. However, there were many a day that the surf was up but we didn't surf because we all had jobs. With some of our jobs we didn't even have weekends off.

I did all kinds of work. I first started selling newspapers when I was a kid. Then I started to work for Charles W. Stone down at the beach doing some garden work and helping to do repairs all during the winter. He owned a bunch of cabins and cottages at the beach.

When war came I went into the Coast Guard and I got stationed right back here in Santa Cruz. We had port/star-board duty-- 24 hrs. on, 24 hrs. off-- so every other day we had off to surf.

OLM:

What would you have considered a crowd out in the water and what do you think about the crowds today?

Harry:

One time at Cowells we counted 33 out on a weekend, and that was crowded. Today the crowds would be amazing and so would the competition. But they (surfers today) do really well because they've got those boards and they can whip them around and hotdog them. They don't have to worry about it if they fall in the water because they've got the wetsuits. They're also not worried about losing their boards. We used to catch a

ride off of what they call Indicator now and ride it all the way back to the beach. That was the ride of the day, catching it all the way to the beach, not doing what they do now!

OLM:

What was the feeling like out in the water between the surfers? Did you feel that there was a lot of camaraderie?

Harry:

Yes, you see there was no competition then, if you didn't get this breaker you'd get the next one because there weren't that many guys out. There is definitely still camaraderie. We meet out here at the surfing



Surfing at Indicators: Jack Moore, Sam Maugeri, Bill Grace

museum every Friday and tell big stories and have a lot of laughs. We've had parties and reunions, we're still good friends. We had friends from Burlingame and San Jose ... from all over. It didn't cause a problem because it wasn't that crowded out there.

In our day, we surfed Cowells, the Rivermouth, and Pleasure Point. We didn't surf too much at Steamer Lane because if you lost your board it would go into the rocks. There were some guys surfing out there but it wasn't like it is now. There were no leashes; the size and weight of the boards we used would have torn your leg off.

OLM:

When would you say surfing really began to take off as a popular sport and feelings of localism became prominent?

Harry:

It was after the war, when wetsuits came out and the boards changed so that almost anybody could carry one. It was also that it became the fad in the movies and really started picking up. We never dreamt that it would become as big, powerful, and as money oriented as it has. In fact there was some good surf here a month ago and they said there were about 250 to 300 surfers between Steamers and Cowell Beach. Everybody said if it wasn't for the wetsuits they would not be out there.

OLM:

Do you know how Steamer Lane got its name?

Harry:

Claude "Duke" Horan. He's the guy that named Steamer Lane. We were on the beach one day with a big winter storm and had a fire going up against the cliff to try and keep warm. The waves were really big and he



Steamer Lane in the early 1940's

looked outside and said, "My God, look outside, they're breaking clean out in the steamer lanes." He's referring to the shipping lanes outside. You'll hear other stories, but I'm sorry, that's how it happened.

OLM:

When did you stop surfing and why?

Harry:

Well, I got married in 1948; so shortly after that, I was working two or three jobs trying to make ends meet and pay rent. I was just too busy.

OLM:

Can you recall one of the biggest or best days you've ever surfed?

Harry:

I would say one August day there was a tropical storm down in the Pacific and we had big surf and hot weather. We'd actually dunk ourselves in the water to cool off. We could pick (the waves) up at Indicators or outside of Indicators (which we used to call Cypress Point because of the Cypress trees out there). We'd ride them all the way to the beach one right after the other, just fantastic surf. It was at least head high which is good for Cowells. It was pretty big for us with our paddleboards.

Although Harry is no longer surfing he remains an important part of the surfing society. On Fridays he and his friends volunteer at the Santa Cruz Surfing Museum in the lighthouse at Steamer Lane. We are thankful for the time Harry spent with us and for the memories that he generously shared.

Source

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