

Photo: © Dan Coyro

# A life in the curl

Waterman Johnny Rice's passion for the ocean

By Terri Morgan

**F**rom the moment you walk into the Westside home that Johnny Rice and his wife Rosemari Reimers Rice shared for many years, it's apparent that their lives revolved around the ocean and art. Several pristine Johnny Rice surfboards hang from the ceiling. The walls are filled with Rosemari's paintings, weathered beach signs collected over the years, and surfing photographs. Dream catchers and other artifacts illustrate his proud heritage as a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, as well as the couple's devotion to friends and family. A 1950s photograph of Johnny and the elite Waikiki "Beach Boys" is on display near a photograph of Rosemari's grandmother.

"It's like a museum in here," said Nadine Reimers, Rosemari's daughter. "It's the archives of the history of surfing."

Somewhere amidst the vast collection of surfing memorabilia and artwork, which Rosemari jokes is the only thing holding up the walls of the home she bought in 1970, is a photograph of Johnny being inducted into the International Surfboard Builder's Hall of Fame in Huntington Beach 14 years ago. The first Northern Californian honoree began shaping surfboards in the 1950s when boards were still being built out of redwood and balsa. By the time his ailing health forced him to hang up his planer this year, Surftech was selling epoxy Johnny Rice models. Along the way, he created countless boards for surfers riding waves around the globe.

Velzy taught Johnny how to shape surfboards, launching his career in the surf industry. A complete waterman, Johnny also served in the Coast Guard and worked as a Merchant Marine . . .

"I couldn't tell you how many boards he shaped," said Rosemari. "Thousands and thousands." His shaping room remains in their garden, in an outbuilding that also contains her art studio. Rosemari, who began surfing not long after Johnny did, also was a surfing pioneer. Not only did she master the sport in an era when few women took to the water, she was the first female team rider for Dewey

Weber Surfboards. In 2007, she was immortalized on the Surfer's Walk of Fame in Hermosa Beach.

Over the years, Johnny mentored countless young surfers in California, Florida, Brazil and Hawaii. Longtime surfer and artist Jim Phillips cherishes the memory of being one of those lucky kids. As a 15-year-old novice, Phillips looked up to Johnny, who was one of the best surfers at Pleasure Point at the time. Most of the older surfers adopted a brash persona and intimidated younger kids and

(Top) Santa Cruz native Johnny Rice studies his 8' Elite Quadra Piglet in his shaping room behind his Columbia Street home.



Photo: Johnny Rice collection



(Above) Johnny making a bottom turn at Santa Cruz's legendary surf spot, Steamer Lane. (Right) Johnny (L) and Mike Winterburn pose with two early surfboards that were stored at the Santa Cruz Surf Club (early 50s). (Below) Johnny at Pleasure Point with a board that Dale Velzy built for him (1957).

Photo: Johnny Rice collection



beginners. Johnny was different. While he could be cantankerous at times, he took time to offer tips and encouragement to novices.

"Johnny is very generous," Phillips said. "He was secure enough in his position to talk to me and my friends when the prevailing older surfing culture routinely rejected and harassed us younger surfers."

Johnny Rice seemed larger than life to his young admirers.

"He had kind of a Dennis Hopper persona," said Marty Coniglio, a Santa Cruz County resident who met Johnny in Hermosa Beach during the 1950s. "He was a wild guy with a big heart."

One of the first well-known women surfers in the area, Betty Van Dyke, met Johnny in the early '50s when she first started surfing. Although she was 20 and he was just 14, they became good friends due to their shared love of the ocean.

"There was just a small group of us in Santa Cruz who were in the water," recalled Van Dyke, who used her mother's Brownie camera to photograph her fellow surfers back then. "I liked him a lot and we became really close friends. He was a lot of fun. He had a

Photo: Betty Van Dyke

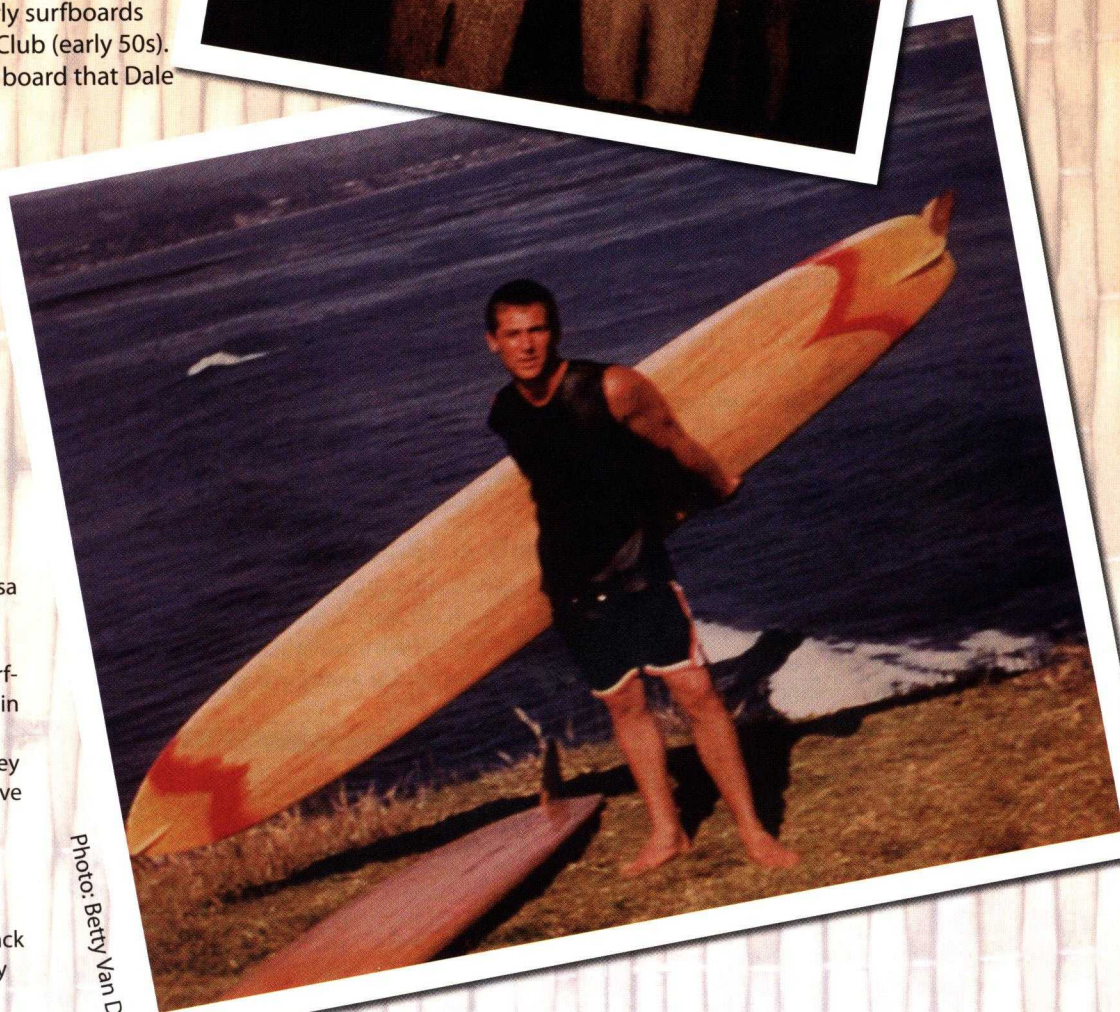






Photo: Johnny Rice collection

(Above) Rosemary and Johnny hang out on the beach in Malibu, probably one of the most famous settings in surfing (1954).

good sense of humor and he was smart."

Johnny also caught the attention of Dale Velzy, one of the first commercial surfboard makers in the state.

"Velzy was the center of the universe for us, and he took to Johnny right away," Coniglio said. Velzy taught Johnny how to shape surfboards, launching his career in the surf industry. A complete waterman, Johnny also served in the Coast Guard and worked as a Merchant Marine where he became the captain of a huge cargo ship. Despite his successful and various careers, however, he is best known as a top-notch shaper and an excellent surfer.

"I've surfed with Johnny over the years at Steamer's, Pleasure Point, the Hook, and Indialantic Beach in Florida," Phillips said. "I would miss waves just to watch him surf with his fluid grace and flowing cutbacks. He seemed to just get better and better over the years."

Johnny and Rosemary dated in high school, but went their separate ways after graduation. Rosemary married someone else and had two kids. Johnny, who was married twice, had three children. About 30 years after they broke up, the two ran into each other at a surf contest at Steamer Lane. A short while later Johnny moved to Santa Cruz. In 1989 the couple got married at Cowell's Beach.

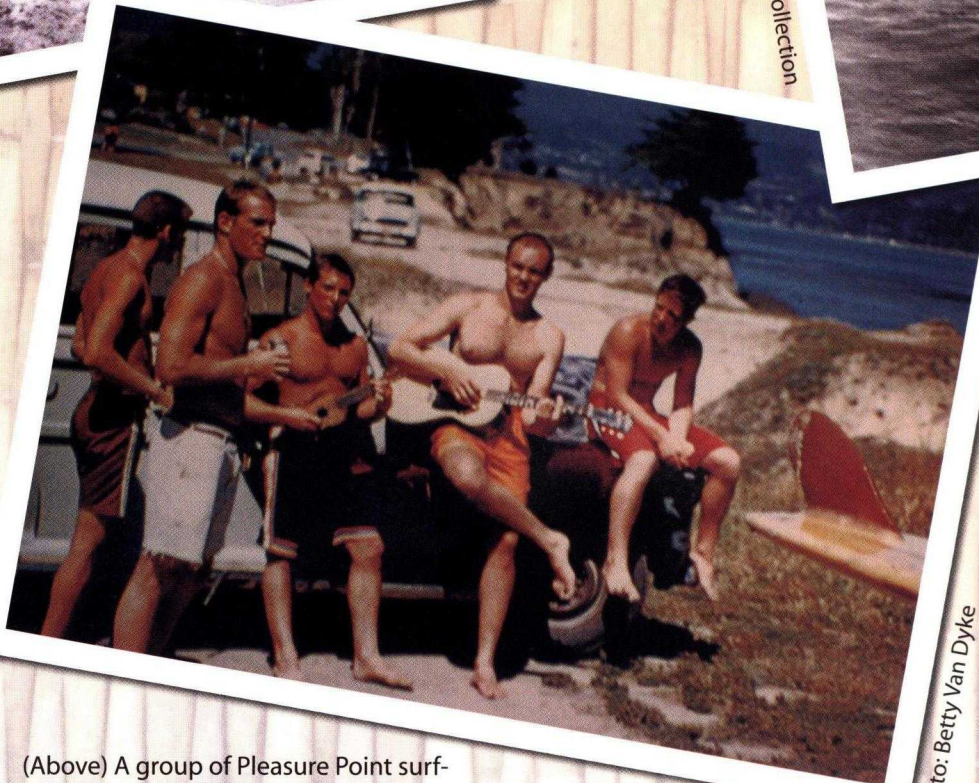


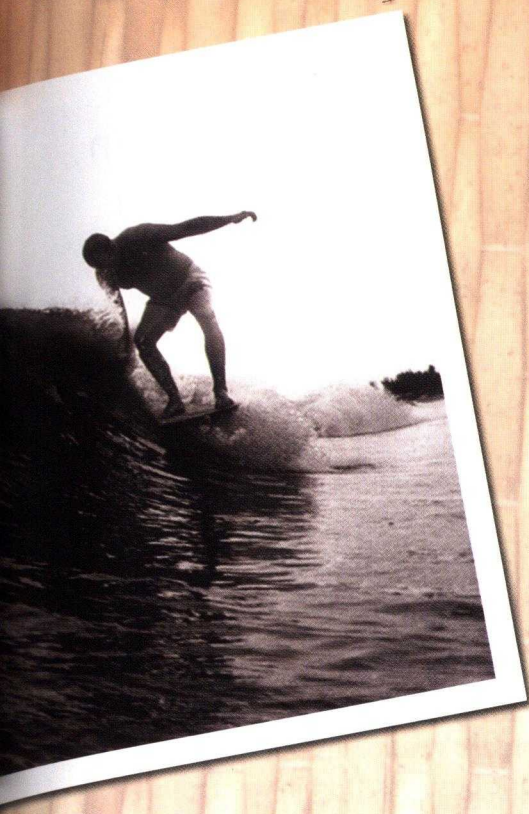
Photo: Betty Van Dyke

(Above) A group of Pleasure Point surfers, (L-R) Jerry Colfer, Spike Bulls, Johnny Rice, Al Palm, and Mike Winterburn, join together for an impromptu jam session (1957).



The Johnny Rice logo has graced countless surfboards since the 1950s.





(Above) Johnny Rice hanging five at Pines in Melbourne Florida (1966).

Rosemari wore a white wetsuit and a white veil, while Johnny donned a black wetsuit for the nuptials.

"It was very special to have two people I know from surfing get married in the water," said Kim Stoner, who was at the wedding. "They're both great people and I'm happy to have them as friends."

The wedding party paddled out into the break, and had to rush the ceremony at the end as a set arrived, Rosemari recalled with a smile. Her tone turned more serious, though, when she spoke about Johnny's current health problems. Two years ago, he suffered a major stroke that impacted his memory. Last year, he disappeared on Labor Day and was found in San Leandro. Because of his memory issues, he didn't know where he was or how he got there. After that, he moved an assisted living facility on Beach Hill. Both Rosemari and Nadine say Johnny is happy at Sunshine Villa, a beautiful Victorian historic landmark which has the feel of a luxury hotel. Family and friends visit regularly. After all, it's a perfect location—within sight, sound, and scent of Cowell's Beach, where 11-year-old Johnny Rice learned to surf on a 14-foot board back in 1949. 🌊

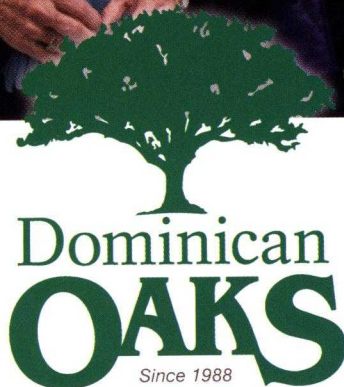
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