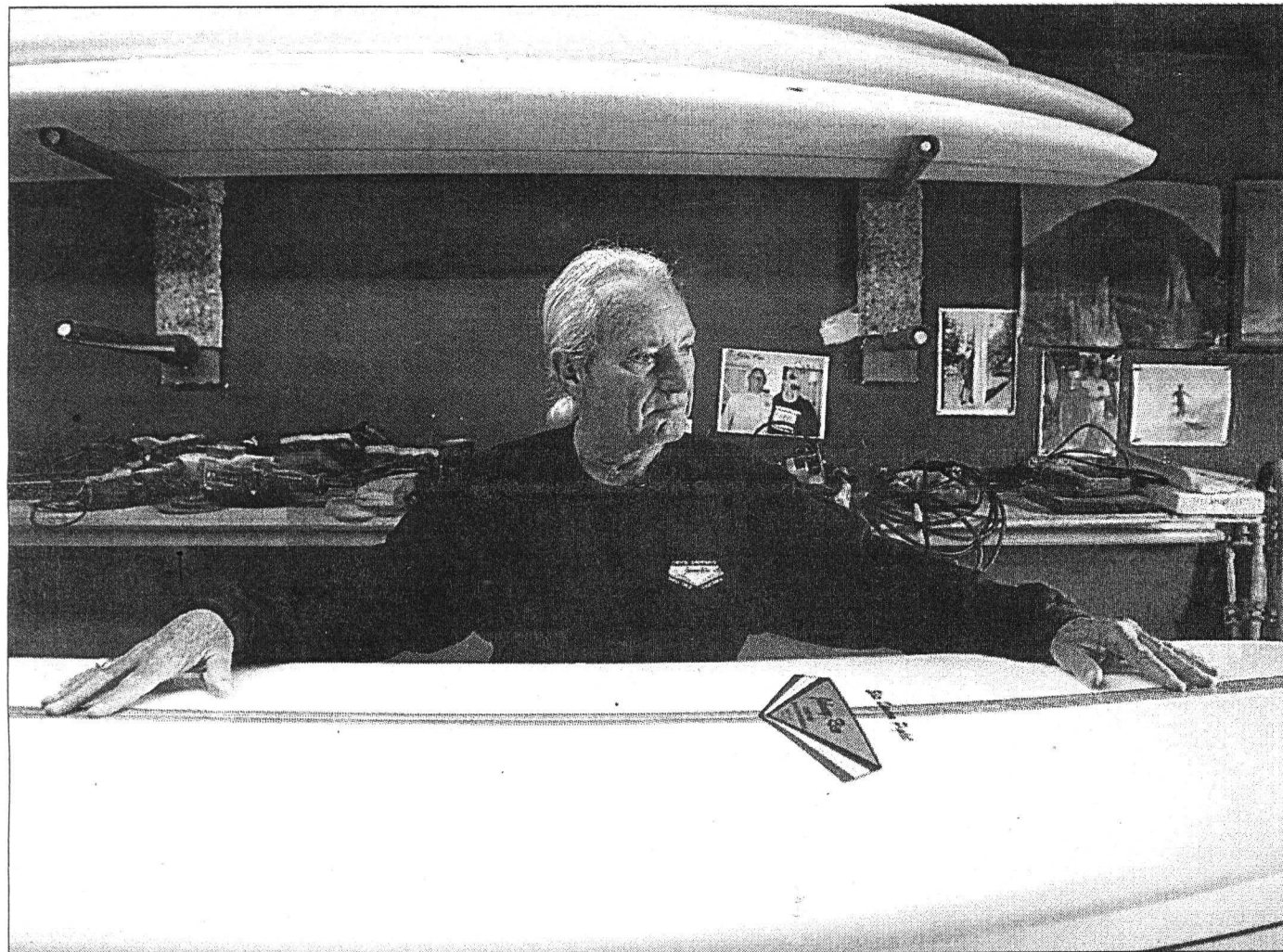


A Lasting Legacy

Celebration for Johnny Rice marks a life of surfboard building



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

Johnny Rice shows a surfboard in the shaping room of his Santa Cruz home in December 2010. Surfboards and photos of the native Santa Cruz shaper will be exhibited at Sunshine Villa from 4-10 p.m. Saturday.

By Stephen Baxter
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SANTA CRUZ » What a ride it's been for 76-year-old Johnny Rice.

He's been a Waikiki beachboy, a surf shop owner and surfboard shaper in Brazil and a member of the U.S. Coast Guard and Merchant Marines. Yet it was the countless hours in his home shaping bay on Columbia Street in Santa Cruz — a few blocks from Steamer Lane — that solidified his reputation as one of the most renowned surfboard shapers in California.

Saturday, a celebration at Sunshine Villa will honor Rice's legacy, and it will include a few surfboards and photos that illustrate his place in Santa Cruz surfing history.

"It's going to be Johnny Rice Day at Sunshine Villa," said his wife, Rosemary Reimers-Rice. "We've got some really special things for Johnny."

Rice has been living at Sunshine Villa since September after he suffered a series of small strokes, his family said. Thursday, Rice's sly grin peeked out

from his straight gray hair falling out of a short pony tail. Creases in his face come from a lifetime in the sun.

Rice grew up in Santa Cruz riding balsa surfboards in the 1940s and 50s.

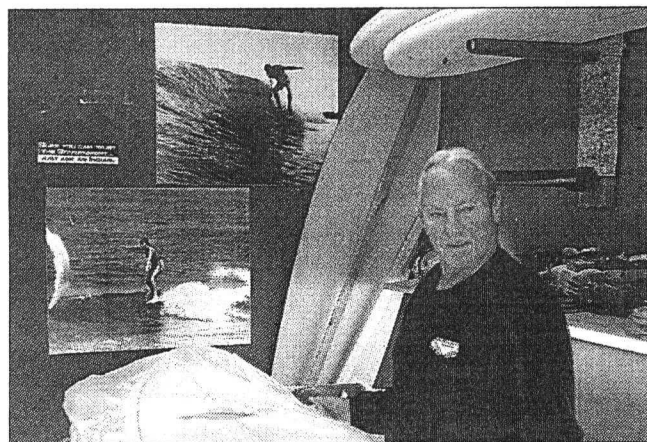
He attended high school in Manhattan Beach, where he met Reimers-Rice in the 1950s. Rice learned to shape boards from well-known shaper Dale Velzy around that time, and he started in part because he hung out at Velzy's shop.

Velzy would say, "Hey Greek! You want to learn how to shape?" Reimers-Rice said.

Rice isn't of Greek heritage, and he found out later in life that his ancestors include Native Americans from the Sioux and Prairie Potawatomi tribes. The Potawatomi built canoes, which is fitting, and the logo for Johnny Rice Surfboards includes the tribes' colors of white, yellow, blue and red.

When Rice joined the U.S. Coast Guard in 1956, he started to lose touch with Reimers-Rice. He was stationed on the East Coast, and when he wasn't at sea, he shaped surfboards in places such as Florida and New

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DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Native Santa Cruz surfboard shaper Johnny Rice works in his shaping room — with photos of his wife, Rosemary, and himself on the wall — in December 2010.

"He has a fantastic reputation throughout the industry. He would always give a little aloha spirit."

— Jeff Langston, friend and owner of Haut Surf Shop

Surf

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Jersey. He served for eight years and continued to travel, surf and shape surfboards.

By that time, Reimers-Rice had become an expert surfer, and she was the first woman to be named to the prestigious Dewey Weber Surf Team in Southern California.

Around 1970, Rice set up a shaping room and shop in Guarujá, outside the sprawling metropolis of São Paulo, Brazil. He learned Portuguese and Spanish, in part because he employed Argentinians at his shop, Reimers-Rice said.

While Rice was in Brazil, "He would always write me little letters," Reimers-Rice said. She didn't write him back because she couldn't find a return address, but she recently found a postcard with a return address. "Whoops," she said.

Rice later became a beachboy at Waikiki in Hawaii, teaching surfing and attending to visitors during long days in the warm water. A few years later, Rice returned to California and worked as a captain in the Merchant Marines in Ventura.

Though it was a government job, friends said he kept his sense of humor — sometimes doing doughnuts in the water with the official boats.

"He's super fun, he really makes you laugh," said Jeff Langston, a friend and owner of Haut Surf Shop in Santa Cruz.

Rice returned to Santa Cruz in 1986 and set up a

CELEBRATION FOR JOHNNY RICE

What: A celebration for Johnny Rice will include a display of surfboards, photos and memorabilia from Santa Cruz's surfing past. Rice, 76, is a renowned surfboard shaper and native of Santa Cruz.

Where: Sunshine Villa, 80 Front St., Santa Cruz

When: 4 to 10 p.m. Saturday

Cost: Free, with refreshments provided

shaping room at his home near Steamer Lane. At a party after the Santa Cruz Longboard Union Invitational contest that year, Rice reunited with Rosemary — more than three decades from their introduction.

By that time, she had two children from a previous marriage, and Rice had two children from a previous marriage. They hit it off and married in 1989.

Rosemary continued to surf well on Rice's boards, and many took notice. It helped Rice's business and increased his customer base, especially among women surfers, Langston said.

As Rice's health declined — he had open heart surgery in 1990 — well-known Santa Cruz shaper Doug Haut and others helped him build surfboards so he could make ends meet.

Rice's old boards are still sought after in Santa Cruz and elsewhere. He no longer shapes.

"He has a fantastic reputation throughout the industry," said Langston. "He would always give a little aloha spirit."