

Jack's Surf Shack was Boys Town

Just above the shorter of two retaining walls that separate the Dream Inn from the Cowell Beach parking lot once sat the original Santa Cruz surf shop operated by Jack O'Neill, which



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Our Ocean Backyard

was the primary source for surf boards and wetsuits from 1959 into the 1960s. Now thanks to Santa Cruz City Councilman David Terrazas, the spot has been designated a "California Point of Historical Interest" and a plaque and temporary mural will be erected this month.

The recognition would have seemed unlikely when the shop was operating because, unlike now, surfing was not in the main stream of the area's culture and life. The shop itself, however, played a pivotal role in the lives of many Santa Cruz families.

After relocating from San Francisco in 1959, Jack found a former real estate office located just a few steps from the waves. He transformed the 500-square-foot building into a store that sold and rented surf boards and accessories, including wetsuits.

While construction of the Dream Inn eventually forced it to close, it got a temporary reprieve from an influential ally. Jack explained it to me this way: "When construction began on the Dream Inn, Santa Cruz's mayor said, 'You cannot close the surf shop; it's Boys Town.' In addition to it being kind of a hang out for surfers, mothers used to drop their boys off in the morning and pick them up in the evening. The older surfers were awfully nice to them, but they could have learned too much."

The city moved the portable building away from the construction site for the original hotel. "The mayor arranged to have some parking meters taken out and O'Neill Surf Shop was moved to the parking lot," Jack said.

Before he started the original full time surf shop, manufacturing boards and wetsuits, Jack had worked in San Francisco as a "detail man" calling on engineers and draftsmen. He also made time to surf at places such as Kelly's Cove. Frustrated with limited time in the cold water, he figured out a way to keep warm, later developing a thermal suit design that ultimately made use of a product called Neoprene.

He started his business in 1952. Jack told me that Charlie Grimm, whom he described as



CONTRIBUTED

The original Santa Cruz O'Neill Surf Shop was on the site of today's Dream Inn.

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"one of the pillars of the beach," said: "O'Neill, you are going to sell to the five guys on the beach, and then you're going to be out of business." In an interview with Drew Kampion for his book "Jack O'Neill: It's Always Summer On The Inside."

Jack said that prior to moving to Santa Cruz, he spent a lot of time here.

"I'd come down to surf and often bring the family," he told Kampion. Jack noted the consistent surf breaks and number of families and saw a market for the sport of surfing.

It was the first company in Santa Cruz that offered custom made wetsuits.

Jack's wetsuit technology enabled surfers to spend more time in the water. It

also allowed some pioneers to develop the sport to a more sophisticated level.

Jack worked to obtain federal registration for the name "Surf Shop." While it was a business, it also provided many youth unfettered access to the beach and ocean.

Pat O'Neill, President and CEO of O'Neill Wetsuits, was a young boy when his father ran the shop. "We hung out there all the time, if we weren't in school, we were there," he told Drew Kampion in an interview that appears in the book.

You can buy a copy of Drew Kampion's book autographed by Jack O'Neill to benefit for O'Neill Sea Odyssey's ocean science program at <http://tinyurl.com/bzw5ozf>.

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