

The Early Days of Surfing at Dana Cove by Bruce Beal

Hawaiian surfer Duke Kahanamoku, the father of modern surfing, brought the sport here to Orange County in the 1920s. Sidney Woodruff, the developer of Hollywood(land) and later, the lantern street area of Dana Point, invited “the Duke” to Dana Cove to teach children here to surf during his visit, according to Alice Davis, Woodruff’s daughter. The US Post Office has just issued a Duke Kahanamoku postage stamp.



“Peanuts” Larsen takes on the occasional steep wave, called “Killer Dana”, in the early days of surfing Dana Cove. Killer Dana was permanently killed when the Dana Point Harbor breakwater was constructed.

Photo Courtesy of Doris Walker

There is a written account of a surfing safari in 1935 by noted surfer, Charles “Chuck A Luck” Ehlers. He states that when he reached Dana Point he was met by 8-foot glassy waves and another 6-plus surfers, including “Peanuts” Larsen (shown in photo left), George Brignell, Johnny Gates and others.

During the 1930s there were about 24 surfers frequenting and sometimes living on the beaches of Dana Point, according to local historian, Doris Walker.

Then, there was no city, no authorities to deal with, and plenty of fish, lobster, and abalone in the sea, and vegetables in the fields inland to eat. In fact there was so much seafood that a decent living could

be made by these early surfers selling it to surrounding restaurants. Surfing was a recreational pastime when stomachs and pockets were full, but became essential when the surf was “up”.

One of the legendary surfers who frequented “Dana” with his big, heavy, redwood plank in the 1930s was the late Preston “Pete” Peterson, who arguably was the Duke of California surfing. According to Malcolm Gault-Williams on his website www.legendarysurfers.com, he was the reigning contest champion of the 1930s and one of the greatest watermen of the century. He was an expert diver, swimmer, surfer, paddler, sailor, and yachtsman.

Pete Peterson was also a master of tandem surfing, whose partner later in life was Barrie Boehne. “Barrie is my wife and tandem partner,” stated Steve Boehne, master surfboard shaper and Infinity surf shop owner here in Dana Point. “She won the World Championship in 1966 with Pete Peterson and again in 1972 and 1994 with me. Pete and I were blessed to have such a skilled and eager partner. I know of no other athlete able to compete at a world class level for over thirty years.”

Another equally legendary local surfer, one of the first and best California surfers and all-around watermen, was Lorrin “Whitey” Harrison, also deceased. He was the 1939 Pacific Coast (i.e. national) Champion Surfer. He too could ride “Killer Dana”, a sometimes huge right wave that came around the Point, on a 100-plus pound plank of redwood. A beautiful solid redwood board made by Lorrin in 1938 for Peanuts Larson is displayed in Steve Boehne’s Infinity surf shop.

Whitey made surfboards in Capistrano Beach in the 1950s and 1960s and was an originator of polyurethane foam in surfboards and fiberglass outrigger racing boats. He founded the Dana Outrigger Canoe Club in 1972, and you will see its outriggers in the harbor even today. According to locals, he was famous for his enthusiastic yelling on the way to the beach of “Let’s Go Let’s Go”. This refrain became the title of his biography, written by his daughter, Rosie Clark, and photographed by Whitey’s wife, Cecelia Harrison. This book is a must read for surfing history buffs.

According to Malcolm Gault Williams, Cecelia Harrison came from one of California's pioneering Spanish families, the Yorbas, residing in San Juan Capistrano. The Harrisons raised their family in a 200-year-old adobe home still standing near Stonehill Drive and Camino Capistrano. Cecelia married Whitey Harrison in 1946 after learning tandem riding with him at Doheny Beach.

“When I met Cecilia, she was walking down the beach at Doheny with her cousin, and I came ridin' in on this board right to where she was standing,” Whitey said in an interview that can be found at www.legendarysurfers.com. “That had to be about 1945”, Whitey said. She said, 'That looks like fun.' I said, 'Yeah, you've gotta try it.'

“So I spent a week talkin' her into going surfing with me. She said, 'Well, I don't know, they've had such awful drownings in my family, nobody wanted to go near the ocean.' So I said, 'I've worked lifeguard for five years, I'm not gonna let you drown.'

“A fella named Voss Harrington was surfing with me at the time I was going with her. We were in the abalone business together. Voss, Fritz and Burrhead worked abalone with me all up and down the coast of California... I talked her into coming over and helping trim abalone at the cove. Then I got her to go surfin' with me at Doheny. Voss had this 11' board. I caught a wave with Cecilia and he was on the shoulder and jumped off when he saw us coming tandem. I was standing up, and his board flipped right over, hit on top of her head and shoved her teeth through her lower lip.

“So that's how we started. Since then she got so she could ride real good.”

During the late 1940s and the 1950s to come, Dana Point would embrace the surfers who would form the world’s surfing industry.