

A Surfer's Tale

Chapter One

I became enthralled with surfing years before I ever held a surfboard in my hands. Having been born and raised in Southern California, my mother took my brother and me to the beach often during the summer. We lived close to the coast, so it was the obvious thing to do for a fun day. We played in the shallow tide pools trying to catch the tiny crabs that darted out from their little caves carved into the rocks. When we got too close, the curious crustaceans rushed back inside as if they were playing peek-a-boo with us. At a young age, I felt an attachment with the ocean and the beach. The connection was so strong that inside I felt it beckoning and tugging me to continue returning to it. I absolutely loved the feel of the chilly water, the salt in the air, the sand between my toes, and the warmth of the unfiltered sun.

When I reached the age of nine, I got hooked on skim-boards. It was invigorating waiting for waves to thrust foam laced water, that was only inches deep, high up onto the sandy embankment, and just as it peaked, I would start running, toss the board onto the water before it rushed back out to the sea, jump on the thin, lacquer finished wooden disc and skimmed across the water at a high speed. Once I became good at it, I would shoot out to the shore break on top of the skim-board and flip into the water by jumping or crashing into an oncoming wave.

By the time I turned eleven, the Morey Boogie Board was

born, and it would take me from the shore to the waves. No skill was required to ride the rectangular chunk of blue and white foam with a rubber leash that attached to the wrist, and in no time at all, I was zipping down four to six-foot rolling walls of water. During the time I spent on the Boogie Board, I learned about swells, tide changes, rip currents, red tides, undertows, and most important, how to read and navigate waves.

A turning point in my pre-teens came during the early 1970's when everything about me became all about surfing and the beach lifestyle. I discovered a new world that I didn't know existed. I purchased the Beach Boys album *Endless Summer*, and it didn't come off the turntable for years. While my family and friends were getting their musical spiritual uplifting on Sundays at church singing hymns, I was getting mine to the tune of songs like "Surfing USA," "Catch a Wave," and I began having dreams of the "Surfer Girl." My new found taste in music was rather odd after my mom and dad divorced; my mother became quite the hippy and her taste in music changed. She worked long hours at a hospital to support a home and her two young boys, but on the weekends, she would play music such as The Woodstock Festival; she loved Janis Joplin. She dated this guy Bill, who was a yuppie type of hippie that looked like John Denver, but he drove a cool Porsche – and I think she was dabbling with smoking weed at the time



with him. I have a feeling she was revolting a little after the divorce and changed from the 50's style wife who was prim and proper, go to church on Sunday with the entire neighborhood kind of gal, and turned into a woman that broke the shackles, found herself, and learned to love all that life had to offer.

I was exposed to some of the most innovative hard rock music from the late '60's but was attracted to the harmonies and guitar playing of surfing music. The exposure to the harder side of Rock & Roll from that era of music would come into play a few years down the road.

In the morning before school and at night before bed, I put on headphones so I could turn the music up loud; I would stare at the artwork on the fold out album cover that was adorned with vibrant colors, luscious greenery, bright and bold Hawaiian flowers, a majestic wave in the background and the illustrated Beach Boys, tan with long hair. I transformed overnight into something that became the stereotypical Surfer image before it was stereotypical. I began wearing Hawaiian print shirts with bright floral colors. My dad use to have my hair cut short, extremely short; an old-school 'butch' (as I call it) hairstyle. I wouldn't call it a hairstyle, because it made me look like Opie from the Andy Griffith Show. Putting a bowl over my head and cutting my hair would have achieved the same result. After my parents' divorced, I grew my blonde hair long with ringlet curls past my shoulders which quickly turned bleach blonde from being in the sun.

When I was fourteen-years-old, my long hair caused a problem between my grandfather, Les, and me. He was a devote Baptist, and long hair was not acceptable on a male in the church. My hair upset my grandfather, and one day, he let me know how much he disapproved of it. I pointed to a picture of Jesus on his dining room wall. I said, "Jesus had long hair." We didn't talk for several years after that argument.

I have to say, my grandfather knew he was dying, and before

he passed away, he spent an entire day with each one of us grandchildren on separate days. We didn't discuss his impending death. He was happy; he was going home to be with the Lord. That day, he wanted to know how we (I) were doing in life. Were we happy? In love? Future plans? He wanted to go knowing that all his children were doing well. His passing was the most graceful and honorable thing I have ever seen.

I was fascinated by the Hawaiian lifestyle and the look of what took place on the tropical islands. I wanted a Puka shell necklace like they wore in Hawaii in the worst way, and believe me, finding one back then was not an easy task. I finally found one that was hand strung with real shells and not the cheap imitations such as those found today.

I wasn't following any of the trends of that time period. Actually, I was just the opposite of my classmates in school. I dressed differently than everyone else. I was the odd man out so to speak. My friends had posters of Led Zeppelin, and marijuana leaves hanging on their bedroom walls whereas mine were covered with pages torn out of Surfing and Surfer magazines.

I couldn't be at the beach everyday and longed for the day to return to it. Before I learned to surf, to get the feel of surfing, on land, I started riding a skateboard. I quickly became proficient at riding it, and it became my primary source of transportation for a few years. To this day, my mother still likes to tell the story about her looking out the front window of the house and seeing me flying through the air like Superman when my skateboard hit a rock and came to an abrupt stop which sent me hurtling toward a crash landing on the pavement; seeing that take place scared her to death thinking her kid's face got eaten by asphalt.

My Uncle Gary was a Surfer when he was young before serving time in Vietnam during the 1960's. While he was gone,

I imagined him surfing over there just as they did in the Francis Ford Coppola movie “Apocalypse Now” with bombs exploding in the surf, standing on the shore with his surfboard under his arm saying, “I love the smell of Napalm in the morning.” He told me his surfing stories from when he was a teenager. I was fascinated by them, and that made me want to do it all the more.

My dreams of surfing came to an unexpected halt. Not for any other reason than a blockbuster movie that hit the theaters. The film was “Jaws.” That summer when we went to the beach, no one was getting into the water because they had visions of a fountain of blood shooting out of the water and the man-eater from the movie chomping them into little pieces. The beaches were almost empty, and those that were there got no further into the water than knee deep. People were suddenly aware that the Great White shark was roaming the waters, and the movie instilled in them the fear of death by being eaten alive. The ocean demands respect, and it's frightening not knowing what lurks below. I, on the other hand, began studying the Great White shark. I learned about their migrating pattern, where in the Pacific Ocean they mostly populated and found out they were mainly concentrated in the cooler water higher up in Northern California. It was very rare for a Great White to be seen in the waters in Southern California. However, research at the time showed that the Great White was slowly migrating south, following a jet stream, and they were headed our way to feed on the abundant seal population. Researchers claimed it would be years before they would invade our coastline and that alleviated the fear created by a fictional movie, and my goal to be a Surfer was back on.

Since I was too young to drive a vehicle, I rode my skateboard everywhere, and it became an extension of my body. I needed to up the thrill factor and started riding down long winding mountain roads and empty swimming pools. This

was at the same time the Lords of Dogtown/Z-Boys (Tony Alva, Stacy Peralta, and Jay Adams) were invading the backyards pools mere miles away from me. At one time, we crossed paths at an empty swimming pool of a house that was vacated for the planned 105 freeway. My friends and I searched for any concrete embankments that would emulate riding waves.

My brother and I built a half pipe out of 2x4's and plywood in the front yard. This served as a training course for riding waves. The maneuvers performed on the half-pipe provided us with the agility needed to ride a surfboard. Before ever getting on a wave, our balance and body movements were already trained for the surf. At the riverbed in Downey, someone had painted a large tubular wave on the concrete embankment using several blues, purple, green, white and black spray paint. We would go there with our skateboards and ride up and down the steep wall over the illustration pretending we were carving big surf. We would even simulate maneuvers that we had seen in Surfer magazines.

It was time to graduate from the pesky Boogie Boarder that got in the way and was a nuisance to the Surfers and do what I truly wanted to do... surf. My dreams were filled with fantasies riding a curved wall of rolling thunder.

I finally saved up the money and was so excited that I could barely contain myself when my mother drove me to Harbour Surfboards in Seal Beach to buy my first surfboard. One of the workers took me to the back room where all the new surfboards were lined up against a wall. I didn't know which one would be best for me as I stood there gawking at the shiny new boards. He asked where I would be riding and told me what size would be best for my body height and weight. I picked out a six-foot 4-inch single fin board that was lime green with a six-inch wide white stripe down the center. I remember it well because it was a first love as I felt the smoothness of the newly laid fiberglass. I caressed it and ran my hands up and down

the sides of its firm, thin body.

As I walked to the register with my new love under my arms, the smile on my face was bigger than ever before. A trip to Disneyland or Christmas morning with a mountain of presents under the tree couldn't compare to the excitement I was feeling at that moment. From then on, I spent all my free time at the beach practicing. It didn't matter if it was blown out, I was there if there were waves or not.

Once again, my wardrobe changed overnight. This time to board shorts, OP (Ocean Pacific) draw-string pants and t-shirts from every surfboard shop in Southern California. Once again, I didn't fit in with those wearing designer jeans and western shirts adorned with fancy embroidery. I didn't care to fit in or to be just like everyone else. The music I listened to changed as well. The Beach Boys were replaced by more aggressive and somewhat off-kilter groups such as Alice Cooper, Ted Nugent, and Kiss to coincide with the increase of aggressive riding as I became proficient at surfing.

I went to school during the week, but when Saturday morning came around; I was up before the sun and headed down the street on my skateboard with my surfboard under my arm to catch the bus on Lakewood Boulevard that would take me on a 45-minute ride to Seal Beach. During the summer months, this was known as the "Beach Bus" as hordes of teenagers from Azusa, located at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, and forward down the line, would make their way to the beach. By nine o'clock in the morning, each bus was filled with kids. On the weekend, the buses came every 30 minutes instead of one every hour to accommodate the mass of teenagers headed to the beach. For those that didn't get on an early bus, they could end up waiting as three or four would pass by before one would stop that had room on it.

The bus ride home late Saturday afternoon during the summer was an experience all on its own. A few blocks from

the pier on Main Street was a grassy knoll with a few benches and several trees for shade. Hundreds of teenagers gathered there around 4 pm to make their way home. There were times I would have to wait 4 to 5 buses before getting on. Each bus was packed tight like sardines in a can. There was no air conditioning in buses back then, and it was hot inside. Not only from the hot air coming in from the windows pulled down, but from the body heat produced by dozens of sunburned kids. Sand covered the seats and the floor, and the bus had the sweet smell of tropical suntan lotions. The long ride could have been miserable from the heat and gritty sand stuck to salty skin, but it was more like a party inside. Kids would bring squirt guns with them to the beach and fill them with water before leaving so they could cool themselves during the bus ride. However, it always turned into a squirt gun fight and then they sprayed cars passing the bus. I always made new friends on the bus rides that I would see again at the beach.

All I cared about was practicing and getting better at surfing. Most of the time I would go by myself and made friends with Surfers at the beach that had the same love and dedication for the sport as me.

During the week, I hung out with a group of neighborhood kids that I went to school with that we dubbed the “Marbel Gang”, but when the weekend, summertime or when the days became longer and warmer just before school was over for the year, I was at the beach. I had no interest in going to parties, drinking or getting high as my friends did. However, this group of guys completely destroyed my childhood innocence as I became a teenager. We met in the morning an hour before school and hung out at Spires Restaurant. They were all smoking cigarettes then, and since they were underage, they could buy them from a machine for fifty cents. I wanted to be cool like they were and tried smoking. I purchased a pack of Kool’s and stood in front of the mirror trying to inhale the

smoke. My virgin lungs burned with every attempt; I choked and gagged, my face turned red, eyes bulged out, and tears ran out of my eyes. *“This is a lot of work to be cool! I don’t see how this is enjoyable.”*

Many nights while they were out partying, I was swimming laps in a pool. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t a loner at all. I had the desire to find that “Surfer Girl” as depicted in the Beach Boys song and dated several girls that went to my school. Also, I would periodically go to teen hangouts such as Golf & Stuff where large groups of kids my age congregated at night.

On Saturday, I went to the beach early in the morning and surfed during the tide change when the waves are biggest. When the tide change was complete, and the morning swell was gone, leaving only mushy ankle busters of one to two foot “slop” surf for swimmers to play in, I hung out with friends among the thousands of other teenagers packed onto the sand at the south side of the Seal Beach pier until the late afternoon tide change. At which time, I picked up my surfboard and hit the waves.

I felt more alive at the beach than anywhere else. I loved everything about it. My soul was at peace when I inhaled the scent of the ocean with traces of salt and kelp in the air. My skin came alive by the warmth of the sun and the cool ocean breeze that kissed my sun-baked face. To me, I felt the best when I was a little sun burnt, salty, and gritty with sand particles scattered over my skin. The smell of tropical suntan lotion and the pleasing aroma of surfboard wax was, and still is, exhilarating to me. The same goes for when I would repair dings or cracks in my surfboard; the odor of fiberglass resin was intoxicating to me.

Speaking of surfboard wax, this is a chore that all Surfers enjoy. Applying a fresh coat of wax to the deck of a surfboard is therapeutic to a Surfer and is usually done when not at the beach. It begins with either placing the board on the grass in

the front yard or straddling it across the lap. It's a labor of love performed with forceful pressure and circular motions of the hand and fingers. As a teen with hormones going crazy, the only wax I used was Mr. Zogs Sex Wax "The Best for Your Stick" solely based on its name. That has to be one of



the best names for marketing in the industry since surfing is comprised mostly of young males. Seriously... how much more cool can one get with a product name such as Sex Wax? The funny thing is, I loved the name and hadn't even had sex yet. I had the circular labels plastered everywhere I could get them to stick.

There was one problem with wax on the deck of a surfboard. It wasn't an issue during the winter when a wetsuit was required to keep from getting hypothermia, but during the summer when all we wore were shorts, it became a huge problem for those that surfed quite frequently. Rash guards hadn't been developed yet, and what would happen is grains of sand got embedded into the wax, especially on hot days when the wax would tend to melt while the surfboard was sitting on the beach. After a few days of hard riding, the wax that had melted picked up sand and the deck became more like sandpaper. It would grind into the torso when paddling in and out of the waves. Before the end of the day, the skin on my stomach and chest looked like road rash, and worst of all, my nipples became raw and felt as if they had been through a meat grinder. It was almost unbearable going out later in the evening with a shirt on as the fabric painfully scrapped over the tender, sometimes bloody flesh that would develop scabs. However, as weird as it sounds, it was a welcome pain because it came with being a Surfer.