



O'AHU  
**Riding the Plank**

Two or three times a week, John Clark drives down to the beach, pulls out a piece of fine art and heads into the waves. Clark has been surfing for more than half a century—he rode his first wave in 1954, age 8, at Waikīkī—so when he says that his five-foot, two-inch, finless *alaia* “takes a little practice” to master, you’d better believe it. It’s a racy, fast-turning board, a bit too short for him to ride standing or kneeling. But he’s satisfied to surf it lying down and rides it as much as any of his modern-day boards.

Clark’s fascination with the archaic *alaia* board stems from what he does when he’s not surfing, i.e., researching surf (and beach) history. For the past five years he’s been scouring nineteenth-century Hawaiian-language newspapers for his latest book, *Hawaiian Surfing Traditions from the Past*.

While many English-language accounts from that time lump Hawaiian surfboards into two broad categories—*olo* and *alaia*—Clark says there were at least four: *Olo*, the longest, were cigar-shaped boards that ranged up to sixteen feet; *alaia* were roughly six to nine feet long, with the rounded nose and square tail typically seen in early photographs; *kīko’o*, another long-board, was a hybrid of the first two, shorter than the *olo* but longer than the *alaia*; *papa li’ili’i* was the generic name for anything smaller than the *alaia*, and also the ancestor of the modern *paipo*—a stubby, maneuverable board usually ridden either kneeling or prone.

With the modern advent of fins (for stability) and later transition to foam-and-fiberglass, these comparatively heavy and difficult-to-ride boards became virtual artifacts. But Clark is part of a recent revival of interest in archaic surfboards: There are several well-known *alaia* riders in the

Islands—including famed waterman Brian Keaulana—and a large following abroad, particularly in Australia.

Clark’s *alaia*—he owns two—were made by his friend Bud Scelsa, himself a well-known *paipo* rider. One is of redwood and pine, the other of native *wiliwili* and *koa*. They’re beautiful, but Clark insists that form doesn’t trump function.

“Bud’s an excellent craftsman, and the *wiliwili* board really does look like a museum piece,” he says. “But it’s not a novelty; it’s meant to be surfed—and to be riding a traditional Hawaiian surfboard ... this is where it all began.”

—Roland Gilmore / Photo by Chris McDonough