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 Waikiki—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 where 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; kiko’a, another longboard, was a hybrid of the first two, shorter than the olo but longer than the alaia; papa l’i’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 Seela, 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