

This issue's heritage article concerns the state of surfboarding among the Hawaiians during the time of Captain Cook's discovery and why the Hawaiians surpassed all other people of their time in surfing equipment and ability.

SURFING AT THE TIME OF CAPTAIN COOK

By Chuck Shipman

In this article, I will be concerned only with the earliest accounts of surfboard riding. All events will concern surfing on the big island of Hawaii. The big island is seldom surfed today because of its dangerous, rocky coastline, tricky currents and huge winter swells, and you will find the perils of some of the sights mentioned in these narratives give us who visit there today an increased respect for the nameless surfers of old Hawaii.

Captain James Cook was murdered by Hawaiians in February of 1779. Lt. King succeeded into command and sailed back to England. Along the way, he finished the journal of his captain. Among his recollections about the natives of "Owhyhee" was history's first detailed description of surfboard riding. Wrote King, "Swimming is not only a necessary art, in which both their men and women are more expert than any people we had hitherto seen, but a favourite diversion amongst them. One particular mode, in which they sometimes amused themselves with this exercise, in Karakakooa Bay, appeared to us most perilous and extraordinary, and well deserving a distinct relation.

"The surf," he continued, "which breaks on the coast around the bay, extends to the distance of about 150 yards from the shore, within which space, the surges of the sea, accumulating from the shallowness of the water, are dashed against the beach with prodigious violence. Whenever, from stormy weather, or extraordinary swells at sea, the impetuosity of the surf is increased to its utmost height, they choose that time for this

amusement, which is performed in the following way: twenty or thirty of the natives, taking each a long narrow board rounded at the ends, set out together from the shore. The first wave they meet, they plunge under, and suffering it to roll over them, rise again beyond it, and make the best of their way, by swimming out into the sea. The second wave is encountered in the same manner as the first; the great difficulty consisting in seizing the proper moment of diving under it, which, if missed, the person is caught by the surf, and driven back with great violence; and all his dexterity is then required to prevent himself from being dashed against the rocks. As soon as they have gained, by these repeated efforts, the smooth water beyond the surf, they lay themselves at length on their boards, and prepare for their return. As the surf consists of a number of waves, of which every third is remarked to be always much larger than the others, and to flow higher on the shore, the rest breaking in the intermediate space, their first object is to place themselves on the summit of the largest surge by which they are driven along with amazing rapidity toward the shore. If by mistake they should place themselves on one of the smaller waves, which breaks before they reach the land, or should not be able to keep their plank in a proper direction on the top of the swell, they are left exposed to the fury of the next, and, to avoid it, are obliged again to dive and regain the place from which they set out. Those who succeed in their object of reaching the shore, have still the greatest danger to

encounter. The coast being guarded by a chain of rocks, with, here and there, a small opening between them, they are obliged to steer their boards through one of these, or, in case of failure, to quit it, before they reach the rocks, and, plunging under the wave, make the rest of their way back again. This is reckoned very disgraceful, and is also attended with the loss of the board, which I have often seen, with great terror, dash to pieces, at the very moment the islander quited it. The boldness and address with which we saw them perform these difficult and dangerous manoeuvres, was altogether astonishing, and is scarcely to be credited."

Some years later, the American missionary, William Ellis, became the first whiteman to journey completely around the big island of Hawaii. Here are some excerpts from his dairy:

SURFING AT WAIMANU

"As we crossed the head of the bay, we saw a number of young persons swimming in the surf, which rolled with some violence on the rocky beach.

"To a spectator nothing can appear more daring, and sometimes alarming, than to see a number of persons splashing around among the waves of the sea as they dash on the shore; yet, this is the most popular and delightful of the native sports.

"There are perhaps no people more accustomed to the water than the islanders of the Pacific; they seem almost a race of amphibious beings. Familiar with the sea from their birth, they lose all

dread of it, and seem nearly as much at home in the water as on dry land."

CHILDREN SWIM AS SOON AS THEY WALK

"There are few children who are not taken into the sea by their mothers the second or third day after their birth, and many of them swim as soon as they walk.

"The heat of the climate is, no doubt, one source of the gratification they find in this amusement which is so universal, that it is scarcely possible to pass along the shore where there are many habitations, and not see a number of children playing in the sea.

"Here they remain for hours together, and yet I never knew of but one child being drowned in the number of years I

quite black, and preserved with great care. After using, it is placed in the sun until perfectly dry, when it is rubbed over with cocoa-nut oil, frequently rapped in cloth, and suspended in some part of their dwelling house.

"Sometimes they choose a place where the deep water reaches to the beach, but generally prefer a part where the rocks are ten or twenty feet under the water, and extend to a distance from the shore, as the surf breaks more violently over these.

"When playing in these places, each individual takes his board, and, pushing it before him swims perhaps a quarter of a mile or more out to sea.

"They do not attempt to go over the billows which roll toward the shore, but watch their approach, and dive under

change their position on the board, sometimes setting and sometimes standing erect in the midst of the foam.

"The greatest address is necessary in order to keep on the edge of the wave; for if they get too forward, they are sure to be overturned; and if they fall back, they are buried beneath the succeeding billow."

CANOE SURFING — WHOLE VILLAGES, INCLUDING CHIEFS, SURFING

"Occasionally they take a very light canoe; but this, tho directed in the same manner as the boards, is much more difficult to manage.

"Sometimes the greater part of the inhabitants of a village go out to this sport, when the wind blows fresh towards the shore, and spend the greater part of



have resided in the islands. They have a number of games and gambol fearlessly in the water.

"Sometimes they erect a stage eight or ten feet high on the edge of some steep place, and lay a pole in an oblique position over the edge of it, perhaps twenty feet above the water; along this they pursue each other to the outermost end, where they jump into the sea.

"Throwing themselves from the lower yards, or bowsprit, of a ship, is also a favorite sport, but the most general and frequent game, swimming in the surf. The higher the sea and the larger the waves in their opinion the better the sport."

SURFBOARDING

"On these occasions they use a board, which they call papa hee naru, (wave sliding-board), generally five or six feet long, and rather more than a foot wide, sometimes flat, but more frequently convex on both sides. It is usually made from the wood of the erythrina, stained

water allowing the billow to pass over their head."

GOING IN ON THE SURF

"When they reach the outside of the rocks, where the waves first break, they adjust themselves on one end of the board, lying flat on their faces, and watch the approach of the largest billow; they then poise themselves on its highest edge, and, paddling as it were with their hands and feet, ride on the crest of the wave, in the midst of the spray and foam, till within a yard or two of the rocks or the shore; and when the observers would expect to see them dash to pieces, they steer with great address between the rocks, or slide off their board in a moment, grasp it by the middle, and dive under water, while the wave rolls on, and breaks among the rocks with a roaring noise, the effect of which is greatly heightened by the shouts and laughter of the natives in the water.

"Those who are expert frequently

the day in the water. All ranks and ages appear equally fond of it.

"We have seen KARAIMOKU and KAKIOEVA, some of the highest chiefs in the islands, both between fifty and sixty years of age and large corpulent men, balancing themselves on their boards, or splashing about in the foam, with as much satisfaction as youths of sixteen.

"They frequently play at the mouth of a large river, where the strong current running into the sea, and the rolling of the waves toward the shore, produce a degree of agitation between the water of the river and the sea, that would be fatal to a European, however expert he might be; yet in this they delight; and when the king or queen, or any high chiefs, are playing, none of the common people are allowed to approach these places, less they should spoil their sport."

KAUMUALII AN EXPERT SURFER

"The chiefs pride themselves much on excelling in some of the games of their

country, hence Taumuarii, the late king of TAUAI, was celebrated as the most expert swimmer in the surf known in the islands."

FEAR OF SHARKS

"The only circumstance that ever mars their pleasure in this diversion is the approach of a shark. When this happens, tho they sometimes fly in every direction, they frequently unite, set up a loud shout, and make so much splash in the water, as to frighten them away. Their fear of them however, is very great; and after a party returns from this amusement, almost the first question they are asked is, "Were there any sharks?"

"The fondness of the natives for the water must strike any person visiting their islands; long before he goes on shore, he will see them swimming around his ship; and few ships leave without being accompanied part of the way out of the harbor by the natives, sporting in the water; but to see fifty or a hundred persons riding on an immense billow, half immersed in spray and foam, for a distance of several hundred yards together, is one of the most novel and interesting sports a foreigner can witness in the islands."

John Papa Ii was a native Hawaiian who grew up in the Royal Court of Kamehameha, the Conquerer, during the late 1790's and early 1800's. Ii tells how Kamehameha and his queen, Kaahumanu, in their youth were schooled in canoe surfing, board surfing and body surfing. Then he tells of the surf they rode:

"In Puua, North Kona, is a famous surf called Kooka, where a coral head stands just outside a point of lava rocks. When the surf dashed over the coral head, the people swam out with their surfboards and floated with them. If a person owned a long narrow canoe, he performed what was called *lele wa'a*, or canoe leaping, in which the surfer leaped off the canoe with his board and rode the crest of a wave ashore. The canoe slid back of the wave because of the force of the shove given it with the feet. When the surfer drew close to a place where the surf rose, a wave would pull itself up high and roll in. Any timid person who got too close to it was overwhelmed and could not reach the landing place. The opening through which the surfer entered was like a sea pool, with a rocky hill above and rows of lava rock on both sides, and deep in the center. This was a difficult feat and one not often seen, but for Kaahumanu and the king it was easy. When they reached the place where the surf rose high, they went along with the crest of a wave and slipped into the sea pool before the wave rolled over. Only

the light spray of the surf touched them before they reached the pool. The spectators shouted and remarked how clever the two were. This art was held in esteem at that time, and so the surfing places were constantly filled with men and women.

"The surf of Huiha at Honuaula in Kailua Proper, directly above the place where ships anchored and just seaward of Keikapuipui, was rough when it rose. A person who had just learned to surf was afraid of it, but those who were skilled regarded it as fun. The landing place for this surf was a circle of sand. The water swirled gently as it went out from the shallows and it was there that the surfers came in to reach the sand circle.

"Huiha and Kiope were covered with surf riders when the sea was rough and the surf went all the way up to them. There were two small points on the north side of the sandy landing place, covered with the coarse 'aki'aki grass, and to the north, a point of pahoe. Just a little north of this point were two coral heads which were used to gauge the surf. On the inner side of the pahoe and on the north of Keikapuipui, was a surfing place for children and for timid men and women.

"If the king rode in, he went ashore gracefully on the surf of Huiha; but when it was rough he went right into Kiope. Sometimes he could hardly reach Kiope because of the narrow entrance. The surf dashed over the point of Pahoehoe and washed unobstructed and gently into Kiope. Here the mark was observed for the riding of this surf was the point of Kaliliki. If the sea sprays rose upward two or three times, that was the number of the wave. If the sea spray of Kaliliki went upward with force, a high surf was indicated and the timid kept away. The skilled went close to the source of the surf and remained there. As to the king, he was frequently seen leaping from a canoe into the surf. Expert surf riders unused to this surf were tossed about by it and found it was wise to sit still and watch the native sons, who were familiar with it, crouch in the flying spray. A swimmer daring enough to try to land would be killed."

SURFING AN ART FORM

These accounts show that surfing was the national pastime of the Hawaiian people; further, that surfboard riding was an art practiced by chiefs and commoners, men and women, and even by little children.

Captain Cook, Lt. King and William Ellis had, amongst them, visited most of the island cultures of the South Pacific, the Carribbean and the Atlantic. They

agree that the Hawaiians surpassed all other people of their time in surfing equipment and ability.

The August 1969 issue of SURFING magazine named some of the cultures in which surf riding was practiced, probably long before men first came to the Hawaiian islands. In most of these cultures surfing was a children's pastime often discouraged by adults as a waste of time. The Samoan chief, Palauui Tuiasosopo, confirmed that his parents would scold him for surfing and encouraged the more practical sports of skin diving and spear fishing. In other cultures such as that of the Peruvian coastal fishermen, surf riding was merely an incidental, if pleasurable, part of the daily fishing routine.

FIVE FACTORS FOR CHANGE

In Hawaii, five factors combined to change surfing from a children's diversion to a highly sophisticated art. First, the Hawaiian Islands have the most favorable conditions for surfing known with an almost perfect climate, enjoyable water temperature all year round, and consistent powerful, tubular waves.

Second, the Polynesian-Hawaiians were great water men, and as Lt. King states, surpassed all others in swimming skills.

Third, the alii or chiefs were a leisure class that loved dangerous sports. At some very early time they lent their prestige to surfing and adopted it as one of the few peacetime means by which a young chieftain could gain popular recognition and riches to promote his political ambitions.

Fourth, the Hawaiians were the only gamblers of the Polynesian peoples and they were extremely fanatic betters. Duels and contests on the highest possible surf excited the multitudes to unbelievable wagering. Their annual athletic contests during the Makahiki Festival would have rivaled the great Olympics. Surfing was always an important part of the October to March Makahiki events.

Last, the surfboard builder in every other culture was, at best, a toy maker. In Hawaii, a good surfboard builder became a Kahuna or member of the professional class which included priests, doctors, lawyers, teachers, navigators, historians, and so forth. The surfboard builder was supported by the chief and by fees from the commoner. He and his apprentices were free to spend all the time they wished building better surfboards. Thus, through the years the prehistoric Hawaiian surfboards evolved into the most sophisticated sliding foils to be found anywhere in the world until the 1930's when modern technology began to be applied to surfboard design and construction.

