

UNDER

Mothball Fleet

A Moment with David Swanson, Paipo Boarder

By David Pu'u

This past season, I had been staying at a house perched above the Waimea shore-break. Sandy Swanson had recently rented the digs and was subletting rooms to help make ends meet. On a flat day, Sandy and I sat on the deck watching the bay doing its imitation of a swimming pool while we traded personal history. Recounting my life as a board builder, Sandy remarked that her dad had recently lost a couple of his old boards to a thief. They'd been taken from the garage behind the family home located on the Anahulu stream in Haleiwa. Didn't take me long to do the math. Old guy, old boards. Turns out they were made for Sandy's dad by Greg Noll and Pat Curren. "Just what else is in that garage?" I asked her.

The next day, Sandy took me over to meet her dad. Paul Winfield Swanson was napping. I guess I would be too if I had been born in 1918 and lived in this beautiful home on a sleepy river. Peacocks roamed the two-acre lot, coaxed into staying by Paul's regular feeding. They had migrated from the park at Waimea. The entire scene was idyllic, something right out of a James Coleman painting. In the detached garage were a couple of British cars, stacked on top of each other, in perfect condition, but covered in thick dust, as was the rest of a lifetime's accumulation of stuff. Rummaging through the lot of it, watching for cane spiders, I found this stack of boards behind the cars. In short order, I had them outside, leaning against the garage wall. Paipos, a complete collection of them.

Paul Swanson was a graduate of Hollywood High, son of a Pierce/Arrow dealer whose lot was on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. During WWII, he was a flight mechanic in the Air Force. His tour of duty saw him stationed first at Pupukea Heights, here on Oahu, then Saipan, where he weathered the war. Paul loved Saipan, and intended to return some day. Postwar, he got involved in operating a paint and body shop back in L.A. Weekends were spent racing hot rods on the street and at the local track. In 1949, with a pregnant wife and two little girls (Sandy and Karen), Paul left for Saipan. As before, he stopped on Oahu. They ended up staying. Sandy recounted how home life was a bit rocky: her dad had become a heavy drinker. By 1954, Paul had moved out of the house and built a shack at Army Beach (now know as Ali'i Beach Park).

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Life at the shack boomed for a couple of years. Henry Preece and John Severson shared the place. Weekdays were spent working or surfing, weekends saw beach parties. Friendships flourished with Buffalo, Bud Browne, Jose Angel, Fred Van Dyke, and Peter Cole, the whole crew apparently doing what we still do today—hanging out, surfing, partying, living life around the beach. In 1956 he divorced. The event coincided with the '56 tidal wave which erased the huts and Paul's shack from the beach.

For a period of 20 years, Paul surfed, breaking his legs twice while surfing big Sunset. It was while rehabilitating from the injuries that Paul took up paipo boarding, and became friends with Val Valentine, a paipo builder and rider. He learned to ride the quirky, speedy boards at Pupukea. The ancient art stuck and he eventually converted to paipo riding almost exclusively. In 1965, Paul bought the house here on the river. When Val died, he left his collection of boards to his friend. Here I was polishing them up, making sure they wouldn't get pinched when Paul came wandering out of the house, a dull look in his eyes.

Sandy explained that Paul had Parkinson's disease, and in spite of medication, it took a while for things to register when spoken to. But typically, as with all of us, as I began to talk to him about his life and surfing, you could see the light in his eyes. We ended up laying the boards out and taking some photos. Paul slowly showed me around his place. More photos.

As I was getting ready to leave, we put the collection away in the house. Handling each board, I wondered about the waves each had ridden. What swells and days each had seen. It is curious how boards are a lot like their owners in that each has a story to tell. I wondered where these would go when Paul was gone.

Update

Further Adventures of "The Atoll Man"

Readers of The Journal originally met Charlie Corbett through an article by Dave Parmenter about an expedition to Christmas Island when Dave, Sam George, Bernie Baker, Rell, and Yvon Chouinard encountered Corbett and were fascinated by his South Pacific saga. Later, Charlie sent us a letter and photos of himself surfing on Fanning Island from which we created "Blue Collar Paradise" (TSJ Vol. 4#3). When we publish news of Charlie, it not surprisingly attracts a flock of responders who volunteer to join him, donate effort and materials to his struggling island venture, but rarely are able to even contact him. Every year or so Charlie sends another photo of himself in trim at his reef left that rips down the coastline just 10-15 yards off the coral rubble

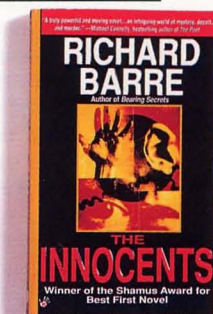


beach, all the while lamenting his loneliness. Corbett has been trying to establish a surfing/fly fishing camp on Fanning for 3-4 years. But the atoll has no reliable connection to civilization, just periodic trading vessel service to the remote dot. So a visitor who gets off the boat must hang there for up to 3-5 months until the next arrival, unless they come by private yacht, approximately a week's sail from Hawaii. Here's the last known communiqué from the illusive Mr. Corbett, the first dated April 27, '99; "I'm slowly on my way back to the States to see my parents and hopefully meet and share some stories with you. I've been getting great surf for the last five years on Fanning. Unfortunately, I've yet to share even one wave with a real surfer. The photo shows a typical left. I've already gone 50 yards with another 60 or so to go. All the same." July 27, '99; "I still have not got out of here. I just bought a 36' Beach catamaran that would be perfect as a live aboard platform for surfers and fishermen. This year I'll be on Christmas, and when I save enough money for two new diesels, I'll use it for Fanning. I have a long way to go: water maker, bedding, cooking, and eating utensils. But for a simple start, I am ready on Christmas. I'm doing this mainly so I can surf with someone. Five years surfing alone is enough. The boat can cater for groups up to six for surfing and fly fishing. I'll be ready for this winter here on Xmas. Maybe you know of some who are interested. For now, it's by mail. Chuck Corbett, London, Christmas, Rep. of Kiribati. Or c/o Dive Kiribati, Christmas Island, Rep of Kiribati (ph. 680-81-139) signed, "The Atoll Man."

Library

Prime Crime

The Innocents;
Bearing Secrets;
The Ghosts of Morning;
Blackheart Highway
Four novels by Richard Barre
Berkeley (paperback)
\$5.99 each



Santa Barbara mystery writer Richard Barre (pronounced "berry") will satisfy both the serious collector of mainstream surf-related literature and the casual reader looking for a good page turner to pass the time between flat spells. Barre has written four mysteries to date, all of them following the perilous adventures of Wil Hardesty, an aging Vietnam vet with a nose for trouble and enough personal baggage to make a psychotherapist's tongue wag. Any mystery fan will quickly recognize the familiar elements of struggle, loss, and redemption that lace these dark, private-eye stories, but Barre's take on the genre adds a refreshingly original twist: his gumshoe protagonist is a credible surfer.

The Innocents is Barre's earliest Wil Hardesty novel, and it's the best place to meet Wil at first glance. A strong, stoic type who lives in a tiny house in the flyspeck south Santa Barbara community of La Conchita, Hardesty longboards Rincon to relieve stress (arguably not an advisable practice) and regards the constant tug of the ocean