

Big Boards, Banana Stalks and Everybody in the Waves



Clarence Maki, 1957

Ben Whittle, left, surfing beside Sidney Nakamura in a 1957 photo taken by Clarence (Mac) Maki, a pioneer of surfing photography in Hawaii. Maki taught John Clark, author of "Hawaiian Surfing: Traditions From the Past," how to surf in the 1950s.

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Forget, for a moment, what you know about surfing: the professional sport, the multipurpose verb and online metaphor. Put aside the Beach Boys, the baggies, the huarache sandals, too. Surfing's all that. But those bushy bushy blond hairdos have dark brown roots.

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Greg Rice from "Hawaiian Surfing: Traditions From the Past" (University of Hawaii Press, 2011)

Greg Wong bodysurfing at Point Panic, a surf spot near downtown Honolulu, in 2009.

Two new books and a documentary film, all out this year, are reclaiming the story of surfing as Hawaiians once knew it. They are telling the neglected tale of one little world, on eight little islands — surfing before outsiders took it to California and far beyond.

"Hawaiian Surfing: Traditions From the Past" is the most startling of the three. John Clark, a surfer who was once deputy chief of the Honolulu Fire Department, draws deeply from Hawaiian-language newspapers from the 1800s, after Europeans arrived but before the stark eclipse of Hawaii's population, tradition and culture, a loss that native descendants have been striving for

generations to reverse.

Tracing every reference he can find to surfing, beaches and waves in the Hawaiian language, Mr. Clark shows surfing as a social sport played on a scale unimaginable

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anywhere today. In old Hawaii, everyone surfed, children to grandparents. They surfed with long boards and short boards and no boards. They surfed big winter waves and lazy shore breaks. They surfed the mouths of rivers. They surfed the beach, skimming on sheets of water left by receding foam. They surfed with banana stalks. After hotels came to Waikiki, they surfed with wet pillowcases: they'd fill them with air, run, flop and fly.

"When the surf was good, the whole village got up and moved to the beach and everybody jumped in the water," Mr. Clark said in a phone interview from Honolulu.

This amazed the Europeans, who watched children play in the zone that to them meant shipwrecks and broken necks. "None but natives ever master the art of surf-bathing," Mark Twain wrote in 1866, after wiping out.

Surfing required not just grace but strength, since the old boards were heavy, finless slabs of wood. You couldn't paddle out while lying on one; you'd have to swim behind, pushing like a tugboat. Rides were tricky.

But then, as now, they were exhilarating. In the old stories and news accounts, Mr. Clark finds frequent comparisons of surfers to ocean birds, and references to surfing as a sexual dance. Soon enough, though, the missionaries made everyone put on pants and mumuus. They discouraged idling and sensuous pastimes like surfing and hula. The young Princess Kaiulani kept surfing in Waikiki, a pointed act of rebellion. But surfing declined steeply in the early 20th century. Hawaiians kept at it, though, as surfing evolved into an individual sport, with athletes like Duke Kahanamoku, the Waikiki beach boy and Olympic star.

Kahanamoku and other legends, like Buffalo Keaulana and Wally Froiseth, appear in "A Deeper Shade of Blue," a documentary by Jack McCoy, which uses stunning footage to show that Hawaiians remain great innovators and keepers of the soul of surfing.

And in "Waves of Resistance: Surfing and History in Twentieth-Century Hawaii," Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, a history professor at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, takes the story to the present day. He argues that the surf zone is one place where native Hawaiians have successfully resisted the encroachments of outsiders. Hawaiians lost their kingdom in 1893, but surfers, he said, have been leaders in a struggle for environmental and cultural renewal. They may have been pushed off the land, but have not yet lost the waves.

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/08/opinion/08fri4.html>