



all the sensations and excited people. It was in that atmosphere, I was bitten by the surfing bug.

We learned from the waves - feeling the motion and energy of the surf. In 1954, at 6 years old, I started my wave riding apprenticeship, utilizing inflatable surf mats. Inflatable mat surfing was popular and we learned to ride prone, crouch, ride straight in and angle across the waves. The mats were typically made by Converse, the shoe manufacturer. The rented mats were made in matching colors and were numbered for identification. Our surf mats were inflated to a higher air pressure than for tourists. Ours were inflated as hard as rocks, so they did not bend on a breaking wave. My family provided us with many privately owned surf mats. As well, we did not wear rubber swim fins on

our feet. I started mat surfing at several locations on the Cape Fear Coast, typically Johnnie Mercers Fishing Pier, Lumina Pavilion, and Crystal Fishing Pier on Wrightsville Beach or the Boardwalk Area and Fisherman's Steel Pier at Carolina Beach. From 1954 until 1960, I was in swimming and canoe training at the YMCA. My family taught me gentle body surfing and I was swimming like a fish by 4 or 5 years old.

This was at a time when contemporary surfboards were not readily available on the Cape Fear Coast. However, in the early to middle 1950's, low density styrofoam surfboards were available and we rode them in the prone position. There were at least two contemporary surfboards (Bill Creasy and Stanley Winborne, owners) around Wrightsville Beach between 1954 and 1959, but focus of their use was as a family and not as an individual. That was the kind of relationships that turned us into the contemporary pioneer surfers.

The Cape Fear Coast wave is perfect for body surfing, which some locals consider the purest form of surfing. By 1956, your author was developing the skills to handle the waves of the ocean breaking near the shore. We often learned to body surf by piggy backing or doubling with an older relative or friend. The

buddy system was a requirement to advance into breaking waves. We learned to body surf as the waves broke near the shore creating a turbulent surf front of bubbles, foam, spray and splashes of water. As the waves propelled our bodies through the breakers, we fell into a deeper love for the sea. We honed our skills, racing man to man, as we traveled shoreward on broken waves. We also learned to roll over on our backs while body surfing.

Our formal swim and dive training paid off. A significant part of body surfing was also developing a strong kick stroke with your legs and feet. We developed as strong bodysurfers, as

we kicked off the bottom. The position of wave breaking is important to the body surfer. We would swim out with a buddy to an observable position where the waves were constantly breaking. The crests generally overturn down the face of the wave, the wave is of the spilling or rolling variety and is ideal for body surfing. We termed the method of catching a wave, porpoising, because it is clearly used by bottlenose dolphins and porpoises to play in the waves near the shoreline just before the waves break. By watching porpoises we learned to exit out of the back of waves. If the waves are too large, they are not suitable for body surfing and at that time we utilized a wave

Wrightsville Beach - 1954

Skipper and his brother, "Buddy", enjoy a day playing on their surf mat at Johnnie Mercer's Fishing Pier.



Surf Mat Competition

In 1954 at the Makaha International Surfing Championships in Oahu, Hawaii mat surfing was included in the surfing competitions. According to World Surfing Champion Fred Hemmings, "Events included women's open, senior open and junior men championships, bodysurfing, paddleboard races, tandem surfing and mat surfing." California's George Greenough, was riding surf mats in the mid fifties and is credited for starting the short board revolution in the late sixties. Mat surfing earned its rightful place in surfing history, before the boogie boards were invented in 1973.



riding vehicle. It was important to practice body surfing skills, particularly if it was a dumping or plunging wave. We learned to avoid turbulence, by diving under breaking waves as they moved towards the beach. The turbulence passes overhead when the body surfer dives to the bottom and clings the sand. Body surfers must be in good physical condition to catch and ride a wave - they must be able to accelerate quickly to the wave speed. This is easily done by standing and propelling the body forward just as the wave touches the back of the legs or back.

The next step is to swim onto the wave and catch it just before it breaks. Once skilled, we could catch the wave with no swimming strokes or one stroke. We developed maneuvers that helped us escape the possibility of serious neck, head or spinal injury caused by going straight down head first towards the beach to the shallow sand bank below the dumping wave. Rough water body surfing, strong swimming skills, rescue drills and buddy system skills were a requirement in the early days, driven by our training as lifeguards. We were taught to negotiate strong ocean currents, both simulated and in water training. At a very young age, we swam in actual strong rip currents. I always remember the verbal drill, "stay calm - don't panic"; "relax or you won't make it"; "the pull of the ocean

is strong, you must go with it, don't fight it." In the early days surfboard riding, wipe outs generally required swimming to retrieve your surfboard, as surfboard leashes had not been invented. The interrelatedness of lifeguard training, swimming, body surfing, mat surfing and water skiing set the stage for contemporary surfing in the late 1950's and early 1960's.

Secret Spot

Why were the pioneer surfing days during the 1950's and 1960's so glorious? In our day on Onslow Bay, there were more porpoises surfing than there were surfers surfing. Your author has seen the day on Long Bay, when alligators outnumbered surfers in the surf zone! It is not unusual that alligators are washed into the ocean at the mouth of the Cape Fear River and its estuaries. Gorgeously rugged, un-crowded and absolutely loaded with wave riding potential, the Cape Fear Surfing Coast was an adventure waiting to be discovered. It was a daily treasure hunt to uncover the magic behind the appeal of the Cape Fear Coast's maritime environment.

