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“Those Ruffian Surfers & the 1953 Surf Ban!”

By Donna Jost

HOW THE EVOLUTION OF SURFING IN LAGUNA BEACH LED TO A SURFING BAN

Dick Metz has been surfing in Laguna Beach since the 1930's. Back then there were maybe five or ten surfers in town, the same up the coast in Malibu, and around ten at Windansea. “I went to college in Santa Barbara in 1950 and there were probably only three surfboards in the whole town,” recalled Metz.

Laguna Beach was a “movie” town in the 30's, more bohemian. Movie stars like Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Betty Davis, either owned homes in town or visited on occasion. “I used to play with Shirley Temple on the beach in front of my father's restaurant,” said Metz. “The town was definitely on the fringe.”



*Dick Metz father's restaurant (on left) and
 Loyno Drugstore in Laguna Beach;
 Photo Credit: Dick Metz*



Hobie at his surf shop.

Photo Credit: Bruce Davidson

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Before World War II, across the country, society was way more formal. Men wore three-piece suits to work; complete with a tie and a vest. “My grandfather always carried around a gold pocket watch on a chain that he kept in his vest pocket,” remembered Metz. “I never wore a watch in my life! But that was a sign of success to his generation.” Life was even more conservative on the beach. “Girls wore these big old bathing suits where you didn’t see any skin!” he complained.

Then, there were the surfers. While most of Metz’s friends had jobs and supported themselves, there were a handful that lived and survived on the beach. Gasoline was only ten cents a gallon, a hamburger was ten cents, or you could dive offshore for your dinner and cook it right on the sand; it wasn’t difficult to imagine such a life before the war.

There was only one time during World War II that Metz remembered you couldn’t hang out at the beach. Three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a Japanese submarine surfaced off Santa Barbara’s shore and fired shells at the oil rigs. On high alert, thinking that the white sandy beaches were a potential landing zone, barbed wire was strung across Main Beach in Laguna.

“The military also set up an observation post with artillery pieces near the Top of the World,” said Metz. “There were no homes or water tower at that time, but they had a perfect view of Main Beach. Then they asked a bunch of us kids on the track team to be messengers. I got to wear a helmet with a lightning bolt on it.” Dick and his friends never officially delivered any messages down to their headquarters at the police department. They just practiced a couple of times. Then, by 1942 or 43, the barbed wire went away and left the beach wide open again.

The war in Europe ended first. That’s when the first wave of servicemen came home. Then when Japan surrendered, the rest of the boys came back in 1947 to 1948. Wives and mothers, who had gone to work to help win the war while their boys were away, went back to being housewives. This created an abundance of jobs for the men, especially at aircraft manufacturers like Douglas Aircraft in Long Beach, California. The GI Bill was also enacted to allow servicemen to go to college.

“That’s when surfing started to really get going,” Metz said. “Friends like Dave “Keyhole” Tompkins, Parkin Cosby, and Bob “Hammerhead” Gravitch returned with a different attitude.”

Surfboards were also about to evolve. Whereas before, 100-pound redwood long boards were commonplace, it was a discovery in England that changed the shape of the surfing industry.

Trying to come up with an idea for a much lighter and faster plane to carry bombs during the war, the country’s defense department’s research produced the Mosquito Bomber. This caught the eye of Douglas Aircraft when they learned about the use of Ecuadorean balsa wood sandwiched between sheets of Canadian birch, as well as fiberglass. Balsa wood was only grown in the high Andes, so it wasn’t something readily accessible.

Keyhole’s friend, “Hammerhead” worked at Douglas Aircraft in the late 1940’s, where a sample of the Mosquito Bomber’s fiberglass was sent. He got a hold of a piece of it and brought it down to Laguna.



*A brand new balsa and redwood surfboard - Laguna Beach 1947;
Photo Credit: Dick Metz*

After experimenting with the sample he got from Douglas Aircraft, Hammerhead got to work and shaped a balsa board edged with redwood, using the fiberglass. By 1948/1950, the fiberglass board got so popular with local surfers that the idea caught on and they started to become commercially available. “Long boards went from 100 pounds to about 40 pounds and half the size,” said Metz. “I actually have that first board Hammerhead shaped over at Surfing Heritage.”

The original long boards also had no fins because there wasn’t a way to attach them, which meant that you could only surf at San Onofre or Doheny. Their sets didn’t break as hard, so it was easy to ride big boards. “In the 1930’s, if there was a fin on a board, it was only about one inch deep,” said Metz. “Ten years later, you could put a much deeper fin on your board with five or six layers of fiberglass.” Suddenly, you didn’t have the problem of it breaking off when it hit the beach.

By 1953, as the sport began to evolve, there were a lot more people surfing in Laguna. “During the summer, people would camp down on Main Beach and set up tents. There were no laws against camp fires like today. Although you couldn’t camp at Brooks or Oak Street—the high tide came all the way up to the rocks—the south swell at Brooks Street was the best spot to surf,” said Metz.



Dick Metz and friends at Main Beach in Laguna - 1950; Photo Credit: Dick Metz

After the war, things changed. You couldn't camp on the beach anymore. That didn't stop Metz and his friends from partying down at Brooks Street. At night, there'd be drinking and guys trolling for women. Remember, they'd been away for a year or more; their hormones were kicked into high gear. Dotting the beach, couples would wrap themselves up in large towels and roll around on the sand.

Since wetsuits hadn't been invented yet, towels served a multi-purpose. Surfers back home from the war didn't need a bath house to change clothes. "They'd just wrap a towel around their waist and drop their drawers." Gravity would naturally cause a towel to sometimes slip and you'd see a butt cheek or two.

Homeowners like Vern Tashner, who owned a place above Brooks Street Beach, didn't like all the flashing and goings-on down below on the sand. "Vern complained about everything," said Metz. Tashner got so aggravated about the surfers, he ended up going to the City with a list of petitioners and started raising a big stink.

Back in the 1930's, surfers didn't exactly have the best image. They were considered ruffians and troublemakers. If you had a surfboard on your car, it was like you were a Hell's Angel today. You were out of step with the culture of the times.

By the 1950's, things had improved slightly. Surfers cleaned up a bit. But Newport Beach still had a rule that you had to buy a ten-dollar license to surf in the city and stick a decal on your board. When Laguna tried to do the same, it didn't work because the surfers were always getting new boards.



Brooks Street in Laguna Beach, Keyhole Group 1954, Photo Credit: Dick Metz

Because of the public outcry over the surfers down at Brooks Street, the City banned surfing at all of Laguna's beaches from 10am to 6pm. "Brooks Street, Oak, and Thalia were the only places to surf in Laguna because of the long boards we rode," Metz recalled. "The next six to twelve months was a big hassle."

"When Hobie's dad built the "two-car garage" on PCH in Dana Point, if we weren't camping down at Salt Creek away from the main road, we hung out at his shop, riding motorcycles, drinking beer, and shooting rabbits. There was no policing, no post office, just vacant lots; Dana Point wasn't even a town yet."

Eventually, the surfing clubs came about. Hevs McClelland and a group of surfers formed a committee that soon founded the United States Surfing Association in 1961 to try to prevent the ban that Laguna Beach and other city councils in Southern California had imposed on surfing. Its first board of directors included Hoppy Swarts as president and Vice President, Hobie Alter.

"When Camp Pendleton took over San Onofre, the higher ups on the Marine base spoke to the Commandant. They told him that if they let them have an exclusive club with up to 500 members, they would put in toilets and keep the beach clean." Hobie, Keyhole, Burrhead, and Peanuts Larsen all paid ten dollars to sign up. The club filled up instantly with Metz coming in as Member #110. It was so popular that you couldn't get in unless someone quit.

“Hobie, the responsible and mature one in the group,” said Metz, “realized early on that surfing should be taken seriously. He suggested Mike Hynson, Robert August, and Bruce Brown wear suits and ties as they carried their surfboards through the airport on their way to making *The Endless Summer*. He wanted to make surfers appear more in-step with society, and that scene and photograph from the movie gave surfing’s image a huge boost.”

Prompted to take additional action against the surfing ban, Hobie and his friends responded by organizing the Laguna Beach Surfing Club. According to an article in the Laguna Beach Indy, written by David Vanderveen on June 13, 2013, Hobie went to Red Guyer, Laguna Beach City Recreation Director, and football and track coach at Laguna Beach High School about starting a contest at Brooks Street. About the same time that the Laguna Beach Surfing Club morphed into the now 62-year old Brooks Street Surfing Classic, foam surfboards came out in 1958/59, which changed the surfing culture forever. And the rest is history.

“The Hobie Memorial Hawaiian Kick-Off Party”

Downstairs at the Cannons Restaurant was filled to capacity. The food was unbelievable. The ambiance couldn’t have been better. And funds were raised. Everyone showed up excited to honor Hobie Alter and to show their support for the Hobie Memorial Foundation’s goal to build a monument in the City of Dana Point. The night was a huge success!



*Judy Henderson, Liz Bamattre,
& Karin Schnell*



Jim Stewart & Mark Christy



Nancy Jenkins & Barbara Johannes



*Susan Alter, Robbie Roberson, &
Caroline Wake*



Cubby & Wayne Rayfield



*Carolyn Wake, Susan Alter, Wayne
Schafer, Lance Jost, & Jeff Alter*

Billy Hamilton, Brooks Street Surfer

Billy Hamilton was born in Long Beach in 1948, and moved with his family to Laguna Beach soon after. Raised at the beach, he started surfing when he was just eleven years old.

Surfing came naturally to Hamilton. Hanging out at Oak Street, his dad bought him his first Hobie board in 1963 from the factory, paying about \$100 for a Ralph Parker model. Within four years of learning to surf, Hamilton won the Brooks Street Surfing Classic in 1963 in the junior division.

“Hobie was a big influence on Dana Point. I was fortunate to have him mentor me along,” said Hamilton.

Graduating in 1966 from Laguna Beach High School, he went to Orange Coast College for a while and worked at the first Chart House in Newport Beach.

Surfing opened up a whole new world to Hamilton after graduation, he became a member of the prestigious Windansea Surf Club, he traveled to Hawaii to surf in the Makaha Championships, and again in the Duke Kahanamoku in 1970, coming in second. He also co-starred in a handful of surf flicks, including *Five Summer Stories* and *Pacific Vibrations*. He even did the stunt-surfing for Jan Michael Vincent in *Big Wednesday*.

In 1968, he was recognized by Duke Kahanamoku as one of his most favorite surfers, and by 1985 Hamilton was voted one of the top 25 most influential surfers in history.

Thirty years later, Hamilton patented a surfboard design with the rails around the edge. This process produces a surfboard with rails encapsulated with a tight woven band of fabric providing up to 60% improvement in strength over conventional fiberglass, which allows extreme surfers to push the performance envelope and attack bigger waves.

Hamilton flew over from Kauai to attend a 50-year anniversary dinner for Hobie’s team riders, which in the 1960’s included surfing greats Phil Edwards, Joey Cabell, Corky Carroll, Micky Munoz, Joyce Hoffman, Joey Hamasaki, Gary Propper, Herbie Fletcher and Hamilton. Before he left for California, he made a board with fabric around the rails, and presented it to Hobie at the party. Hobie said, “Out of all the boards I’ve made, this is the first time someone gave me a board.”

Hamilton still resides near Hanalei on Kauai where he makes custom surfboards and grows balsa wood. You can check them out at www.billhamiltonsurfboards.com.

Lance Jost, Artist

Local artist, Lance Jost has been given the honor of creating the Hobie Memorial in Dana Point. Fortunately, for Jost, in 2015, the right people at the right time formed a foundation to build such a monument: a legal mind, a historian, two arts advocates, and a local boat builder who has a history with Hobie Alter. They came together for the first time on April 24, 2014, and have worked diligently to reach their goal.

Working on the Hobie Memorial is a very emotional journey for Jost. Driving home from Hobie's memorial at Doheny Beach in April 2014, he said to his wife, "Somebody needs to create a memorial of Hobie Alter in Dana Point, and Hobie deserves that it be done well!"

"This community, family, and friends are just as excited as I am about the memorial. Hobie contributed so much to Dana Point, and they feel a kind of ownership," explained Jost. "So there's the added pressure of getting it right! As an artist, all I can say is that it takes time to accurately sculpt someone as well known as Hobie. It doesn't happen overnight. We just have to all be patient and let the creative process blossom."



*Jost's two mosaics on the Doheny Pedestrian Bridge, Dana Point;
Photo Credit: Donna Jost*

Well known for his creations within the City of Dana Point, Jost was first commissioned back in 2009 to create the two mosaics on the west side of the Doheny Pedestrian Bridge, located at the southern entrance to town. Again, in 2011, he delivered another commission, the artwork on the Mary Ellen Thomas Memorial Fountain in La Plaza Park, a project he worked together with Yvonne English, owner and landscape architect at Legends Design Studio.

Jost's career as an architectural sculptor, has encompassed a range of his skills aside from sculpture, which has garnered him a variety of commissions. Most recently, he created the *15 Stations of the Cross* for Saddleback Church at their Rancho Capistrano Retreat in San Juan Capistrano, and currently he is awaiting completion at the bronze foundry and for delivery of his 10-foot high *Lancer* for California Baptist University in Riverside, which is expected on April 24, 2017. To see more of Jost's work, go to www.lancejostdesigns.com.



*Jost's "The Lancer"
Photo Credit: Patrick Rees, Art Bronze, Inc.*

..... *First Annual*

HOBIE ALTER MEMORIAL

3-CLUB BAREFOOT GOLF TOURNAMENT

MONDAY, MAY 22ND @ THE RANCH AT LAGUNA BEACH

REGISTRATION 1:00 PM | SHOTGUN START 3:00 PM

SCRAMBLE FORMAT

.....

YES! Sign me up at a cost of \$250 which includes golf, dinner and prizes!

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Check enclosed in the amount of \$ _____
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