

# LEGENDS



*of the*  
**California Coast**  
*1885 ~ 1959*



*Dedicated to Sally Yater*

## Acknowledgements

**I** want to thank my co-conspirators Renny Yater and Kevin Ancell for having the original concept for this project. I could not have done my part without the perseverance and direction of my partner and art director Suzette Curtis, who breathed life back into the project after a long hiatus and who also created this book. To Matt Warshaw for allowing us to excerpt his extensive editorial histories from the Encyclopedia of Surfing. To Paul Holmes for his generous feedback and for writing the foreward of the book. To Barry Haun at Surfing Heritage and Cultural Center for his support in making the photo archives and original boards available to us. And Peter St. Pierre for reproducing the Simmons, Velzy and Quigg boards. To Pat Sparkhuhl for his support and ideas on how to move forward at a critical time. To Scott Hulet at Surfers Journal for his encouragement and insights. To Jocelyn Mathe, Kate Turning & Steve Jacobi, Bill Dewey and Sam Belling for their photography. of the boards. And my deepest appreciation to all of the pioneers in surfing who drove the evolution of our sport on this coast and for their visionary quest in riding waves.

~ John Comer, 2019



## Foreward *by* Paul Holmes

**I**t's not very surprising that surfing, surfboards and art have a long and deep relationship. Surfing itself is considered by many to be an artform – a dance on water – and surfboards are three dimensional sculptures designed to harness the energy of moving waves. Surfing inspires and informs both artists and artisans.

Since the beginning of surfing's revival at Waikiki in the early 20th century, surfers have enhanced their boards with graphics. In both Hawaii and California, even crude planks were often inscribed with the owner's name carved into the wood, sometimes highlighted with paint. Occasionally, the designs were more ambitious: a portrait of a Hawaiian chief, for example, was painted on the nose of a board owned by Duke Kahanamoku.

Aside from such embellishments, by the 1930s and '40s balsa and redwood stringers, laminated noseblocks and tailblocks also gave wooden surfboards what we recognize now as a special "craftsman" artisanal aesthetic.

As wood boards gave way to high-tech foam and fiberglass, resin tints, pinlines, stripes and color-blocking panels were

all employed to make custom-made surfboards unique and colorful. By the 1970s, airbrush art enhanced futuristic shortboards with psychedelic surf-fantasy and cosmic sci-fi motifs.

But all this merely a backstory whispered among aficionados wandering in the virtual halls of surf history. This particular project celebrates the connection between art and artisans in surf culture in the context of places, people, and surf spots during pivotal moments in surfing's evolution.

The collaborators take us on a time-traveling trip to rejoin influential and creative pioneers who made milestone contributions to the development of surfing, and surfboard design and construction, at the time and place when surfing history was being made – although none of the protagonists could have known it in their day.

While surfing was certainly born in Hawaii, it was in California that it grew and prospered due to the creativity and vision of key craftsmen and artists. Enjoy the ride!

*Paul Holmes is a former editor of Surfer magazine and author of several books and articles profiling surfing's pioneer craftsmen.*

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## Heritage, Craft & Evolution

**I**t is always exciting to see a collaboration in the arts that penetrates so deeply into the craft, heritage and evolution of the individuals as well as the culture they have inhabited. Thirteen years ago Renny Yater, Kevin Ancell and John Comer began just such an effort as they launched a project to commemorate classic surfboards and shapers combined with paintings of historic surf locations on the coast of California. The boards tell the story of an evolving sport, artform and culture that comes to life through this defining collection. Surfing has become ubiquitous – moving from culture to commodity – making it even more important to honor the origins and individuals that have kept the flame alive.

Renny Yater and Kevin's Ancell's collectible surfboard projects led to the inclusion of plein-air painter John Comer and this historic project became a reality. The project includes paintings of Santa Cruz and Corona del Mar in addition to seven boards representing the materials and shapes ridden at Redondo Beach, Palos Verdes Cove, San Onofre, Rincon, Malibu, Manhattan Pier and Dana Point during specific periods of surfing history. Each board also features oil painting vignettes of these locations. The second series, includes four contemporary boards created by Yater with full frontal paintings by Comer of Rincon, El Capitan, Refugio and Point Conception in Santa Barbara County. Renny and John have been surfing these breaks for decades as well as living and working in the area so their roots and experience there inform all aspects of the project.



# LEGENDS *of the* California Coast

## SANTA CRUZ

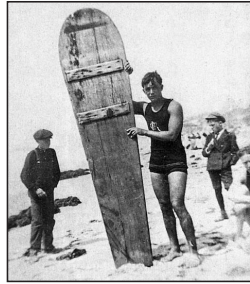


*Rieman & Pray*

**Kawananakoa Bros**  
*Redwood Olo*

1885

## REDONDO



*Attributed to L.M. Robin*

**George Freeth**  
*Plank Board*

1907

## CORONA del MAR



*Tom Pulley Collection*

*Plank  
& Kookbox*

20s-30s

## PALOS VERDES



*Don James*

**Tom Blake**  
*Hollow Paddleboard*

*early 30s*

## SAN ONOFRE

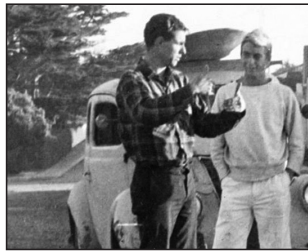


*Ned Jacoby/SHCC*

**Pacific Homes**  
*Swastika Board*

WWII  
*early 40s*

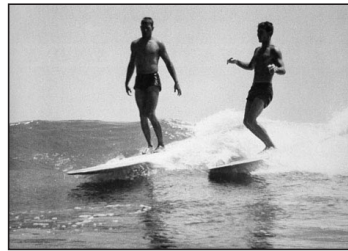
RINCON



**Bob Simmons**  
*Balsa Twin Fin*

*late 40s*

MALIBU



**Joe Quigg**  
*Balsa Chip*

*early - mid 50s*

MANHATTAN



**Dale Velzy**  
*Balsa Pig*

*early - late 50s*

DANA POINT



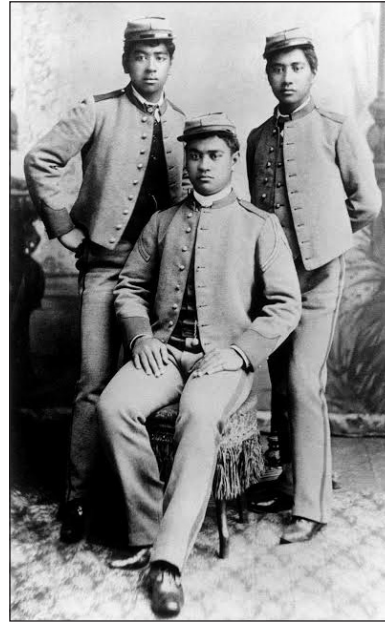
**Hobie Alter**  
*Balsa Board*



# SANTA CRUZ ~ Kawanānākoa Brothers



SAN LORENZO RIVERMOUTH - 1885  
*Oil painting on canvas by John Comer. 22" x 75" 2018*



*Rieman & Pray*

American waves were surfed for the first time by Hawaii's KAWANANAKOA BROTHERS, Jonah (heir to the royal throne), David, and Edward, who attended a San Mateo boarding school and in 1885 rode homemade redwood plank boards at the San Lorenzo Rivermouth in central SANTA CRUZ. A small group of locals continued to board-ride along the city's southern beaches as far back as the 1890s, but the sport really took root here in 1938, in part thanks to an inspiring visit by Hawaiian surfing patriarch Duke Kahanamoku.



A cliff-lined surfing hub located in north central California, Santa Cruz is about 70 miles south of San Francisco. The 19th-century birthplace of surfing in mainland America, it is a magnificent wave haven now filled with dozens of partially over-lapping groups of longboarders, aerialists, kayakers, big-wave riders, and rank beginners. "Nowhere else in the world," *Surfing* magazine noted, "will you find so many different types of waves packed into such a short coastline: big surf and small surf, long glassy walls, steep curling peaks, and fast-breaking shorebreak." *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



# REDONDO BEACH

## George Freeth



Redondo Beach Historical Commission

### GEORGE FREETH PLANK BOARD - 1907

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as wood plank by  
in Ancell. Vignette oil on gesso painting of Redondo Beach by John Comer. 8' x 23" x 4" 2018*





THE PLANK BOARD was made and ridden by GEORGE FREETH, colonizing surfer from Honolulu, Hawaii; referred to in his time as the first expert Caucasian surfer, and long regarded as the original American surfer after his 1907 wave-riding demonstrations in Venice Beach, California. In the summer of 1909 he gave demonstrations at REDONDO BEACH for the opening of the Henry Huntington-owned Redondo Plunge. Freeth's performances often drew hundreds of spectators. More important for American surfing, he taught dozens of school-age boys how to ride waves and make solid-wood plank surfboards, and charted new surf breaks in Ventura, Palos Verdes, Huntington Beach, and San Diego.

Freeth became the state's first professional lifeguard in 1907. He welded surfing and beachfront heroism, and the two would remain linked for nearly fifty years. The Freeth legacy also includes the surfing truism that a really dedicated wave-rider has to make sacrifices, sometimes big ones, in nearly every other aspect of life – education, career, family, relationships, and until recently, social standing. And last, Freeth was the first commercialized surfer. Freeth himself probably made little or no distinction between riding for pleasure and riding for money, but future generations of surfers would debate the subject endlessly. *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



Witt Family Collection



Witt Family Collection

# CORONA del MAR



CORONA del MAR - 1934  
*Oil painting on canvas by John Comer. 20" x 31" 2018*





The long, easy-breaking waves at **CORONA del MAR**, located between the original Newport Harbor jetties, were regarded in the 1920s and 30s as among the best in California, ridden by pioneering surfers like Duke Kahanamoku and Tom Blake. The Corona del Mar Surfboard Club, formed in the late '20s, was the mainland's first surf organization and early editions of the 1928-founded Pacific Coast Surf Riding Championships were held at Corona del Mar. A jetty extension in 1938 rendered the surf unridable for the type of boards used at the time. *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



# PALOS VERDES COVE ~ Tom Blake



## TOM BLAKE TYPE PADDLEBOARD - EARLY 30's

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as Redwood with metal rails by Kevin Ancell.  
Vignette oil on gesso painting of Palos Verdes Cove by John Comer. 11' x 23" x 3.5" 2006*



The cliff-lined PALOS VERDES COVE, with its four distinct reefbreaks, was first ridden in 1929, and quickly became a favorite among prewar American surfers. The Cove was sometimes called “California’s Little Waikiki” for its easy-rolling waves and dramatic cliffs that faintly resembled Diamond Head in Hawaii. Surfers of all abilities rode the Channel, an easy-breaking wave in the middle of the Cove; during bigger swells, a few riders moved either to Ski Jump, a right-breaking wave to the north, or Indicator, a left-breaking wave to the south.

A visit to the Cove was often an all-day affair, as the surfer had to shoulder his 45-pound wooden plank board down a half-mile dirt trail from the road to the beach. The carefree California surfing idyll was in part created on the beach at the Cove,

as surfers caught abalone and lobster in the nearshore waters, and cooked over open fires on the beach, while drinking jug wine and playing ukuleles.

While TOM BLAKE can’t be placed ahead of Duke Kahanamoku as the world’s most influential first-generation surfer, his contributions to the sport – in terms of board design, wave-riding technique, competition, surf photography, and literature – are in many ways more tangible. “Blake altered everything,” surf journalist Drew Kampion wrote in 2001. “He almost single-handedly transformed surfing from a primitive Polynesian curiosity into a 20th century lifestyle.” *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*





# SAN ONOFRE ~ Pacific System Homes



## PACIFIC SYSTEMS HOME BOARD - EARLY 30's

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as Balsa Wood with Abalone inlay by Kevin Ancell.*

*Vignette oil on gesso painting of San Onofre by John Comer. 10'6" x 23" x 3.5" 2006*



SAN ONOFRE was the sweet and easy low-simmering crucible of American surfing in the 1930s and early 1940s. The San Onofre wave was perfectly engineered to work with a 50-pound wooden surfboard. A telescoping set of reefs produced a long stretch of beginner's surf near the beach, and a more concentrated peak further offshore – like Waikiki, but at one-third the scale. San Onofre waves were longer and better-

shaped than those found at Venice, Hermosa, Pacific Beach, or any of the other surfer-populated Southern California beach-breaks, and unlike the winter-only reefs at Palos Verdes Cove, it had rideable surf all year. A typical San Onofre wave not only broke both ways, left and right, but reformed as it went; a surfer might begin a ride by pulling a tight angle toward San Clemente, then aim for the beach, then dip a rail and charge off in the other direction. Overhead surf arrived pretty often, but maybe the best thing about San Onofre, surf-wise, was that it could conjure waves from nothing. Beaches to the north and south might be completely flat, but there was always something to ride here.

In 1929, Meyers Butte, the college-age son of one of the Pacific System Homes cofounders, persuaded the company to build and market a line of surfboards. Surfing had been introduced to Southern California 22 years earlier, but not until the late '20s was board demand high enough to encourage production-line assembly.

Little is known about the first PACIFIC SYSTEM HOMES boards, produced either in late 1929 or early 1930, except that they were made from redwood strips held together with lag bolts, and were probably 10 feet long and weighed about 70 pounds. Pacific System Homes produced the Swastika model surfboard in the 1930s, the sport's first commercially made board. Pine and redwood boards replaced the all-redwood boards by 1932. *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*

## RINCON ~ Bob Simmons



SIMMONS BALSA TWIN FIN - LATE 40's

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as Balsa Wood by Peter St. Pierre.*

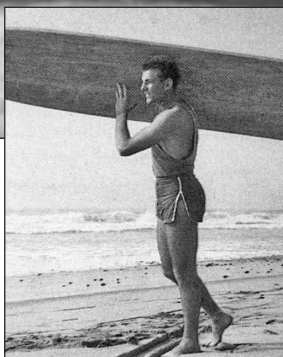
*Vignette oil on gesso painting of Rincon by John Comer. 10' x 23" x 3.5" 2017*



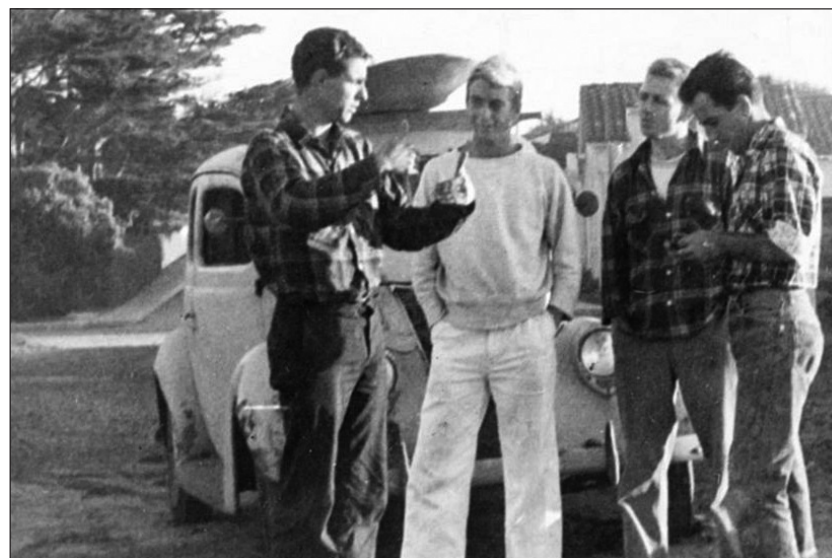


RINCON POINT surf break, located at the Ventura and Santa Barbara County line in Southern California, has also been known as the “Queen of the Coast”. Rincon is one of the most famous surf spots in California, known around the world for its well-formed waves and long rides.

Rincon is divided into three parts: the Cove, Rivermouth, and Indicator. The cove is the best part of the point and is the closest to the freeway. Rivermouth is the fastest section of the wave reaching from the mouth of Rincon Creek to the large white/stone house. Indicator is at the top of the point, visually obstructed from the freeway. While Rincon is most famous for its long right-breaking waves, Indicator also produces some extremely fast left-breaking waves during the summer, when southerly swells are most prevalent. During a larger westerly swell, all three sections often connect into one contiguous rideable wave.



Surfboard design rocketed forward in the postwar years. It was a group effort, but BOB SIMMONS, a knobby misanthropic engineer from Pasadena, was the person who got things started. Simmons began adjusting the prevailing design components—length and width, rocker (the nose-to-tail curve, as viewed from the side), foil (nose-to-tail thickness), weight, rail curve, fin shape and placement—to see how each variable affected speed, bite, and maneuverability. His first big design change, in an effort to cut down on “pearling,” was to scarf-joint a block of balsa wood to the front end of a new board, which allowed him to shape a few crucial inches of “kick” into the nose. Simmons created the twin-fin board: instead of one long center-anchored keel. Roughly half of the two hundred boards Simmons built between 1947 and 1950 were solid balsa, wrapped in fiberglass. *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



# MALIBU ~ Joe Quigg



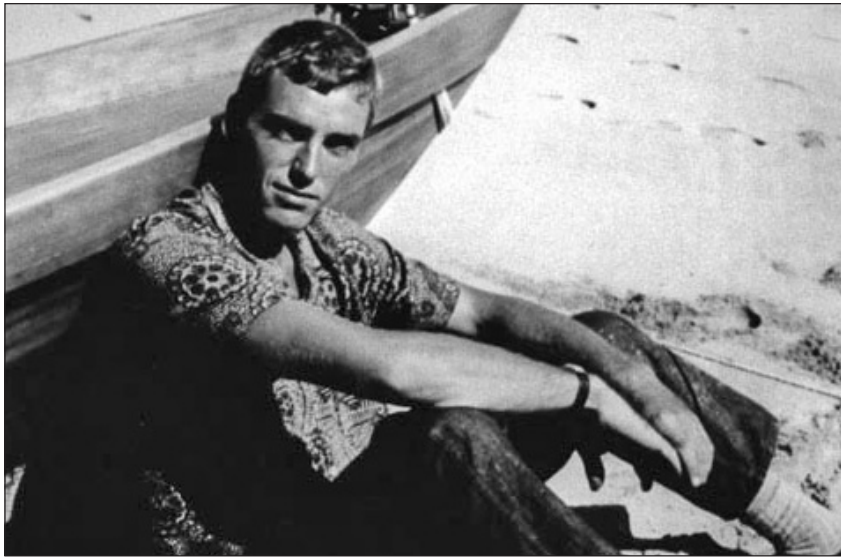
JOE QUIGG Balsa MALIBU CHIP - EARLY to MID 50's

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as Balsa Wood by Peter St. Pierre.*

*Vignette oil on gesso painting of Malibu by John Comer. 9.6' x 23" x 4" 2017*

A California pointbreak, MALIBU is often described as the “original perfect wave,” located on the northern arm of Santa Monica Bay in Los Angeles County; a surf-culture hothouse, it was the center for much of the advancement in surfing performance and board design from the mid-40s to the mid-60s. Virtuoso surfboard designer and craftsman, JOE QUIGG was originally from Santa Monica, California

Designed by Joe Quigg, the “MALIBU CHIP” was thin, nose-lifted, yellow-beige, and covered in paraffin wax for traction. They looked like giant, greasy potato chips. The Malibu chip allowed the surfer to ride near the center, which kept the board on a much quieter track. Further, the new board didn’t just hold an angle. By leaning over one rail or the other and applying pressure, the surfer could now drive a few degrees up and down the wave face.



Joe Quigg Collection



Renny Yater Collection

The Malibu chip was first and foremost a better-riding board. But it was also a touchstone for a group of surfers who helped to change the sport’s disposition. In the hands of people like George Freeth, Tom Blake, Bob Simmons, and even Pete Peterson, surfing at times looked to be the province of loners and misfits. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, and they helped give the still-new sport it’s own particular energy and independence. But Joe Quigg, Matt Kivlin, Tommy Zahn, Dave Rochlen, and the rest of the Malibu chip innovators were closer in spirit to Duke Kahanamoku. They smiled their way through the whole process, from designing boards to wave-riding. They were sociable. They opened things up to girls and beginners, and managed the difficult trick – rarely achieved in decades to come – of presenting the sport as both cool and friendly.

*Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



# MANHATTAN PIER ~ Dale Velzy



VELZY Balsa Pig - MID to LATE 50's

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as Balsa Wood by Peter St. Pierre.*

*Vignette oil on gesso painting of Manhattan Pier by John Comer. 8.6' x 23" x 3.5" 2017*

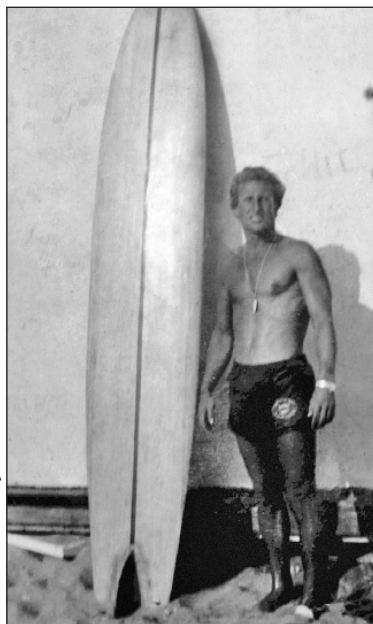
From "Dale Velzy is Hawk"



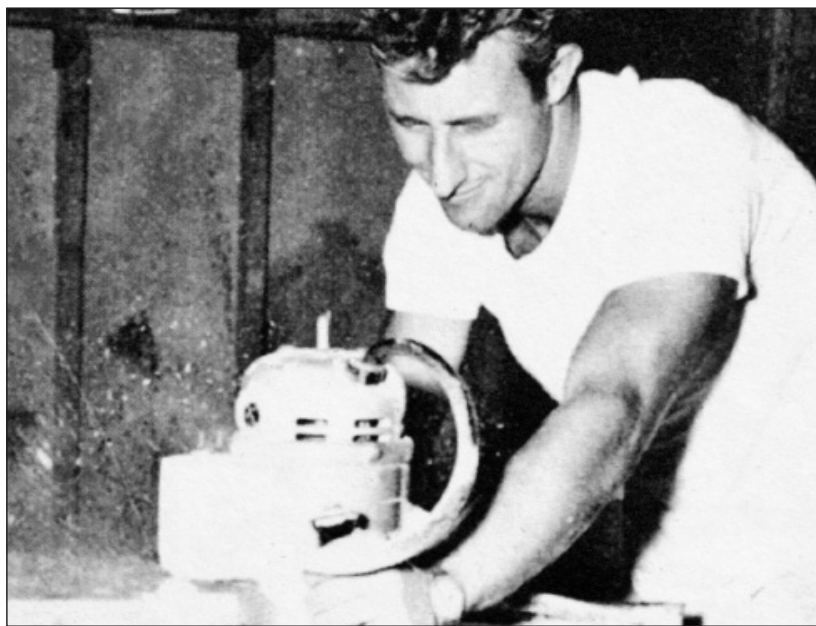
DALE VELZY would become the defining mid-fifties boardmaker. He was the oldest of the new group, a grinning tattooed former Merchant Marine and part-time pool shark from Hermosa Beach who loved hot-rods and horses nearly as much as he loved to ride waves.

Simmons, and Kivlin had all the beaches in northern Los Angeles County pretty well locked up. So Velzy decided to work closer to home, in an area called South Bay, which included Hermosa, Redondo, Manhattan, and Palos Verdes. Barefoot and bare-chested, using a pair of sawhorses and his grandfather's tools, he worked beneath MANHATTAN PIER in 1949, until city officials noticed the wood shavings fanning out across the beach and shut the operation down. Undeterred, Velzy rented a tiny storefront just up from the pier. He had a two-tone "Designed by Velzy" surfboard logo made, and at age twenty-two became owner of the sport's first licensed boardmaking outlet.

From "Dale Velzy is Hawk"



"Dale could out-drink, out-shoot, out-ride, out-shape, out-sell and out-finesse all comers," Surfer's Journal wrote in 1994. "And he made it all up as he went along." He was best known for creating the "PIG" in 1955, a wide-hipped board that became a prototype for today's longboard. *Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



From "Dale Velzy is Hawk"

# DANA POINT ~ Hobie Alter



## HOBIE Balsa BOARD - EARLY to MID 50's

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, faux painted as Balsa Wood by Kevin Ancell.  
Vignette oil on gesso painting of Dana Point by John Comer. 10'6" x 23" x 3.5" 2006.*





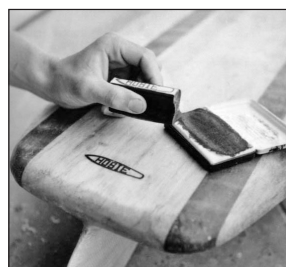
A beachfront city in south Orange County, California and a surf industry hot-spot for more than 50 years, DANA POINT was named after 19th-century American author and sailor Richard Henry Dana, who described the area in his 1840 book *Two Years Before the Mast*. By the late 1950s, surfers had mapped out five different breaks at Dana Point, and the main spot – a right-breaking wave located just off the headland, sometimes called “Killer Dana – was famous up and down the coast for producing bigger surf than anywhere in Southern California. During a south swell; waves here would occasionally hit 12 feet or bigger. Many of the state’s best pre-war surfers were Killer Dana regulars.

Construction on Dana Point Harbor began in 1966, and was completed two years later, destroying Dana Point and giving the not-yet-formed surfing environmental movement its first martyred break.

Founded by surfer and ocean sports industrialist HOBIE ALTER and headquartered in Dana Point, California, Hobie Surfboards dominated boardmaking from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Alter started building and selling balsa boards out of his parents’ Laguna Beach garage in 1950. Three years later, his father bought him a small plot of land on Pacific Coast Highway in nearby Dana Point, a town with only two other businesses

at the time. Alter designed and built a small factory/retail building, and Hobie Surfboards opened in 1954 – the first commercial surfboard outlet in Orange County and the first shop of its kind built from the ground up.

*Matt Warshaw, Encyclopedia of Surfing*



# *The Santa Barbara* CHANNEL COLLECTION



## RINCON

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, oil on gesso painting of Rincon by John Comer.  
Wall mounted. 5'10.5" x 18" x 2.5" 2017*





## EL CAPITAN

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, oil on gesso painting of El Capitan by John Comer.  
Wall mounted. 5'10" x 18" x 2.5" 2017*



## REFUGIO

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, oil on gesso painting of Refugio by John Comer.  
Wall mounted. 5'4" x 18.5" x 2.5" 2017*



## POINT CONCEPTION

*Fiberglassed foam surfboard by Renny Yater, oil on gesso painting of Point Conception by John Comer.  
Wall mounted. 5'10" x 17.5" x 2.5" 2017*



# The Artists

## Renny YATER



Joe Curren



John Severson/Yater Archive



Dick Perry/Yater Archive



John Severson/Yater Archive

**R**enny Yater, inducted into the Surfing Walk of Fame in 2019, was one of the first commercial surfboard builders of the 1950s – a generation that really put surfing on the map. As the sport of surfing has continued to grow and flourish throughout the years, so too has Yater’s reputation as a leading contributor to the surfing industry. Perhaps even more remarkable than Yater’s early accomplishments has been his ability to change with the industry, staying on top of current trends and new materials and continuing to produce innovative new boards.

In the early 1950s, Yater shaped and fiber-glassed his own boards. During the mid-50s, Hobie hired him to glass his balsa boards in his Dana Point shop. In 1957, he moved over to Dale Velzy’s shop in San Clemente where he began to shape balsa boards. In the fall of 1959, Renny opened Yater Surfboards in Santa Barbara and at age 87 can still be found in the shaping room every day turning out classic Yater boards.

**K**evin Ancell was adopted at a young age and raised by a group of southern California surfers. They were the movers and shakers of the 1970s surf scene, and for Ancell, surfing became a way of life as well as a teacher of discipline; it helped him meet challenges and overcome fear. That is where the art comes in. For Ancell, art is an exploration of the inner self and another form of self-expression.

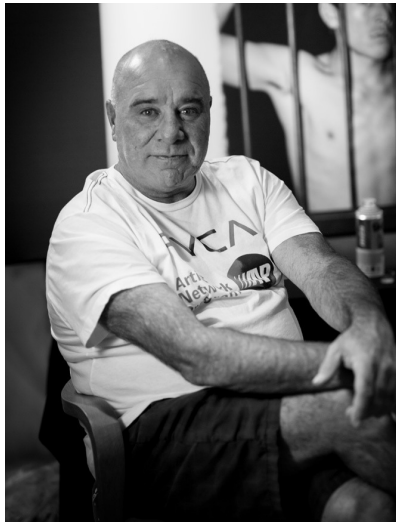
Ancell draws most of his inspiration from Manuel Ribeira, a Spanish painter who lived in Italy. He is also inspired by the works of Rembrandt, Caravaggio and the old, Flemish masters. Though he now lives and works in Kauai, Ancell's past wanderings have included Mexico, Costa Rica, and China. In China he studied Wu Shu and taught American culture at the Beijing Institute of Science and Technology until he was expelled for "improper political and spiritual activity." When he's not painting, he's out surfing or making surfboards.

*Todd Glaser*



## Kevin ANCELL

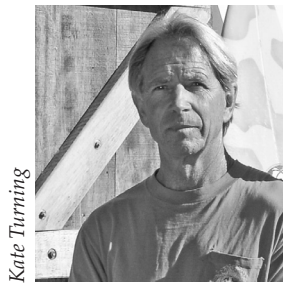
*Ron Herman*



*Todd Glaser*



# John COMER



Kate Turning



*Oil Painting of Dana Point by John Comer*



Jocelyn Matthe



Jocelyn Matthe

John Comer's professional painting career began in 1968 with his first solo gallery exhibition and has been intermingled with surfing and sailing voyages to the Caribbean, Central America, Pacific Islands and Africa. As a sailor he came to appreciate the importance of the atmosphere in a painting. "The weather is the important thing... it affects what you see and don't see - colors and shapes."

In the tradition of plein-aire painters who have celebrated early California, his work is distinguished by a level of craft rarely seen in contemporary painting, his landscapes are both skillful renditions of familiar and unfamiliar scenes, and subtle meditations on time, space, and light. In recent years he has painted primarily in Baja California Sur producing work that reflects his enduring relationship to the land and sea.







Bruce Brown

# LEGENDS *of the* California Coast 1885 ~ 1959