

Surfing Magazine introduces the first in a series of History Articles entertaining the idea that the Surfer will enjoy reading and knowing about his heritage.

PRE-HAWAIIAN SURFING HISTORY

By Chuck Shipman

When Capt. James Cook discovered the Hawaiian Islands in January of 1777, he found well developed surfboards floating among the canoes that flocked around his ships and later witnessed remarkable feats of surfriding skills. Surfriding was not a new diversion for him. He had seen and recorded such activities before during his earlier voyages in the South Pacific.

Body surfing, board surfing and canoe surfing were not exclusive to the Hawaiian people. Many Oceanic people practiced at least primitive forms of these sports in widely scattered areas.

The coastal indians of Peru are apparently the earliest surfriders. Pottery, about two thousands years old, has been unearthed which shows men sitting, standing, paddling, and even riding waves on "caballitos" or "balsas." These "balsas" are light bundles of reed seven to twelve feet long with pointed uplifted noses resembling Australian surf skis. The normal paddling and riding position was seated as though astride a horse, so the "balsas" were named "caballitos" or "little horses" by the Spanish. There is ample evidence that the "caballitos" were used for pleasure as well as for fishing. Plate eighteen of the revised edition, **Ancient Peoples and Places — Peru** by G.H.S. Bushnell shows a boy on a "caballito" without any fishing gear. He is smiling exuberantly as he is pulling out of a wave in the shorebreak and paddling out for another ride.

Peru has some of the most consistent surf in the world with swells averaging six feet, much of the year and many days of heavier surf. Each day the fishermen must cross the surf line

to reach the rich fishing grounds beyond and return through the surf without losing the fruits of a morning's hard labor. The Peruvian Indians have been riding the waves for fun and profit for thousands of years. It is intriguing to speculate whether or not other coastal American Indians and Eskimos became proficient in surfing their kayaks, birch bark canoes or dugouts.

Eighteenth century European explorers observed body surfers in the West Indies and later compared this activity to surfing in the Pacific Islands. More research is needed to clarify if paipo boards were used to aid these body surfers.

Ben R. Finney, in his thesis toward a Master's Degree in Anthropology at the University of Hawaii, points out that surfboard riding was practiced in West Africa around Senegal, Ivory Coast and Ghana. There appears to be no connection between surfing in West Africa, the Pacific Islands or Peru. Near Dakar, Senegal, Finney states that African youths and young fishermen regularly body surf, paipo surf and stand erect on boards about six feet long. Finney cites a European observer, Alexander, who saw young Africans riding light wooden planks in 1838.

Among the Ancient Mediterranean peoples there remain only a few accounts of surf swimming and perhaps rudimentary body surfing as a recreation. This is probably due to the colder water and very small or inconsistent surf.

The ancient Europeans had more surf but even colder water. However, some of the Iberian people, particularly the Portuguese fishermen, seem to

have been excellent surfboat men. Reference libraries have impressive pictures of these fishermen battling out to sea through six foot surf to set their nets and later racing in on the face of a wave to the beach. Their basic fishing techniques may be as old as that of the Peruvian Indians, yet there appears to be no recreational surfing. Again, cold water limits the enjoyment of surf riding for even the hardy and capable Portuguese fishermen.

Micronesians, Melanesians and Polynesians almost universally practiced surf swimming, body surfing, and canoe surfing. These skills are apparently as old as the cultures of these island groups. They were necessary skills for people whose existence depended upon the vast and turbulent ocean as their prime source of protein. The open sea was the only highway between various islands and could only be reached by crossing treacherous reefs and breakers. Fishing required daily crossings over familiar passages but trade and warfare required voyages across the open seas and landings through unfamiliar surf. Non-swimmers, indeed, non-surfers could hardly have survived for long on many of the Pacific Islands, much less spread their culture throughout such a great ocean.

Ben Finney, in his Master's thesis, lists over thirty of the major island groups where board surfing was found by early European observers. The highest development of surfing was found among the Polynesians who populated the Great Triangle between New Zealand in the Southwest, Easter Island in the East, and Hawaii in the North.

Finney lists Samoa, Tahiti, New Zea-

land, Marquesas, Rapa, Tonga and Hawaii as having the most highly developed surfboards. Paipo board surfing by children was observed on other islands including Easter, Cook, the Tuamotus, Pukapuka, Niue, Uvea and Futuna and the Ellicies.

In New Zealand, S. Percy Smith writes in 1921, that he observed maoris surfboarding at Taranaki and the Bay of Plenty. He described a typical board as being six feet in length and only nine inches in width. Smith says it was an old sport called "whakaheke ngaru".

In Samoa, Buck, in 1930, and Turner, in 1861, told of a sport called "facase'enga" practiced by children riding two to four feet boards in prone positions. Two Samoan leaders, Palauui Tuiasosopo and Tofu Tia, who visited Honolulu in 1969, tell of surfboarding in their youth on the island of Tutuila with boards as tall as they were. They said it was an ancient sport called "la'au fa'ase'egalu". Both agreed that the usual positions were prone and kneeling, but standing up all the way to the beach was the thing to do.

"Neither are they strangers to the soothing effects produced by particular sorts of motion, which, in some cases, seem to allay any perturbation of mind, with as much success as music. Of this, I met with a remarkable instance. For on walking, one day, about Matavai Point, where our tents were erected, I saw a man paddling, in a small canoe, so quickly, and looking about with such eagerness, on each side, as to command all my attention. At first, I imagined that he had stolen something from one of the ships, and was pursued; but, on waiting patiently, saw him repeat his amusement. He went out from the shore till he was near the place where the swell begins to take its rise; and watching its first motion very attentively, paddled before it with great quickness, till he found that it overtook him, and had acquired sufficient force to carry his canoe before it without passing underneath. He then sat motionless, and was carried along at the same swift rate as the wave, till it landed him upon the beach. Then he started out, emptied his canoe, and went in search of another swell.

three natives came up who seemed to share his felicity, and always called out when there was an appearance of a favorable swell, as he sometimes missed it by his back being turned and looking about for it. By then I understood that this exercise which was called "ehoroee" was frequent amongst them; and they have probably more amusements of this sort, which afford them at least as much pleasure as skating, which is the only one of ours with whose effects I could compare it."

Where the climate is agreeable, the surf is consistent and the water temperature is bearable, islanders and coastal people dependent upon the sea will become capable surfcraft handlers. If the surf is consistent enough and water temperature is enjoyable these people will become accomplished swimmers and body surfers.

The more surf swimming they do, the more likely it is that they will begin to use float boards and primitive paipo boards to assist them.

Given hundreds of such islands and coastal regions where canoe surfing, body surfing, and paipo boarding were



In Tahiti, Capt. Cook in 1776, Morrison in 1785, and Ellis in 1831, describe various forms of surfing including prone, sitting, kneeling and standing positions on surfboards and in canoes. These were called "fa'a he'e naru" and "horue" by the natives. Capt. Cook on his second voyage described a canoe surfer at Matavai Bay in Tahiti:

"I could not help conclude that this man felt the most supreme pleasure while he was driven on, so fast and so smoothly, by the sea, especially as, though the tents and ships were so near, he did not seem in the least to envy, or even to take any notice of the crowds of his countrymen collected to view them as objects which were rare and curious. During my stay, two or

practiced, it is inevitable that in a few of these places the paipo boards would be lengthened and improved to a point where the riders could kneel, stand, and maneuver them across the face of waves.

Therefore, we find such widely separated areas with surfboard riding well developed as Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa, New Zealand, and West Africa. 