

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Pacific Origins*

*The tide of emigration, let it roll  
as it will, never overwhelms the  
backwoodsman unto itself; he rides  
upon the advance, as the Polynesian  
upon the comb of the surf.*

Herman Melville

THE Pacific ocean isn't always true to its name. It generates raging storms and produces some of the largest sea swells in the world. For ages its waves have pounded the shores of continents and islands, heaping an obstacle between man and the open sea, and warning him of what crushing power the ocean holds. In several parts of the Pacific, however, men turned the restless edges of this ocean to their own advantage. In search of recreation men learned to ride the waves. The island people, it seems, surrounded by the sounds and the spectacle of the sea, were the first to tame its less-violent offerings.

No one knows who first realized the possibilities of riding the swells that had always been so much a part of island life. It may have been a weary swimmer bounced all the way to the beach in a white boil, or a canoe full of fishermen straining to make shore in heavy seas, who first knew the thrill of racing across the rising slopes. As for when it happened, we can only guess. Simple surfing with a body-board may be several thousand years old, as old perhaps as the settling of the Pacific islands. Hawaiian surfing, on the other hand, is probably younger. Recent archeological findings suggest that Hawaii was settled around A.D. 500. The first Polynesian settlers probably were already skilled in simple surfing, and perhaps after a few hundred years of riding Hawaii's waves the uniquely Hawaiian form of the sport was developed. A cautious guess would then set Hawaiian surfing close to 1,000 years old.

If the earliest dates are vague, there is no uncertainty about the fact that by the eighteenth century Hawaiians had been surfing long enough to develop a sport that amazed early European observers. Explorers, sailors and missionaries tell of islanders enjoying the fascinating sport of "wave riding," "surf-riding," or "surf boarding." We have already noted Lt. King's surprise at their skill, as early as 1779. "Their first object," he said, "is to place themselves on the summit of the largest surge, by which they are driven with amazing rapidity towards shore." And Hawaiians were not alone in their enjoyment of the Pacific's waves. A few years later and two thousand miles south, in The Society Islands, James Morrison, Boatswain's Mate on Her Majesty's Ship, *Bounty* observed daily life in Tahiti. He noted that the most expert Tahitian surfers would stand on their boards and ride until the wave broke. Other early accounts establish the riding of ocean surf as a widespread pastime among such Polynesian islands as Tahiti, Samoa, and Tonga. But contrary to some reports, the pastime was not exclusively Polynesian. Various kinds of wave riding were practiced, at one time or another, in most Pacific island groups, from New Guinea in the west to the Pacific's most isolated outpost, Easter Island, in the east.

One might ask whether the sport developed first in some central area and spread from there to the rest of the Pacific, or whether it arose independently in several island groups. It is difficult to say conclusively. The lives of all Oceanic people are, of course, involved with the ocean; their fondness for the water has often been observed. The use of a stray board to aid in swimming or for riding the waves around an island wouldn't be too great a step for a water-oriented people. And the step from there to a more organized form of the sport isn't hard to imagine. This, plus surfing's widespread popularity, indicate that it could have been discovered independently in several areas of the Pacific's scattered island world.

During the centuries before the white man sailed into the Pacific, surfing may have spread beyond Oceania to other parts of the world. But there is no evidence of any such diffusion before the growth of

modern surfing. With one exception, moreover, it is doubtful that wave-riding as a popular recreation existed anywhere beyond Oceania before the 19th Century. That one exception is the West Coast of Africa, in areas of Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Ghana. Near Dakar, Senegal, for example, African youths and young fishermen regularly body-surf, ride body-boards and catch waves while standing erect on boards about six feet long. These Atlantic skills seem in no way connected with the Pacific, either historically or prehistorically. Evidently it's an old pastime in west Africa; young Africans were seen riding waves while lying prone on light wooden planks, as long ago as 1838, long before surfing began to spread from Hawaii. The African sport grew independently on the other side of the world, it seems, where favorable weather, water temperatures and ground swells met once again with an oceanminded population. Even though surfing clubs now flourish in modern South Africa, there is no connection with the native sport to the north. Surfing came to South Africa via Australia and came to Australia, of course, from Hawaii. The isolated example of non-Pacific surfing in West Africa has had little or no influence beyond its own beaches, and so it stands as an interesting footnote to the history of the Pacific sport.

In the Pacific most of the early accounts were inspired by examples of wave-riding in Polynesia—that great triangle of islands that includes Easter Island to the west, New Zealand to the south, and Hawaii to the north. If we compare surf sports in Polynesia with those in the rest of Oceania, Polynesian superiority is evident.\* Unfortunately, there are no written records or oral traditions to tell us that surfing was invented here, carried there, or developed somewhere else. Scraps of legends and scattered accounts from 18th and 19th century visitors have to be pieced together. From these,

\*This is particularly true of Eastern Polynesia, an area which includes Hawaii, Tahiti, The Marquesas, New Zealand and some lesser islands. These islands are in many ways culturally distinct from Western Polynesia, which includes the important groups of Samoa and Tonga, on the western periphery of the triangle.