

GOOD THINGS LOVE WATER

S U R F S T O R I E S



C H R I S A H R E N S





INTRODUCTION

The First Surf Story

"...some made it to shore on boards."

—Acts 27: 44

THE WORLD'S OLDEST KNOWN surf story takes us back at least 500 years. Preserved through chants and hulas, ancient Hawaiians told how Maui Chiefess Kelea was kidnapped and taken to Oahu, where she proved herself the best surfer in the Islands.

While Kelea's saga predates Gidget's by over 400 years, veiled references to surfing can be traced to Homer's *Odyssey*, dated between 650 and 750 BCE. Older yet, Peruvian artifacts depict people riding waves around 4,000 years ago. Surfing, however, might be older still—as old as time itself.

Imagine Adam, or, more likely, his rebellious wife, Eve, wandering from Eden to check out the Persian Gulf. Once there, she immerses herself in the clean, warm waters. Using a large piece of tree bark for floatation, a whitewater wave catches her and propels her toward the shore. After bellyboarding a few more waves, she rises to her feet and lets

out a hoot heard all the way back to her Garden Home. Besides discovering surfing, she discovers what we now call stoke. In trying to convey her experience to the slack-jawed Adam, the first surf story is told.

The idea of Adam or Eve being surfing's first parent seems plausible in light of the experience of legendary surfer, Woody Brown.

According to Brown, "In 1937, I didn't even know surfing existed. I had never seen so much as a picture of a surfer or a surfboard."

At that time, Woody was a pioneering glider pilot, transplanted from New York City to San Diego. Perched 300 feet above Blacks Beach in La Jolla, his wife slingshots his sailplane from the family car over the cliff and into the wild blue yonder. After crashing on the beach, Woody locates a piece of driftwood, swims it out a ways, and rides a wave shoreward. After discovering the secret thrill of prone surfing, the adventurous, athletic, and inventive Brown returns home and builds a surfboard shaped like an airplane wing. After standing

tall on his board, he abandons sky for sea, riding anything the ocean throws at him.

Not until Craig Stecyk's 1976 *Surfer Magazine* masterpiece, "Curse of the Chumash," did it become obvious to many of us that surfing in California predated written records. Stecyk realized that members of the Chumash Tribe were surfing hundreds, maybe thousands of years before Europeans arrived in the Golden State. While their wave riding may have been initially done for practical reasons, like getting to shore faster, the process felt darned good. When some brave waterman caught a wave and stood, racing an endless Malibu wall on his plank canoe, other tribal members tried going him one better. To determine who was the best wave rider among them, they each caught waves and rode them as far as they could. The one who covered the most distance was deemed the winner. After coveted golden cowrie shells were put on the line, professional surfing was born at Malibu.

While I am in no way comparing myself to Eve, Kelea, the Chumash, or Woody Brown, I discovered surfing in 1956, at age eight. I had never before seen surfing when my neighbor, Robert, who accompanied our family on vacation to Lake Arrowhead, found two large strips of pine bark on shore. After paddling the frail slabs out a few feet, we turned them around and bellyboarded tiny ripples to the sand. By evening, we were standing up on our organic surfcraft. We had no name for the fun new activity, and mainstream surfing remained unknown to us until 1959, when Robert and I saw

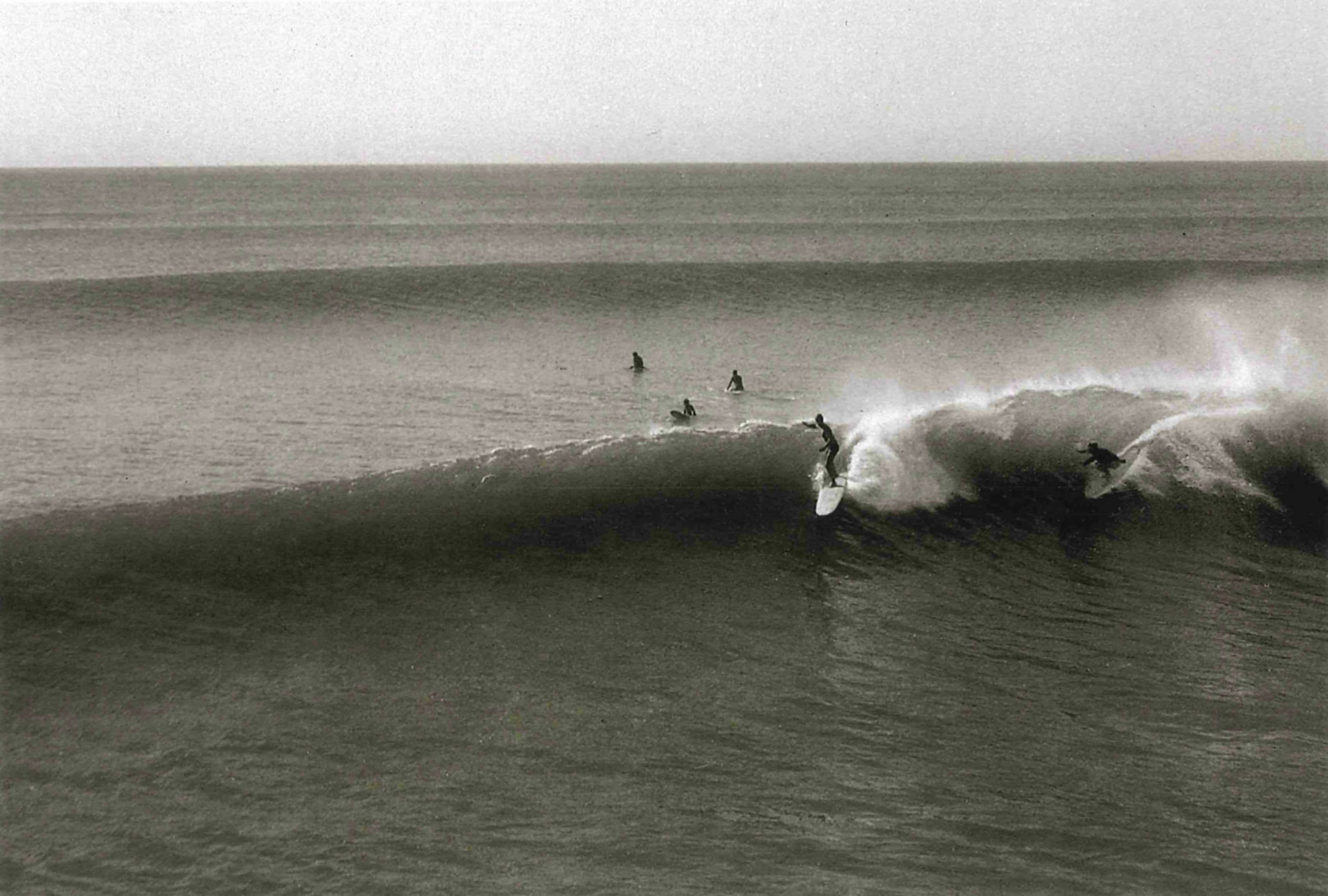
Gidget together.

Everything about Gidget, including Mickey Munoz stunt doubling for the "girl midget," was fake, but once our water had broken, we had to surf. Upon returning to my house, Robert said he knew how to make surfboards. At his suggestion, I ripped the tracks from the plywood sheet supporting my HO Railroad set. Robert sawed the sheet in two, squared off the noses, and painted each half yellow. We never did catch any waves on those planks but used them to skimboard joyfully over the damp sand. It would be another three years before I traded 45 of my paper route dollars for a used 9'6" Wardy Surfboard. I was finally a surfer.

In The Shadow of the Pier

By the summer of 1962, I spent most weekends hitchhiking from Montebello to Huntington Beach Pier with my best friend, Chicky. As often as not, some jerk who wanted to drag cute little Chicky into the men's room with him, picked us up. Chicky was small, but he could fight, something he'd learned after two stints in juvie. The first time a driver made a play for him, he punched him in the face. Left stranded on the side of the road again, I suggested Chicky not hit anyone until we reached our destination. After that, he played along with the perpetrators all the way to the beach. Once dropped off, however, he swore at them and kicked dents into their fenders.

Hitchhiking was tough until Chicky had the bright idea of inviting Sarah Jane, the only surfer





girl in our town, to join us. It was easy getting rides then. Sarah Jane was tall and pretty with braids the color of new snow, and, in her loose-fitting Bing Surfboards T-shirt, a lure few male drivers could resist hitting on. Chicky and I hid in the bushes while she stuck out her thumb, and, seconds later, a car skidded to a stop. The driver figured he'd scored until we ran out from hiding and piled into his back seat.

At the beach, Sarah Jane borrowed a board and did tricks like reverse kickouts and hanging five. We always cheered her on, but whenever she shot the pier, I silently prayed she'd miss the razor sharp, barnacle-encrusted cement pilings. She always did. Nothing could hurt Sara Jane.

But she was popular, and we were not. By the time she turned 13, all the guys in our town fought to take her to the Saturday matinee at the GarMar Theater. They all knew not to try anything in the dark theater with her, however. She would slap you harder than your mother.

Eventually, it was back to just Chicky and me on the side of the road, sometimes waiting hours for a ride to Huntington where we fought for our spot among the locals.

Huntington was a tough town, as the sons, and very few daughters, of hard-living oil-field rough-necks surfed beneath the pier's cold shadow. Good surfers shot the pier, a dangerous move some HB locals called "fiberglass keepaway."

We borrowed boards, and after surfing, dealt damp hands of five-card stud beneath the pier for

cigarettes and spare change. My grandfather had taught me the game well enough to take each of those poor saps for at least 50 cents. My winnings were sufficient to treat myself and the entire crew of losers to tall stacks of 35-cent pancakes at the appropriately named, fly-infested Buzz Inn across the street from the pier. If poker didn't yield enough cash, Chicky employed the game of panhandling like he'd invented it. The cute little blond waif in ragged second-hand clothes approached some old tourist lady like *Oliver Twist*. He said his dad's car was out of gas and could she please spare a nickel or a dime to help them get home. Just before approaching her, he would grab a cigarette butt from the sand, light it, take a puff, pass it to me, and insist I blow smoke into his eyes. If he looked like he was crying, he was sure to get an entire buck.

Beneath the pier is where I first heard the older guys discuss Hawaiian waves so big they blocked out the sun, and surfers with animal names like Bull, Rabbit, and Buffalo who aimed to tame them. We heard about a spot a few miles south of Huntington called Trestles, which was rumored to have perfect surf. This forbidden Eden was guarded by thorns, however. It lay on the Camp Pendleton Marine Base and was accessible only to those courageous enough to face the "jarheads" who apparently viewed surfers as clay pigeons lined up in the crosshairs of their M14 battle rifles. This was good because the waves were never crowded, and bad because it was rumored Marines often shot at surfers who refused to paddle in. To my knowl-

edge, nobody was actually shot, but thinking your life was on the line made surfing Trestles infinitely more adventurous.

Someone said a place called Rincon peeled for a mile before evaporating into a lonely cove. Since *Surfer Magazine* appeared only six times annually, and surf movies hit town just once or twice a year, we had no way of disputing or confirming such fantastic claims.

I heard that local hotshot, Ron Sizemore, hung heels while shooting the pier on a ten-foot wave. When Sizemore's photo finally appeared in *Surfer*, he was indeed shooting the pier in reverse. He was not hanging heels off the nose, however, but was near the center of his board. And the wave, rather than being ten feet, was closer to two. Since myth is more magnetic than fact, Sizemore's legendary wave was not cut down to size, but continued building until it was over 15 feet tall.

One story often repeated in the early '60s was that Phil Edwards, then widely considered the world's best surfer, would show up at a break where no one knew his face. After dragging his board clumsily over the sand, he enters the water, arms flailing like a hodad, toward the peak. Struggling to catch a wave, he nearly gets pitched over the handlebars. Upon standing, however, Phil performs his unique aquatic magic, turning on power and grace like only he can. Mission accomplished, he splits for home in his car, leaving those in the lineup wondering, "Who was that guy?" When I questioned Phil about that story decades later, he

said, "I would never do anything like that." He himself denies it, but, like Elvis sightings, many swear they saw the performance firsthand. Though untrue, this and other fantastic tales nailed my juvenile imagination with a golden spike. From then on, anything was possible.

Wave sizes, kegs drained, and gangs of hodads pounded by two or three valiant surfers were exaggerated for the sake of a good story. Then, in the same way caller ID ruined the prank call, surf reports, video cameras and eventually the omnipresent cell phone crippled the surf story. There is no longer any need to dream. We know a wave's size and exactly how it's ridden before it even breaks. Such information makes surfing more convenient and less mysterious. And, without mystery, surfing is sometimes reduced to a mere sport, a fun, healthy game played for points, cash, and Instagram likes.

Not all the following surf stories are mythical, however. Some, like Woody Brown's near-death experience in 50-foot Waimea Bay in 1944, are verified by credible sources. But the myths are best left alone—dreamscapes that create Ulysses-sized heroes call us toward bolder versions of ourselves.

May the following bring you into the shadow of the pier, to dream that someday you will hang heels while driving through the pilings. I hope this takes you there, even if there is no there beyond the limits of an eternal gremmie's imagination.