

## Lorrin “Whitey” Harrison: California Pioneer Surfer of the 1930’s

### The Doheny Years

#### Malcolm Gault-Williams



*[If you were to look up the definition of “waterman”, Whitey Harrison’s picture would be next to it. Born in California, a stowaway on a ship to the Hawaiian Islands, a surfer, diver, outrigger paddler, fisherman, an innovator of boards and outriggers, a man who loved the sea and all its blessings. The follow is an excerpt from a full biography of the legendary Lorrin “Whitey” Harrison by Malcolm Gault-Williams. This portion of Whitey’s story focuses on his years living in Dana Point and around his beloved Doheny Beach. Whitey was a true California waterman and a man DSBLA can be proud to honor as Doheny Legends. Ed]*

#### Dana Point, 1930s

"When I was in Hawaii," retold Whitey, "I was paddling canoes all the time... When I came back from Hawai'i with my first wife, we lived in Dana Point. I started fishing commercial, and then I got a motorcycle and rode it all the way to Los Angeles to work at Pacific Redi-cut Systems Homes for a summer." Pacific Redi-cut Homes was the first company to produce commercial surfboards. "Tulie Clark and Carroll 'Laholio' Bertolet worked there too. Quite a few surfers worked there, this was about 1931. We were shipping sixty boards a month to Hawaii... There was this guy there named 'Dutch' that was notching these swastika symbols in some of the boards, and he couldn't speak a word of English. They called these 'swastika boards.' He'd mix glue and we'd glue up the blanks. Then we'd run them through a shaper to get a rough shape then finish them with hard planes and sandpaper. It drove me crazy, but it was work. They sold a balsa redwood plank for about \$25.

"They also made and sold paddleboards. They had me racing them against all the other boards up and down the coast. They would cut all the balsa scrap into blocks, glue them together and cut them into a plan shape. Then we'd cover the top and bottom with 1/8" mahogany sheets and then laminate redwood strips along the sides which ended with redwood nose and tail blocks. They worked pretty good, and they were light!"

Whitey began shaping boards at the rate of four boards a day for one hundred dollars a month. The boards were constructed of laminated redwood and balsa which could be milled and joined with a newly developed waterproof glue. These boards used the lightness of balsa down the middle and the strength of redwood around the rails. Varnish protected the outside. "The rail shape was full with a square upper edge and rounded lower edge. The typical board was 10' long, 23" wide, and 22" across the tail block, and was known as the Swastika Model because of the distinctive logo the company used." It was later discovered that Dutch was a Nazi. After 1939, when war broke out in Europe, the swastika insignia was discontinued on Pacific Redi-cut Systems Homes boards.

Most of Whitey's shaping, however, was done in his own shop. "... in 1936. I'd just come back from Hawai'i and I was shaping boards for different guys like Joe Quigg and Matt Kivlin, guys that surfed Malibu and all over. They'd drag a blank down to Dana Point and have me shape it. I had a garage with balsa shavings a foot thick all over the floor. Tom Blake and everybody would come down and sleep there... You know, we had big waves at Dana Point [before the harbor was built]. I even made a storage rack down on the beach and kept all the boards down there. There was no way anybody was gonna take one of those boards by carrying it outta there! It might float away before anybody was gonna carry it out. Peanuts Larson would come by the shop and take the leftover balsa and make model planes."

### **Dana Point & San Juan Capistrano, 1940s**

After World War II, most board experimentation shifted from Waikiki to Southern California. Material-wise, besides the addition of balsa, the innovation of the skeg and the introduction of new materials like fiberglass helped propel development. As far as shaping was concerned, the scoop nose and use of rocker had long term effects on improving board design.



In 1946, at age 33, Whitey married his second wife, Cecilia Yorba, from one of California's pioneering Spanish families. They raised their family in a historic 200-year-old adobe in San Juan Capistrano.

"When I met Cecilia, she was walking down the beach at Doheny with her cousin, and I came ridin' in on this board right to where she was standing. That had to be about 1945. She said, 'That looks like fun.' I said, 'Yeah, you've gotta try it.' So I spent a week talkin' her into going surfing with me. She said, 'Well, I don't know, they've had such awful drownings in my family, nobody wanted to go near the ocean.' So I said, 'I've worked lifeguard for five years, I'm not gonna let you drown.' A fella named Voss Harrington was surfing with me at the time I was going with her. We were in the abalone business together. Voss, Fritz and Burrhead worked abalone with me all up and down the coast of California... I talked her into coming over and helping trim abalone at the cove. Then I got her to go surfin' with me at Doheny. Voss had this 11' board. I caught a wave with Cecilia and he was on the shoulder and jumped off when he saw us coming tandem. I was standing up, and his board flipped right over, hit on top of her head and shoved her teeth through her lower lip. So that's how we started. Since then she got so she could ride real good."

As late as 1948, most all surfers still knew or knew of each other and surfboards were

still pretty much of the redwood & balsa variety. "When I first started surfing," 1950s-60s big wave rider Greg Noll said, "Bob Simmons was just beginning to experiment with other materials. You'd hear a few stories about new, revolutionary Simmons boards, but up to that time there was Matt Kivlin and Joe Quigg riding redwoods at Malibu. Doc Ball and the guys at the Palos Verdes Surfboard Club. Velzy, Leroy Grannis, Ted Kerwin, the Edgar brothers at Hermosa and Manhattan. Lorrin Harrison, Burrhead and the guys at San Onofre. A few guys down in La Jolla. The entire surfing population consisted of maybe a couple hundred guys, most of them riding redwood boards, paddleboards and balsa/redwoods."

"It's amazing how long it took to get to the point where you could stand up on those redwood boards and just ride a little soup," testified Dale Velzy who shaped many of them.

### **Showing The Way, 1950s and After**

Lorrin's barn in San Juan Capistrano -- built around 1890 -- became an important Southern California research and development center for water craft experimentation. Craft included diving gear, paddle boards and outriggers as well as surfboards.



"When I came here [to Capistrano Beach] we kept horses in [the barn] for the kids. Later I converted it into a surfboard shop where Fly and I built two hundred and sixty rental boards for Steamboat over in Waikiki. I've probably built twenty canoes here altogether. I built five that were 44'-11" long, right here in the barn."

Polyurethane foam surfboards had their beginnings here and in the workshop of Dave Sweet and Dave Rochlen.

"The first person to try foam in a surfboard was Bob Simmons in 1950, using polystyrene foam," wrote Greg Noll. "In 1955, Lorrin Harrison in Capistrano Beach became the first to try polyurethane foam, and in [May] 1956 Dave Sweet in Santa Monica made the first sustained effort to develop polyurethane foam board."

In June 1958, Hobie Alter came out with the first commercially successful polyurethane foam board design. Then, in 1961, Gordon "Grubby" Clark formed Clark Foam, which became the largest foam-blank manufacturer in the world. "Foam didn't change surfboard design all that much," pointed out Greg Noll, "but it did stabilize and streamline the boards. The same type of board could be made over and over again without worrying about different weights of wood, bad grain, etc."

Grubby Clark said Whitey, as an innovator, inspired many surfers, including himself. "After all the places he'd been and waves he'd surfed, he could still get pumped about a 2-foot day at Doheny. That's the most remarkable thing about Whitey -- how he retained his

skill and enthusiasm for surfing throughout his long life."

With the exception of orange and avocado ranching, Whitey's work history was almost all related to the ocean. He was instrumental in introducing outrigger canoe racing to the Mainland; put in time as a lifeguard; surfboard builder and innovator and; lobster and abalone harvester based out of Dana Point Harbor. "Whitey was one of the best divers on the coast," said noted diver David Tompkins. "He was all over the place, living up at Cojo for weeks at a time, diving out in the Channel Islands. He showed us the way."



[DSBIA thanks the author, Malcolm Gault-Williams for allowing us to publish this portion of his article. The full piece can be found at [http://files.legendarysurfers.com/surf/legends/ls08\\_whitey.html](http://files.legendarysurfers.com/surf/legends/ls08_whitey.html)

