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Legends of the Surfer Subculture: Part One

Tanis Thorne

The adventurous nature of the sport of surfing and the conditions of its historical development facilitated the creation and sustenance of an indigenous folklore.¹ Surfing legends, tall tales, wonder tales, and fabulates are the genres conspicuous to the folklorist in terms of repetition of themes and characterizations; for fantasy and heroism are the leit-motifs of surf-lore. In many of its manifestations, surf-lore is a special interpretation of historical events and personages; it thus provides the folklorist the opportunity to observe the process of legend formation from fabulate and memorate.

Surfing is a performing sport; it is highly individualistic, ego-building, and competitive. It can be a very dangerous pursuit, even on relatively small waves, if the surfer does not have sufficient skill or experience (i.e., “wave-knowledge” and the sense to “flow with the ocean”). Commonly, the thrill of power and speed is the major draw of the sport.

The challenge, the physical rewards, and the aesthetics of the surfing experience are significant and should be emphasized, as these are either entirely unperceived or underestimated by the casual observer. The memorate of Ron Drummond, who rode the surf in a canoe, illustrates the aesthetics of a big wave experience. He was two miles out one day at Tijuana Sloughs, (so far out that he “couldn’t recognize anything the size of an automobile on shore”), trying to ride waves which were thirty to forty feet high:

Well, you *can't* describe waves like that. One way of giving ya an idea was it was awfully *lonesome* out there—when the canoe would go wa-a-ay down in a trough and you’d look wa-a-ay up on either side of you and see these great big, sloping hills on both sides of ya and gradually you’d come up to the top of the swell and you’d be wa-a-ay up on this mountain,

1. I am using William Hugh Jansen’s definition of folklore here: “Folklore is that proportion of a group’s culture and belief that does not derive from formal, institutionalized educational forces, indeed that frequently exists despite such forces.” “The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore” in *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), ed. Alan Dundes, 45. Jansen’s essay was the inspiration for this paper.

looking down on everything. Well, you know, you'd be considered the biggest liar on earth if you ever told anybody how big they were. (X 1540).²

The two major types of ideal surfing experiences, i.e., being "tubed" (being totally encapsulated in a tunnel of water) and racing for one's life down the face of a monstrous wave (the bigger the better), have made a marked impression on the surfer's imagination and have had a definite formative effect on the linguistic products of that imagination. The sport of surfing, it might be argued, inevitably bred tall stories; as one chronicler has observed, mountainous waves generate modern myths.³ Often it is extremely difficult to tell fantasy from reality in a narration, making the task of classifying the stories as memorates, fabulates or legends problematical.

Contrasting the variants of the well-known "Tidal Wave Legend" with an earthquake wave memorate, demonstrates the subtle transition to wonder tale or legend. Out body-surfing at Crystal Pier, Santa Monica in 1923, one informant, whose integrity I do not doubt, saw a huge wave looming on the horizon, got into position, and rode the enormous wave:

Well, it was an earthquake wave, and I rode it and skidded right up—not just to the edge of the beach—but, I suppose, about 200 feet up amongst the picnic baskets and blankets and all that. But that was sort of an event in my life. It was a *real wave* (F931.4). [Laughter]⁴

In an account written in 1872 by Whitney, a man named Holoa of Minole, Hawaii was washed out to sea in 1868 as a tidal wave receded. Being powerful and a good swimmer, Holoa wrenched off a floorboard or rafter from his sea-borne abode, and surfed safely to shore on the fifty foot tiday wave: "the feat seems almost incredible; were it not that he is now alive to attest it as well as the people on the hillside who saw him" (D2151.3.1)⁵.

I collected three multiple-motif variants of the "Tidal Wave Legend" in 1975 (all of which had been learned from oral sources), and most of the surfers whom I questioned were familiar with the tidal wave and floorboard motifs as the essence of the story. In one of these three elaborate variants, there were several (five or six) young men who, seeing that all was lost with their village, headed for the surf ("go-for-it" as the contemporary *joie de vivre* surf slang has it) and one managed to survive the huge comber. A second variant was close to the structure of the Whitney version, except that it concentrated on the technical aspects of the conditions creating the tidal wave and the pos-

2. Ron Drummond, 19 March 1975.

3. Ben R. Finney and James D. Houston, *Surfing, the Sport of Hawaiian Kings* (Rutland, Vermont, 1966), 89.

4. Ron Drummond, 19 March 1975.

5. Peter Dixon, *Where the Surfers Are: A Guide* (New York, 1968), 51.

sibilities of actually riding it.⁶ The third is printed in full below; the informant learned the story when she was in the seventh grade in 1960–1961 in Kailua on the Isle of Oahu:

It was just a story. I mean like everyone would always used to say [voice deeper], “Hey, have you heard that story?” Anyway, I think it was supposed to have been the 1960 tidal wave which was really a big one and wiped out part of Hilo and Waikiki and Honolulu; and anyway, this guy, he lived out in the country, either in Kanēohe or somewhere along that coast, the eastern coast of Oahu. And uh, his whole family had evacuated up into the hills and everything; and then, he forgot his money under the floorboards of his house, you know, just a shack on the beach. And he ran back down to get it and like right as he was getting his money out, he saw this wave was just coming straight for his house; so anyway, he grabbed his money, and he grabbed the floor board to the house. And uh, supposedly he surfed in on the tidal wave; he just rode the wave in and the water at that time went in about a half mile, maybe? I don’t know if it’s true, but it was a story that everybody told. He was a Hawaiian guy (*D2151.3.1*).⁷

The individualism of the sport of surfing, the performance orientation, and the challenge of mountainous waves explain in part the growth of legends and tall tales, but historic and geographic factors also were determinative. An age of exploration happily coincided with an age of heroes to produce the potential for legends within surf-lore.

In a recent interview in *Surfer*, Phil Edwards, a very imaginative individual and a leading surfer of the late 1950s and early 1960s, said that in his day, “it was an era of heroes.”⁸ Characteristically, the heroes were the ones who rode the biggest waves or pioneered new surf spots or otherwise excelled in style or creativity. As surfing was such a young sport (having been revitalized in Hawaii during the twentieth century after near extinction), surfing history was being made daily.

What is distinctive about legendary accounts of heroic personages in surfing is that the heroes were not usually remote, super-human, ancestral figures, but individuals who were known in an immediate sense through personal acquaintance, stories on the surfing grapevine from eyewitnesses, or the latest surf films. Superior or eccentric surfers were tangible and forceful models, and the narrations of these heroes’ feats, which spread far and wide, became an effective force in socialization.

The mobile sportsmen who heard the call of *The Endless Summer*, one of the first commercially successful surfing films, were active tradition bearers. An atmosphere congenial to the cultivation of surfing folklore was provided during sojourns (surfing “safaris”) to remote and

6. It is my understanding, as well as the consensus of my informants, that it is impossible to ride a tidal wave.

7. Kris Sellin, 10 January 1975.

8. Phil Edwards, “Interview: Phil Edwards,” *Surfer*, 15, 2 (1974): 29.

faraway places. As few other forms of entertainment were available during these safaris, time not expended in surfing was frequently spent exchanging surfing anecdotes, fantasies, and stories of surfing idols.⁹ Of course, anytime there is a swell coming in anywhere, a lot of surf-talk is generated.

It is not uncommon to hear from surfers the expression "he was a legend in his own time," or to hear an individual described in Herculean terms. In the first place, the earliest surfers had to be of sufficient strength to carry the 120–150 pound redwood boards. One old-timer recollected:

I weighed 118 pounds, my board weighed ninety-five. I was kind of a tradition; I would keep my board on my shoulder, start for the beach, the wind would blow, and I'd end up walking to San Diego.¹⁰

The free and unselfconscious use of the hyperbole and of superlatives are common in surfing memorates; the longest ride, the largest wave, and the longest free-fall are highly popular and seemingly obsessive conversation topics. Several sources of speculation which have become almost archetypal in the surfing world are the largest, yet unriden, waves of Kaena Point and the "perfect" waves of the island of Niihau where only full-blooded Hawaiians are allowed.

Buzzy Trent is a legendary strong man among surfers. Often, like other such heroes, he is described as an "animal-man" or an "iron man." He was reputed to have broken his arm in sixty-five feet of water [!] at Makaha on one occasion; he was pummeled down with such force that he bounced off a reef and broke the limb. In response to the question, "How did he ever make it to the surface?" my informants replied, "He's an iron man" (X964). Stressing that Buzzy was an intelligent fellow who *preferred* to be an animal, one informant continued:

There's many stories about his physical strength and ability and his dynamic personality. He's married to an Hawaiian gal named Violet, and Violet's mother is a Kahuna and a voodoo practitioner; and when she and Buzzy have a falling out, Violet goes to her mom and puts a whammy on Buzzy. And makes his eye twitch and just drives him up the wall. And it's really—whether it's psychosomatic or not, I don't know—but people over there believe in it, and when you live in the area, you begin to yourself. . . . Like the one story that typifies this guy is, whether it's true or not, typifies the aura that surrounds him, is that he's carrying hod—which is wet cement—on the 18th story of the Elieki [?] Tower, which is under construction in the late sixty's in Waikiki. It's a tower condominium development right on the beach at Waikiki. And he's up on

9. David Stern and William Cleary, *Surfing Guide to Southern California* (Malibu, California, 1963), vi: "Already it [surfing] has its heroes, old-timers and legends, its own language and code of ethics."

10. Judge Robert Gardner, 18 March 1975.

the 18th or 20th floor and a construction worker is carrying a beam and swings around, and swings the beam and knocks Buzzy off, over the edge on the 18th floor and he falls for two stories and catches himself, stops his fall with his hands by catching a girder. Stops himself in mid-flight, just *stops* himself and pulls himself back up and goes back up to the top where he fell from and beats the guy up and gets his hod and goes back to work (X940). And like that, like surrounding that, is the fact that Buzzy has ridden the biggest wave ever ridden, at Sunset Beach on an outside day, probably thirty-five feet on a day when there were forty to forty-five foot waves breaking.¹¹

The strong man legend is very much in the mainstream of American tradition; surfers did not invent him. The folklore prototype is Davy Crockett or Mike Fink; what Constance Rourke has called the mythic figure of the Backwoodsman.¹² Surfers came to terms with the world in a folktale-like manner by elevating it to heroic dimensions and this conceptualization, in turn, became the cultural screen through which new material was adapted into characteristic patterns and themes. As folklore grew up around each surf-spot, historic or pseudo-historic precedents were set.¹³

The debt contemporary surfing folklore owes to the Hawaiian culture is difficult to ascertain. It has been stated that few of the myths, legends or beliefs or even vocabulary terms of the sport of surfing survived the purge of Calvinism during the 19th century.¹⁴ A full exporation of this material through field work in Hawaii, however, is likely to belie this generalization. Two of my informants gave evidence of two beliefs perhaps directly traceable to the Hawaiian belief complex: one informant stated that sharks were reputed to be the spirits of dead Hawaiians (E617.3), and another attested to a vigorous belief in Hawaiian sorcerers (*Kahunas*),¹⁵ and the little people (*akua li'i*, the non-human spirits who dwell in the myriad forms of nature).¹⁶

In 1912, Duke Kahanamoku, renowned for his surfing prowess and his seminal role in revitalizing the sport, brought his heavy redwood board to California on his way to the Olympics. There is evidence that the early Californian surfers during the next three decades not only made pilgrimages to the Islands as the succeeding generations were wont to do, but made conscious efforts to stylize themselves after the

11. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975.

12. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of National Character* (New York, 1931), 40.

13. Lauri Honko has observed that tradition is already present in the experience, in Linda Degh and Andrew Vazsonyi, "The Memoriate and Proto-Memoriate," *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (1974): 237.

14. Finney and Houston, 89.

15. Also see, *The Black and White Magicians of Hawaii*, ed. Sibley Morrill, (San Francisco, 1968).

16. Martha Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology* (Honolulu, 1970), 2.

Hawaiians; the language was used as far as possible and luaus were held.¹⁷

There were many experiments with board design during the period from 1940 to 1955 to make the boards lighter and more maneuverable. One anecdote, telling about an accidental breakthrough in board design, is interesting because the characterization of the hero combines the aspects of benefactor and trickster. Kellar Watson told the story about why Tom Blake, an inventive early surfer, was so unpopular in the Islands at one time. It seems that as the contest runners were hard pressed to find a fair way to determine who was the best surfer; they decided to arrange a competition based on paddling ability, and standard-sized boards were issued to the major surf clubs on the Islands. Tom painted all the Outrigger Surf Club's boards one color. When the day of the race came, Tom won by a clean hundred yards; but by chance it was discovered that he had hollowed out his board and disguised the operation with the paint job. His club was disqualified and dishonored, but Tom had discovered how to make boards lighter and faster, and this started a new trend in surfing.

Tom Blake is also credited with the invention of the skeg, but there are numerous separate etiological stories about this important contribution. In a facetious vein perhaps, one version contains the explanation that the surfriders grew so angry at the paddleboarders at San Onofre because the paddleboarders could only go straight off (thus ruining the waves for the surfriders) that one surfrider put a metal nose on his board—which was solid—to ram and sink the hollow paddleboards. The ramming board was accidentally inverted and the maneuvering power of the fin was discovered.

Probably the most significant contribution to folklore from this inventive period is the "Legend of Bob Simmons." Simmons, a graduate of California Institute of Technology, was a "convert" and an innovator in design. He disappeared at Windansea, La Jolla in September, 1954, and his body washed up a few days later.¹⁸

The first version of the Simmons' story is told by someone who knew Simmons fairly well, and thus can safely be called a memorate form of the legend:

Bob Simmons was a guru, I guess, of the sport, because he was a Cal Tech graduate, with straight A's. Very bright guy and he was into physics. Well, he got in a bicycle accident; he hit a car and screwed up his arm. So that, it was bad enough that when he was in the hospital, the doctors

17. "Duke's Famous Ride" has long been a part of the folklore of the first generation of Californian and Hawaiian surfers. In his book, Duke Kahanamoku set the record straight on this much exaggerated feat. At Waikiki, he said, he made a half mile ride on a thirty foot swell at the speed of thirty miles per hour, so fast that the chop "sounded like the patter of machine guns." See Dixon, 49. I collected one variant of this story in which the Duke was reputed to have picked out a wave at Diamond Head and made a five mile ride!

18. John Severson, *Modern Surfing Around the World* (New York, 1964), 21-22.

said it was so bad he'd probably never use it again. And it so happened, that in the next bed was an old San Onofre surfer who started relating tales of riding surfboards and getting into tunnels and how healthy it was—physically and mentally—and so Simmons got stoked and decided he'd get involved in surfing. Feeling that the therapy of paddling on his arm would be good. The doctor's did say that if he'd work his arm constantly and really discipline himself, he would maybe regain the use of it. So when Simmons got out of the hospital, he started researching surfing and surfers. And became involved in it. Enjoyed it, enjoyed the challenge of design. Was the first to use a lot of different materials, because he was involved in research in the aircraft industry. He got involved in fiberglass and, I think, was one of the first to use fiberglass. And sandwich construction—foam cores with plywood skins which is a very, very, strong composite. Consequently, after years of surfing and design, he became pretty well-known.

He was kind of a mysterious fellow; he was a vegetarian, almost a fruiterian, I guess. Still lived at home; he was in his early thirties, I guess, and was still living at home. Kind of would slip to the beach and wouldn't socialize and was generally pretty mysterious. Well, it happened that a good friend of mine was a good friend of his—probably his best friend at the time—and we were all surfing Malibu one afternoon or evening, and at dark we got out of the water and the surf was exceptionally good. And we were standing around a fire and talking and Bob Simmons and myself and Bev Morgan and I can't remember who else was there. At the time I had just turned sixteen, I guess, and uh, had a driver's licence and my mother let me use her—what did we have? We had a 1941 Mercury woody station wagon. And so uh, Morgan and Simmons were all stoked to go to La Jolla, which is a big deal from Malibu, as it was about a seven hour drive, to go surf Windansea the next day. So I was, I said maybe I can get my car. Simmons had an old car and his probably wouldn't make it or he didn't have a car or something. So anyway, it turned out that my mom wouldn't let me have the car the next morning, so I couldn't go. Somehow, Morgan scammed a car, took Simmons with him and went on down and surfed Windansea, and it was pretty big . . . when Windansea's big there's a tremendous rip tide that runs out on either side of the bay and it's very difficult to swim in and Simmons not being a strong swimmer at all, especially because he could still hardly bend his arm . . . uh, evidently, sometime in the morning, probably around eleven o'clock, he lost his board in a big wave in a big set, a series of waves, and was last seen swimming against the rip tide trying to get his board. He had a lot of pride and wouldn't ask for help, of course; and uh, they found his surfboard on the beach washing around, maybe a half an hour, an hour later. Somebody had pulled it out of the water and laid it up against the shack on the beach and uh, Morgan, who had gone down the beach to surf another break, had come back and [asked] "Where's Bob?" and looked around and saw his board and nobody saw him. He waited around another couple of hours and nobody had seen him so they didn't know what to do, and it's pretty shocking when you can't find your friend. Evidently, what had happened, when they did finally find him three days later—he had a partial fracture of the skull. It looked like a board had probably hit him in the head when he wasn't looking and he drowned. In fact, two days after he

drowned, a friend of mine was down at Windansea and saw him turn over in a shore break, and ran out to grab him and missed him and then he was sucked out to sea again and disappeared. . . . So I heard about it that night at Malibu and, of course, it was really shocking, because he was one of the big daddies and it's really shocking when someone you know is skilled and intelligent gets killed . . . that's done . . . I've said enough.¹⁹

In a variant of the Simmons' legend, the informant first credited Simmons with various innovations and then concentrates on his heroic daring and mysterious death:

He'd do things like put ropes on the side, little things to hold ropes so you could turn your board over, and when the wave broke over your head, you know, to hold the wave off, and shoot up and under. . . . But they used to, were a Southern California group; it was in the '40s, I believe, and he was always known to ride the biggest waves; there was no wave he wouldn't take on the California coast. And it was a big day at La Jolla, and they were all out—which means five or so because there weren't many surfers then—and uh, they just saw him go down in the white water, and he just never came up. His board was found, but he just passed off into the sunset.²⁰

Another variant, told by a surfboard manufacturer, contains the information that all the surfers who are now board manufacturers used to get their boards from Simmons, and emphasizes Simmons' role as a cult hero, his "sonic brain whiz" intelligence, and his eccentricity:

Nobody ever talks about him. The old timers know about him. Like all the surfboard builders now, like then, Greg Knoll, Dewey, Brewer, all those, were all riding Simmons'; nobody even knows how to make one [a Simmons-type surfboard]. And he locked himself in a room that you wouldn't believe and there was balsa wood foam dust three feet high; you'd go in there and Greg Knoll would go in and knock on the door. And no answer or nothin'; he'd kind've open up the door and here'd be Simmons eating a can of pork and beans, sitting in three foot of balsa wood dust. You know, you can't even breathe, the stench is so bad. But I mean I guess he was a guy that made a lot of money and then just totally dropped out. I guess, you could kind of call him the first hippie or whatever, guy that didn't want to work anymore and got into making boards for a livin' instead of being an engineer, because I think he was an engineer.²¹

The Simmons material gives the folklorist a unique view into the process of legend formation and the relation of hero legend to the values and ideals of the interest group which has produced it. Simmons' physical debilitations, personal struggles, and pride are deem-

19. Mickey Munoz, 25 March 1975.

20. Richard Sellin, 10 January 1975.

21. Rick James, 12 February 1975.

phasized in the post-memorate material in favor of Simmons' invulnerability, his mysterious death, his intelligence, and his role as cult benefactor.

The validity of this study lies in its demonstration that folklore is a viable phenomenon in the modern world and its insight into how the personality and structure of the folk group effects, and is reflected in, the creation of folklore. As the sport is individualistic and egoistic, the surf-lore is often haughty and exaggerated; there tend to be many cult-hero stories and braggadocios of a one-up-manship nature. Is the "anything goes" free-form feature of the sport reflected in the tale telling? It does seem clear that surf-lore shows a marked respect for physical strength and skill, has an action rather than a *bon mot* orientation, seems to gravitate toward adventurous subject matter, and indicates an esteem for intelligence—not as an end in itself—but only as the means to tangible and immediate ends.

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