

# OCC Wahines Rode the Waves 100 Years Ago

By Barbara Del Piano

In case you're under the impression that surfing was once a man's sport, you may be surprised to learn that wahine have been riding the waves for hundreds of years. During the olden days, when Alii ruled the islands, surfing was a common sport and many of the good surfing areas were reserved strictly for them.

In the first European account of the Islands (1778) Captain Cook described how a princess "paddled her board through heavy surf to catch a ride in the rolling waves."

Many women, both commoners and Alii, including Queen Kaahumanu, favorite wife of Kamehameha I, excelled in the sport. In a *Thrums Annual of the early 1900s*, it states that "Native legends abound with the exploits of those who attained distinction among their fellows by their skill and daring in this sport, indulged in alike by both sexes; and frequently too...the gentler sex carried off the highest honors."

One reason that the Estate of Queen Emma was so amenable to leasing the land in Waikiki to the Outrigger Canoe Club in 1908 was that the area had once been a favorite surfing spot for the future Queen who was to later marry Kamehameha IV. Princess Kaiulani was also an exceptional surfer who spent many hours in the ocean on a long board surfing in front of her home on Waikiki Beach.

In the early 1900's however, surfing was dying out, at least at Waikiki, prompting Alexander Hume Ford to establish the Outrigger Canoe Club to revive the classic water sport. One of the best wahine surfers in the early days was OCC's Josephine Pratt, referred to by Tom Blake in his book *Hawaiian Surfboard* as "the best woman surfboard rider in the Islands."

In 1909, the first surfing and canoe paddling contests were held. Organized by Alexander Hume Ford, the event was to entertain passengers on a cruise ship that would be stopping in Hawaii that year. The cruise director was so enthused that he donated four silver trophies, known as the Clark Cups, for the event. Winner of the wahine surfing contest was Josephine Pratt.

Other outstanding surfers of the era were the Dowsett sisters, Marion "Baby" and Beatrice. They are reputed to have surfed the full length of Canoe Surf with Duke Kahanamoku, all three on the same board. Mariechen Wehselau Jackson, an



When they weren't setting world swimming records, Bea Dowsett, Gerd Hjorth, Ruth Scudder, and Josephine Hopkins could be found surfing at Waikiki circa 1920.

Olympic swimmer, was also known for her exceptional surfing ability.

Hawaii's next top wahine surfer was Josephine "Phena" Hopkins Garner. Although swimming was the major sport in which she competed, when not in training she surfed purely for fun. In her oral history, Phena says "I used to spend all my days out there in the surf from eight o'clock in the morning until lunchtime. Change the bathing suit. Rest for an hour. Back out on the board again until five o'clock – every day."

In 1917 she won the Women's Surfboard Championship at Queen's Surf. She credits Dad Center with teaching and coaching her. Other adept wave riders who followed were Ruth Scudder Gillmar and Lillie Bowmer Mackenzie.

Wahine surfing continued to grow through two world wars. Under the tutelage of people like Dad Center and Johnny Hollinger, many young girls and women learned to ride the waves off Waikiki. During the 1930s, Beatrice Newport took top honors as the best wahine surfer.

During the 1940s Pat Honl, Helen Haxton, Pat Barker, Pam Anderson, Gwen Davis, Eva Hunter, Ivanelle Mountcastle, Doris and Anita Berg and Yvonne "Blondie" Boyd, to name just a few, were avid surfers and could be found weekdays after school or weekends at Baby Surf, Populars, or Queens.

The boards they rode were long and heavy, but the gals carried them from the lockers down to the beach, about

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fifty yards. Doris Berg Nye relates that her board weighed 90 pounds. In her oral history, Doris' sister, Anita Berg Whiting says, "My board was so heavy this guy came up and asked if he could carry it for me. 'Yeah, okay,' I said. He tried to pick it up and fell right down with the board. So I flipped it up and put it on my shoulder and put it in the locker." Never underestimate the power of a wahine surfer.

Things did change, however as a result of World War II technology which ushered in the end of the wooden board era. The long, heavy redwood boards were replaced with shorter, lighter, fiberglass and resin boards, a decided advantage for female surfers. By the end of the 1950s foam boards were in common use for both men and women.

The popularity of surfing for both sexes spread across the globe, with Australia and California probably leading the pack. Even the move from Waikiki to Diamond Head in 1964 didn't interfere with the enthusiasm the sport nurtured at the Outrigger Canoe Club.

Wahine surfing competitions did not begin on a regular basis until the late 1960s. Among the Club members who competed were Stephany Sofos, Nohea Rochlen, Heidi Hemmings, and Evelyn "Evie" Black. Some surfed only in Club events but Heidi and Evie went big-time.

Evie credits Rabbit Kekai, at the time an Outrigger beach attendant, with teaching her both paddling and surfing. When she gave up the water sports to go away to college, she had amassed over 400 trophies for both surfing and paddling and was considered not only Hawaii's best wahine surfer, but the best in the entire U. S.

To this day, surfing continues to attract women throughout the world and many have become professionals. The boards have changed, the techniques are different, but riding the waves remains a favorite sport.

As Helen Haxton Brodie once said, "We surfed because we loved to. We just loved being out in the ocean."