

Beach, Surfing, and Skateboards

Growing up skateboarding and surfing in Pacific Palisades in the 1960s.

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I grew up in Pacific Palisades in Southern California overlooking the Santa Monica Bay with a view of Palos Verdes and Santa Catalina Island. The beaches had a profound influence and wove into my life. The overcast mornings, sound of waves, smell of saltwater air, sunsets on the bluffs, and sunny beach fashions were everywhere.

My parents bought a home on Muskingum Avenue in 1952. At that time you could see the ocean from our living room bay window before the eucalyptus trees grew. The Burgs spent many afternoons on the beaches along the coast highway. My mother and father would schlep us kids to hang out with our first cousins the Smiths, Mary Lou and Jimmy and their kids, down at the Deauville Club. The club was located at the base of what is now the Santa Monica Ramp. There was a whole contingent of families that would get together and play volleyball in the sand. This was in the late fifties and I was just old enough to walk around and burn my tender feet on the hot sand. Probably this is where I got my first taste of saltwater and the pain of sunburn. We would arrive in my parents late forties era "woody." My sister Melissa, Laura, Ricky, or Patty and I would mingle and dig in the sand with the Smith kids, Andrew, St. John, Maura, Paul, Beaver or Georgie. Volleyball was popular at the time and was also played at State Beach (Will Rodgers State Beach) located at the base of Chautauqua Blvd. at Pacific Coast Highway 1. This area and most of the Santa Monica Bay was a hot bed of beach volleyball and also known for good surfing since the 1920s.

In 1959, my sister Pattie worked in a ice cream parlor next to the Standard gas station across from Mayfair Market on Sunset Blvd in Pacific Palisades. She was a student at Santa Monica Junior College on Pico Blvd. During this period she met Con Colburn. Con would come in all straggly, wet, and sandy from surfing and try to talk her out of an ice cream cone. She gave in most of the time and they became great friends. Their friendship lasted four or five years and during that period she helped with bookwork and painting signs for his fledgling surfboard business, Con Surfboards. She also would accompany him when he would pick up blanks from the Hobie shop, because at that time Con was not making his own blanks. Con's shop in 1959 was located on Olympic Blvd. in Santa Monica. As Pat was my surrogate mother, she would take me along on her visits so I spent time at the shop as well. The smell of resin and fiberglass and the sound of Con sanding and shaping the boards is still with me. On many occasions Pat and Con would go to surf movies at the Santa Monica Auditorium. These were rudimentary 8- and 16-millimeter home movie surf films that were projected on a screen and usually the guy who shot it would narrate over a public address system.

My other sister Laura was asked out numerous times by Miki Dora. She refers to him as the Bad Ass Blaster. She says of her Malibu days in the summer of 1962 that Miki would approach her on the beach saying, "Hey pretty baby, let's go out." Her high school friend, Mandy Pryor, had crushes on the Aaberg brothers, Steve and Denny. Once, Mandy dove off the Malibu pier just to

impress them. Laura said the more intellectual surfers played chess on the beach while the others, like Lance Carson and Johnny Fain, duked it out on the waves. Needless to say, we had some of the top surfers walking up our driveway and knocking on the front door. Ah, the lure of young girls.

It was sometime during 1964 that I constructed my first skateboard. Cub Scouts was the latest activity that my parents had me involved in and this particular day my mother delivered me to the weekly gathering which was at Philip Cleary's home on Alcima in the Pacific Palisades. Phillip and I were grammar school mates and his mother had the troop set up in the garage. During these meetings we made all sorts of stuff like key chains glued to cracked marbles, gifts, and whatnots. One day the boys had a box filled with old garage-sale steel roller-skates and boards from Philip's father's lumberyard (Palisades Lumber and Materials). In no time, we disassembled the skates by removing the center wing nuts with pliers. The next step was to flatten the heel and toe guards with a hammer so that the skate would lie even on the boards. It was a wonder that no fingers were smashed with all of the racket we made with those hammers. Next was to attach the skates to the boards. We used flathead nails, hammered in and bent over. It was trial-and-error to find the ideal location for each skate, front and back; after all, we were treading on virgin territory. Finally, the first to flip his board over and ride was sorely surprised. Those that had nails sticking through the top had to bend them over or risk bloody feet and those that nailed the skate on crooked would fly helter-skelter off into the bushes. It was pretty comical to watch a bunch of hyper kids in Cub Scout uniforms careen down the sidewalk. These skateboards with steel wheels made the sound of a roaring jet going by. They also made a funny white trail as the wheels crushed the concrete pavement.

Commercial skateboards did not exist for me. At ten and eleven I was fairly self reliant and continued to make my own with upgraded wheels and board shapes as others did. The kids in the neighborhood were wise to skates for most of us participated in the Friday night roller skating at Palisades Park, where you could rent skates with wooden wheels, skate inside the gym to your favorite rock 'n roll music on a record player that spun 45's, and maybe play a game of dodge ball afterwards.

Surf music was prominent on the airwaves and we were hep to it. AM stations such as KFWB and KRLA played a mix of Duane Eddy, Dick Dale and the Deltones, The Ventures, The Beach Boys, The Surfaris and numerous other surf bands on a regular rotation. I had a Surfaris album with yellow trim and a picture of surfers at the Malibu wall which I thought was totally bitchin'. The big fender reverb sound was everywhere.

Most of the kids that were skateboarding in the Palisades had an intimate relationship with the surf. We grew up on the beach either learning to body surf, skim board, raft, belly board or surf. We were all good swimmers too. My sister Laura loved to swim out beyond the big sets and then call me to follow. It was pretty gnarly to swim out and dive under six and seven foot waves. I had to grab on to the sand under the water and then push off the bottom after the wave broke over me. I learned fast how to take a wave, get tubed, duck under the wave just when it broke, and pop out on the other side. Back then we didn't use fins. At Bel-Air beach's lifeguard tower #5, where we hung out most of the time, the ocean wasn't that deep so we could still bob off the bottom on big wave days.

Bay Street, State Beach, Sunset Beach, Topanga, Malibu, Zuma, and Trancas were all familiar local spots. But, in fact, in the early sixties most of the beach breaks were excellent for surfing, along with many of the jetties that dotted the Santa Monica Bay. Decent left and right breaks were common. I was a goofy foot so I preferred left breaks. In the mid-seventies, severe storms swept through the bay and changed the wave-breaking profile. It seemed all that was left were shore breaks.

Along with skateboarding, in 1964 I was also playing little league baseball on the Panthers team. More and more kids were skateboarding and congregating at the massive inclined parking lot at Palisades High School, known simply as “Pali.” It was fairly loose-knit group, mostly crazy youths hauling ass down the parking lot then climbing back up along the wire mesh that was put down to hold the ivy and bank from sliding; then we’d haul ass down again. At that time bikes and skateboards were our main mode of transportation. (My bike was the ever-popular Schwinn Sting Ray, purple with a sparkle banana seat with semi sissy bar, butterfly handlebars, and a slick for the back tire.) Friends and strangers were beginning to show up regularly at the top entrance of Pali’s parking lot. As it goes with kids, boredom begets friendly competition. Going down the incline became monotonous so we went down in new ways. Instead of standing, we sat on the board, laid on it, stood on trash cans—anything we could think of and get good at it. As our competitive natures grew, so did the more outlandish tricks. Kids began imitating surfers with maneuvers such as the “Paul Strauch five,” walking the nose, hanging five, hang ten, and leaping pirouettes. As tricks progressed, the skateboarders developed their own terms like kick turns, curb jumping (both up and down curbs), and kick outs. Pretending you were surfing was standard practice. We knew how to be stylish from watching surfers like Miki Dora. Accidents turned into tricks, like having the back wheels slide out when bearing down on a turn. When kids finished zooming down the incline, they would kick out into the ivy but sometimes they would flip their boards up and catch them and that would turn into how many flips could you do before you caught the board. Like anything kids did, showing off was always in the mix. Soon people were there just to watch and take pictures. Tricks got more inventive—kick-outs had spins added, kick turns turned into the frog walk or a 360, walking the nose turned into nose wheelies then into heelies. The combinations simply multiplied.

Next in progression was to set up an exhibition or contest. Teams were talked about and teams began. Several of us, Terry Keller, Burke Murphy, Chris Picciolo and Tim Keller formed a team. Tim became our manager and arranged match contests between us and other teams to take place at the Pali parking lot, one-on-one runs down the horseshoe incline. Judges would score the runs with the best overall-scoring team winning the contest. Tim had been on another team called Sunset Skateboarders and he enjoyed taking on the duties of managing our team.

Pali was not the only spot where skateboarding took place. Any and all asphalt-paved school playground areas with sloped sides were fair game because they were built into hillsides, producing a slope much like a wave in the ocean. The more familiar schools were Marquez Elementary, Palisades Elementary, Paul Revere Jr. High, Bellagio Elementary, Brentwood Elementary, as well as the parking lot in front of Palisades Medical Center. At the height of what I’d call the first wave of skateboarding there were numerous newspaper articles depicting kids as trespassing vandals. There would be photos of kids climbing school fences and squeezing

through locked gates of school property. When has that ever happened before? Kids wanting to get into school instead of wanting to get out! The bad press that skateboarding received at the onset, in the mid-sixties, helped to perpetuate a rebellious image that carried on into the seventies. We skateboarded everywhere, taking our boards wherever we went. I remember skateboarding along the old boardwalk from Santa Monica Pier all along Venice down to Pacific Ocean Park ("P.O.P."), hanging on to the trolley for a free tow.

The prevalent consciousness of the day was that skateboarding was a fad that would fade. Little did the public know that skateboarding would someday become a commercial rage and climb to the esteem of an Olympic sport.

Around this time the YMCA was offering a program called "Surf Caravan." This program consisted of several "Y" buses that transported a slew of kids, a few adult chaperones, some YMCA officials, and a bunch of surfboards down to Tijuana and Ensenada, Mexico. The plan was to camp on a fabulous expanse of beach on the Ensenada coastline and let the kids surf to their hearts' content for about two weeks. I went along, as did several of my friends. It was great. I was using a Bing board at the time. There were super beach breaks, the water was warm, and we were even turned loose in Tijuana for a day to learn the art of bartering.

The Palisades Skateboard Team got started in 1965. Several members were actively pursuing a sponsor. I approached a longtime family friend, Don Burgess. He was the owner of Don Burgess Pools and lived on El Medio in the Palisades. Don showed interest and said he would get back to me. On another front, Tim Keller had approach Laguna Sportswear and they also showed interest. We may have been impatient and perhaps should have lined up three or four sponsors to choose from, but as it turned out we decided to go with Don Burgess Pools as our sponsor. Shortly after accepting Don Burgess Pools as our sponsor, Tim turned down the offer from Laguna Sportswear, who would have probably boosted us to the sponsorship and visibility level of other high profile teams such as Hobie and Makaha. But a commitment was a commitment and so now we had an official team.

We got down to business creating a logo and team emblem. Tim was the eldest of the team members and thus the de facto manager and organizer. He spoke with his father, Jack Keller, who sketched out a skateboarder in silhouette doing the "Paul Strauch" maneuver on a skateboard. This was used for our team patch, applied to the back of a black nylon windbreaker with broad white horizontal competition stripe. Tim posed for the patch figure while his father drew it. A patch using the Don Burgess Pool logo was created for the left front side of the jacket to indicate the team's sponsor.

The sponsor was responsible for providing team members with supplies of skateboards, wheels, bearings, team jackets, and transportation to contests, entry fees, and so on. Don was actively involved with the team. Out of his house he began manufacturing custom boards that the team members would test ride and report back. By this time a new type of clay wheel had been developed. Don was inventive and used ideas from pool design, introducing them to skateboards. He developed a resin mixed with sand for a non-slip grip surface around pools, then applied it to skateboards in competition stripes in various colors. The board shape was solidified and

Palisades Boards began production. Not only did team members receive new boards but the boards were sold at local stores including Palisades Hobby Shop.

The team started to grow in two areas. First was new membership. The roster included Peter Burg, Barry Blenkhorn, Burke Murphy, Shane Murphy, Tim Keller, Terry Keller, Don Mike Burgess, Ricky Burgess, Rick Percell, Chris Picciolo, Todd Elmergreen, Jerry Giancola, and Susie Rowland. At the time, Susie was only one of a handful of talented girl skateboarders. (Others would be Colleen Boyd and Wendy Bearer, who was the sister of Danny Bearer, both on the Hobie Team. Wendy appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show skateboarding around in a circle to some current song of this period.) Most of the team members surfed on a regular basis as well.

The other area was the development of new tricks such as handstands on a moving skateboard. I began experimenting by holding the board on the pavement, moving slowly, then kicking up into a handstand. This evolved into going down into a frog stand while skating along, pressing into a full handstand, coming back down on the board and again standing upright, all while the skateboard was flying along. 360s turned into 720s, then 1080s. Other new tricks included one-footed heeies and wheelies, headstand into handstand, and of course the stall, where you lean the board back on its tail end and drag along the ground, used as a brake to slow down. Jumping over school benches turned into jumping over a bar at a measured height. All of these tricks were being invented, practiced, and perfected.

The world of skateboarding exploded and teams popped up everywhere. The International Skateboard Championships held at the La Palma Stadium in Anaheim, May 22-23, 1965, brought skateboarding into living rooms throughout the world. There were 280 boys and girls that showed up from Mexico City, Dallas, Phoenix, Berkeley, and Southern California to compete in this rally sponsored by the Vita-Pak Super Surfer Skateboard team. ABC's Wide World of Sports televised the competition and included my run in the flatland slalom. Our team finished third to Hobie and Makaha. The Hobie team's John Freis and Torger Johnson won first and second overall. Torger was by far the most radical and fluid skateboarder in the contest. In the 11 and under age bracket, Don Mike Burgess, eight years old, was third overall, placing third in figure-eights and the flatland slalom. I was fourth in flatland slalom and fourth in trick-riding. We both received finalist medals.

More contests followed: the South Gate Open Contest, July 4, 1965; Palisades-Malibu Jaycees Skateboard Tournament, 1966; and a contest between Brentwood's Ventures and Palisades Skateboard Team, 1966. So many friends were skateboarding that it's hard to remember them all but the Stevie and Davy Hilton, George Trafton, Jay Henderson, Kevin Jones, Bob Janis, Scott Kelso, Pat Hunt, Scott Archer, and Donna Cash come to mind.

Our sponsor, Don Burgess, was an avid 16mm moviemaker. He shot numerous films of the team at various contests. One shows me during a group exhibition going down the Pali incline where I did a handstand, veered off into the ivy, and crashed into a sprinkler head. I received a severe cut on my hand and had to be taken to the hospital to get several stitches. Many of these films may still be available through Don Mike Burgess, Academy Award-nominated cinematographer (Forrest Gump, etc.).

I spent many days during those summers walking to and from Bel-Air beach. There was a trail through the private club down the ice-plant hill that dropped onto PCH. There you had to cross the highway at your own risk. We had a great group of kids in bikinis and jams that hung around lifeguard tower #5. Frank Barnes was the lifeguard and he was the coolest. Before becoming lifeguard, Frank played water polo for San Jose State. On many mornings I would meet him at tower #5 and together we would jog up and down the shoreline. We all literally looked up to him: at 6'4" he was an impressive dude. One day I dragged my sister Laura down, introduced her to Frank and, as it happened, they fell in love and later were married.

Speaking of sisters, another sister of mine, Melissa, just a year older, was spending time with Torger Johnson. She was in the seventh or eighth grade at Corpus Christi school and Torger was in the ninth grade at Paul Revere Jr. High. They were sweet on each other and it was cool to have Mr. Skateboarder himself saunter up to the front door for a visit. By the way, Torger was a phenomenal surfer, too.

Jumping on the bandwagon in July of 1967, the Hormel company planned to shoot a television commercial with skateboarders. Don Burgess was contacted and auditions were held; four members of our team were chosen. Barry Blenkhorn, Don Mike Burgess, his younger brother Ricky, and I were to be in The Not-So-Hot Hot Dog commercial. I was chosen over teammate Terry Keller on the basis of height. There was a photo shoot for stills that ended up plastered on the Hormel trucks that drove around various cities. The TV commercial ran for a year and we were compensated handsomely; we all collected residuals as well. The Hormel gig put us in the realm of professional skateboarders. It was one of the earliest commercials using skateboarders.

As the summer wore on, I finished playing baseball with the Pirates (Pacific Palisades Boys Baseball Association) and spending time surfing at State Beach. Some time around this period I bought a new Hobie 8' 2" clear-coat board. It was beautiful. I also purchased a plastic nose guard to fend off dings, along with an O'Neil wetsuit. The new smaller boards were just arriving. Our group of young surfers spent the days learning to play penny-ante poker, smoking cigarettes, and trying to impress girls. I was surfing with Irv Hansen and spending time with Terry Macris, a poet/surfer. He was Frank Barnes's roommate at a house at First & California Street in Santa Monica. Frank introduced us. Terry's parents owned the house. Terry was much older at 24, so I was more like a mascot that tagged along. He took me surfing many times in his totally bitchin' '67 Chevy Impala. We would get up early for donuts and just cruise the southern beaches—Venice, Playa del Rey, El Segundo (El Stinko), and as far south as San Clemente. Once, while surfing in San Clemente, I stepped on a sea urchin and had to pull purple spikes from my heel. State Beach had lots of great surfers hanging out—Da Cat Miki Dora, Johnny Sugarman, and Corky Carroll. You could always catch someone shredding.

As with everything, change is inevitable. During the later part of the 60s, I began a lifelong involvement with rock 'n roll. I found a new passion, the guitar.