

# The Death of Longboarding and Other Stories

by Chris Ahrens

## THE PAUL STRAUCH FIVE

There's lots to see at The Malibu Inn—a stuffed bear, some ancient musical instruments, WWII memorabilia. But the most interesting things there can't be perceived until after midnight. That's when the music works as a backdrop to the loud conversation which consists chiefly of lies about great swells and great rides. On this particular night, Josh Faberow and Tom Wegener are debating the relative merits of highspeed noseriding while Bruce and Layla King resurrect the Watusi and the other hundred-plus patrons drink and talk and listen and feel.

Dewey is gone. Lance's number has been retired. Mickey doesn't live here anymore. Kemp is camped north of that other great California point. Kemp's younger brother, Denny "Sideways" Aaberg, leads a little combo known as "Cheater Five," belting out a well-tuned mix of blues, oldies and vintage surf; much of it original. So good, like a point wave surfer in his prime, that you barely notice at first, taking it for granted the way you do all good things until you get a little distance from them. A mental newsreel as fresh as *Big Wednesday* rolls out while Denny strikes up the band, which consists of his lead guitar, a very solid drummer, one of the best female bass players this side of Chicago and a familiar looking conga player who goes by the name of Reno, a man last seen playing tag with big west peak Sunset. Malibu will do that to a soggy brain, I thought, rubbing my eyes. The band was called "Cheater Five," but Denny has been convinced to change its name to "The Paul Strauch Five," a tip of the hat to the Hawaiian invasion. Everything in the universe was perfect for that split second, and PS5 dove into Crumple Car.

## EIGHT FOOT HAWAIIAN

MY NAME IS DENNIS TOMPKINS. I am 23-years-old, a carpenter by trade, and a surfer by choice. Because I grew up surfing Lake Michigan, an area that rarely has good waves, I am not a great surfer. Nonetheless, I love my home.

It is an honest place. A place where 100 pennies equals a buck and 12 inches always adds up to one foot.

I had never in my life traveled anywhere for surf. Not until Hurricane Iniki provided me the opportunity by slamming into the Island of Kauai, ruining the place and providing work for those of us willing to help rebuild it. I was surprised and stoked when a friend from Florida sent for me and asked if I wanted some work and a place to stay in paradise. It took me just two days to quit my job, pack my tools and head for the Islands and the opportunity to ride the first real waves of my life.

I was lucky. On the very day that I jumped off the plane, I paddled right out into perfect head-high, warm water waves. The Hawaiians in the lineup were nice enough not to laugh at me when I fell after attempting the biggest waves of my life to that point. When one of the local surfers paddling out saw me wipeout, he was kind enough to offer a few pointers, suggesting that I ride further up on my board if I wanted to make any waves. I thanked the man for his advice and then I asked him how big the wave was that had just nailed me. Being exactly six foot, two inches tall, and noticing that my wave was a little taller than me, I was surprised at his reply. "Ahh, maybe three feet," he said, as he smiled kindly and then paddled away. He must not have seen the wave at the peak, I reasoned, certain that my wave was a lot bigger than three feet tall. Until then, I always thought that three feet was about waist high. Of course, I was wrong about that.

In the process of my surf apprenticeship I made many mistakes, falling in critical sections, and paying a high toll for my increasing water knowledge. My biggest mistake, however, was not in the riding of waves themselves, but in breaking the habit of incorrectly calling wave sizes from the face, rather than from the back of the wave, as everyone in Hawaii does. It took me weeks to realize that a six foot wave is twice my height, a three foot wave is

taller than me, and anything smaller than me is flat. Just plain flat. There are no one foot waves in Hawaii. By the time that December rolled around I was calling wave heights correctly.

By then my job had begun and I went to work, helping to restore a restaurant that had been leveled earlier that year by the high winds. The surf was good that winter and I was fortunate that my boss was also a surfer. Because he understood my love for surfing, he often let me go home early when a good swell was running. Not only in that way, but in many other ways, he was the most understanding man that I have ever worked for. My boss back home would have fired me if I did the sorts of things that I did here.

Sometimes in my haste to get off the job and go surfing, I cost the construction company a lot of money. Once I broke a big bay window because I was looking to see which way the trees were blowing. Another time I built cabinets into a closet because I was thinking about the surf. But that wasn't the worst of it. No. The worst came when I cut a huge stack of lumber, all the wrong length.

The boss had trusted me with hundreds of studs that were all far too long, and he told me to cut them all in lengths of eight feet. Well, I was new to the Islands and there was nobody around to ask for advice, so I went right to work. First, I took out my tape measurer. Then I changed all of the markings on it. At the six foot I wrote three feet, and the ten foot mark, I wrote five feet, moving up the line, converting Mainland scale to Hawaiian scale until I came to the end of the tape. Then I worked until I had cut almost every one of those studs to exactly eight Hawaiian feet. By that evening I was soaked in sweat and covered with sawdust. The boss returned just as I was finishing the last cut. As he stood next to the island-sized studs, he told me to stop what I was doing. "Do you know what a foot looks like?" He asked patiently. Still confused by Hawaiian arithmetic I did not reply. Then he whipped out his tape measure and

pulled out 12 Hawaiian inches, which looked exactly like 12 Michigan inches. He looked at me sternly and said, "Now, that's a foot."

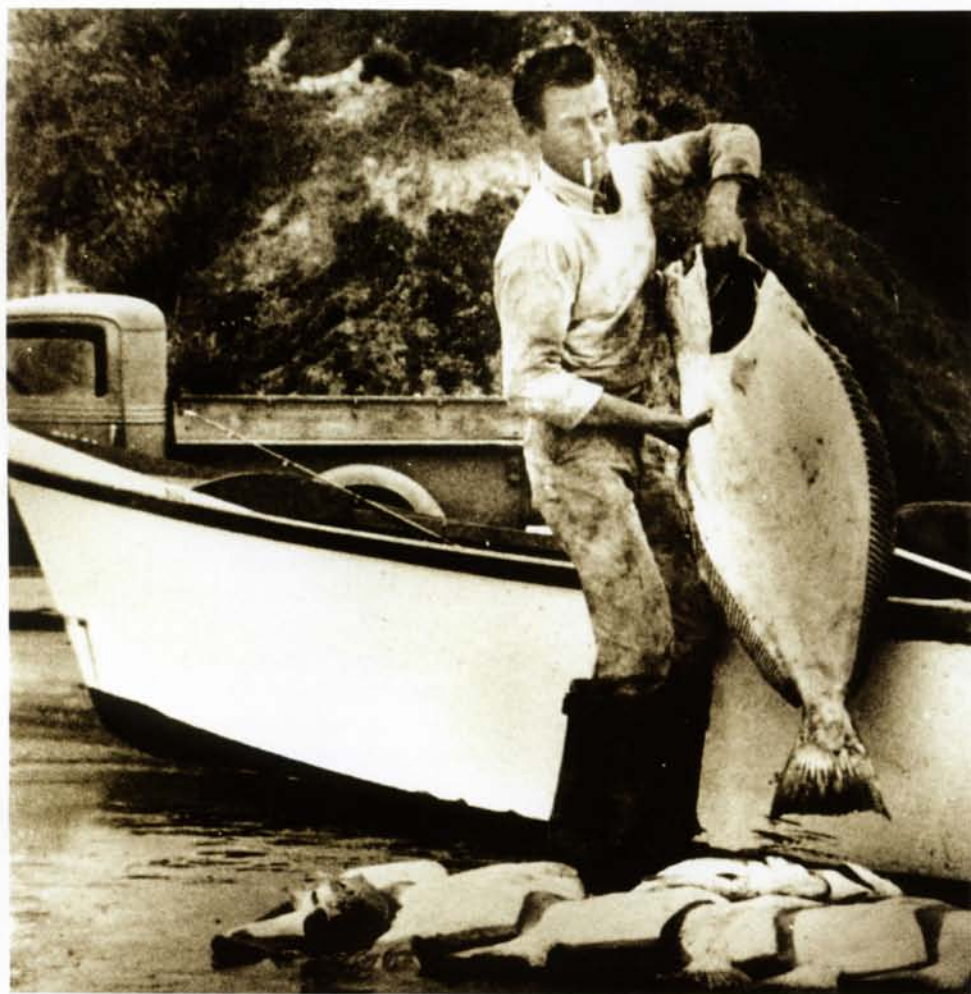
This cleared up most of my confusion about lumber size, but not about wave size. I struggled through the winter, getting pounded by four- to five-foot surf and feeling like a wimp because of it. When the restaurant was completed, I returned to the Mainland. I had thought about staying in Kauai, but the controversy over the size of things would have driven me nuts. I might never again have a boss who measured wood from the front of the tree.

### STUDIO 54 MEETS THE ASP

*(or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the U.S. Open)*

"SORRY, MISTER AHRENS, but you're not on the list." The girl who passes out the wristbands is serious about keeping people like me isolated from the working press and VIP's that frequent the U.S. Open. The last time I got thrown on my ear like this I was trying to crash a Hendrix concert on Maui. Discouraged but not defeated, I headed for the big Huntington kitty-litter box and sat down. Here there would be no free food. No shade. No watching the sets and saying, "Gee, I'll bet Trestles is going off right now!"

Wedge between the Tustin Surf Taco Bowling Team and the Orange County secretary for the NRA, it's impossible not to turn your attention away. The international flags are very pretty. The commercial flags on the pier are not as pretty, and not one of them wave for a surfboard company. The inquisition has fallen into the hands of those who have never surfed anything more radical than the net. Where will the power brokers take us in the year 2000? Hopefully, we'll all make more than 20 cents a word as the millennium turns. But let's also hope that they don't bring the entire asylum, including the guy who says, "Five minutes, five minutes remaining," to G-Land or J-Bay. My prayer is that they isolate and contain the cancer beneath the Orange County big top.



COURTESY LEWIS FAMILY

Stan Lewis. Swami's, late '50s.

Greg Noll, who was in town to be inducted into the Walk of Fame, ventured from Main Street, down to the beach to check out the event. There, he ran into Herbie Fletcher, Bill Stewart and Rusty Prisendorfer. Himself a veteran of the surf business, Greg feels comfortable with this crew. But soon the hype began to wear on Da Bull like a December flat spell. Strolling the HB sand, Greg nearly tripped over the big black power cord that connected tent city with the rest of the world. Contemplating a pull of the plug, a move that just might have proven more heroic than his four-story Makaha elevator ride 30 some years ago, Noll nearly took the drop and the fall for all of us. I could see the Waimea adrenaline surge through his body. Once again the sport was in his hands. "Five minutes. Five minutes remaining!" Greg's fingers tightened around that slender electric umbilical, then, uncharacteristically, he decided to behave himself. Dropping the cord, he headed back across the street.

The swell was a muscular four to five feet and we had the joy of watching Egan, Knox, Hoy, Machado, Rommelse, Beschen and Slater gather points, one good turn at a time. By noon, I was headed home. Passing my exit, I continued south to a good Mexican sandbar. Here press credentials are not necessary to feel good about yourself. The session did its job and washed the dirt of the industrial revolution from under the fingernails of my soul. I slept well that night. Just before everything went black, however, I said my prayers for the surfing world.

#### A SWAMI'S STORY

STAN LEWIS QUIT HIS JOB picking watermelons in the Imperial Valley and hitchhiked to Solana Beach in the Summer of 1933.

Walking over a sandy rise, the 18 year old saw a man rowing a small, wooden boat to shore. The boat sat low in the water, weighted down by a good catch. Lewis would remember that moment vividly—right down to the transparent clarity of the Pacific Ocean—until his death 46 years later.

He would remember it as the moment he decided how to spend the rest of his life.

Stan slept in a beach cave in the area for days, and approached fishermen, Dick Heiner, day after day, until Heiner gave him a job. Heiner taught Lewis the fishing trade. Taught him how to pick abalone, trap lobsters and catch halibut and sea bass. He taught him to filet the fish without wasting any of the precious meat. One day Heiner took Lewis home. There Lewis met and fell in love with Heiner's daughter, Mae. Later Mae and Stan were married. The result of their union lives on today in Tommy Lewis, 45, a legendary North County San Diego surfer and fisherman who still fishes the coast in a small wooden boat.

Stan would often take Tommy out into big surf, kill the boat engine and say, "Okay, get us out of here." "He believed in knowing how to row," Tommy remembers with a laugh. "And he was a daredevil. One Friday the 13th, he broke a mirror, petted a black cat, walked under a ladder and parachuted from an airplane into a school of sharks—just to prove that the variety wasn't dangerous!"

Mae Lewis, now in her 60s, has heard fishing stories from her father, her husband and now her son.

"My husband was fishing for rock cod (off of Swami's) when he reeled in something very heavy. When he got it to the surface, he saw that a huge octopus had come up to eat the fish. It was bigger than the 16-foot boat he was in, and he tried to cut the line, but it was too late.

"The octopus attached itself to the bottom of the boat, and nearly sunk it. Stan sharpened his knife on his stone, and went around cutting off the tentacles that had reached clear over the side of the boat. The octopus still would not let go. Stan managed to get the boat in through the surf with the octopus still attached to the bottom.

"On shore, some men put the octopus in a wagon and paraded it through the streets of Encinitas. It had come from very deep water and it was bright red.

"There used to be a small landing for the boats at Swami's," continues Mae. "There were three or four boats there. Three or four at Seaside and a few in Oceanside. The boats were left there all the time. The fishermen, some of whom camped out on the beach in tents, were allowed to drive onto the sand in their Model A's and Model T's to haul out their catch.

Paramahansa Yogananda (founder of the Self Realization Fellowship temple adjacent the cliff at Swami's ) would come to the beach with bodyguards each day. My father would offer him fish, but Yogananda was a strict vegetarian, so Dad would offer him things from the sea like starfish and shells, which he accepted," Mae recalled.

"Once when the fishing was bad and Dad hadn't caught anything in several days, he told Yogananda about it. Yogananda said, 'Don't worry.' He blessed the boat, and the next day it nearly sank from the weight of the sharks he pulled in."

#### THE RICHEST MAN IN THE WORLD

BETWEEN HARD PAINFUL GRUNTS ON the toilet where I was hoping to produce a bowel movement without any blood in it, I read the newspaper and I saw my picture in it. There I was, old, wrinkled, frowning in my gray suit, one of 30 such suits, all the same, all hanging, alone in their own closet, and the words beneath the picture "The Richest Man in the World" written like they mattered, like a celebration beneath the picture of the dying man. I would trade places with any one of the poor bastards who sold my photo on the street for a quarter to someone who saw the picture and believed the lie and wanted to be as I am now.

From the toilet I walked through endless halls that were empty of people and of debate and of laughter, filled with paintings and plants without even a breath of life in them, seeing pictures of people long since dead who mean nothing to me and never did. To my left is an ocean of a swimming pool centered in a lawn that goes on

forever, all the way to the horizon where it is finally interrupted by a tall, spewing fountain and a line of palm trees. There are birds and there is other life in the yard, but no human life. Nothing except for the gardener stooping to pull weeds from time to time, but mostly sitting, looking at nothing, wasting my money to do a job that a monkey could do if only I had one.

Food will come and then drinks and then company, and people who will see only the money and favors that I dangle in front of them when they look at me. Nobody will ever talk about the game, but it is the only thing that gives any of us much joy anymore. None of them will look to see that I am drowning in the butter and sour cream of my own success. I hate all of them and they hate me. But I will shake their hands and they will laugh if I say something that I want to be funny and pretend to be interested when I want them to be interested, and do nothing at all unless when I want them to do nothing at all.

After many drinks, we will sit and talk of how to make more money. Then my servants will sneak out behind the main building to smoke and drink and make love as quickly as they can, and then come back to work, stinking of sex, poverty, cigarettes and hate. I do not expect love, but sex is something that I can still have, but have not had without payment of some sort or another (add up the cost of six wives, uncountable mistresses and monthly prostitutes for five decades) for a long time. Perhaps the new girl in the kitchen will want to make an extra fifty before the night is out, and I wonder if I will hate her more if she says yes or no to me. A few drinks from now and I will know, and maybe some of the others too will know, if I care to invite them into the fun. Fun for them. But it is I who will buy their fun and have to endure the anger on the girl's face when she thinks that I am not looking and I see her cleaning all of us from the lining of her cheap coat before going home to spend her money on things that young people like. If I see that she hates me,

I will have to fire her. If I see that she likes me, I will have to hate her.

Tomorrow will start a new week and there will be calls to make and companies to buy and sell and a hundred people whose lives will never be the same because, because I feel like buying something, or selling something, or building something, or destroying something, or starting something, or stopping something, or playing with something, or making nothing into something or making something into nothing. Then, when I am tired of playing, they become like every other thing that grows old to me, and I will not pity those caught on the game board when I smash it, but I will envy them because they will come up again after they have been broken, and believe and dream and rise and be broken again and again and again. But they will not be destroyed. No matter how we hit them, they will not be destroyed, and that is why I admire them, envy them. Hate them. God, I hate them, especially when they try to make me understand. Understand? Of course, I understand.

And then I will rest from my work for a while, and before I fall into a shallow martini and Valium-induced slumber I will see a glimpse of something—a plank, a surfboard standing without reason against a stone wall. And I will see the young boy content to be like all the other young boys, with the same white swimsuit and surfboard, but not with their grace or skill, but with joy, paddling the surfboard out into the blue water to look down and to see the fish below him, moving together as one fish when he paddles, happily, hurrying to move out to where the waves are, in hopes of riding a few of them. I will hear talking and swearing and laughing and I will be happy, believing that it's happening again and I will move fast and warm over the water with Matt, and Doc and Leroy and we ride together and then race to the pier, and I won't care that they won and that I lost and they won't care that I am not like them, and that I have to go home, up on the hill and cannot camp out in the dirt for the night.

Tomorrow and the next day will be the same for us. Then will come the hard sound of a bell and I will wake and it will start all over again. And I will think, "I would give the stupid-faced man holding the phone and the martini a million dollars, ten million dollars, anything, anything he wants if he would just reach down and dry the tear in my eye or ask me why I have been crying.

### THE DEATH OF LONGBOARDING

IN 1966 YOU RODE THE NOSE as often as you could. Two years later noseriding had all but disappeared. By 1973 few people even remembered how it was done. Then came a slow longboard revival championed by the old guard. Then came Joel Tudor. With few notable exceptions, it has taken over 20 years for longboarding to match '60s excellence again, and to hit the same wall that led to its death 30 years ago.

Kurt Ledterman and Sandy Neilson were out of step by being brilliant on longboards at La Jolla Shores in 1972. Herbie Fletcher always packed a longboard in his quiver. I'm not sure that longboards ever completely died out at San Onofre or Waikiki. Few agree on who was the first to rediscover that longboards were fun for small waves. Revival came to me personally in the Summer of 1974.

It was the smallest summer in memory when Donald Takayama countered with a mint Nuuhiwa Noserider, paddling out to Stone Steps, and hanging five to the sand on a wave that the shortboarders on hand wouldn't bother with even if their ridiculous (for California) pintail semi-guns could catch it. A short while later, Nuuhiwa abandoned his fish and borrowed one of Takayama's longboards. By the end of that week, Donald and David were into long tip time and noseriding duels. Donald dusted off some old templates and built a few eight-foot noseriders for himself and his friends. Within a year, a small underground group was toying with longboards regularly, whenever the surf went flat.

By the mid-1980s, longboards were gaining acceptance again, primarily as

stationary platforms for spinners, headstands, cockroaches and mid-board arches. By 1990, roughly half of the surfers in Southern California were on longboards. For the most part, however, longboarding was still a developing and awkward act characterized by dramatic poses, shuffling to the nose and throwing the hands into the air.

A few weeks ago, surf photographer, Jim Pigeon, gave an impressive slide show at his house. We were treated to a parade of hot, young surfers hanging ten perfectly—hands at their sides, toes and knees over, with little variation in their traditional styles. I was stoked to see that so many kids had rediscovered the art. Then, on the ride home from Pigeon's, it occurred to me that these kids, like the great noseriders before them, had walked the plank to the end, and had no place left to go. When questioned later, many of them expressed boredom with noseriding. Other than quitting, it seems to me they have but three options:

Continue to make slight refinements to something that is nearly perfect.

Switch to "progressive" blade-thin, granny-rocker, nine-footers, and do a slowed-down version of shortboarding.

Ride shortboards.

Longboarding gained credibility with the rise of longboard videos and magazines, one of which I worked for in the early '90s. While the only game in town at the time, it was, nonetheless, a challenge to keep the publication interesting. Our readers quickly tired of seeing waves in the four foot and under range, the waves best suited for longboards. They wanted to see longboards at Pipeline and Sunset. We gave it to them, and proved once again that a great surfer could survive a heavy wave on a longboard, but only in the way that a great golfer plays a decent round with a broomstick. Like the broomstick on the golf course, the longboard on the serious wave is a novelty that the public soon tires of, demanding to see athletes doing their best without restrictions on equipment. Once the point's been proven, why hinder performance with extra width and length

in waves where nobody (with a few exceptions like Herbie Fletcher) ever even thinks of hanging five?

Even Joel Tudor, one of the first in the modern era to charge Pipe on a noserider, has all but abandoned his longboard in heavy conditions. As for surfboards termed "longboard guns," they are nothing but conventional guns, porked out and given a new name. Nearly by definition a longboard is a noserider (or one with the trim area near the nose). Until surfers ride the nose consistently on "longboard guns" at Sunset, Pipe or Todos, these are longboards in name only.

My first recollection of the shortboard revolution came when the great noserider, Steve Bigler, appeared at the Santa Ana River Jetties on an Australian made Vee bottom in the mid-eight foot range. Naturally Bigler ripped. After the show, we all wanted to ride boards like his, even though none of us were anywhere near mastering noseriding in the way that he had. By 1968, the best surfers who had become bored of noseriding, were all on Vee bottoms or mini guns. The rest of us followed (sometimes reluctantly), as surfing moved away from trim position and toward the speed, maneuverability and tuberiding offered by lighter, smaller equipment.

A good argument can be made here that many surfers can't ride shortboards effectively, and so should stay with longboards. This is as true now as it was in 1968. True in the same way that most recreational basketball players would benefit from a hoop set at eight feet rather than one set at ten feet. But nobody wants an eight foot hoop; we want the same hoop that Michael Jordan uses, even though few of us will ever perform a slam dunk in our lives.

In the final evaluation, good longboarders are quite simply good surfers. And like all good surfers, these longboarders want to progress. With no room left on the nose, they hope to ride deeper and get more vertical. For this, they will need shorter boards. And when they do eventually go short, the masses will, once more, be compelled to follow. \*



Tudor, finding shorter fits better at Pipe. Winter 1996.

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