

The Cover Story

Meeting Duke Kahanamoku By Don DeGraw



When I was about seven years old, my parents, along with my three sisters and I were living in Anaheim California, just South of Los Angeles from 1942 to 1949. My father worked in a shipyard there as a welding supervisor. On weekends my father would take us to Huntington Beach where we would



play in the surf and collect seashells and stuff during the day. We would stay until after dark and watch the big navy guns over at the navy yard as they practiced. It was like the 4th of July almost every night.

On one trip, I can't recall if it was 1943 or 1944 (remember I was only seven years old and remembering dates is not something most seven year olds think much about, except maybe their birthday and Christmas.) Anyway, we couldn't find parking at Huntington Beach where we usually went, and had to go further south to Newport Beach instead. Normally we would have avoided Newport Beach due to the extreme height of the breakers. I can't recall the month of the year, but it was probably in the spring because I remember it as being somewhat chilly when we first jumped into the car but pleasantly warm by the time we arrived at the beach. Naturally, because Mom and Dad were busy looking after my three little sisters, they sort of left me on my own. I was combing the beach for Moon Stones to give my grandmother, and wandered some distance down the beach. I was startled when I heard a shout from the water and stopped just in time to keep from being knocked down by a very large man riding a huge long plank of wood, which turned out to be a surfboard. He slid to a stop in the surf only a foot or so in front of me. He jumped off the board and asked if I was all right. Keep in mind that in 1943 or 1944 surfing hadn't caught on really big in California, so the sight of a real honest to goodness surfer was something to behold.

I don't recall what I said or if I said anything, I just stood and stared up at him, then down to the board, then up at him again. He was old! I mean really OLD, he must have been at least fifty. His skin was very dark and he had a huge head of graying hair and he had an enormous nose **[Picture on front cover]**.

He stuck out his hand for me to shake and it was so big I was afraid to let him get a hold on my hand for fear he would crush it, but I shook hands with him anyway. "They call me Chief he said and asked me my name. I said "Donald," then I asked him, "Chief, like an Indian?" He laughed and said "not quite but close." I'm a sheriff, actually. I remember my saying, "you look more like an Indian than a sheriff," and then him telling me, "well I played an Indian a couple of times, does that count?" It was some time later that I was made to understand that he was telling me he had played the part of an Indian in the movies.

He asked me if I rode, meaning did I ride a surfboard, I of course told him I didn't have a board. I had watched a few kids riding boards at Huntington Beach, but it wasn't something I had even thought of doing, mainly because I was not a very good swimmer. He pointed out at a couple of dark specks atop a large wave and told me they were a couple of his students. We talked for a few minutes and he told me all about surfing and how he taught kids like me how to do it, and swimming and stuff. He told me he lived in Hawaii, but he had once lived here in Newport Beach. He said he was in California to attend some kind of event, I can't recall him telling me what event that was, but now I know it must have been a surfing competition of some kind.

All the time we talked I couldn't keep my eyes off that big surfboard of his. I remember walking all the way around it a couple of times. Then he said "go ahead and give it a try, while I run up to the roadside shop and get me a soda pop." I said "I ain't ever done it before, I don't know how!" "Nothing to it", he said and he

turned and walked off. Well I bent down to get the board (Which was solid wood and must have been all of fourteen feet long.) I tugged and I pulled and I pushed until I was blue in the face but couldn't budge it. When he returned he had a bottle of cream soda in one hand and big orange soda in the other hand, held them out and asked me which one I wanted. I took the big orange, and sat down on his board beside him and told him "I just couldn't get it in the water." He just laughed and said "I really didn't think you could, but thanks for watching my board for me".

He told me the board weighed one hundred and fourteen pounds, and was made of Hawaiian Koa wood. He said it was an exact replica of his first board when he was a boy in Hawaii. He finished his soda, handed me the bottle and said I could keep the ten cent deposit they would give me up at the beach store. He shook my hand again and said "see you around" -- picked up that board like it didn't weigh more than a couple of pounds, and walked back into the surf jumped on top of it and paddled out to sea.

I stood watching him until he had gone out of sight and thought I might have to make me a surfboard and try it myself when I was older. While I watched I realized that my baby sister was tugging at my hand and telling me that it was time to go.

When we were in the car heading home, dad asked me what I had been doing for so long -- they were getting worried about me. So, I told my dad and mother about the strange dark man and his big surfboard. I told them his name was Chief. Dad had no reaction nor did my mother, he could have been the king of Borneo for all they knew. Later that day my father's baby brother, Uncle Wayne had come to our house for dinner. It was Uncle Wayne's 20th birthday, and he was my hero -- in all things bad. He rode a big motorcycle, and owned his own car, and spent all his time at the beach. Mom always said he was a beach bum and didn't like me hanging around with him very much. Anyway, I related what had happened and Wayne got this great big smile on his face and said I had probably just met a surfing great, by the name of Duke Kahanamoku.

Wayne said "Boy, would I like to meet him. You are one lucky little buzzard." Or something like that. He told me that the Duke was a famous American hero. He told me about the Duke saving a whole bunch of sailors using his surf board, and before that, he had won all kinds of gold medals in the Olympics.

Since I was only seven and couldn't get my tongue around the name Kahanamoku, I naturally went on to other things.

My uncle Wayne suggested we try and build a surfboard when I was eight or nine; we made it out of two 12 inch planks of pine that my father had stored in the garage. I didn't think he would mind us using them, boy was I wrong about that! It turned out that he had them to use as scaffolding boards for painting our house. When we finished the board, it was about seven feet long and I could only just barely lift it. Neither Uncle Wayne nor I were able to ride it, no matter how much we practiced. A little beach-side bar and grill bought it from us to use as a sign out front of the bar -- fifty dollars which was a darn good price in 1943 or 1944!

We went back to that beach many times but I never saw Duke again. It wasn't until 2002 that I even heard his name again. I had only been collecting stamps a short time and was shocked to find the USPS was dedicating a stamp in honor of the 112th anniversary of his birth. I immediately went on the internet and the first thing that popped up was a picture of the guy I had met on Newport Beach that day.

So, for all you kids that think they would like to be a surfer, I encourage you to Google "Duke Kahanamoku", and read about him. Also, remember this -- you never know when you might meet someone famous.

And you yourself may achieve some degree of greatness and fame that some other kid can look back on and say, **Hey, I met him once.**