

# Riding The Wave

A passionate legion of pioneering wave riders are committed to ensuring Delray's surfing legacy

BY JUDY ALEXANDRA DIEDWARDO



**A**s modern surfing exploded in popularity during the 1960s, both its evolution and place in pop culture were on the rise, especially in coastal towns like Delray Beach, Florida, which was a mecca for an entire generation. Coming-of-age local surfers Fred Salmon, Corky Roche, Bill Keeton and Tom Warnke were at the vanguard of this thrilling new sport and remained steadfast in their passion for keeping South Florida's surfing history and culture alive. "Credited as being among the first to surf Delray Beach were locals Rick Kohl, 'Smitty' Smith,

Bob Rex, George Timmons, Johnny Mac Bird, Stewart Iglehart, Allen Carpenter, Henry Kamiya, Bill Terry and Mike Pickering," says Tom Warnke, executive director of the Palm Beach County Surfing History Project and Surfing Florida Museum, who is committed to preserving the history, culture, memorabilia and future of East Coast surfing.

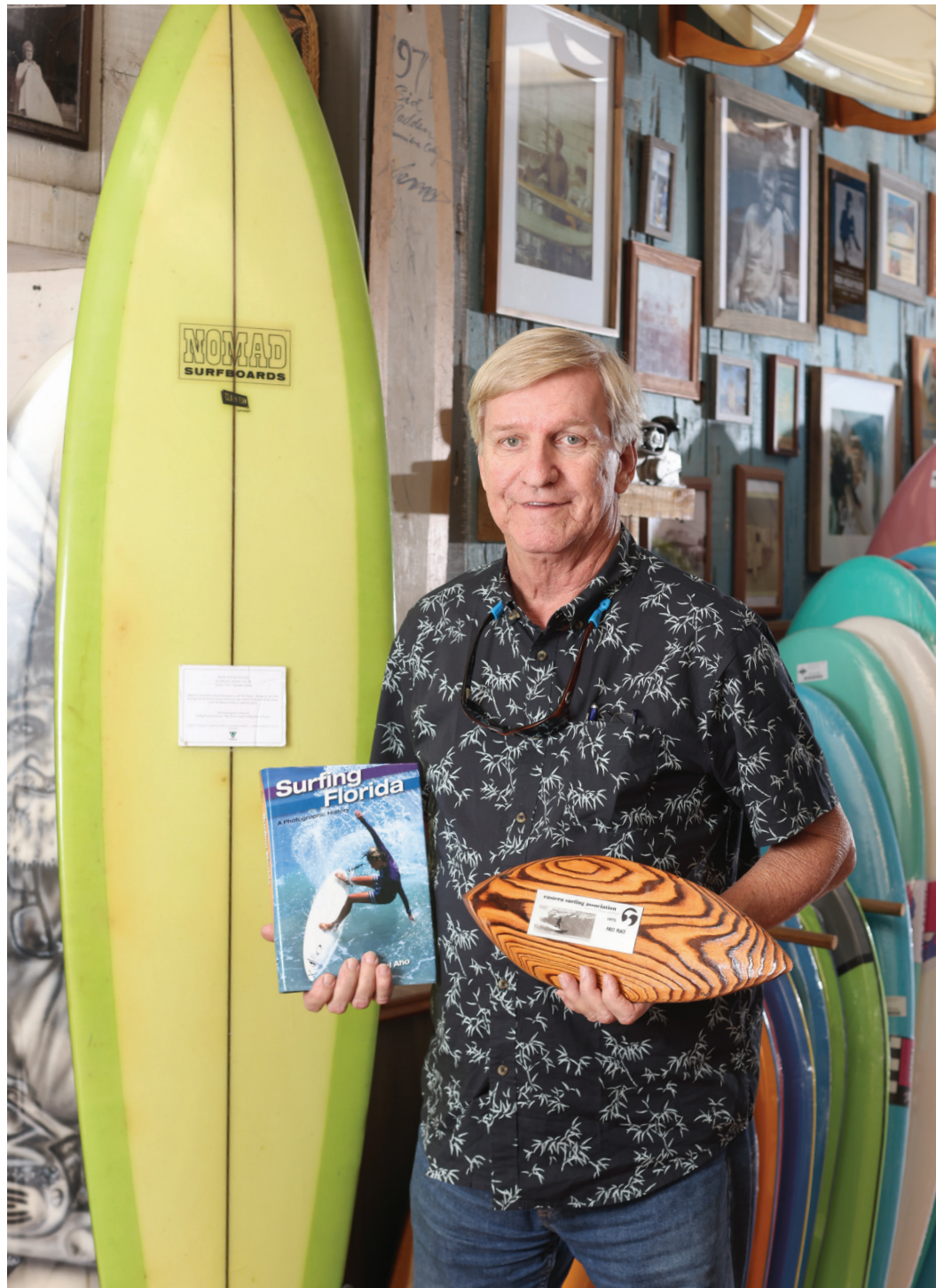
"But through our research we hope to uncover more names and photos of these early trailblazers," adds Warnke. "Even today surfing history is being made in Delray Beach, as happened in 2018 when winter storm 'Mars' created perfect 15-foot waves—some of the best ever recorded here."

Warnke says it was a "revelation" when he began surfing in 1956 after his family moved to Boynton Beach. "I was 8 when I rode my first waves on an inflatable mat. Delray had a good surfing spot at the end of Atlantic Avenue. I could rent a board from Delray Bicycle & Sporting Goods for an entire day with a coupon in the Sunday paper for \$1.25. They sold some of their rental boards, which is how I bought my first one."

Warnke and several classmates from Seacrest High School would routinely take their 45-minute lunch break at the Boynton Inlet bait and tackle shop lunch counter for a burger and Coke, because it was the ideal spot to check out the waves. "That's why we ate there," says Warnke. "It certainly wasn't for the burgers!" Once school was out, the same group would change clothes in their cars or at the beach and surf for two hours before going home to do homework.

"We were real purist surfers, not deadbeats who had surfboards on their cars for show," says Warnke. "You can tell a real surfer by the way they hold the board: under one arm, nose downward."





AARON BRISTOL

Tom Warnke with vintage surf relics.

### DELRAY BEACH'S SURFING ICON

The arrival of Ron Heavyside in 1962 would change the local surfing scene forever with his innovative vision for surfboard design and unconventional, trailblazer personality.

"Ron and I met in high school in 1964 after his family moved to Briny Breezes," reflects Warnke of his friendship with Heavyside that spanned the next half century until Heavyside's passing in April 2018.

"He was one of the first students at Seacrest who shocked everyone by wearing

his hair ungreased, dry and over his forehead. He was original in everything he did."

Aside from being an incredible natural surfer, Heavyside's talent as a surfboard shaper emerged under the mentorship of legendary surfer and glasser Jack Reeves, who he worked under at Delray Bicycle & Sporting Goods making boards under the Caribbean Surfboards label.

Reeves is among the bedrock of 1960s Delray Beach surfing and who taught Heavyside about shaping (design and

construction) and glassing (resin color and finishing). Reeves remains a premier glasser at Fiberglass Hawaii for the legendary Dick Brewer, who is considered the most influential shaper of the early 1970s.

The store was also one of the hangouts in town. Its rental business included about 100 surfboards that would all be rented by 10 a.m. on some weekends.

Heavyside's design talent was also recognized by Seacrest High School wood shop teacher Johnny Mac Bird, who was also a surfer and who enlisted the budding craftsman and two other students to make hollow wooden surfboards with plywood decks and pine rails. That board, along with other examples of Heavyside's innovative shapes and craftsmanship, are part of the collection of the Surfing Florida Museum.

In 1965 Warnke and Heavyside worked together as busboys at the Seascape Restaurant in Briny Breezes: "A high-end, white-tablecloth place where we could see the ocean," recalls Warnke. Ironically, it was 100 yards from where Heavyside would launch his self-styled Nomad Surfboards just a few years later.

In 1968, Heavyside's father offered him a 12-by-16-foot corner in his Briny Breezes TV shop on A1A to sell his boards. That cramped corner has now grown into Nomad Surf Shop, a sprawling, 6,000-square-foot maze of surfboards and surfing attire that, over the past five decades, has played a pivotal role in cultivating Delray Beach's vibrant surf culture and securing its place in surfing history. In the 1970s, Nomad Surfboards was one of the best-selling surfboards on the East Coast, turning out more than 40 boards per week and wholesaling boards to dozens of surf shops from Miami to New Hampshire.

"My dad was one of the original board builders on the east coast," says son Ryan Heavyside who, along with brother Ronnie, continues their father's legacy. Some of Heavyside's early board designs from the late '60s and early '70s still hang from the store's rafters as an homage to its innovative founder.

"He took pride in his work and had an open heart. He knew everyone and had relationships with so many people. Everyone knew him. He cared deeply about people and the environment," Ryan says.

Delray Beach is still an epicenter of surfing because it has a great sand bar that picks up lots of swell, making for great surfing, adds Ryan. "When we get north swells in the winter, that is prime time."

Ryan went on to become a professional surfer after qualifying in the 1996 U.S. Team Trials for Surfing America's U.S. team. Strikingly handsome as well as athletic, he also worked as a menswear model and traveled frequently for photo shoots. But over time, the rigors of competing and modeling conflicted with his commitment to the family business, and instead he chose to devote his time and energies to Nomad.

In addition to the business side, the Nomad Surf Team was also a dominant force on the East Coast as other regional surf shops up and down the coast brought their presence to the competition scene. Nomad Team riders included 1972 East Coast Men's Champion Carmen Irving, Paul Aho, Kevin Grondin, the Neumann brothers, Rusty Fleetwood, Lenny Nichols, Ozzie Winchester and members of the Cripple Creek Surf Club based at Boynton Inlet.

"By 1967, we had about 12 surfing clubs in the county," Warnke says, among them Riviera Beach's Possum's Reef Club, Singer Island's Sandy Shores Surfing Club, Surf Syndicate Surf Club, the Cripple Creek Surf Club for Boynton and Delray, and the Surf Fossils Club for guys over 25."

Back then, the Palm Beach County Surfing Association met every month at the MacArthur Dairy at Southern Boulevard and Military Trail and was attended by a dozen or more surf clubs, each with their own card table and name tags, says Warnke. "It was like the United Nations of surfing clubs. Each club had one vote, though there would always be at least 100 people there. It was a lot of fun."

Once business concluded, the group gathered to watch surfing movies and enjoy milk and ice cream courtesy of the dairy. "We weren't some rowdy group," Warnke says. "This was a very civilized group of people who loved surfing, and many were business professionals."

Palm Beach County was home to a robust competition circuit, and Delray Beach had many of the sport's top-rated surfers, who traveled to contests from



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Boca Raton to Jupiter, including an annual contest held in Delray Beach when Warnke served as director for the Eastern Surfing Association (ESA).

That tradition of supporting and hosting competitions has continued under the leadership of the Heavyside brothers. Nomad has provided generous sponsorship for annual ESA contests over the past 50 years and routinely supports the local Surfrider Foundation and Surfing Florida Museum events.

"Ron Heavyside sponsored the first big contest that I ran in 1969 at Boynton Beach

and provided the first place trophy as a donation from Nomad for the men's division," says Warnke. "We had about 80 people in that division, and Ron, who was a great surfer, won! He won his own trophy!"

"He was very smooth and, especially then, style got you points."

Other innovators who were vital to the local surfing culture were brothers Paul and Lee Richwagen, whose parents owned Richwagens' Bicycle shop on Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach directly across from Delray Bicycle & Sporting Goods, which had a huge inventory of rental surfboards.

Ryan and Ronnie Heavyside at today's Nomad Surf Shop





motel in Ocean Ridge until they could find something more permanent after moving from California,” recalls Aho, who remembers seeing a “tall lanky kid get out of this car with California plates.” That kid was Ron Heavyside. Aho worked at Nomad during high school where he airbrushed and laminated boards with Heavyside instead of attending art class. “My art teacher, Dick Ennis, would allow me to go there instead of class, which was great, especially since I was earning \$50 a day.”

**SURFING’S OLD GUARD**

Another South Florida surfing powerhouse and advocate was Dr. John ‘Chum’ McCranels. Born in 1938, not only was he a beloved local orthodontist, but he was an irrepresible advocate and lover of the sport.

“When we were kids, and especially when dad competed, the whole family traveled up and down the coast to surf all the best spots. It was a way of life,” says his son, Dr. Scott McCranels, who shares his father’s passion and advocacy for surfing. “There’s really nothing like it. No phone calls, no emails, no one will mess with you.”

Chum built the first surfboard he then rode as a boy at the Lake Worth pier after seeing a schematic in *Popular Mechanics* magazine. “He dragged the plywood-and-cypress

creation into the water, caught a wave, and was hooked!”

Dad didn’t subscribe to turf wars like some, says McCranels. In fact, he was notorious for waving others in to share the wave he was riding, not keep it to himself, which went against what most surfers were doing. “He loved to surf and often went on his lunch break. His yellow VW van with the red stripe would be parked by the Lake Worth pier where he grew up surfing.”

Doc McCranels went on to win a United States Amateur Surfing championship and was inducted into the East Coast Surfing Hall of Fame. He died in 2019 at age 81.

**ANTI-SURFER MOVEMENT**

But not everyone was enamored with this exciting water sport. General skepticism against teenagers in the 1960s extended onto the beaches, and in 1964 several South Florida coastal towns began efforts to outlaw surfing.

It began in Palm Beach and then spread up and down the coast. The town of Palm Beach Shores banned possession of a surfboard anywhere in the town limits.

“Before then, we were confined to surfing in one small 100-yard section of beach in Delray. They even hired lifeguards to monitor our activity and would arrest anyone who ventured beyond that area.”

Arrests were selective, and for four years the ban went unchallenged. But in 1968, local surfer and Fossils Surf Club member Bruce Carter got himself arrested intentionally to trigger bringing the case to court.

“Somewhere around 1965 there was even a meeting organized for about 100 surfers by the Palm Beach Police Department at their council chambers to ‘legitimize’ and register surfers who

Some Aho surfing memories



“In 1964, Richwagen’s had their own brand of boards called the ‘Richie,’ which they made on premises,” remembers Warnke. “They had a big 10-foot-long mold on the premises that they would pour liquid polyurethane into, clamp shut and cook to make the polyurethane foam boards. They were, possibly, the only place in Florida that had their own mold to make surfboards, which is a significant part of Delray’s surfing history.”

**SURFBOARD ART**

Fellow local surfer Paul Aho, who began surfing at age 11, was also instrumental in the South Florida surfing movement. An artist and author, Aho designed most of the Nomad logos for Ron Heavyside 50 years ago and went on to chronicle the history of Florida surfing.

In 2014 he authored *Surfing Florida: A Photographic History* through Florida Atlantic University (FAU) and launched a multimedia exhibit documenting the history of surfing in the state and the impact its surfers and surf industry have had on the sport’s international development. It traveled the state and is now the property of the Palm Beach County Surf History Project and the Surfing Florida Museum.

“The Heavysides stayed at my parents’

The Surfing Florida Exhibition



wanted to avoid arrest,” Warnke says. “To register, attendees paid \$20 (which was a lot in those days) before going downstairs to the police station to be photographed and fingerprinted for their ID card. And that’s how you surfed legitimately in the town of Palm Beach.

“At the same time, we had decided to go to court over it and fought for years before it was overturned. But in the interim, more than 100 were arrested and fined \$50—some more than once.”

After multiple appeals, in July 1970 the Florida Supreme Court struck down the ban, citing it as arbitrary and unreasonable. Surfing could be regulated, not banned.

Among the many artifacts Warnke has preserved in the museum collection representing that time in history is a scathing Letter to the Editor in a local Delray Beach newspaper from resident Betty Knott. Her letter ended with: “I have two teenagers and when their activities are continuously curtailed I have no other choice than to consider changing our residence of 10 years. The un-judiciously repressed adolescent is the maladjusted adult and I make this statement after study into this area.”

**THE PICTURE KEEPER**

Ironically, one of the most important figures in local surfing history was not a surfer. M.E. Gruber was a postman and amateur photographer from northern PBC who took photos as a hobby.

Gruber, who didn’t surf, was a postman who photographed surfers from 1965-1972. He also contributed to the local surf scene by hosting public events that featured surfing-themed slide shows and films through the early 1980s. Thankfully many of those images have since been preserved by the Surfing Florida Museum.

**WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER**

Advocacy has been a natural path for Warnke who, in 1966, founded Boynton’s first surfing organization, the Cripple Creek Surf Club, and went on to produce hundreds of surfing contests as volunteer director of the ESA.

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international environmental organization Surfrider Foundation, dedicated to addressing ocean water pollution, sea level rise and public beach access.

“Delray has one of the deepest and richest surfing histories, as do the neighboring coastal towns from Jupiter to Boca,” says Warnke, who has been a driving force behind the Surfing Florida Museum’s remarkable curated collection devoted to that history. “The storyboards alone that Paul (Aho) created for us are incredible.”

But sadly, the collection has lived a largely nomadic and, at times, closeted existence. Finding a permanent home for

their half-century of priceless memorabilia and professional-grade exhibits is proving more elusive than finding that perfect wave.

“We’ve moved from place to place for years now, and we continue searching for a committed partner and more permanent location,” says Warnke, who remains hopeful especially with the enthusiasm for local surfing clubs that continues to grow. “Our ultimate partner? Many nonprofits partner with universities and colleges—and FAU has helped tremendously with our exhibits—but we’d rather be more centrally located.”

Dr. Scott McCranels