

Santa Ana River Mouth Pier 1969.....September 2012

By Des Whelan

There is no pier at the Santa Ana River mouth. You want a pier; you go to Newport or Huntington! That's the way it was and the way it is today, dude. So I was told by some local surf guys while sipping on a beer back in October 2000 inside some bar on main street, Huntington. I tried to tell my story but I must have been too old for these guys to have any creditability with and I soon let it go as some loud surf punk music started up. Meanwhile, the guys I was talking with went into some kind of epileptic head bopping thing.

Yep, I felt out of place being 45 years old sitting in this dive surrounded by twenty something's. After watching a few fights and a guy older than I fall on his face while suffering several hours of being belly up to the bar, I headed back to my crappy rented room a few blocks north before I ended up the same.

I had not been in Huntington for 18 years and really was out of touch with the surf culture. I was there to see my family in San Diego but first see few guys at the surf museum for the 30 year reunion for the old Huntington Beach Surf Club. Bruce Gabrielson was the ring leader of the club and owned Wave Trek Surfboards on which I rode for most my surfing days. I was a lot younger than most the guys in the club. My older brother Tim knew most of them better, but I still showed up for a few contests now and then and always felt indebted to Bruce for keeping a board under my feet. It was good to see him and a few others like Steve Holt.

In those days Huntington locals were like gunslingers in a western movie. They all had nick names like Baby Face, Smiley, Sniffer, Snake, Bummer, Doo Doo, Greek, and even a guy named Pineapple. Nobody was violent. In fact it always amazed me how well people got along even in crowded conditions with the air reeking of a gunslingers and testosterone. Maybe that was just how guys build up courage to drop in on large waves. I never really psychoanalyzed it all but the HB pier had too many people in the water for me to surf there exclusively.



My home beach became Brookhurst, about a half mile north of the Santa Ana River Jetty. Brookhurst had a good wave at times but inconsistent over winter. Regardless it was close to home and if I wanted to get a few waves after school without the gunslingers of the HB pier, the Brook was perfect. In the summer during big south swells this spot could put up a great left that looked more like something from Hawaii than some OC state park beach break. Very few people would be out in the water as Brookhurst only had about ten locals back in 1969. We used to paint our bikes up as ugly as possible. Then as you got to the beach you tossed it on top of your buddy's bike in a big pile. After a few hours this pile of ugly cruiser bikes were all locked up in a mess out on the sand. This served as protection from the thieves

that would come in from inland. We figured no one would bother and no one ever did. It was always the girl with the new ten speed properly locked up that the punks from Santa Ana would rip off.

The winter of 1969, it starts raining in late January. There were steady rains in So Cal for two weeks straight. Eventually, the Orange County sanitation treatment facility on the Santa Ana River started to bleed raw poop out into the river. We all knew there was a poop factory back there but never gave it a second thought. Not knowing what was going on and figuring it must be a red tide or rain mud from the river my friend Steve Smith and I started to paddle out into some storm surf at the Brook. After just a few minutes a lifeguard jeep pulled up and was yelling at us to get back to shore on his loud speaker. Now this was the late 60s and any cool 13 year old kid would have to show an attitude towards an authority figure, right! But when I heard the words RAW SHIT on the loud speaker, something started to make my defiance of authority turn and pick up the first wave back to shore. Yep, that lifeguard introduced me to the raw facts in a way that embarrassed the hell out of me. Apparently there was a Quarantine sign we walked past without noticing. Steve and I ran to the showers a few hundred yards away praying that the water was on. We stood under that water for a half hour flushing everything possible. It was one of those days you try to forget but never can. No one got sick!

No one surfed Brookhurst that winter either and it was March before I even went down for a look. I noticed a lot of construction equipment had been moved onto the beach to the south at River Jetty. I walked down to take a look. As any kid would I snooped around a while before a guy in a hard hat surprised me with a loud "What the Hell You Doing Here".



He had a half beard and a pissed off look with a big monkey wrench in his back pocket. I knew enough to be respectful. After a few words and questions of my own he turned out to be a pretty good old guy.

He explained what all the equipment was for and what a sewage outfall was all about. This outfall was going to have 10 foot concrete pipe taking the sewage about four miles out to sea. I made the mistake of telling him about surfing in shit back in February, I thought it was relevant. The guy just kind of stared at me like I was the dumbest kid he ever meet then went on explaining how they were going to build a trestle/pier that would extend out several hundred yards in order to put this 120" pipe down. In twenty minutes I learned a lot from this man but soon I started to wonder if this pier would have any effect on the surf. He wasn't the right guy to ask so I took off.

In just a few months that pier was up and out there a few hundred yards as advertised. It all was made of steel. Pilings pounded in at slight angles with heavy metal rails for equipment to roll back and forth on the top. All in a nice rusty color that Iron takes on. It didn't really affect the surf much at first.

It was April and any south swell still was at least a few weeks away, if we were lucky enough to get a swell. The sand flow was still moving towards the south. I decided to go surfing instead of school as I recall. The construction of the pier took a surprising twist as they were pounding in long sheets of metal on both sides of the pier to form walls on both sides of the pier. This would allow them to work between

the walls without waves blowing through where the work was to be done. It was a steady pounding of metal as I was picking up three foot junk surf while watching progress.

I remember it was a Friday after school in late May and I was walking the sand down to Brookhurst . Disappointment hit as three foot junky waves were closed out and drained of any shape. I looked down towards the new steel pier and thought I was seeing a mirage. One big ten foot peak breaking three quarters of the way out, using the pier as a measure! No it couldn't be I thought as right in front of me were only three foot junkies that looked like they just came out the back side of a dam. Then back to the pier another peak and this time some guy was dropping in to a bottom turn and the size of the wave was confirmed. I was running south with my board before that guy kicked out. Huffing and puffing I paddled out to the sand bar that had built up better than half way to the end of the pier. I realized that the walls of the pier were serving as a wave machine. Kind of like the Wedge in Newport Beach. The energy would pile up outside on the steel wall and eventually bounce off and over on top of a sandbar that was trapped from moving south. So imagine the Wedge only 700 feet out and a left that went the whole 700 feet.

The one guy out in the water was working with the construction crew and said he had been out since noon after going home to get his board. The pier and wall blocked all the wind that usually came from the south and all this had made for some kind of a wave. You couldn't see it from Coast Highway. There was too much equipment with cranes and ten foot concrete cylinders stacked up everywhere. You couldn't see it from the Newport side and no one but a few guys surfed to the north so it looked like a dream set up for a secret spot.



The next day it was bigger than the day before. Twelve foot faces with short rights towards the pier if you wanted and a left that rolled along like a dream, two football fields long. No it wasn't some huge hollow wave, not until the shore break anyway. But it did have a few hollow spots as the wave traveled over smaller sand bars that were locked up from the pier. It was a forgiving wave that allowed a guy to try new stuff at double head high most of the way. After a dozen backside cutbacks leading into re-entry type turns to drop in all over again. My legs would get burning so the shore break was welcome. And a bomb of a tube was waiting that made a great ending. Then if you wanted you could walk over to the pier and walk the pier out to the sand bar and jump in. It was about the same as the high dive at any high school. This kind

of exposure allowed a guy to really get on his surfing game and those opportunities were rare. It was like a dream, right place and the right time!

Of course the six or seven guys that knew about this place all swore not to tell anyone. For four or five weeks it was this way before the swell dropped to nothing for a week and a south swell came. For a few weeks there was a constant south swell and the place held up well but did start to draw a crowd. The sand bar that was generating the big peak had been created by the west swells but now was melting

away with the south swells. The place still had some good waves but the perfect waves were gone and the place looked like a Malibu weekend. So much for not telling anyone.

I started to surf elsewhere. They took the walls off the pier I believe in the early spring of the next year. I was bummed out because I thought after winter put some sand back up against the north side walls of the pier I would get that big peak back. All the sand started to flow again and the Santa Ana River Jetty had a steel pier without side walls for two years, with reasonably good waves on both sides. One day in 71 or was it 72, I walked down to surf and the entire pier was gone. I don't think it took them a week to take it all away.

Just as amazed by the waves generated I was impressed watching the construction and the order of events. Later in my life I was a scheduling engineer at a Washington state nuclear site being constructed. I always remembered that old Ironworker guy with the monkey wrench who took the time to explain what it was they were doing and the order of events. I have tried to find pictures of the pier and wall. I did find a picture of a pier they had back in the 50s for the original shorter sewage outfall but none of the 1970 project. I would like to see it again.

I am not sure why anyone would care about this story except that it is so vivid a memory that I am compelled to write about it. If anyone has any pictures of the old pier or questions feel free to contact me at [wdesido@aol.com](mailto:wdesido@aol.com). Thanks, Des Whelan