



YESTERDAY

Duke Kahanamoku

The “human fish” introduced surfing to America.

BY ALEXIS BURLING

Thousands of years ago, long before their isolated islands became an American state, native Hawaiians practiced something they called *He’e nalu*, or wave riding. While standing atop 114-pound, 16-foot long boards made from the wood of koa trees, strong men from wealthy families gracefully skimmed the surface of the waves.

But to mainland Americans in the 1850s, the idea of stepping into the ocean was unheard of. There were sharks. The salty water was unsanitary. And the fierce waves were dangerous. Even when coastal resort towns, like Corona del Mar in California, began cropping up and city dwellers flocked to the shore for vacation, beaches were seen as social spots for friends to gather, not places to swim.

Then, an unknown 21-year-old Hawaiian named Duke Kahanamoku changed people’s minds. With his size 13 feet and hulking upper body, “the Human Fish,” as he was later known, proved to the world that the ocean was something that could be embraced, not feared.

During a swimming championship in August 1911, Duke shocked the nation by shattering the world record for the 100-yard freestyle while swimming in salt water. Plus, he did

Compare/Contrast

Directions:

1. Read both articles.
2. Write down five facts about surfing in Duke’s day and five facts about surfing today.

something Americans had never seen before. He hurtled through a series of gigantic waves on a surfboard, like his ancestors used to do. A day later, *The Honolulu Advertiser* echoed everyone’s astonishment with its front-page headline: “Hawaiian Youth Astounds People by the Way He Tore Through the Water!”

Within a year, Duke was recruited to compete in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. He won gold medals in nearly every category he competed in. And for the next 20 years, he toured the world, giving swimming and surfing demonstrations to huge crowds of adoring fans.

By the 1960s, thrill-seekers nationwide wanted to try their hand at surfing. Stores selling only surfing gear lined the boardwalks. Skateboarding became popular too. And the Beach Boys became one of the top-selling bands of all time. Clearly, the lyrics of one of their hit songs represented the mood of the country: “Everybody’s gone surfin’ . . . Surfin’ U.S.A.” ■

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