Rendered Crossings: Mexico seen through the prism of Californian mid-century surf travel and photography

Preface

In preparing a selection of photographs for the exhibit *La déferlante surf* at the Musée d'Aguitaine, at one point I was confronted with an array of images of early California surf culture. At one point, I paused before a photo of two sandaled feet - no, two *huarached* feet – insolently resting on the windowsill of a car in the foreground while a wave breaks in the background, rendered in the muted tones of mid-sixties surf photography. In that moment, lyrics from the beachboys, scenes from John Milius' *Big Wednesday*, and a *recent* New York Times commentary on the relevance of the huarache sandal all cascaded into a correlated visual theme: that of the profound impact of Mexican images on surf culture and iconography. While Covid-related travel restrictions and archival closures have limited *access to* primary source references, the following pages are a preliminary investigation into this association.

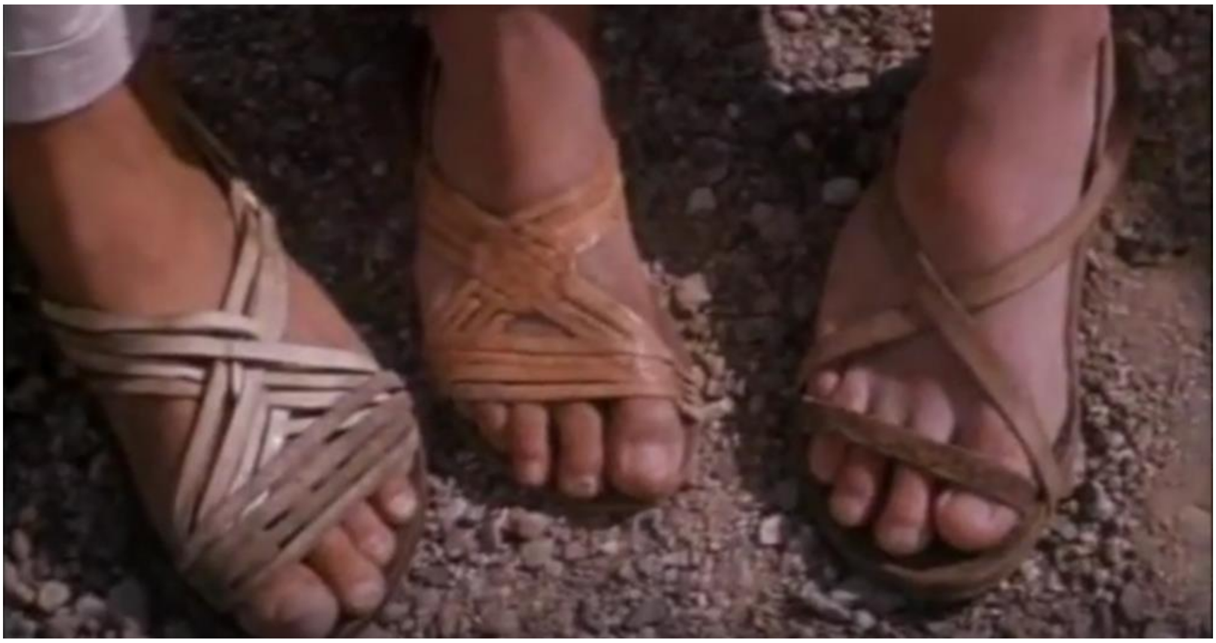

Figure 1 1950's surfers' huaraches, photo Bruce Brown

With surfing introduced to the continental United States in 1885 and popularized by Duke Kahanamoku's publicity tour in 1912, the first exploratory forays into mainland Mexico and Baja California were soon to follow. By the nineteen twenties and thirties, surfers seeking new experiences and settings were already setting off on both brief and extended voyages which led further afield, finally leading into Central and South America in the nineteen sixties and then beyond.

The photographic documentation of these voyages was shared firstly via the amateur efforts of travelers such as Dorian Paskowitz throughout the nineteen thirties and forties, through impromptu social gatherings as well as informal reproduction circuits. Soon to follow were the more sophisticated renderings of professional or semi-professional photographers such as John Elwell and later, Ron Stoner, which appeared in the local and newly-developing specialized press mediums, as well as in advertising efforts from California-based brands. These images, diffused at both the local and national levels, greatly contributed to the construction and perception of a subculture and lifestyle based around surfing.

In this paper, I would like to begin to explore not only the principal early actors of this documentation and their work, but also the mechanisms at work in their photography: the initial selection of sites and objects of focus, the repetition of photographic subjects, and perhaps most importantly the subsequent iconization of certain themes and artifacts. In short: Mexico through the prism of the nascent California surf culture.

Far from culturally anecdotal, the role of border crossing into Mexico in the development of a specific surf-related subculture is primordial. The early photographic representations of both Baja California and Mainland Mexico strongly contributed to the artifacts, rites, and visual imagery associated with a fringe lifestyle which has become in many aspects quintessentially popular culture – first in California and then increasingly globalized in nature.

Surfing South of the Border - A brief history

Like any voyage, this paper starts with the beginning: how surf travel from the United States into Mexico came into being. Such travel may seem to be a given, perhaps even mundane element, in contemporary surf culture, with historian Drew Kampion stating that, "Surfers are nomads. To surf is to seek, and to seek is to roam. To find a good wave might require traveling a good distance. To find a great, uncrowded wave might take you to the ends of the earth." (Kampion 117). Yet surf-specific travel south of the border must have concrete origins and causalities. And these origins are, like a turbulent sea, both exciting and somewhat murky. Current popular culture often situates Mexican surf travel by United States residents at somewhere in the mid nineteen sixties, based on the dates of the first publications in the specialized press. Even in academic studies, such as Walter Blair Tom's 2013 Master's Thesis *Surfer Exploration and Migration: North American Surfers in Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua, this seems to be the popular starting point such endeavors:* "Travelling to exotic and foreign locales was a practice conceived and pursued in the 1960s." (Tom 36). As such it is part not only of the growing wave of surfing's popularity, but it fits nicely with an expansionist, post-Gidget[1] image of a linear cultural construction in which surfing travels from Hawaii to California and is then progressively spread through intrepid explorers and cultural ambassadors to other locations.

But the origins of crossing the border, board in tow, are situated much earlier than surfing's mainstream presence or participatory boom. After its introduction to the mainland in 1907 by Hawaiian George Freeth "to demonstrate surfboard riding as a publicity stunt to promote the opening of the Redondo-Los Angeles railroad" (Young 43) surfing slowly spread along the California coastline.[2] Between the First and Second World Wars, a scattering of surfers and proto-communities developed with hotspots in San Diego, San Onofre, Malibu… Of course, the term hotspots is relative, with Greg Noll recalling that prior to the Second World War The entire surfing population consisted of “only two hundred surfers in the entire State” (Noll 93). This slowing emerging culture quickly developed travelling tendencies, driven both by the somewhat capricious nature of the sport – changing conditions due to swell size and direction, wind, tides and shifting sandbars – and the desire to exchange with other practitioners. There was, of course, continued exchange with Hawaii and anecdotes abound with stowaway passages involving Pete Peterson or Lorrin Harrison (Young, 54). In the increasingly automobile-centered West, surfers quickly modified cars to easily carry boards or to provide accommodation, and took to the roads. In addition to variations on local beaches, trips were made between San Diego and Santa Cruz, including points in between. Early California surfer Lorrin Harrison’s daughter Rosie recalls, “Daddy bought a 1936 Chevy sedan for $60. It was perfect. He could hardly wait to drill holes through the roof to install home-made surfboard racks on top.”[3] In a modified version of America’s twentieth century dream of automobile-based freedom, surfers roamed the coast seeking, somewhat paradoxically at times, both new waves and people to ride them with.

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[1] "Gidget" is a composite phenomenon comprised on Frederick Kohner's 1957 novel, and the 1959 film release by the same name. This combination is generally recognized as bringing surfing 'to the masses' and ushering in a wave of popular participation and interest in the sport and lifestyle.

[2] Technically, surfing was introduced to the State earlier, and perhaps on multiple occasions. The first of these to be officially recorded being in Santa Cruz in 1895, while "David Kawananakoa, Edward Keli'iahonui and Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole, nephews of King Kalakaua, were on a break from a military school in San Mateo and spending an idyllic summer with a prominent Santa Cruz family." In light of the frequent exchanges between Hawaii and the mainland, there may have been other instances as well. However, they remained isolated and did not generate a known, local surfing culture prior to Freeth. See Mercury News: https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/09/01/the-backstory-on-santa-cruzs-rich-surfing-history-and-culture/

In this context of mobility, it appears logical that surfers cast their gaze towards the southern border with Mexico. While the urban development of Tijuana was relatively recent and contingent upon the flourishing commercial and tourist trade generated by the border, cross-border traffic had never stopped following California’s annexation. Gard Chaplain and others regularly spent time in Mexico diving and sailing, and the coastline’s appeal was known, if in a fragmented fashion.

And yet, the first cross-border surfing experiences may have been anecdotal. In the current period in which a fortified border with Mexico has been almost normalized, it is important to remember that the international border was a relatively relaxed affair in the early-to-mid twentieth century. In a discussion on beach-use practices, Kim Feldmann reminds us that “It was only in 1994, when the US government reinforced immigration control by increasing and extending the border fence some 90 metres into the Pacific Ocean and implementing systematic checks via Operation Gatekeeper that asymmetries were consolidated.”[4] Prior to this, and certainly well into the nineteen eighties, it was possible to begin a wave in the United States and to finish it in Mexico, or to be carried by current north or south of the border. With an active local surfing population reaching back to the late nineteen thirties, figures like Dempsey Holder crossed and recrossed the border in search of, or in the process of riding, waves. In a 2016 article, David Sith refers to Holder: “He was one of my grandfather's friends in the 40s, and among the first to surf the scary Tijuana Sloughs in 1937.” And these waves did not remain obscure, with surfers from San Diego to Los Angeles coming to the border to challenge the big-wave break. Recollections compiled by Serge Dedina of surfers traveling to the sloughs read like a who’s-who listing of period surfing figures including John Elwell, Lorrin Harrison, Jim Drever, and others.[5]

While the surfing scene in Imperial Beach provided fertile grounds for casual crossing of the border and rich cultural exchange, California surfers were simultaneously travelling further south into Mexico – in search of different waves and cultural elements. While it is unknown who made the first surf-specific overland trip to Mexico, what is sure is that during the nineteen thirties and forties, Dorian Paskowitz, Vikki Flaxman, Matt Kivlin, Bev Morgan and Gard Chaplain were only some of the named surfers to have made the voyage.

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[3] See history of Lorrin “Whitey” Harrison: http://www.legendarysurfers.com/2011/03/whitey-harrison-3.html

[4] See article online: https://surfsimply.com/surf-culture/divided-surf-dynamics-mexico-us-border-zone/

[5] See article online: https://patch.com/california/imperialbeach/waterman-dempser-holder-and-the-tijuana-sloughs

Among early surf travelers to Mexico in the 1940's was San Diego native John Elwell, who was also amongst the first to both document and diffuse his photographs. While initial forays were limited to the upper regions of Baja California, Elwell's influence on later travelers is marked. In the photograph below is apparent the multiple transitions taking place at this time, concerning surf craft and transportation, as well as destinations.

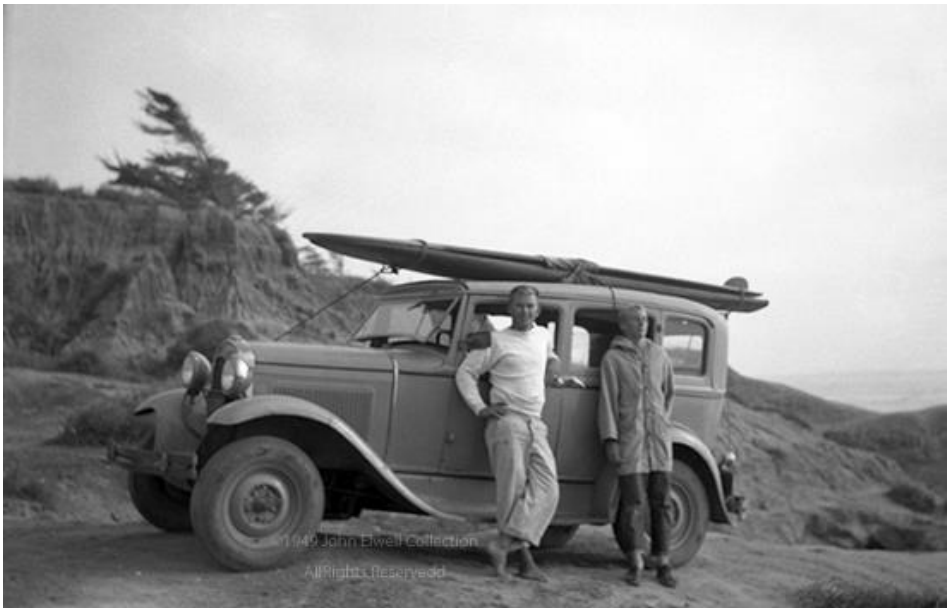
©1949 John Elwell Collection
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Figure 2 John Elwell Collection

Elwell himself describes the photo as follows.

> *The car is 1931 Ford Model A four door sedan. The boards are a hollowed out red wood plank and a reshaped plank by Simmons on top. A good comparison between the old planks and Simmons' light displacement boards.*
>
> *The Ford was marvelous in Mexico. It rode over rough roads, traveled on beaches with the tires deflated, and could be repaired easily. It had a gravity fuel tank. Tom and I were likely the first to discover the Tijuana Playa which was a dry wheat farm, we went into the area through a swinging unlocked gate on a dirt road, and found huge untouched lobster nests. The Playa is now a huge beachside development South of the Tijuana Sloughs and Imperial Beach. No one was there and it was a pristine, a virgin area full of lobsters and fish. We traveled with pliers, a screw driver, and bailing wire to fix things on the car if we had too. We often had too. We never saw any surfers or divers in Mexico during this time. We were the first and went often. It soon changed fast.*[6]

And part of this change involved the next generation of surfers, those who came into surfing in the nineteen fifties and who were somewhat distanced from their predecessors. Among the surfers who would distinctly mark surfing's relationship with Mexico through their visual imagery are Greg Noll and Bruce Brown.

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[6] See: https://johnelwellcollection.com/tales/surf-vehicles/john-elwell-and-tom-carlin-sunset-cliffs-san-diego-ca/114/

While surf trips into Mexico had begun by the nineteen thirties and continues through the forties, it's in the nineteen fifties that their exposure began to have a greater impact on the public imaginary in surfing's growing popular culture. This is due to a combination of elements: greater knowledge of the potential for good waves and culture, higher numbers of travelers, and visits by surfers who were to become key players in the soon-to-be surf boom. In an interview with Scott Hulet, Greg Noll describes his early travels, including this passage:

> *In 1954 I was living and surfing in Mazatlán by myself," he says. "I stayed three months. It had everything I was looking for. I came in from surfing Lupe's [a left now referred to by local surfers as "Camarones"] and an old guy came down to the shoreline to greet me. He was dressed like one of those Veracruz guys, you know, all in white, hat and all. Like* The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. He had a goddamned burro on a lead. A kid translated for him, and told me the old man thought I was Jesus when he saw me standing on the water. He made the sign of the cross, and then very carefully he reached out with his goddamned hand shaking and he touched my board.*[7]

Noll went on to spread news of his findings to other prominent surfers, writing "to Bing and Yater and Rick Stoner, see, and they all came down the next year". And he followed this by filming much of his 1957 film *Search for Surf* in this locale – carrying over his aesthetic narration of the culture into film. Another well-known cinematographer, Bruce Brown, enshrined his Mexico travels in film in his 1959 *Surf Crazy*. While most recognized for his 1964 film *Endless Summer*, Brown's earlier works were keystones in the formative years of surfing's first boom – providing a visual support just as the sport was exploding. From literally a few hundred surfers in the years just after the Second World War, surfing's popularity soared to a point at which by the mid nineteen sixties, "the number wasn't anything close to quantifiable: the best Sports Illustrated could do, in its first big surfing feature, was bracket the figure between two hundred thousand and "several million"" (Warshaw 41). It is difficult to stress just how important such visual sources were at the time. Photographer Leroy Grannis describes the appetite for surf photos as "ravenous" and relates how kids living close to his darkroom would even "go through my trash to see if I threw anything away that they wanted." (Grannis 25). As confirmed surfers increasingly sought documentation of their culture, and new surfers sought virtually anything surf-related – though the more authentic, the better, and with slowly refined selectivity – the impact of photographic and film subjects takes on a new intensity.

And the impact only grew throughout the nineteen sixties. Bill Cleary's short-lived *Surf Guide* magazine and other publications not only ensured a greater diffusion of surf culture images, but they also began to host articles on Mexican surf travel and spots. The quality of the waves and the quality of life in Mexico, at least for travelling surfers, became an increasing part of the surf experience. It is probably Stoner's photo documentation of a trip to San Blas in 1966 that truly opened the floodgates in terms of popular surf travel. Still, it is worth mentioning that Stoner's work was built upon that of another travelling surfer and photographer, Leo Hertzel. His photos and descriptions of the spot lead to the Surfer Magazine sponsored trip, and hence to Stoner's documentation of the spot that Scot Hulet describes as "a sort of avatar for tropical perfection in the 60s." While Ron Stoner may have been the best-known photographers to capture Mexico in this period, others both amateur and professional continued to contribute to the growing legacy. W. Blanchard's book *Surf Safari: Malibu to Panama, 1969*-71 recites just such an adventure, combining a great deal of Mexican travel points further south. The family's adventures were first documented by camera, and then in the form of a documentary work published in 2011.

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[7] See: https://www.surfersjournal.com/editorial/aka-stoners/

By the nineteen seventies, crossing the border into Mexico to surf was an integrated part of not only the California surf culture construct, but by extension, the world surf culture construct. Following the model established by their perceived predecessors, surfers from Europe to Australia regarded Mexico with the same longing as their California counterparts. Well in the public's eye through photo-rich magazine features, "Mexico in the '60s and '70s was surfers' 'moon walk' -- a not-too-distant place with a lot of unknowns that we could explore in our own space capsules."[8] And the same forces which drove surfers to Mexico began to push them towards Central America. In a direct continuity of the initial drive into Mexico, Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson describe their extension in their groundbreaking 1973 article "Discovery on the Way Home from Central America" cited by Keith Plocek.

> *There's an unwritten rule that states you don't leave good surf, especially if it's uncrowded. Mexico had both. Why keep going into an unknown void? Because exploration is what makes the surf world turn. Waves have a way of making us all restless. Some of us get more restless than others, and so the search begins.*

Of course, surfers crossing the border into Mexico cannot be removed from a broader context of border crossing that is prevalent in Southwest culture. These crossings have historically ranged from the necessary to the practical, involving every aspect of life from conducting business to visiting family to recreating. Imposed upon the region in 1848 via the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the border was imposed upon existing communities and family constructs, and the trans-national aspect of regional culture has never ceased. As American culture developed, the role of the border changed accordingly, and while the full scope of broader border crossings is well outside the scope of this paper, it is of note that many features are paralleled in the surfing and non-surfing populations. Exotism, selected permissiveness, economic advantages… Californians have traditionally sought these qualities in Mexico; from Tijuana's Agua Caliente resort providing alcohol to a parched prohibition-era population to retirees seeking greater purchasing power in the 2000's, Mexico is the number one destination in American border crossings (Wikipedia describes the San Ysidro/Tijuana border point as the fourth busiest land border in the world[9]). This importance is reflected in cultural productions from cinema to music. And yet, while its role in popular American culture is important, its role in surfing culture is, as we will see, paramount.

The artifacts of surf travel – recorded in images and otherwise

Surfing is, by definition, closely associated with physical objects. The very act of surfing as usually perceived, which is to stay standing or riding prone on a board on a wave, requires at minimum a board. And in this sub-culture, boards are elevated to an almost mythological status as items both functional and symbolic. Greg Noll speaks in his boardroom interviews about the "holy relationship"[10] with surfboards, and renowned shaper Donald Takayama frequently referred to boards having "soul". And this level of attention is granted to nearly every physical object in a surf culture – from apparel and footwear to jewelry and accessories. Of particular interest is that a striking number of the objects which visually define in part this culture, are of Mexican origin. As such, both the objects themselves, and the traditional means of their acquisition – surf travel – are core to the creation mythology and cultural actuality of surfing.

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[8] See: Kevin Naughton, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/the-searchers-two-orange-county-dudes-who-pioneered-the-surf-road-trip

[9] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Ysidro_Port_of_Entry

[10] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZGuoWc7VL4&t=175s, 0 to 1m50s.

Physical artifacts have always accompanied returning voyagers, and surfer-travelers are no exception. It seems likely that whoever made the first surf-forays into Mexico brought back some form of physical souvenirs with them. What is sure is that by mid-century, certain artifacts occur with increasing regularity. This process is recognized, and is directly referred to in the following citation:

> *Soon they started bringing back some of the native style from down the coast. Comfortable, utilitarian clothes in bold colors and sun-bleached stripes quickly took hold across California. Along with the blankets, sweatshirts, shorts and hats they brought back these new, stronger, longer lasting sandals that the Mexicans swore by. And so, over night Huaraches made landfall in California.*[11]

While the above text presents a simplification, the basic inference to the prominence of Mexican attire in surf culture is clear. In this section we will address the artifacts directly linked to Mexican culture as well as their representations through images. For if elements of attire began to filter back to the United States in extremely small quantities, it is their proliferation in the form of images that allowed them to a greater impact on developing surf codes and culture.

Strongly associated with surf photography are articles such as sarapes or ponchos, sombreros, and the iconic huarache sandal, and far from anodyne these items are heavy with implications.

By the time of Bruce Brown's *Surf Crazy*, a visual code is being established, one in which Mexican surf travel is associated with selected objects, rites and settings. Among these are depictions of the border crossing itself, frequently accompanied with desertic images, followed by colorful backgrounds filled with equally colorful characters, and importantly, selective elements of Mexican attire. A full examination of these elements is beyond the scope of this work, but one of the most recurrent, and most compelling is the Mexican huarache. Not only a convenient form of footwear and an object that declares its owner to be among those initiated into Mexican surf travel in an era where such ethnic items were rarely distributed north of the border, Brown's narration takes huaraches to a new level of commentary. In *Surf Crazy*, huaraches are not only a visual object, but a narrative element. In describing the varieties and associating them with various regions Brown is not only tying into a surf culture reference, he is succinctly and efficiently evoking both the journey and the destination in all their richness and diversity. Manzanillo, Mazatlan, Wymas… each sandal depicted on screen is associated with its point of origin, as well as with one of the well-known surfers starring in the film. Mexico is here rendered both familiar and more complex, as well as individualized. This latter point is important in a sub-culture in which despite trends and popular associations, the perception of individualism is highly sought after and coveted. By the time that the Beach Boys are singing about huaraches in 1963's Surfin' USA the association between California surfers and huaraches is explicit.

If everybody had an ocean
Across the U.S.A.
Then everybody'd be surfin'
Like California
You'd seem 'em wearing their baggies

Huarachi sandals too
A bushy bushy blonde hairdo
Surfin' U.S.A.

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[11] See: https://tingsic.tumblr.com/post/6477074327/huaraches

If there were any lingering doubt, the association continues on another track from the same album, *Noble Surfer*. Among the lines extolling the virtues of this fictional hero are the following.

Hurachis on his feet
Bushy hair on his head
And where he's going he'd never tell

Traveling, romanticization, exotism… all of the visual hallmarks present in early border-related surf photography and codified for the public at large in surf cinema are here laid out for an overwhelmingly non-surfing public. Not only is Mexican travel a key element in the surfer-identity construct, but here it is made an inherent and valorized part of the Californian an even American constructs as well. Immediately identifiable, these items which constitute only a few, minor details among the multiple of sights, sounds, and locations of Mexican culture available to a visitor from the United States are perhaps so impactful because of their portability. Considering the relationship between object and representation, and the distinct cultural contrast evoked, these artifacts among others are amplified through their appearance on film.

While the origins of certain recurrent elements are likely to be found in their relationship, conscious or not, with transportable objects that make their appearance north of the border following surf travel, it is interesting that they also potentially imply something else. Two possible avenues of interpretation appear possible. The first of these relates, once again, to the importance of the sandal. While mid-century photos of Americans seem to indicate that closed shoes are the overwhelming norm when not directly on the beach (these can be sneakers, or boots, or loafers, depending on the context), photos of surfers in Mexico seem to most frequently show either locally-sandaled or bare feet. This would seem to correlate with the Western notions of “going native” or “going barefoot” as suggesting a departure not only from the routine, but from the safety of the developed, maybe overly civilized, world. The entire country being visited is symbolically associated with the one place with whom surfers most strongly identify -the beach – and the rules or lack thereof that apply to this space are projected onto the host country.

The other largely repetitive items of personal attire, the sarape/poncho and the local straw hat, or sombrero, are interesting in that they provide a symbolic association with the base needs of shelter and comfort, those items that are inherently sought in any environment. This relationship is reinforced through not only the objects themselves, but the way in which they are framed: surfers sleeping under a poncho, or on the side of the road sheltered from the sun by a large sombrero. While these images may play upon the national stereotype of a napping Mexican peasant, they also imply that the voyagers are never quite without shelter, always playing on the precarious edge. This is revelatory of a somewhat paradoxical aspect of increasingly popular surf travel: the desire for a challenge, but not too dangerous, and for a version of otherness that is not completely other. In terms of cultural depictions of Mexico, it is also of interest that this image of a sombrero-wearing, sarape-covered napping peasant is seen differently through national cultural lenses. While it plays the role of a trope north of the border, in Mexican culture it has a long history as a cultural artifact reflecting well-deserved rest after a long labor. This theme, addressed in work by artists such as Diego Rivera and documented by historians such as Charles Phillip Jimenez, was adopted, though misconstrued, by visiting Americans.[12]

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[12] For a brief history of this figure from a Mexican perspective, see: https://www.wfae.org/arts-culture/2015-10-01/what-makes-the-sleeping-mexican-so-divisive or https://borderlore.org/artifact-the-sleeping-mexican/

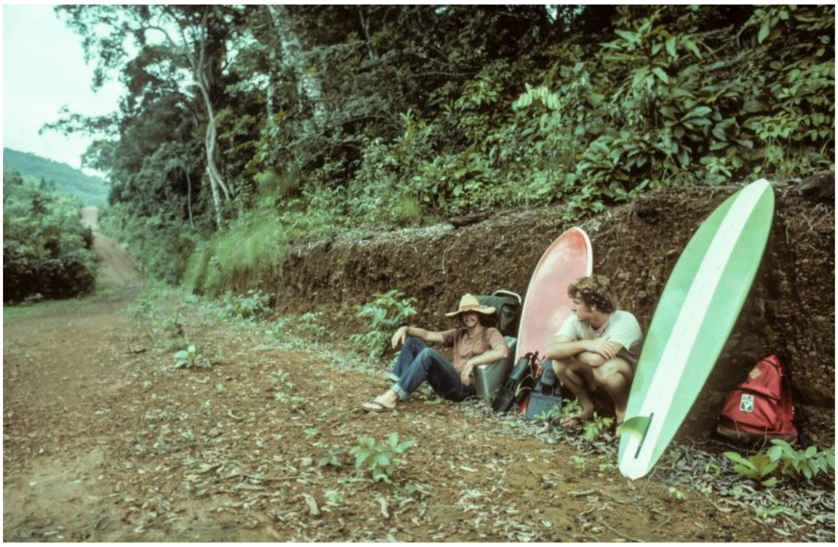

Figure 3 Photo Craig Peterson

The iconic image of “the sleeping Mexican” could just as easily be that of “the sleeping roadside surfer”, and the country and culture of Mexico are thus a formative part of the developing surf culture construct. Just as they were apparent in images by John Elwell or Bruce Brown, these same elements have continued through into the present era. While Craig Peterson and Kevin Naughton may be incorrectly lauded as the first Latin American surf travelers (Keith Plocek referring to them as “pioneered the surf road trip” in this context) in the 1970’s, the foundations for the visual codes present in the above photo were laid long before: sandals, unkept hair or sombrero, minimalistic comfort in an exotic setting that has become familiar.

While the personal objects discussed above represent only a sample of those depicted in period photography, they do provide insight into the selection process and vision of the photographers and their audience. Of additional interest is how those objects are placed in context in the composition of shots. It is this combination that conveys the full picture of the surf travel narrative. Without being exhaustive, some of the key themes that are repeated in the iconography are: the passage between countries or the frontier itself, the crossing of a desert, small towns or rustic, idyllic locales, and of course waves. This combination creates a complete narrative that encompasses the journey as well as the destination and the objective and is composed of several, near-essential elements.

The first of these is crossing the border itself, which can take the form of either a formalized crossing in an urban setting or by a desert crossing. In both cases, the separation between both culture and landscapes is made clear. While early photographs by John Elwell and others emphasize the barren landscapes that mirrored the Baja California prior to its post-World War Two demographic growth, later renderings often include more urbanized scenes that reflect the increasingly developed border. This latter view is highly compressed in John Milius’ *Big Wednesday* foray into Tijuana, with street vendors, alcohol, easy sexuality and heavy congestion all competing for the viewer’s attention in a cacophony of images and sounds. These two images are not mutually exclusive, for example Bruce Brown emphasizes both the sweeping borderland desert landscapes east of San Diego and the bustling town of Nogales with its impressive currency exchange and seemingly unregulated traffic in *Surf Crazy*. In each case, however, the theme of a significant crossing is selected and recorded, emphasizing the otherness and implying a possibility of danger. This certainly appears to be the case when these themes are revisited and repeated in Mark Jeremias and Jason Baffa’s 2007 documentary film *One California Day*. As alternating images show parched landscapes, burning cars, and isolated roads the narration by Chris Malloy describes both the potential dangers and rewards of crossing the border in search of waves.

> *Down in Baja, you know, you never know what's going to happen…*
>
> *The roads are full of potholes, the police may or not be police, the food source might be there or it might not be. And you know, there are those little risks that you take.*
>
> *But you can do what you want down there.*[13]

Although this imagery can be qualified in the case of the earliest photographs, the Alta California landscape not having yet been as thoroughly transformed from its native desert as it would be in the second half of the twentieth century, it clearly marks a border crossing as part of a broader rite of passage. And it is one that frequently involved alcohol consumption, sexual activity, and general outlandishness by north-of-the-border standards.

Having crossed the border, the contextual backdrops change significantly and are frequently composed of small towns, empty beaches, and other idyllic settings. In such romanticized images, colorful buildings and seascapes emphasize a link to a simpler period. While California's coastline was quickly developing, Mexico was seen as a destination which retained both pristine waves and a more traditional culture. Images such as this photograph by Ron Stoner seem to emphasize the potential of the destination, indicate the direction, and inherently as the question via the sign-posts as to whether the viewer is ready or willing to go.

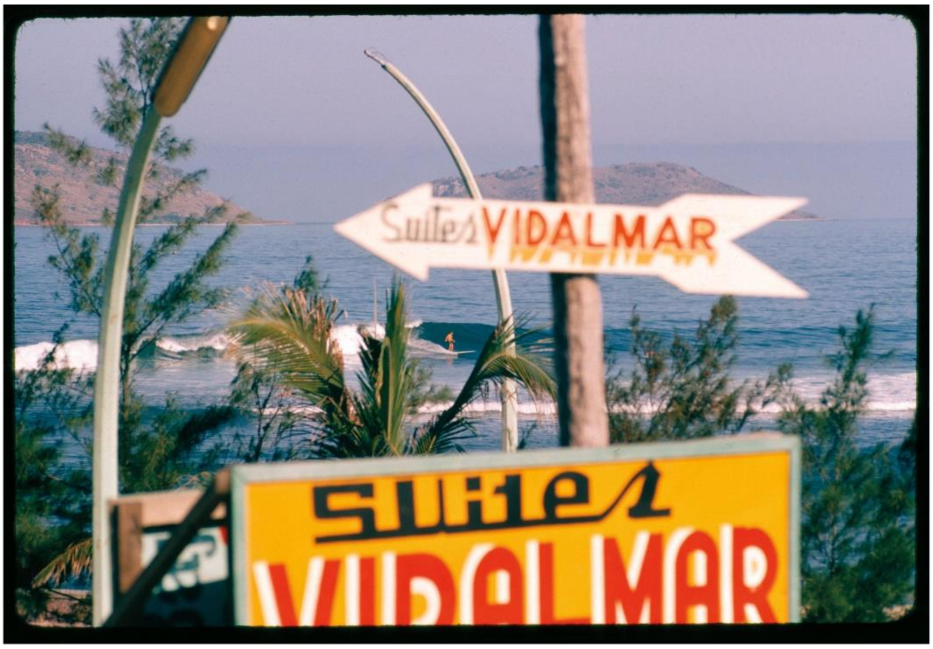

Figure 4 Photo Ron Stoner

The framing of the photos evokes not only a visual moment, but allows a clear association between the act of wave riding, artifacts, and their spatial situation, but also provides a reflection on the national and notional states associated with those subjects and spaces. California surfing, through such images, is intrinsically linked not only to surf travel, but to the destination of Mexico and rewards of such travel. Thus, they provide a complex, evocative visual heritage in which themes are recorded, developed, and enshrined in a construction that is far beyond simple escapism, or exotic tourism.

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[13] See: *One California Day*, 18m50s to 19m40s.

Formation of a culture - Diffusion and implications

The mechanisms through which early surf travel photography was diffused are of interest in this study. As discussed, the actual number of California surfers prior to the nineteen fifties was relatively small, and yet these individuals and groups maintained contact and exchange through the decades. While there were rare, formalized instances of diffusion such as photographer John "Doc" Ball's 1946 *California Surfriders*, prior to the appearance of a specialized press in 1960 with John Severson's S*urfer Magazine*, most photographs were shared in impromptu gatherings or, later, small showings in intimate settings. Rare printed photos were acquired and studied as indicated by the quote from Mike Doyle's autobiography *Morning Glass*:

> *One of the older surfers down at Manhattan Pier told me about a book called California Surfriders by Doc Ball. It focused on surfing in the 1930s and '40s… I took Doc Ball's book home and studied each picture for an hour at a time, scrutinizing each grain in the black-and-white photos… (Doyle 26, 27)*

These intimate forms of diffusion are recorded by the likes of Ball when discussing his own work and perhaps finding its apogee in the staged slideshows of Ron Stoner which Matt Warsaw describes as intricately prepared evenings with "loud and approving comments eventually giving way to a nearly hypnotized quiet" (Warsaw 48). Perhaps the single most influential surf photographer of the nineteen sixties, Stoner created images that chronicled, refined, and defined surf culture. And with prominent photo documentation in articles such as his 1966 "Stoner's Mexican Log", Mexico's place in that culture could not be missed.

What was happening with Ron Stoner personifies what was happening through surf-related images in this pivotal period of surfing's popular culture. From an informal, extremely marginal activity and lifestyle with minimal documentation, surfing was increasingly represented in visual form by a specialized corps including press, photographers, and film-makers. As a transitionary phase in diffusion, the earliest surf films combined the intimate oral-storytelling history of shared photographs with this new-to-the-discipline media. Both Greg Noll and Bruce Brown shared their early films in local venues around Southern California with live narration from the filmmakers themselves providing the oral narrative. In this way, a tradition of direct transmission was maintained that both legitimized the audience through a specific rite of initiation or inclusion and amplified, in a personal manner, the impact of the visuals provided. The personal nature of these early works in reference to Mexico is directly cited by Noll in a Surfers Journal Filmmakers documentary, where he states that in addition to being competitors in the market, he and Bruce Brown were first and foremost fellow surfers and travelers. "The year before he started in film, we were in Mexico together and I was filming *him*, calling him a camera hog!"[14] With an increasing number of publications and films, the codes present in the early films become clear visual markers of a subculture even as that subculture and its elements are being coopted by a broader popular culture industry.

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[14] From Greg Noll interview with the Surfer's Journal: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL9FeVpqwa0

Early surf films touched a Californian public largely comprised of dedicated surfers, but increasingly sophisticated productions beginning with Endless Summer reached a national audience of greater mixity. The same can be said about the specialized press, especially the successful Surfer Magazine. In this way, the images that came out of Mexico truly affected the formation of surf culture in the broadest possible sense. Continued photographic and film presence, advertising campaigns, surf contests, the development of a strong, local surfing scene, and of course surf travel itself – all of these developments can find their roots in the early depictions.

This impact is not exaggerated. Seemingly mundane items such as the "Baja pullover" have their roots in the nineteen seventies in the popular imaginary.

> *"Mexican Baja hoodies were once used by surfers all over the world. They became an icon surfing item through the 70's along the coast of California. Surfers would have regularly gone surfing the golden beaches of the Mexican coast line and bought clothing on the way back."*[15]

And yet, as has been established, the popularity of this item can be traced through surf photography and film at least back to the nineteen fifties. While the evolution of such artifacts is of interest in and of itself, the implications behind their adoption is of greater complexity and several dominant themes can be discerned.

The first of these is that through such artifacts – their documentation and adoption - surf travel and more specifically surf travel to Mexico, becomes an indissociable marker of the Californian surfer. Inherent to this theme is the role of a border crossing, which often takes the form of a rite of passage. As such, it lends itself particularly well to a sub-culture construct, and one with subversive tendencies at that. In her article Surfing Subculture, Jessica Zehr aptly describes the general social condition of surfers: "Many Americans have values that laud people who are productive, hard working, and successful members the working force. Surfers are almost the opposite of this, so it makes sense that the general population would see them as a deviant or "tainted" group" (Zehr 14). Rather than normatively staying home and working, and rather by crossing the border in search of waves, freedom, and excitement Californian surfers were – consciously or not – replicating the American ideal but outside of the United States. This paradox is furthered when taken in its modern incarnations, with Chris Malloy explicitly stating in *One California Day* that "It's perfect, it's the way California was…" before expanding on the qualities of the Mexican people and linking them with the "California spirit".[16] In this construction, exotism, freedom, hedonism, fun, and even danger are interwoven in a complex cultural tapestry that far exceeds cultural stereotypes.

Through its prominent place in images, and hence in the imaginary, Mexico also complexifies the dominant perception of a Hawaii-California cultural construction in regards to surfing. While 'pilgrimages' to the birthplace of the modern sport are central to surf travel themes, those more local forays into Mexico also have a nearly sacred place. And if the Hawaiian shirts and palm frond hats of the nineteen forties and the pukka shell necklaces of the nineteen seventies have durably marked the visual identity of the culture, they do so concurrently with the Baja pullover and sombrero.

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[15] See: http://thelonelysherpa.com/vintage-surfer-baja-hoodies/

[16] See: *One California Day*, 18m50 to 19m40.

Conclusions

As surf-related culture is increasingly recognized and studied, insights into the early role of travel photography are of particular value. These early images laid the groundwork not only for a culture-specific rendering of border crossings and of the Mexican nation and peoples, but also contributed to the popular conceptions of these elements in popular US culture. The intimate slide shows of travelers such as Doc Paskowitz became the models upon which latter American depictions of surfing south of the border were based, including the influential surf films of the late nineteen fifties and sixties, as well as John Milius' semi-autobiographical *Big Wednesday* or Mark Jeremias and Jason Baffa's contemporary documentary *One California Day* are based. A tremendous amount of work remains to be done: examining the collections not only of photographers like John Severson and film makers such as Bud Browne, but also of other early surf travelers to Mexico including Guard Chaplin, Whitey Harrison, or Bev Morgan. While it remains to be developed and refined, the cultural incorporation is such that it can be asserted that Californian surfing culture is fundamentally indissociable from its Mexican elements, as shown by the Beach Boys singing about Mexican *huarache* sandals as a key personal and cultural identifier.

While surfing is often perceived as a Hawaiian-Anglo-American construct, the reality is much more complex, with a high level of cultural hybridity representing plural influences. Hawiian cultural influences are Hawaiian prominent features of continental mass surf culture, in twentieth century surf photography they clearly share their space with Mexican iconic references in the popular imaginary. Beginning with the border images of John Elwell, this combination is both historic and well-documented through the photographic lens. If modern surfing originated in Hawaii and migrated to California, by the mid-twentieth century it was ready to head south.

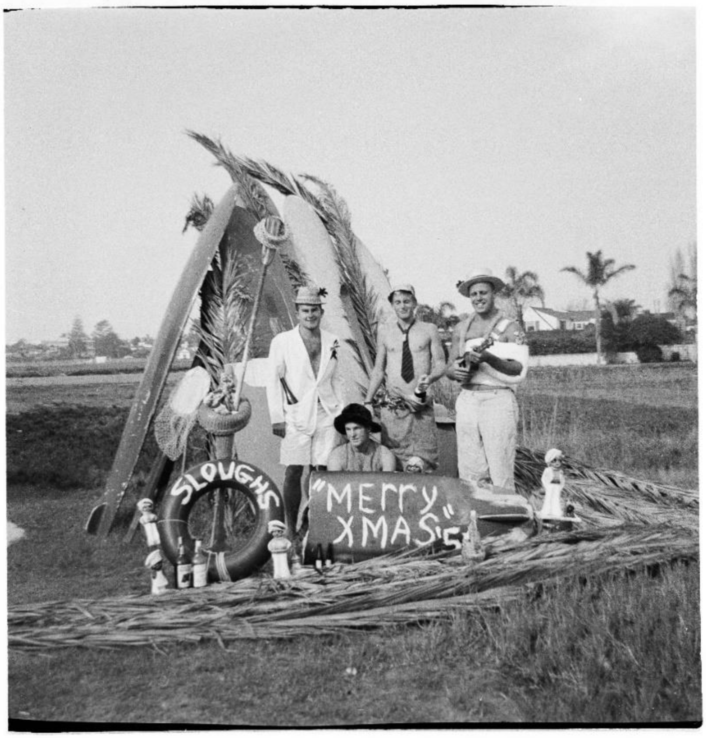

Figure 5 John Elwell Collection

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