

The History of Outrigger Canoe Paddling in California

by Michael (Jake) Jacobs

Courtesy of SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA OUTRIGGER RACING ASSOCIATION (SCORA)

California Outrigger Canoe dates back to 1959. The first race held in California was on **September 20, 1959**. This first race was a long distance race *from Avalon on Catalina Island to the Newport Dunes inside the California Coast*.

This race involved two boats shipped to California from Hawaii through the efforts of **Albert Edward "Toots" Minvielle**. Both of them were koa wood boats with the names of "Malia" and "Niuhe". "*Niuhe*" means "*shark*".

The "Malia" team was composed of Hawaiian All Star outrigger paddlers organized by Toots. Some of the members of that first Hawaiian team to paddle the Catalina Channel in 1959 were Chris Bodie, Blu Makua, Archie Kuana, Joe Gilman, Sonny Henriques, and Dougie Carr.

The California team paddled the Niuhe. This first mainland team included George Kopa, Tom Johnson, Dan Uadis, Frank Saddler, Mike Johnson, Dave Arne, Doug Wood, Ron Druman, Lorrin Harrison and others.

The Hawaiian team in the Malia won the race in a time of **5 hours**. The newly formed California team in the Niuhe finished close behind in a time of 5 hours and 11 minutes.

Lorrin "Whitey" Harrison, the steersman, and an original member of the first California team had the following remembrances of the early beginnings and that first race, "When I first heard about canoe racing here, I had a dug-out canoe that I built in 1950. We were surfing it down in Doheny. **Noah Kalama** came by, he knew my sister from Hawaii, and I knew him from body surfing. He said, 'Lorrin can you get a team together of guys down here you think would like to paddle? We'll have a race with an Hawaiian team.' I said 'Yeah, we can do that!' So we started coming here to the Dunes, paddling here till 9 o'clock every night. There was about 15 guys all paddling here. Other guys would build a fire and we'd stay here and paddle when the wind was howling. we worked for two months, we were so sick of paddling here. I thought we would never get out and see the ocean. Finally Noah let us go out and it was rough outside too. That's the way it started, right here in these Newport Dunes.

Then they brought the Hawaiian team over so we all hooked behind some big boat, towed all the people and the two boats over to Avalon. The race started the next morning after we were there. It was just two boats in the race from Avalon. Coming across we were making changes. We had about 25 people to draw from. About half-way across, the escort boat ran ahead to drop people in the water and made a big wake. The wake flipped the boat straight up on edge with the ama (outrigger) straight out of the water. I stayed - stuck in, but my number one man was about 20 feet off the stern and it threw all the other men out too. So Noah put a whole new 5 guys in and we kept going. At that time we were right even with Blu Makua and the Hawaiian team. When we came into the south end of the Newport Dunes, they finished 11 minutes ahead of us. I had been in the boat for 5 hours and 11 minutes with no drink of water and I thought I'd just die when we hit the beach 'cause of the paddle Noah gave me, he said 'You gotta have a big paddle for this race'. That sucker weighed 10 pounds at least. I still got the paddle, I got the proof, if any one wants to paddle 30 miles with it, they can have it."

The famous **Duke Kahanomoku** served as the Grand Marshall of the first California Outrigger event and founded the Catalina to Newport Dunes race- the original California Outrigger Classic. The subsequent races were underwritten by the Balboa Improvement Association and Ira Dowd, part owner of the Newport Dunes.

While the first Catalina to Newport Dunes Race was a culmination of efforts and farsightedness on the part of several outstanding persons in canoe paddling, the spirit behind the spread and development of outrigger canoe paddling as a sport, both in Hawaii and California, is the famous Albert "Toots" Minvielle.

Toots Minvielle was born June 1 1903 in Ohaa Hawaii, where his father managed a sugar plantation store. Toots moved to Oahu in 1916 and swam for the Outrigger Canoe Club and paddled for the Jr. Boys O.C.C. After graduating in 1929 from the University of Hawaii as an Engineer and Land Surveyor, he worked on Molokai as a Military surveyor. In **1951** Toots Minvielle started organizing the *first Molokai Channel race* - a six-member team Ironman race. (the three teams that competed finished within 18 minutes of each other).

Always the innovator, Toots began sending Hawaiian teams to California in 1958 - while also developing California outrigger racing teams. In 1970 he sent the first Hawaiian team to race in Tahiti, in 1976 to Japan, and in 1978 to England to race the English Channel. While introducing the German people- particularly their Olympic athletes - to outrigger canoe paddling, in 1981, Toots approached the International Olympic Committee and proposed the acceptance of outrigger canoe racing as an Olympic event.

Toots Minvielle and 1958 were pivotal points in the history of outrigger canoeing, especially for California. In 1958 Toots met **Tommy Zahn** from Santa Monica, another legend in the history of California Outrigger paddling, shortly after Tommy had paddled the Molokai Channel on a surfboard.

Soon after their meeting, Toots consulted Tommy about the possibility of introducing competitive outrigger canoe racing in California.

Tommy Zahn responded immediately - there was sufficient interest. He arranged a luncheon meeting in early 1959 with Ira Dowd, the owner of the Newport Dunes, Sam Miller (then Commodore of the Balboa Bay Club), and Al Oberg, Harbor Master of Newport Beach in 1959. All the "right" people were there and California's Outrigger Racing History had begun.

Beside promoting competitive canoeing as a sport, Toots backed the initial effort for the acceptance of *fiberglass canoes*. In 1958 Toots proposed that outrigger canoes be made of fiberglass to the *Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association HCRA*. Traditionally the canoes were made from koa logs.

These logs were hard to acquire and season, and the finished canoes were never consistent in weight, size or dimension. In comparison, fiberglass canoes would be of uniform shape, size and dimension, and could be made quickly and inexpensively.

Toots also recommended the HCRA expand their race association to California and initiate competitive outrigger racing on the mainland - hoping to end the petty bickering between the local paddling groups. Hawaiian teams, having done well in their local divisions, could look forward to mainland competition as their reward.

Toots' letter went unheeded and unanswered by the HCRA. But Tommy Zahn responded to Toots and planted the seeds for the *California Outrigger Canoe Association*.

Today in California, outrigger canoes are made almost exclusively of fiberglass. They are regulated in uniformity as to their weight, size and dimensions. This development of fiberglass outrigger canoe racing boats in California resulted from the vision of Toots Minvielle coupled with the efforts of Noah Kalama and Tom Johnson.

Noah Kalama, sent to California by Toots Minvielle to coach the first California Outrigger team, and *Tom Johnson*, and original member of first California Outrigger racing team, were the first to perceive the need for California-based canoes. The boats used for that first Catalina race were scheduled to be shipped back to Hawaii after the competition was completed.

Noah Kalama and Tom Johnson realizing the development of California outrigger racing would hinge upon a local boat supply were quick to act. They made a mold of the Malia's hull - and California outrigger boat building was born.

In **1960** Noah and Tom produced three boats. The "Mamo Kai" of **Marina Del Rey** and the "Virginia" of Balboa were among the first. By **1965** there 15 fiberglass boats and 7 clubs in California. When Tom Johnson retired from boat building in **1986**, **Bud Hohl** stepped in to fill the gap. Bud has produced over 30 fiberglass canoes. Other to produce fiberglass outrigger racing boats in California are **Lorrin Harrison** from Dana Point, **Dennis Campbell** from Imua Canoe Club, and **Al Ching** from **Lanakila Canoe Club, Redondo Beach**.

In addition to promoting outrigger canoe racing in Newport in 1959, *Tom Zahn* also established contacts on a second front - Santa Monica. The Santa Monica connection led to meetings between Toots Minvielle, Aubre Austin (owner of the Bank of Santa Monica) and Joe Massaglia (owner of the Hotel Santa Monica).

These meetings had a major impact on California outrigger canoeing: 1) a new race was added to the existing California season, which so far consisted of only the Catalina/Newport Dunes race. This new race, initiating a *two*

week Sports Festival at Santa Monica, was from the Malibu Pier to the Pier at Santa Monica. The primary credit for the establishment of this second California race goes to Joe Massaglia. 2) a new club, the Santa Monica Canoe Club, was created. All of these early men of vision in the Santa Monica area deserve a heart-felt thanks.

In the **second Catalina to Newport Race, held in 1960**, there were 5 boats: two of Toots Minville's boats with crews from Hawaii, two newly constructed California based fiberglass boats, and Lorrin Harrison's 1950-vintage dug-out outrigger (actually the first California-built boat). Lorrin's sycamore dug-out took third place in that race.

The sport of outrigger paddling caught on and grew. By the third year there were 8 teams in California.

As early as **1963** the need for an organization became apparent and "KOA", the **Kalifornia Outrigger Association, was formed**. Mercy Makeau became KOA's first secretary in 1963 and remained in that position until 1967. Mike Zintel became KOA's President in 1964 and served through the end of 1965. In 1966 Bud Seals became KOA's second President. Bud accomplished a comprehensive refining, organizing and codifying of California's competitive canoe racing rules. Working right alongside Bud was Carol Sloan, KOA's second secretary. Together they secured the first insurance policy covering Kalifornia Outrigger Association canoes and activities. Meanwhile the efforts of KOA's attorney, Joe Bezna, paid off and KOA became incorporated. From a humble beginning of a single race in 1959, the sport of California outrigger canoe paddling had grown into an incorporated, organized association in a mere eight years.

In 2004, KOA changed to be the SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA OUTRIGGER RACING ASSOCIATION (SCORA) and covers areas from as far south as Imperial Beach to as far north as Avila Beach, connecting 22 Outrigger clubs via race venues, meetings, and the Internet.

Although Toots Minville initiated efforts to bring Hawaiian Canoe Paddling to the mainland in 1958, **1959 was the year paddling arrived - the same year that Hawaii joined the United States of America**. What may have been initially seen as merely a gesture - sharing a facet of Hawaiian culture with the mainland through the Aloha Celebration and the aloha spirit of Toots Minville- has given mainlanders, especially Californians, a tease, a feel and a love for Hawaiian traditions.

Mahalo Hawaii, mahalo Toots Minville for outrigger canoe paddling - a wonderful slice of Hawaiian life.