

Bio:

Rich Wilken

[richwilken@mac.com](mailto:richwilken@mac.com)

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Wilken Surfboards:

I grew up in Pacific Palisades, California, where my father was a pastry chef and my mother ran a coffee shop. I was born in 1946 in Santa Monica – only because the Palisades didn't have a hospital.

My family usually went to the beach just south of the Bel Air Bay Club in Pacific Palisades where big wave rider Pat Curren was the summer lifeguard, about a quarter mile south of the end of Sunset Blvd. and PCH, and also at the Sand and Sea Club (the former Marion Davies beach mansion) in Santa Monica.

I first got interested in surfing while attending Paul Revere Jr. High, when my friend Mike Hastings, whose father owned Hasting Plastics in Santa Monica, would sell the first published issues of Surfer magazine out of his school locker to his fellow students. Hasting Plastics was the local supplier of resins and fiberglass in the North Bay area for anyone making surfboard, so Mike's family had a tie in with Surfer Magazine before there were many surf shops in the area.

My first surfing attempts in about 1957 were on a hollow finless plywood paddle board that my older brother John made in his Jr. High wood shop. Needless to say, trying to learn to surf on a directionless paddle board had its drawbacks, and I soon lost interest trying after a few splinter filled go outs. Brother John next brought home an old beat-up fiberglass and balsa board that at least had a fin (and a giant V-shaped nose ding) that provided some what better results. This gave me my first experience of learning how to patch dings with fiberglass and resin, in an attempt to keep the relic from sucking up too much saltwater during each go out.

In 1961 I bought my first surfboard about the time I started high school at Pali High, the first year it opened. It was a butt-ugly brown, yellow and red streaked well-used 9'-6" Dave Sweet from Dave's shop at 14<sup>th</sup> St. and Olympic Blvd. in Santa Monica. The fin was set so close to the tail that it was a bitch to turn, but at least it was not made in a junior high wood shop. I still remember the smell of melting paraffin wax in an old coffee can on my Mom's stove so I could hot-wax a base coat on the deck of the ugly-ass Sweet. Yes it was ugly, but it was my first board, -- keeping this stick floating for another year or so gave me more practice at patching dings.

Surfboard number two was another used board, this time a 9'-10" Con bought from the Con Colburn's shop on Pico Blvd. in Santa Monica, just East of Lincoln Blvd. Con's wife Susie ran the front retail end of the shop, while the boards were shaped and sanded in the open air next to the alley behind the shop. Some 35+ years later, Susie is now a neighbor and friend of mine, living about 5 doors up the street from me.

This time I didn't just hone my repair skills on this board -- I performed my first multi-color panels and pinstriped outline total re-gloss job on it. I guess this was about the time I found out (even while still learning about variable working times of catalyst-resin-pigment-heat ratios) that I actually exhibited some skill at working on surfboards.

My surfing spots of choice at this time were either Malibu Point, Sate Beach in the Palisades, and sometimes Bay Street just South of the pier in Santa Monica. Even though it is close to my home, I never really liked the break at Sunset point -- usually too hard to catch and to slow a wave, and too many beginners.

It was about this time in 1963, when I was 15 that my father died that I needed to start making money for myself, that I began repairing and re-glossing boards as a serious endeavor. While I had showed talent and selected architecture as a goal in adult life, it became a necessity to help augment the family income, or at least earn all my own spending money for non-essentials and gas for surfing trips by starting "Wilken Pigment" out of my Mom's garage at 15468 Albright St. in the Palisades. Besides local high school friends, I performed all the repair work for the Hobie Shop on Wilshire Blvd. in Santa Monica. "Mr. Head Dip"-Dave Rochlen Jr. was the shop manager at the time, and later Deak Keasbey became the owner of the shop. Besides my own walk-in repair customers, I would refurbish all the trade-ins to a sellable condition, and customize local Hobie team rider boards for the Santa Monica shop.

At age 17 in 1964, while studying architectural drafting at Santa Monica College and running my repair business, my third board was my first ever 'new' surfboard made to my custom specifications. Having seen dozens of his boards pass through the Santa Monica Hobie shop, I selected Terry Martin to shape a 9'-8' beach break style board for me. I ordered it

'sanded' but not with a finished 'gloss' coat as most boards have, so I could add my own personal custom pigment job that included a hand-cut colored French tissue paper Hobie logo blowup and as a floating advertisement of my work, my own "Wilken Pigment" graphic. On it's first walk down to the point at Malibu, before it even got wet, Dewey Weber caught sight of me and my board, and on the spot offered me a job doing his fancy color glossing work at his factory at his Marina del Rey (Venice) factory on Lincoln Blvd.

While I often had to wait for the Weber Surfboards glossing room to empty out from the more plain production boards glossed during the day, I would sometimes spend time waiting by observing the techniques of master craftsmen Harold Igy in the Weber shaping rooms. First learning how to skim the glue and hard shell of the raw blanks with a Skill 100 planer, the art of measurements and laying out and adjusting the outline with templates. Learning the method of walking the length of the blank with multiple passes to tune the flow of the rocker, to turn and blend the rails, to adjust the nose or tail rocker, dish out a concave, and to learn to "feel" the over all shape and character of the progress of the raw blank into a living wave riding work of art, fed my hunger and attraction to this 'sacred craft' of surfboard shaping.

I shaped my first board under the watchful eye of "Igy" at Dewey's factory in the summer of 1965. It was a Performer template with an extreme (for the time) kick and wide nose, born out of a reject Mike Hynson model 3 stringer blank that was remaining on the Walker Foam delivery truck after all Dewey's regular order of blanks were unloaded. That board, and one shaped that same day by Igy for Dewey (who actually took the first blank I had chosen for myself), turned out to be the first two prototypes for the Weber kick nose "potato chip" Performer line that sold thousands under the Weber label. I liked the extra kick because I thought it would help me nose ride better and push through the inside mushy sections at Malibu. It's interesting to look back after all these years and realize that one of the most popular massed produced Weber surfboard models ever made was based on two freak blanks rejected by another company. Well as they sometimes say in the art world, "There are no mistakes -- just opportunities."

Besides learning shaping skills from Igy, I picked up laminating techniques from watching Dewey's topnotch board glasser Mike Bright, who was also a member U.S. Olympic volleyball team.

At the age of 19, while still attending classes in architecture and art at Santa Monica City College (SMCC), and still employed part-time glossing fancy boards for Dewey Weber, I made my first board with my WILKEN label in Santa Monica in the spring of 1966. My first shop/factory was located in Santa Monica in a sub-let little building on a portion of the 'Bourget Brothers Building Material' property on 11<sup>th</sup> St. just North of Olympic Blvd, where their current parking lot is now located, and just 3 blocks from the Dave Sweet shop where my first used board was made and purchased. My first factory-shop was actually built by my brother George and myself, as a space for my expanding surfboard repair and restoration business I had cultivated serving the repair needs of local surf shops and my own walk-in customers. My repair trade customer base, with whom I had developed credibility and a reputations for quality and skill, helped prime my early new board sales.

"Wilken" #1 was shaped for my first team rider Bob Gordon, a local surf crazy fellow Palisadian – with emphasis on "Crazy", or at least a wild care-free hardcore surf character. Bob loved to surf more then do his schoolwork, and loved to party hardy. Not being much of a contest joiner, Bob had sway with several local friends, but not the type of wide exposure and fame needed to spread the Wilken name much beyond the Palisades-Santa Monica area. A few years after leaving the Wilken team, I heard Bob was nabbed by the local authorities for experimenting with 'hemp' cultivation on public lands in the local foothills.

I shaped Wilken #2, which still hangs from the ceiling of a restaurant on the Santa Monica Pier, for myself with a red, white and blue color theme. This board is the oldest surviving Wilken board -- #1 having been burned at Topanga beach decades ago as a sacrifice for better surf.

The first few boards were rather standard shapes for the time, all in the 9'-6"+ range, not that un-similar from what I learned from my time at the Weber factory. What with a lower overhead and no real advertising costs other then a few team riders who got discounts when buying their new surfboards, I could undercut Dave Sweet, Con and other local shops like Hobie and Weber by about 5-10%. That cost edge and the fact that I would custom shape all my boards to match the conditions of local surf breaks I had knowledge of, and meet the ever changing whims of my customers, made my boards in higher demand at an ever increasing pace.

In the first several months of working out of my own shop, all the while continuing doing repairs and still working at Weber, I would buy small amounts resin and fiberglass from the back end of Dewey's factory at a favorable rate compared to normal retail prices I would otherwise have to pay at other retail supply outlets. At first I would buy a gallon or two of laminating and glossing resin, acetone, and a few yards of fiberglass and 6 ounces of catalyst. Then I progressed to 5 gallon cans of resins and 20 or 30 yards of cloth – and a Walker foam blank or two. Then I started to order resin and

acetone in 50 gallon drums, fiberglass by the 100 yard roll at a time, and all picked up from the Weber factory so I could get a good break by piggy backing on Dewey's buying power.

It was about this time, while still working for Dewey part time, and also ordering blanks from Walker Foam by the dozen that Dewey happened to be at the rear of the factory one day when the Walker Foam flatbed delivery truck was being unloaded. Dewey saw the last of his 100 or so blanks dropped off when he happened to notice about 10 or 12 blanks left on the truck with the name "WILKEN" marked on them. When Dewey found out from the truck driver that they were destined for my shop a little further up the line, Dewey hit the ceiling. He marched into his office, got on the phone to Harold Walker and told him in no uncertain terms that if Harold ever sold me another single blank, Walker would lose the Weber account. Needless to say, I was never sold another Walker Foam blank again, and from that day forward I was never allowed to buy glassing supplies from Dewey's back room. And also needless to say, I was from that moment on an "ex-employee" of Weber Surfboards.

After the initial shock of losing my supply line for all my materials, it actually turned out for the best. Gordon 'Grubby' Clark of Clark Foam was happy to get my ever-expanding surfboard blank business, and I was also able to set up generous wholesale discount accounts for resins and fiberglass ordered directly from the manufactures or their local distributors. The best part was that after working with just a few of these new blanks, I realized that Clark Foam was a much more consistent quality blank, with fewer defects, and less prone to tearing while working with a 'Surform' shaping tool. From the day Dewey forced Walker from selling me blanks in 1966, and until Clark Foam abruptly closed in December of 2005, Grubby's Clark Foam were the exclusive surfboard blanks I liked to shape.

With a growing business in the "North Bay" area, and a growing promotional team base including Marty Sugarman - formerly a Hobie team rider, J Riddle from the Dave Sweet team, and Robbie Dick joining, I needed help in the shaping room to keep up with production. While Marty, J and Robbie all gave me loads of feedback from their never ending days of surfing in all kinds of wave sizes and conditions, Robbie was the most interested in learning how to put his wave knowledge to work in the shaping room.

As I had started out learning from Iggy myself, I started Robbie out learning how to use the Skill 100 planner by taking the hard skins, excess stinger wood and glue off raw blanks before I would layout the boards outline with my templates. I next taught him to use a carpenters hand saw to cut out the outline of the finish board, and other finer points of finish shaping. Robbie, with all his wave experience proved to be a quick learner who soon became a main stay of my shaping and design team.

Shapers that I taught completely, or in some way while working at Wilken Surfboards helped get their shaping careers off the ground include, Robbie Dick, John Wheelright, Glenn Kennedy, Scott Preiss, Dean Edwards, Bruce Grant, Tim Pharas, Pat Rawson and a few others that at this time slip my mind.

While in the late '60' and early '70s Wilken Surfboards wasn't the largest surfboard company by far, we were definitely on the cutting edge of the so called Southern California "Shortboard Revolution." Being a small low overhead, but high on team experience feedback operation, we were able to test and modify board design concepts on a monthly, weekly and sometimes daily basis. Our small size, and lack of being tied to an expensive advertising budget promoted "branded" product line like Weber, Con, Bing, Noll and Hobie had, gave Wilken the ability to stay on the frontier of surfboard evolution. At that point in Southern California, we were more like the "skunk works" of design innovation, to the others being more the General Motors of mass production of the surfboard industry.

Text from web blog "Swaylocks – Surfboard Design Forum":

**Re: [billywillgo] What Board Was Miki Dora Riding?**

Posted: September 14, 2010 - 10:09am by Rich Wilken

"Regarding shapes changing quickly in the late 60's -- That was what gave Wilken Surfboards, and other small labels, a big edge over the big guys. We (at least in our minds) were able to come up with new ideas on a weekly or daily basis. Without a big investment in an ad campaign for a particular model, we could advance a new design concept as rapidly as possible, where others could not afford to. Boards length in a few months would drop a foot or so at a time, and then another and another. My shaping started out in the 9'-8" range in 1966 and ended up to the other extreme shaping and riding a 3"-11" twin fin fish in a little over 3 years. In our shop, when we had a new idea that we couldn't wait to try out, Robbie Dick or I would shape a board in the morning, glass it in the afternoon, sand it early in the morning and be test riding it in less than 24 hours. Foam surfboard pioneer Dave

Sweet, who's shop was just about 2 blocks away, could not keep up with the rapid advancement that took place during the "short board revolution" as fast as we and other small guys could."

The longest board I ever rode was a 10'-2" square tail, my all-time favorite board was a 6'-10" down-rail 3 fin diamond tail, and the shortest board I ever shaped and rode was a 1970 3'-11" twin-fin wide tail "Wilken Fish" design that kind of felt more like riding a skateboard, but on water.

I had a great abundance of promotional help, and board design feedback, from my team riders, that were also my "test pilots" for the Wilken line boards. The list included: Bob Gordon, Marty Sugarman, J Riddle, Robbie Dick, Craig Wilson (Hawaii), Glenn Kennedy, Scott Preiss (now he spells it Price), Nancy Emerson, Mike Vos, Jorge "George" Torruella, Steve Hilton, Kenny Linn, Sam Alama (Hawaii), Gary Hansch, Jeff Woods, Scott Heywood, David Ellis, Fred Roberts, Mike Kuntz, Price Branch, Chuck Simmons, John Christ, Stefen Haight, Terry Lucoff, Pud Allen, Brad Bovee, Mark Sauser, Stanley Washington, Rick Blocker; East coast riders--Alden Richards, Howie Bosbyshell, Jeff Arensman, Denis Doyle; and (for a while until he sued me) a guy named Miki Dora.

Although most of my board designs were in a constant form of evolution to stay at the fore front wave-craft, the Wilken line included models such as: The "WonderBoard" (a few weeks later Dewey Weber borrowed that name for his "Wonder Bolt" fin system); The Marty Sugarman inspired "Natural", "Neo Natural", "Green Room" and "Meth" model (for those who like speed – see the Wilken pusher in your area); the "Robbie Dick" model (Let R. Dick shape your stick); the "Flash", the "Wilken Fish"; Scott Preiss designed "Phasar" and "East-West Phasar" models; several Craig Wilson designed narrow Hawaiian shapes and a few others.

While for the first five years of business I usually held down the shaping, design, glossing and promotional side of the business; my older brother George, when not away a college, ran the glassing, sanding and ordering portion of the factory. In the early '70s I had an opportunity to get back into architecture by designing buildings for a restaurant company. While still involved part time promoting the Wilken brand and being a contributing photographer for Surfer magazine; I slowly reduced my shaping work. Eventually leaving the surfboard business totally in the hands of brother George by the mid '70s, I pursued my building design profession in the Malibu and the Palisades. I am now am a licensed architect with a home studio in Pacific Palisades, where I mostly specialize in custom residential design. When not designing buildings I occasionally make a few custom Wilken boards a year for friends, do surf themed airbrush artwork on surfboards and am scanning my old surf photos from the '60s and '70s for a hobby.

Being a surfboard shaper in the late '60s and early '70s in Southern California was a great time and place to be. Great weather, good waves, stimulating environment, limited business restrictions, loads of unique characters, surf movies, surf safaris up and down the east and west coasts and Hawaii, girls in bikinis, contests, parties, great team members and friends, surf photography, ads and articles in Surfer magazine . . . life was good.