

## “POP” PROCTOR

*“The best way to stay alive is to stay afloat.”*

Ed Neely

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“Pop” Proctor is a name known to anyone drawn to the history of Doheny State Beach. He first came to Doheny in 1937 when he was 56. He had recently retired as a mechanic in central California, learned to surf at San Onofre, and soon made Doheny not just his favorite surf break, but eventually his home for most of the year. He lived at the park with the approval of the rangers in his “customized” Dodge (and later Ford) panel truck. He became a local legend and an iconic waterman. Pop was Doheny’s *Numero Uno* surfer, not for being the best wave rider, but for being the one having the most fun. He was Doho’s first lifeguard. He fished from his paddleboard and snorkeled for abalone and lobster. He was a

sought after swim teacher for youngsters, imparting not only swimming, surfing and diving skills, but also a philosophy of how to live life.

In 1973, Pop sat down with Doheny Ranger Dave Craigen and Lifeguard Jim Welch to record an oral interview focusing on his life; he was 93 years old. Despite being at an age most of us would consider the far end of “seniority,” Pop was sharp as a tack, both mentally and physically. He still paddled out on his surfboard, he still jogged the beach each day, he still lived in his truck, and he could still travel back into the years to “talk story,” guiding Ranger Craigen through his life and a piece of American culture we “youngsters” can only read about.

Unfortunately, the tape with Pop’s interview was stored away for many years, passed from one ranger or lifeguard to another. It was eventually transferred onto a CD and more recently transcribed, but pieces of the audio were lost and sadly, some of the discussions are incomplete. Nonetheless, to listen to it now is to hear the best storytelling of a man’s unique passage through life. Pop was an individual, an opinionated, self-sufficient man living a life rich in tales to be shared. The following article is drawn primarily from the interview as well as secondary sources from friends and historians who loved Pop: the man, the myth and the legend.



Edward De Quincy Proctor was born to American parents on the twelfth of December, 1881 in the northeast coast borough of Tynemouth, England, 60 miles southeast of the Scottish border. “I’m not sure whether I’m English or Scot or American,” Pop would say, “They’re all three tied up, but there’s one thing certain: when a cat has kittens in an oven, they’re certainly not biscuits.”

His family moved back to the United States, but in 1893 at the age of 12, his parents, unhappy with the educational system in the States, sent him back to England. He attended a private school to focus on a curriculum of engineering, chemistry and electricity. At 16, he became an apprentice in the engineering department of a shipyard, “building big, huge, mean engines for big boats, 500 foot long and so forth.”

After 3 years, he was transferred to the drafting office, labor he did not enjoy as the close work caused him headaches he attributed to his possible need for glasses. His apprenticeship ended at the age of 21 when he received a certificate qualifying him as an engineer on “those big boats.”

Pop left the shipping yards to become a member of the crew on the steamship *Newmont*, hauling cargo to Hamburg, Germany. His first trip was truly memorable for him because of how seasick he became, “... I didn’t eat for a couple of days but I did my duties...” From Hamburg, the *Newmont* steamed across the Atlantic Ocean and into the Great Lakes to Montreal, Canada where it was sold. Pop stayed with the ship under its new owners, but then began working other steamships as well, repeatedly crossing the Great Lakes hauling cargo between Canadian and United States’ ports. “...I got quite a reputation there because I really had good training on that stuff...”

After time spent on the Great Lakes, Pop needed a change of pace. He headed for the oil fields of Texas where he worked a number of jobs, eventually “graduating” to the position of fireman on the oilrigs. Here, Pop had ample opportunities to demonstrate his skills as an engineer. “...I had a pump throwed its pieces one day and the boss didn’t like that a bit and says ‘you’ll never get that thing back together.’”

“Oh,” I said, “you go away and come back in an hour or two.” Of course, when the boss came back, the pump was in perfect working condition. Showing his engineering talent like this made Pop an important and respected member of any crew.

It was while working in Texas that Pop learned about the lifestyle of a “hobo”. He was told there were three types of hobos, first type being an “out and out bum.” The second, “...was one who traveled about carrying a sleeping bag and a frying pan with him.” The third, the type Pop aspired to, carried “...nothing but a razor and a piece of soap. He’ll work a bit and lives as *Scotch* as he can, earning \$50 or \$100, then quits his job,” Pop explained. “You go down to the beach and you rent a shack down there, a cabin, for probably five, six dollars a month. ... You could live, really, you could if you had to, on a nickel a day because you can go into the saloon, you get a nickel glass of beer, you go over to the free lunch stand... You can have ‘roasta’ beef on one end and you get your bread and pickles and whatever you want. Go to that end for your meat, and the fellow will ask you, ‘do you want it rare or well done,’ and they cut off a sample, and not with a safety razor, they cut off a chunk... So, that’s why I went hoboing, and I’d work here and there and get some money and then lay off and take life easy.”

Pop took his new calling as a hobo seriously. Among his wandering-about adventures includes a trip to Constantinople where he worked on a ferry and a trip to Mexico where he mined for gold and lived amongst the feared Yaki Indians.

Pop and his fellow travelers left Mexico (with very little gold) and made it as far as Salinas, California when their money ran out in 1906, the year of the San Francisco earthquake. There, Pop took a job at the Spreckels Sugar Mill. When his boss found out he was a trained marine mechanic, he was immediately put in charge of all the machinery on three ranches in the area. “I got a hundred dollars a month and found; room, and well, we had a small house there. And we could either cook ourselves or we could go to any one of the three ranches and the Chinamen would cook. They were all good cooks... I made so much money there that I finally got a motorcycle, and then I went motorcycle hobo’n.”

Pop’s “motorcycle hobo’n” took him out of Salinas and across California. When he needed money, he would stop at hotels along the way to inquire if their “annunciators” needed repair (an

annunciator was a circuit board that reported which rooms had buzzed down to the front desk requesting maid service). Most of the time, the problem was in a cooling system using water that had evaporated out. Pop simply replaced the water in the system and collected \$3 per fix.

In 1910, Pop climbed off the hobo motorcycle in Colinga, California and proceeded to settle in. He obtained financing based on his mechanical and electrical engineering skills to purchase a barn that he refurbished and opened as an auto repair garage. He soon began developing other garages, selling one, buying another and developing a very successful auto repair business over the years. He attracted highly qualified employees to work in his garages, including Harry Boy, one of the mechanics for the brilliant electrical engineer Nikola “Teddy” Tesla. Pop spent the next few decades in the central California area around Salinas, Fresno and Taft in the San Joaquin Valley: repairing cars and other mechanical items, riding motorcycles, building race cars, and of course, rambling about California.

It was in the 1930’s on one of his rambles south to the coast of Southern California that Pop discovered and fell in love with surfing, at the age of 56; a passion he would continue with well into his 80’s. He was completely smitten by the sport, not only for the fun he found in it, but for its health benefits. “Surfing keeps you in the greatest health - It’s a great body builder.” At the time, Pop still lived in central California, “You know, I use to drive 206 miles from Taft to San Onofre to ride my surfboard, every weekend... And there were no freeways then, you know... five hours was my best time... I knew every place where the speed cop hid... Oh, that was fun, though.”

In 1944, Pop sold his house in Taft for \$1,000, deciding that southern California was where he ought to be, so he loaded up his truck and he moved to... Doheny. Dana Point historian Carlos Olvera reminds us, “It was just before the end of the war and with most of the young men gone, he had the beaches to himself.” With permission of the rangers, he took up residence in what was the north day use area parking lot, just in front of Bone Yard surf spot and near today’s horseshoe pits by North Creek, living there in his truck during late spring, summer, and early fall. He’d then head out to “winter” at the Agua Caliente campground in the Anza-Borrego desert. Writer Allan Seymour, in a 1992 article in *The Surfer’s Journal*, describes Pop’s Dodge truck as, “the original surfer’s camper/van. Plumbing pipe served as surf racks, and a cook stove pipe angled out the side. He had a built-in bed and enough storage to be self-contained for months at a time.”



*A legal lobster*

Pop became a snorkel diver hunting lobsters and abalone, and he’d fish from his paddleboard under the ever-watchful eyes of the California Fish and Game wardens who were always amazed at his “abundant catch.” Former Doheny Supervising Ranger Jim Serpa remembers Pop as, “just a little old man who came here to retire.” Pop was a smaller man in physical stature standing 5ft. 7-½ in. in height, weighing 145 pounds. His hair turned gray at midlife. Instead of the retired little old



*Catch of the Day / Hand paddles*

man, however, he became a local legend who would become Doheny’s first lifeguard. Serpa goes on to say that one of the Doheny lifeguard towers had been named for him in his honor. “It was lifeguard tower number “9”, “10”, “11”, then ‘Pop.’” The tower’s name was eventually changed back to “12” to keep from confusing rookie lifeguards.

In one of Pop's stories, he talks about teaching Ranger Gene "Woody" Woodworth to dive for abalone, "...and he was a real good diver. One day, Ranger Gene Shaw came along and said to us, 'Look,' he said, 'I want enough abalone to feed 100 people. Gonna put on a big party here.'"

"Well," says Pop, "we'll get 'em for ya. So we got the 100, I don't know how many abs we got, we must of got, we must of got 100 abalone, but there was plenty abalone then."

In talking about the demise of fishing and abalone along the local coast, Pop hypothesized that it was "detergent in the sewage killed the kelp beds out there. Now there's no kelp for the fish to hang around. And these fellas with nets just take everything out. When the kelp was there, they couldn't do that. The abalone themselves, when the scuba came in, the Fish and Game didn't approve of the scuba at all, but scuba was the cause of the abalone getting all took. Fella come down here with four or five more people and he'd go out and get abs for everybody, see. Easy to get with scuba. Abs were very plentiful."

One summer, Ranger Charlie Faulker wanted Pop to watch over his two sons, Charlie and Allen. "Do anything you want," Pop remembers Ranger Faulker saying, "but don't drown them. So, by the end of the summer, both of those kids were good surfers, good swimmers. They couldn't even swim at first, and the older one made a very, very good diver." This began Pop's reputation as an excellent swim teacher. "That was one of my hobbies, taking and teaching kids to swim... I use to take them to the Huntington Beach pool, which is not there anymore, it's a shame."



*Lobsterman Pop*

Carlos Olvera writes, "He had no children of his own, but cared for each boy like they were a son."



*A teacher and friend*

"For decades," wrote Allan Seymour, "...he gave advice to hundreds of young surfers on swell direction, wind velocity, the best dive spots for abalone, and anything else they could think of." Besides sharing his knowledge and skills with his young followers, Pop was even more proud of the self confidence he saw develop within his "students" as they became more and more prolific in their waterman skills.

It wasn't long after Pop moved to Doheny that Head Ranger Jack Frankenstein approached him, wanting to put him to work. Pop told him, "Look, I'm retired to keep out of that." I didn't want to work." That didn't stop Ranger Frankenstein. "... in a few days later, he came up to me and he shook his finger at me and he says, "I've been watch'n you." And I though, "Good Lord, what have I done now." He said, "I've been watch'n you out on that surfboard," and he says, "you're now the lifeguard here."

"Now?" I said,

"Don't give me any arguments,' he says, 'You are now a lifeguard here.' I was the first lifeguard they ever had, I guess.... Oh, that was a good deal because I retired at sixty-three and I had the company pension which wasn't too much, and I didn't get my social security until I was sixty-five, and the lifeguard job then paid seven dollars a day. Now it pays about thirty, ya know. So that extra seven dollars put me on easy street."



Pop was asked how he would lifeguard Doheny's long stretch of beach in those days, whether he would just take a foot patrol up and down the beach or swim. Pop said he was the only person patrolling the beach. "Understand we didn't have any tower then, and we didn't have any cans (floats) or anything like that. I made a can out of an old army one, blown up one, which worked really good. But sometimes, I'd go out and patrol on the surfboard and there were sometimes... that you had to have a surfboard, because, when the tide is down, you've got a good quarter mile out there that you can't swim or you can't run or walk or anything else, but you can go out on a surfboard. And that's the reason I think the guard should have a surfboard at all times. I remember here, a couple years ago, Loren Harrison turned over one of these outriggers out there, and the guard on the beach went out there and Loren said he (the lifeguard) was so cold when he got there, they had to rescue him. Well, if he had a surfboard, there'd of been nothing to it."

Ranger Craigen asked Pop about how he maintained his health, saying he had seen him running on the beach earlier that day, "...and you weren't even breathing hard when you finished... If you had to give somebody some kind of information about life... what would you say?"

"Well, the big important part about that in the first place is to be relaxed, don't be all tied up mentally. Relax in all cases. And the second one is to try and eat some natural food, not all this "chemicalized" food, cause it doesn't do you a bit of good. You take this sodium monoglutamate for instance, it's a stomach irritant, and it's in practically everything, especially soups. I don't get any soup, I make my own. The same thing, get all kinds, you must if you're going to stay healthy; a salad, at least once a day, and that means a raw salad. It doesn't mean cooked salad, macaroni salad or something like that. Leafy green and grated carrots, and green onions, celery, stuff like that. In fact, eat, there're a lot of things. You can grate a potato and it tastes good raw, and a sweet potato tastes very good, grated, raw. I make a salad sometimes and put raisins in there, but you've got to let it set overnight to soften up the raisins.

"And don't go to any excesses. You might be able to smoke a cigarette now and then, but don't smoke. You might be able to get all ginned up every once in awhile but don't do it. Have a glass of wine, that's all right... When it gets to be habitual, that's when the trouble comes in, because you crave a little more all the time. It's just like coffee, you drink coffee and you want it a little bit stronger all the time, a little bit.... I use my decaffeinated coffee, Sanka."

Pop had many other tips for living a healthy life. He would go to bed in his truck about 10 pm getting up at 8:00 am. Breakfasts were two slices of toast with a slice of Swiss cheese and coffee, and fruit the rest of the day, but on Sundays it was a ham and eggs at a restaurant. Then there was always "the catch of the day" smoked fish, fish he had caught and smoked himself. He thought wetsuits and scuba gear made a sissy out of people. He kept active with a daily 4-mile walk, often challenging the uphill grade of Cove Road. His looking forward perspective on life was simple, "You don't die, you just graduate. And if you don't, you just come back here."



1957: Pop's Dodge truck at Doheny, bottom right

In 1961, Pop's quoted as saying, "I'm going to surf until I'm 100; then I'll make up my mind whether it's worthwhile." Born in December of 1881, he "graduated" on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1981 at the age of 99. The State of California's Department of Motor Vehicles had recently declined to reissue his driver's license. Legendary surfer and friend Mickey Muñoz said, "...having lived in a van or truck for the last 45 or 50 years, you know, losing

his driver's license was like, hey, you might as well cut his head off." Pop had been visiting friend Loren "Whitey" Harrison on the Big Island of Hawaii for a couple of months, but when he got back to the mainland and not having a license, he had to live in a hotel in San Clemente. Muñoz continued, "... Pop kind of looked at his life and went, 'Jeez, this isn't what I want to do, this isn't how I want to live my life,' so he just kind of shut himself off and checked out." Mickey is probably right; Pop was just tired of trying to "stay afloat." His remains were carried out to sea in an outrigger canoe paddled by "Whitey" Harrison and other notable local watermen. His ashes were scatter, at Pop's request, by his friend Ron Drummond in the waters off Dana Point.

There are, of course, many rich and favorite stories about the adventures of Pop Proctor. One can only imagine the magic of sitting at an evening beach fire with Pop and friends, Pop



strumming his ukulele and telling tales of living and working on the Great Lakes; his riding the trains as a hobo and his time in jail as a vagrant for having a concealed weapon, his shaving razor that they gave back to him so he could shave; of traveling through Mexico with two friends, each of them having a stash of \$100 and one old coffee grinder; his friendship with an old Yaki Indian chef with whom he shared his rifle when they went hunting; of his

motorcycle hobo'n, crisscrossing California. Then of course, there were his remarkable culinary skills as demonstrated in a recipe for chop-suey he contributed to a San Onofre Surf Club cookbook. It begins, "First you find some spaghetti..."

As the calendar is now approaching December 12<sup>th</sup>, I look forward to raising a glass of good Italian wine, "*Dago red*," as Pop would say, and toasting this fascinating man of Doheny on the 134<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. I think we should honor the memory of this waterman. I hope our interpretive association and the park's rangers and lifeguards will join together to celebrate Pop and his life at Doheny State Beach.



Resources:

Dana Point Harbor / Capistrano Bay: Home Port for Romance by Doris I. Walker, 1987

"Down Doheny Way for 75 Years," Laylan Connelly, Orange County Register, June 24, 2006

"Ed 'Pop' Proctor, Waterman," unpublished essay by Dana Point Historian Carlos Olvera Lifeguard Exhibit, San Clemente State Beach Visitor Center, 2015

"Pete and Whitey", Legendary Surfers: A Definitive History of Surfing's Culture and Heros, Malcolm Gault-Williams, July 13, 2003

Pop Proctor oral interview by Ranger Dave Craigen and Lifeguard Jim Welch, Dec. 2, 1973

"Pop's Truck," Allan Seymour, *The Surfer's Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1992

"Surfing, Frolic Secret of Health," Peter Eiden, Orange County Register, 1961