

PREFACE

A SECRET HISTORY OF THE OLLIE

VOLUME 1: THE 1970s

Craig B. Snyder

Note: This book was released on February 24, 2015 through Black Salt Press.
ISBN: 9781930287006; Hardcover: 912 pages; Dimensions: 9.25 x 7 x 2 inches

The Preface was not published in the first edition of the book. It may be included later in a later edition or as part of an e-book edition. — Craig B. Snyder

PREFACE

In the Beginning

FOR DECADES NOW, the prevailing narrative about the birth and evolution of the skateboard and skateboarding has been limited to (and by) the stories we have chosen or allowed to be codified into truth. But skateboarding has a wider-ranging history than most people realize or admit.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a stream of undertakings, whether conscious or unconscious, to oversimplify and claim ownership of an activity that actually has a deep and complex history, a legacy that has not been completely and definitively traced. For example, some Californians have referred to their state as “the birthplace of skateboarding,” and others have called skateboarding a by-product of surfing, but neither of these statements is exactly true. Clearly California has been a leader and has influenced skateboarding in significant ways, particularly because of the skating manufacturers and media centered there, but the Golden State may not have been the original seed. The skateboard, or “skate board,” as it was known before the mid-1960s, was also a recognized propulsion instrument in other parts of the United States. It inhabited many urban areas across the nation, and in some places it evolved independently of surfing.

Warren Bolster, the distinguished surf photographer who helped relaunch the enormously influential *SkateBoarder* magazine in 1975, commented in his book, *The Legacy of Warren Bolster: Master of Skateboard Photography*, that he recalled seeing African-

American skateboarders in the Washington, D.C., area during the early 1950s. This statement alone tells a completely different story than the one we've been so accustomed to hearing, a tale that's usually centered around some blond white kids on the California coast during the late 1950s who got bored one day because there weren't any waves and nailed some roller skates onto the bottom of a 2x4.

Skateboarding developed in other parts of the world, too, and places like Australia and New Zealand have shared in that early history. Bolster himself, in fact, rode his first skateboard in Sydney, Australia, in 1965, after moving there from D.C. with his family. An Australian named Barry Wierdau appears to have been one of the earliest individuals to make and ride a skateboard in his country. In 1945, at the end of World War II, the 15-year-old Wierdau and a friend made a skateboard from some old roller skates. They called it a "scooterboard," and Wierdau traded it for some ice skates to two American soldiers from California. One can imagine that this early skateboard may have ended up in the United States, possibly touching down in San Diego or San Francisco, where the U.S. had military bases that served the Pacific region.

An image by esteemed East Coast *LIFE* photographer Ralph Morse dated 1947 tells another equally compelling story about the skateboard and its origins. It shows an American boy on a city sidewalk, nailing the halves of a roller skate to a plank of wood. The boy was making a kick scooter, which was basically a skateboard with a disused wooden fruit crate attached to the top—a forerunner of today's popular Razor-brand push scooters. But in this photograph one can clearly see the beginnings of the skateboard: a plank of wood, roller skate technology, and the imaginings of youth. If subsequent photos did not show him fastening a crate to the top of the device, it could have been mistaken for any of the homemade boards that many skateboarders and surfers hammered out in the 1950s and 1960s.

At some point the scooter turned into the skateboard when its handles came off, but it also may have begun life simply as a skateboard with its own origin story. As Ron Leiter from St. Petersburg, Florida, points out, "You have to look at it from the name. It was a skate and a board."

In the late 1950s, Leiter put together his first skateboard at the age of 8 in his hometown of St. Petersburg. Leiter was not a surfer, though he would later take up surfing in the early 1960s as a teenager on Florida's west coast. According to Leiter, the skateboard was hand-me-down knowledge. "It was not unique to California," he says. "[It was] not something I saw on the news. It happened word-of-mouth. It was something that got passed around the guys at my school."

Skateboarding was also a fervent desire, because you couldn't just go out and buy a board; you had to build one from scratch, and doing so required some ingenuity and effort. "Making them was not easy," remembers Leiter. "Roller skates were riveted, not screwed, and you had to first pop the rivet, then screw it into the board. It wasn't convenient. You had to want to do it."

As these examples point out, for many, skateboarding was its own expression, and surfing had little or nothing to do with the creation of their skateboard. This is not to say that surfing did not play a critical role in skateboarding's development during the 1960s and 1970s, because it did. As Betsy Gordon from the Smithsonian Institution states: "My belief is skateboarding was not an offshoot of surfing, but surfing was important. After surfing became paired with skateboarding during the '60s, it gave skateboarding style and made it more appealing. If surfing didn't exist, skateboarding would have happened without it, as it did during the 20th century. But where would it have gone?"

When skateboarding was introduced as "surfing on land" or "sidewalk surfing" during the surfing boom of the 1960s, it changed skateboarding's course forever. The skateboard was no longer seen only as a "toy" like the hula hoop. "Because of surfing," adds Gordon, "skateboarding acquired culture, community, language, ritual, industry exchange, competition, and celebration, among other things."

Surfing's influence, however, wasn't always for the best. During the 1960s, one person made an attempt to call the act of pushing a skateboard a "foot paddle," but that idea was soon abandoned. Other terms like "hotdogging," a 1950s surf term for trick riding, transitioned perfectly into skateboarding, until skaters decided it was too archaic and changed it to "freestyle." (And street-based freestyle later evolved into what skaters today refer to as street skating or simply "street.")

Skateboarding was also affected by other sports during its development. Snow skiing, ice skating, gymnastics, and the stunts of daredevils like Evel Knievel influenced some of skating's early style and moves. The nose wheelie of the 1960s, though similar to "hanging ten" on a surfboard, was influenced as much by hot-rod culture as it was by surfing. The tail wheelie, on the other hand, had no real equivalent in surfing and was completely a car-culture or motorcycle move—a showy celebration of the power behind the vehicle and the rider's (or driver's) control of it. The Helicopter and the Daffy, two popular skate tricks from the '70s, both got their names from similar ski-based moves.

The connection between surfing and skateboarding was important, but it was also mutual. It should not be forgotten that skateboarding and surfing experienced a boom together during the 1960s, and out of that growth came new things for each, including skateboarding's own emerging culture, which by the 1970s began to alter the face of surfing.

All too often, though, the story of skateboarding has been oversimplified, overgeneralized, or overlocalized to say that surfing's—and California's—influences were the only ones that mattered. In some places, they had little or no effect. In Hollywood, Florida, for example, where many of the critical events leading to the creation of the Ollie took place, a bike shop and a skateboard park were among the greatest influences that helped to create one community with its own rituals, language, and maneuvers, bringing together a group of non-surfers who became some of the most influential forces on modern skateboarding. In turn, some of what they created changed surfing, too.

As a skater with East Coast roots, it is my hope that this book will help add some balance to skateboarding's legacy, as it contains not only the story of the Ollie, but includes, in part, stories of a number of skating's other pioneers from around the world—ones you rarely hear about nowadays, or ones you have never heard of before.

Joe Lehm, a veteran of the skateboard scene in New Mexico, runs a skate school in Santa Fe where part of the curriculum includes a weekly history class. As Lehm noted in one conversation, “With your Florida perspective you already know the dangers and likelihood of people, as history and time goes on, tending to focus on the same stories they've heard and retelling them until it seems pretty soon all of skateboarding was born, nourished, and died in California—when that wasn't the case.”

Even inside the Golden State there has been controversy. One of the frequently told tales that Joe Lehm speaks of recounts only a part of the California story. While that story and the people, places, and events that created it are undoubtedly important, its constant retelling has often pushed aside the state's larger history, causing many influential West Coast names to be forgotten, or, worse yet, to be written out of future books and films about skateboarding.

Lonnie Toft, a Californian from the Oxnard region northwest of Los Angeles, was one of the most significant figures of the 1970s, exerting a profound influence upon pool riding as well as on skateboard and snowboard design. Yet he has been largely overlooked in recent years, if not decades. As Toft explains, “Some of this [distortion] is done on purpose, you know. I mean, some of it is political and some of it is greed.” As reported in the April 1979 issue of *SkateBoarder*, Toft was receiving as much fan mail as any other skater, including undisputed legend Tony Alva, but today you wouldn't know that. Toft, a legend in his own right, often goes unrecognized.

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Since part of the purpose of this book is to educate and inform, certain conventions have been used in the text to clarify some skateboarding terminology. At one time in history the name of tricks and maneuvers were capitalized, but the skate press and mass media have since moved away from that practice. In this book, however, it was essential to return to that older, traditional form because many of yesterday's maneuvers are such a common part of contemporary skating they are not considered tricks anymore. Examples include three fundamental maneuvers: the Kickturn, the Elevator Drop, and the Axle Stall. At one time in the 1970s, doing a Kickturn—lifting the front wheels and pivoting around on the rear ones—on a vertical wall instead of carving across its surface was considered outrageous. Even more incredible was doing two or more consecutive Kickturns inside an empty pool, a bowl, or a large concrete pipe, a feat once referred to as “Forever.” The Elevator Drop—placing the board's tail at the top of a banked or curved wall, stepping onto the board and dropping straight down the wall—is now such a rudimentary move that skaters don't call it a trick, they call it dropping in. But at one time this maneuver was so new and radical that a person could easily win a contest by

doing one, and some skaters did. The Axle Stall, in which a skater kickturns at the top of a wall and pauses with both axles on the coping or lip, still goes by that name, but it too was once a maneuver that made jaws drop.

Invention was happening everywhere during the 1970s, so a good rule of thumb when reading this book is to imagine that a maneuver, invention, or event never happened before, because quite possibly it didn't—or that it was happening in different places at the same time, because there's a good chance it was. Skateboarding's birth and evolution were more a result of the collective unconscious than of any individual. Although the term "inventor" has been used time and time again in this book, mostly out of convenience, it is also a semantic nightmare. Does it (only) describe the first person ever to perform or produce an object or maneuver? Or should it designate the person who first realized and demonstrated that object or maneuver's true potential? "Originator" might be a better choice, or perhaps "spark." In the case of the popular skate maneuver we know today as the Ollie, that spark was without a doubt a young, gangly teenager named Alan "Ollie" Gelfand.

Readers should also keep in mind that the 1970s were volatile times in more ways than one, as many of the maneuvers, styles, and techniques being pioneered were taking place on rudimentary equipment that was constantly changing and evolving through trial and error. For this, many of the skaters from the 1970s should be given credit, too.

For the less familiar reader, the appendix in this book and the extended appendix on the website also contain useful reference tools and supplementary information, including maps, a glossary, a listing of selected contests and results, a directory of 1970s skateparks, and a guest essay on the physics behind the Ollie. The focus of the maps is solely the geography and landmarks relative to the central history of this book, and they are not intended to represent, by any means, skateboarding's complete story.

Last but not least, the photography that documents some of the written history in this work is, at times, sparse or nonexistent. Other times it consists only of snapshots or Polaroids taken by amateur photographers, often with family-owned cameras. This characterizes a pre-digital era—before DVDs, the Internet, YouTube, and smartphones—when not everyone had the latest technology at their disposal, when the world was still analog, and when film was expensive to buy and more costly to process. And when, too, at least in the 1970s and 1980s, video cameras and recording technology were either nonexistent, or more expensive and less portable, and thus not as accessible to everyone as they are today. The relative lack of photo documentation here also tells another story: that history was being made, but almost no one, including those who were a crucial part of it, understood that. Most of the history- and culture-makers were teenagers who never really considered that they were making or participating in any sort of epoch; they were just having fun. ■

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All copies of A Secret History of the Ollie from this website and eBay are signed by the author and come with an assortment of stickers and bookmarks. Where to Buy. Publisher/Suggested List Price: \$60.00. "Craig Snyder's work is much more than a secret history of the Ollie. It is a first-rate account of skateboarding. Set against the backdrop of the sun-drenched coastal towns of Southern California and South Florida of the 1970s, this book transports readers to the era in which the acrobatics of today's X Games were born." - H. Michael Gelfand, James Madison University. "Everyone thinks they know skateboarding's history but what they really know is a series of half-facts compounded by hype and amnesia. See more of A Secret History of the Ollie on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of A Secret History of the Ollie on Facebook. Not only that, but it may be the only podcast in the world that is longer than the Ollie Book. YouTube link is in the profile. A SECRET HISTORY OF THE OLLIE, Volume 1: The 1970s Craig B. Snyder The award-winning book on the birth of modern skating; 912 pages, over 1200 images. WHERE TO BUY Olliebook.com: \$41.50 plus free shipping (USA only) eBay.com: \$41.50 plus free. A Secret History of the O has been added to your Cart. Add a gift receipt for easy returns. Share. *SPOILER ALERT*: In just ONE half-sentence very late in the book (psych!) the author states Duerr was the first to ollie on the East Coast, yet sadly requires 507,030+ words (nearly 1,000 pages) to convince readers 'Alan Gelfand' there's that name again was the 'CREATOR' of the ollie. Nope! Quote from FAPA President's Book Awards (not kidding!), "This book will REWRITE skateboarding history as we know it." - Betsy Gordon. So..."When the legend becomes fact, PRINT the legend."