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Bearing down on
the north shore of
Molokai aboard the
Maka Koa.





Shipwrecked

BY HILLARY HAUSER

with Jeff Johnson

SURRENDERING PLANNED ITINERARIES IS LIKE TAKING OFF ON A WAVE. You give a situation a certain amount of consideration, you buy your ticket, you get into the lineup, and you take off thinking you're going to do a particular thing. Then Mother Nature takes over and you're doing something entirely different.

One morning my telephone rang in Santa Barbara. It was legendary North Shore waterman Jeff Johnson, an old friend, who had for years saved surfers in trouble at Pipeline, Sunset, and Waimea before there were even lifeguards at these places.

"You gotta come now," Jeff said. "We're taking a Polynesian sailing canoe from Maui to Molokai—and after that, Oahu. There's no way you can miss this."

I had met Jeff Johnson about ten years ago, during a visit to the North Shore, and in the ensuing years I had heard more and more about his incredible big-wave stunts. But never did I think that I, a 55-year-old woman who bodyboards the Rincon Cove once in a while, think I'd see the face of God on an ocean wave. With Jeff Johnson, this happened—and I am alive to tell the story.

THERE WERE EIGHT OF US IN THIS SIX-MAN SAILING CANOE, paddling and going with the wind along the north shore of Molokai. "Too many people," Jeff later said. "It was hard to steer on that wave." We had left Canoe Beach on Ka'anapali, Maui, aboard the *Maka Koa*, and made it across the Pailolo Channel easily with a combination of paddle and sail. I was riding the trampoline like Cleopatra on her barge, while Jeff and the high-wire owner of the boat, Mike Spalding, sat in the rear two seats as steersmen. Mike Pietch, a 23-year-old surfer from Honolulu, was the lead oar.

As I watched the three girls—Nicole Spalding, Ane Bakutis, and Abbey Romanchuk—paddle, I tried to get the drift and rhythm of what they were doing, because I knew my turn at this would inevitably come. They sometimes chanted in Hawaiian, something like, "*E lau hoe mai na wa'a; i ke ka, i ka hoe, i ke ka; pae akui I kaiana.*"—"Everybody paddle the canoes together, bail and paddle, paddle and bail, and the shore is reached."

Paddle and bail, bail and paddle. The canoe was continually swamped with water, and as the girls started bailing, I thought, sheesh, my Nikons! They were in the hold of the canoe, in a tightly-rolled dry bag, and there was sure an awful lot of water coming out of those hand-held pumps they were using. Finally I told myself, *Que sera sera*. I kept an inexpensive waterproof camera close to use if anything nice and horrendous happened.

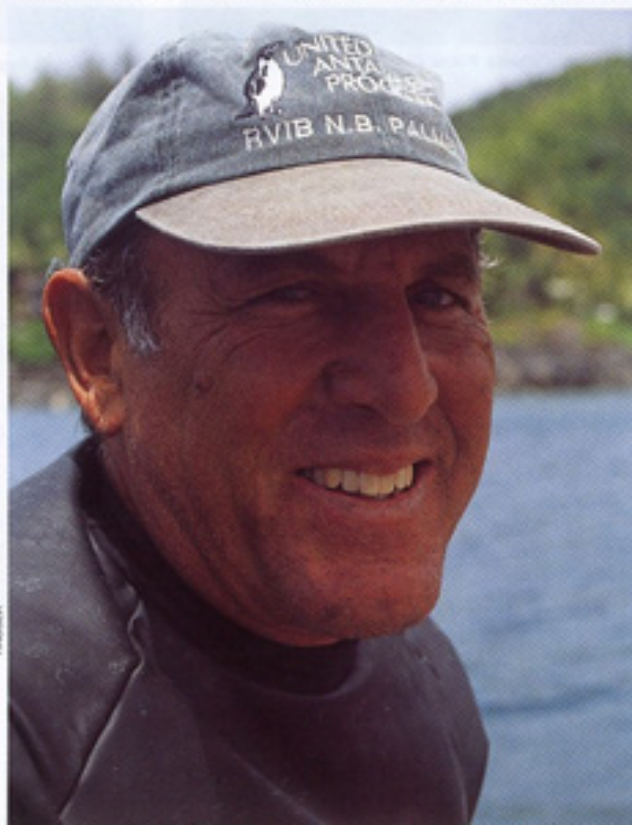
Around the northwest corner of Molokai we pulled into a large bay, and Mike Spalding announced our arrival with the mighty blowing of a conch shell. We were received with friendly greetings by the Molokai fishermen who live there.

The conch shell seems to be a key to acceptance in this part of the world, and so is a simple boat such as we were in. I was eventually to hear of unfriendly receptions dished out on Molokai's north shore—especially to luxury yachts that pull up to certain beaches. On one of our stops we took aboard Kahala Nakihei, a 17-year-old Molokai native who is a longtime friend of Jeff and Mike Spalding. Now we were eight, with two people riding the trampoline. Like Vietnamese boat people we made our way up the wild, tangled coast to a small, rocky beach where a permanent camp had been built at the mouth of a pristine freshwater river. Here, where crags and cliffs drop down to the sea, we landed with the friendly help of the people who live there. Teenaged boys on a weekend holiday from nearby Kualapuu rode little waves next to the mouth of the waterfall canyon, where the smell of a wet forest mingles with the sounds of the river tumbling from the





Canoe-camping Molokai's North Shore allows access to otherwise hidden coves, pocket beaches, and river-carved canyons. Captain Jeff (below) has found his six-man outrigger an effective conveyance.



CANOE-SURFING ON BIG WAVES IS OLD HAT TO Jeff Johnson, who in 1980 assisted in the now-famous ride of a canoe down a 30-foot monster at Outside Avalanche.

Jeff had already been experimenting with tow-ins, beginning in 1975. This was merely the natural thing to try next, because to attack big North Shore waves he had shaped a big, heavy 16-foot board that was great for big waves, but not so easy to get around on. The big-board shaping was actually a three-ring project: Jeff, Flippy Hoffman, and Mickey Muñoz had donated 12-foot blanks with special stringers from Clark Foam, and it took two blanks to make each



Johnson's Kaena Point spear.

board. "They wouldn't fit in anyone's shaping rooms," Jeff said. "Flippy made his over on the mainland, and Mickey had to shape ours in his backyard."

They tried these guns at Outside Avalanche on 15- to 18-foot waves. "Felt like a Cadillac," Jeff said. "Really fast and smooth—ran right over the chop. But they were so heavy to carry around that Flippy and I made a boat to bring our boards out (to the lineup)." This was a "special skill" with a board rack. "If you lost your board, the boat could pick it up and pull the surfer back out to the lineup. For three or four years during the winters, we used my boat day after day at Avalanche and Kaena Point."

Using the boat this way, the next discovery was inevitable—tow-ins. "It was easier to get into the wave this way than to paddle," Jeff said. In 1975, Jeff started experimenting with tow-ins

at Outside Avalanche with Flippy, Roger Erickson, and David Kahanamoku. At the helm of his "special skill," he became known for his artful ability to get in and out of boat-eating surf, and pretty soon photographers, as well as surfers, were relying on Jeff to get them out there—and back.

Five years later, the canoe stunt was ripe for happening.

It had its origins at a Christmas party where Jeff met Tommy Holmes, a longtime paddler who was writing a big picture book, *The Hawaiian Canoe*. Holmes wanted to get an unusual picture for his book—of someone canoe-surfing Waimea on a big, hairy day. Jeff told Holmes he thought

canoe, and Dale Hope broke his arm. "It took a long time to get to him," Johnson said.

While Hope was being shipped off to the hospital in an ambulance, it was discovered that none of the photographers got the picture. "There were guys in the water, on rooftops, along the shore," Jeff said, and no one got it. There was a camera mounted in the bow of the canoe, belonging to Steve Wilkings, and it got broken. The photographers said, "Do it again!" and everyone said, "NO!"

Tommy Holmes and Aka Hemmings were determined to get this picture, however, so they volunteered to restage the harrowing ride. "We



The ill-fated Avalanche experiment.

Avalanche would be better. "I'll pull you into the wave," he offered.

The plan got organized. All they needed were the right conditions. Not long after the Christmas party, Jeff woke up at 4 a.m. to discover Outside Avalanche was breaking big, and the plan went into high gear. He called Holmes, who called all the players, plus seven professional photographers who were to get it all on film, and everything was organized: a 22-foot canoe, Jeff's boat, and three paddlers—Dale Hope, a star paddler from the Outrigger Canoe Club, Aka Hemmings, and Holmes.

"The tow was not good," Jeff recalled. "There was so much spray, the guys couldn't see. They decided to paddle in, went to the bottom. I think it was the biggest wave ever ridden at the time, even by surfers. They just got creamed."

At the bottom, the wave smashed the

went back out," Jeff said. "Now we had two guys in the canoe, and now it's bigger. They started to take off on the first wave of a set, but they held back. The second wave was bigger—cresting, looking like it would break, and they went for it anyway. It went through and Holmes pitched out the back. Now there's one guy (Hemmings), and he doesn't know he's alone."

The canoe made a drop down the wave with the lip following right behind. Aka Hemmings remembers the day very well. He said it was true he had no idea he was riding the wave alone—a wave that at 25-30 feet, is still one of the biggest waves in the annals of canoe-surfing.

"I was oblivious," he said. "The boat was on a good line, everything was there. When I saw the pictures later, I realized how early on the wave Holmes had ejected. It was probably the best thing to be oblivious." A celebrated photograph

of this stunt, taken by Steve Wilkings, now hangs in the Chart House Restaurant at Kaneohe, and at the Hawaii Maritime Center, an institution founded by Holmes. Steve Wilkings' camera captured a sequence of shots that shows Holmes 20 feet in the air at the top of the wave, and Aka barreling down its face—solo. What was going through his mind?

"There are certain sporting events where you go into The Zone," Aka said. "Things got really quiet, in very slow motion. I was working on the balance of the boat, was hiked out on the ama, to keep it down. Then I felt the raindrops from the white water and knew it was time to bail. I made my way to the right side of the boat and barely got out in time."

The white water buried him. "I thought my chest and stomach blew open, you know, like the compression prize fighters get in the face? With my hands, I started feeling my chest, stomach—they were O.K. It was completely dark, I was being stretched every which way. AIR! I started up. The water was thick, like muck. I got to the surface, sucked in foam and started seeing stars. I was on the verge of passing out. I held my body up above the foam, did some deep breathing. Another wave came, I dived under and made it."

Meanwhile, Jeff was maneuvering the boat to get Aka out of the water. "When we got to him, he was pretty delirious," Jeff said. Whether in a crisis situation or drinking a beer on his front porch, Jeff's demeanor doesn't change much either way—cool, steady, level-headed, self-possessed, even slightly amused in the face of impending doom. Fred Van Dyke, who wrote about Jeff paddling out at Waimea on a muddy, onshore,

closed-out day with a 10' chop on the wave faces, concluded, "What he considers simply fun, can, at times, be totally life-threatening."

Hearing these stories, I knew our shipwreck on Molokai was no big deal to Jeff. After all, we had wrecked on an overhead wave, about six feet—baby stuff, compared to what he's used to. He was more interested in what had gone wrong technically. "We would have been O.K. if the bow line to the ama had held," Jeff said. The iako-to-bow line, which is called in Hawaiian, *hauka ka ili'ili*, creates tension between the canoe and the ama pontoon. It was Jeff's feeling that the line would have held the *Maka Koa* together in the shore pound, and if it had not snapped, we would have landed in one piece.

Later, when I looked up *hauka ka ili'ili* in a Hawaiian dictionary, I noticed the literal translation: "stranded, aground, as a ship on the reef."

mountains, where ferns and ginger are shoulder-high and a constant light rain puts a gleam on the barkless wood of guava trees. We were shown makeshift haies where we threw our sleeping bags for the night.

The *Maka Koa* set off the following day, and with much farewell blowing of the conch, we immediately found ourselves traveling along the famous cliff area of the island. These are the tallest sea cliffs in the world most tourists see only by helicopter, where thin slivers of waterfalls drop from another galaxy down cragged peaks, green with rain. It was late in the afternoon when we passed the craggy rock of Okala Island.

Here, the ocean became unruly. The *Maka Koa* was awash in ocean swell, and I couldn't help notice the girls were bailing as much as they were paddling. There was a shift of oars, and I got into the Number Three seat and zipped in. These sailing canoes have neoprene skirts at each seat, zipped up around each paddler's waist to keep the ocean from swamping the boat.

We got around Kalaupapa Point and the leper colony, and then we turned into a bay where there were huge sets breaking on the outside reef. Here, we were going to land.

THE NEXT SCENE WAS STRAIGHT OUT OF *BEN HUR*, ONLY INSTEAD of rowing like hell into a battle that meant certain death, we were paddling like hell in front of furious waves that wanted to eat us alive. "GO!" said our steersmen, "PADDLE!"

I dug in with my oar, and suddenly we were going down the face of an overhead wave that was bigger than anything I'd ever been on in my entire life. Just as suddenly, I knew things weren't going to turn out so well.

Unlike *Ben Hur*, I didn't have ankle chains to worry about, but as we screamed down the face of this monstrous breaker I thought to myself, the zipper, the zipper, the ZIPPER! For about a thousand years our sailing canoe rode the wave, and for the next thousand years I found the zipper at my waist. Then the boat turned sideways, and into the shore pound we went. My God, we were going to flip! There was the



JEFF DAVIS



HALPER

deafening sound of cracking wood as the iakos, the wooden beams holding the pontoon to the canoe, snapped off. Another nasty sound of splitting wood, and the trampoline platform collapsed. Everyone in the *Maka Koa* jumped every which way into a maelstrom of surf that was riddled with pieces of boat and lines, oars, wetsuits, offal, and the wreath that had been mounted on the bow for good luck. Bail the boat! Get the bags out! Get the sail down! Bail, bail! The paddles, there goes one, grab it! Get these bags to shore! PULL THE BOAT! Bail, bail! Pull! Grab that wetsuit! Bail! Grab! Pull! Please don't throw that bag, my cameras are in there! PULL THE BOAT!

At the end of it all, my dive gear was gone forever, dumped from the trampoline and pulled down by the shore pound. But we were all high and dry. So was the boat and all the pieces of boat, all the gear bags and other junk. Now we could take a breath, assess our situation: We were on a dry sand beach at Mo'omomi Bay, Molokai, halfway between the Kalaupapa Peninsula and Ilio Point. The area is referred to on some maps as a "desert," but I didn't need an atlas to know right then that there was no one around for miles. It was late afternoon, the wind was blowing, what were we going to do?

Jeff and Mike started coiling up wet and tangled lines and sorting out the pieces of the boat. Kahala grabbed the cellular phone that had survived the smash-up in a plastic baggie and started talking fast Hawaiian to somebody on the other end, asking for help. The rest of us fumbled around in the gear bags for dry clothes.

When I realized we were all alive, that nobody had died, I couldn't help it: I fell apart laughing. I laughed and laughed and could not stop. It has since been suggested that this was a sort of psychological hysteria, a "release valve," but it wasn't. It was just that the whole thing was the goofiest situation I had found myself in yet.

STRANDED, AGROUND, AS A SHIP ON THE REEF IN MO'OMOMI BAY, the sun was setting when a truck arrived at the opposite end of the beach to save us. Kahala had successfully rallied her Molokai troops to get us out of there. Three big Hawaiians ran toward us and immediately began hauling gear bags and boat parts down the beach. It was hard work, doing all this in sand where you sink up to your knees with each step, but slowly we dragged ourselves and everything we had to the waiting truck.



THE HELM/CRIVELLO HOMESTEAD INCLUDES numerous uncles, aunts, fathers, mothers, cousins, nephews, and brothers from two families that intermixed generations ago—Helm (on the Hawaiian side) and Crivello (Italian). Into this handsome gang was born a Hawaiian hero, who perished at sea in 1977 while paddling between Kahoolawe Island and Maui.

As I began to hear the story of George Jarrett Helm Jr., I was almost spooked—like I had crash-landed into a situation where a story needed to be told. A story to be recorded and put into the context of a powerful ocean such as I had just experienced, mixed up with the watermen who surf, paddle, and canoe all over it, who sometimes make it and sometimes don't.

Helm was a Molokai waterman who decided to do something about Hawaii's tragedy of losing so much of itself to the white man and luxury hotel chains. With two other crusaders, Walter Ritte and Emmet Aluli, Helm formed "Kahoolawe Ohana" (Save Kahoolawe) in the early 1970s.



All shook up: death of the *Maka Koa*, splintered amas and all.

The organization was focused on getting the Navy to stop bombing the island and return it to the Hawaiians.

Sitting at the kitchen table where the *Hōkule'a* party had been raging the night before, Shannon Crivello talked freely about his uncle's disappearance and the "Save Kahoolawe" campaign. "What they did was the catalyst to all that's going on now—the language, the music, the voice of the people," Crivello said. "There was frustration—they had seen their parents stepped on. They had seen Hawaiians being thought of as 'not good.' They had seen Hawaiians sitting in the back seat." In '77, Ritte and another Hawaiian, Richard Sawyer, were on Kahoolawe to claim the island for Hawaiians, while at the same time, Helm had gone to the State legislature to present "Kahoolawe Ohana's" case for the claim. "The word went out that the men on the island were going to be arrested," Crivello said. "My uncle and Kimo Mitchell paddled out there to warn them." The two

men got to the island, but paddling back, they disappeared and were never seen again.

"The ocean was rough that day," Crivello said. On a table behind his chair, I noticed a framed, glassed poster sketch of George Helm Jr., a handsome, intense-looking, bearded man with jet-black hair. "Onipa'a—1993 Year of the Hawaiian—George Helm and Kimo Mitchell," the poster said. It is one of the many national mementos of George Helm, whose renowned singing is still played all over the islands on CDs and tape recordings. There are books, too, that don't circulate much outside the Hawaiian Islands.

Cutting up chicken, tomatoes, onions, and throwing everything into an enormous sizzling wok in an already humid kitchen, Crivello said the people of Molokai are determined to prevent development such as has occurred on the other islands, where mainland money and luxury hotels have wiped out simple island life and local lore. His uncle was responsible for much of this

determination. "He was a spiritual leader," Crivello said. "Many political organizations started forming because of him. I was young when he died, but I remember watching him on television. I was in awe of him."

Wiping his forehead against the stifling heat of the kitchen, Crivello said Helm's disappearance set the Hawaii-for-Hawaiians movement back twenty years. "If he hadn't disappeared, we'd be a people," he said.

Although many books have been written about Helm, one aspect of his disappearance has not been explored or even documented. Crivello said there was a third person with Helm and Kimo Mitchell when they disappeared—and that person refused to talk about what happened and disappeared to Tahiti where he lives in seclusion.

Crivello said the family suspected organized crime, because Helm and Kimo Mitchell were excellent watermen, "but we had to quit talking about it eventually and get over it."

Rummaging through an old "Hav-A-Tampa" cigar box, Jeff looked through old pictures and recalled his beginnings.

He started riding waves in 1950, when he was seven years old, living in Manhattan Beach.

"We used those mats, you could catch anything," he said. "We'd sit out there, a group of guys; it was a big deal to ride on our knees." Dale Velzy was living under the Manhattan Pier,



Trent, Jack, Petey, Patti, and Jeff at home at Flippy Hoffman's Pupukea beach house in the early-'70s.

Jeff's driftwood wave, Berkeley mud flats, 1963.



in an abandoned cement room, and George Kapuu was a frequent visitor. "Velzy was the first I ever saw of surfing," Jeff remembered. He and his friends would go down to get Velzy's balsa scraps to make miniature tikis, which they wore around their necks.

In 1953, Jeff put roller skates on a piece of wood and rode it everywhere—it just may be the first skateboard in history. "Everyone was using Ban Boards," Jeff recalled. "One day, a friend and I took off the handle, made the board

narrower, and stood up on it." Greg Noll lived down the street. I bought my first board from him," Jeff said. "It was a 9' balsa." He started surfing at Longfellow Avenue in Hermosa Beach.

Then he started exploring surf spots up and down the California coast—sneaking into Hollister Ranch with Bob Cooper, who was a glasser for Rennie Yater. "We drove down the railroad tracks, straddling the tracks," Jeff recalled. "Bumpety-bumpety, bump. If a train had come, there was no way to get out of there. We came to the trestle and there was a car stuck there. They had slid over against the cement and couldn't get out. We pushed them through."

When a train eventually did come by, the surfers all gave it a big moon.

During high school days at Mira Costa High, Jeff cut classes to go surfing," he said. "If it was wind blowing offshore, zoom! I was gone."

He was sent to the principal so often for ditching classes, the principal finally said, "As long as you keep your grades up, O.K., but I don't want to see you in here anymore." When Jeff graduated from high school in '61, he enrolled in UC Berkeley.

"It was a big mistake—like going to New York or something," Jeff said. "It was black shoes, black umbrellas, library, and study—no parties."

He and his friends counteracted the dry and deadly academia by throwing parties of their own for which they charged guys one dollar to get in, and girls were allowed in free.

While at Berkeley, Jeff didn't surf. "Surf? It was too far away. The water was freezing. There were few wetsuits then." He was so lonely for the ocean he went out to the Berkeley mud flats, collected a pile of wood pieces, and built a big wooden wave in the middle of a field. Photos of that wave, with Jeff sitting on it, smoking a pipe, have been published in a number of archival magazine pieces.

I couldn't help but think of Jeff's driftwood wave during dinner one night in Haleiwa, when Jeff, Patti, and I ordered a big piece of mud pie for dessert. It arrived at the table in a big upright triangle, and Jeff grabbed his spoon. "Let's make a wave," he said, digging into the pie—and undercutting it until it was transformed into a big chocolate breaker with whipped cream whitewash around the base of it. Fed up to here with Berkeley, Jeff transferred to the University of Americas in Mexico City. "I went to learn Spanish. I went with three derelict friends and that was a big mistake. We threw a big party and got expelled."

Jeff migrated to Humboldt State and married Patti, his childhood sweetheart (they met in first grade). In Eureka, they rented a place from Katy's Smokehouse in Trinidad Bay, where Jeff started working on one of Katy's crab boats as a deckhand. One December, a 30' wave came into the harbor and broke on the crab boat. It started to sink.

"No one would do anything about it," Jeff recalled. "I had a wetsuit by now, and paddled out with my surfboard. The boat was going up and

down six feet. I was real proud of myself—to get on the boat I shoved the board down in the water and sprung up! Then I turned on the bilge pump."

The fisherman who had been fishing the boat for Katy "lost his nerve," Jeff said, and the crab fishing boat fell to him. The following winter he worked in waters where a lot of boats perished, along with their crews. "They were like farmers, lumberjacks," Jeff said. "They would drown because they were not swimmers." Jeff, however, knew how to get in and out of the waves, and "loved it."

During the summer months he fished salmon, which turned out to be something he didn't like. He went down to Santa Cruz and surfed instead. By now, Trent had been born.

In 1965, Jeff got a job with the Fish and Game Department in Santa Cruz. He also started sailing and delivering sailboats. "A guy who owned a hospital would enter the boats in races between Santa Cruz and Los Angeles, and we'd bring it home afterward," Jeff said. "It was like getting a credit card."

Searching for a boat of his own, Jeff ran into a 27' boat a friend said he could use for free. "It was at Moss Landing, loaded up with barnacles," Jeff said. "I sailed it all around the bay." One day, Jeff suggested to the owner that his boat should be sailed to Hawaii.

The owner said, "You should sail it to Hawaii. Take the boat and do it!"

In September '67, Jeff sailed for Hawaii, and thirty days later, he sailed into Hana Bay, Maui.

"I couldn't believe my eyes," he said. "There was a girl in a pareu sitting on a rock near the water, a flower in her hair. It was a beautiful day, there were Hawaiians throwing nets. I couldn't believe it. I said to myself, 'I'm not too late!'"

With that, Jeff, Patti, and son Trent moved to Hawaii—to a little house in Haula, a Hawaiian community on the North Shore. Jeff got a job in Honolulu, working for Dillingham Shipyard as a shipwright. He would stay on the boat during the week and commute out to the North Shore for weekends.

"It got tiring," Jeff said. "I decided to be a diver." Then Patti found a house on Ke Nui Road, which they rented from Flippy Hoffman. Here, Jack was born, and Petey lives today.

Jeff began diving for turtles with Jose Angel. "We sold them to restaurants for a dollar a pound," he said. It was the Hawaiian life—dive turtles in the summer, sell polished turtle shells in the winter, and live off the land—picking fruit and avocados from trees, setting nets for fish, diving for lobsters. He'd start and end each day by going surfing. When fishing turtles was banned, Jose and Jeff turned to diving for black coral.

Harvesting black coral is a deep-water proposition, where dives to 200 feet are common. Jose began to have accidents. One time, when Jeff was diving with him, he got bent. "He came up and said 'I can't feel anything,'" Jeff recalled. Another time, Angel was working off Maui and when he came up, the boat couldn't find him.

He ended up swimming and drifting to Molokai—13 hours. “Everyone thought he was lost,” Jeff said.

The end of Jose Angel came on a day in the early 1970s, when he was diving. To save on decompression time, Angel would carry a rock to sink him fast to the bottom, but on this day he miscalculated his depth, and the rock sent him barreling down to 350 feet. He was never seen



PHOTOS: JOHNSON COLLECTION

again. Jeff had already looked at the brutal statistics of black coral divers—so many of them maimed, lost or killed—and decided the odds weren't very good. He quit and became a building contractor. These days, Jeff spends most of his time surfing, organizing sailing canoe trips with his sons and friends, and there is only a little building here and there. It's the good life. “When you reach our age,” Jeff told me, “the whole point is to have fun.”

It was almost dark when other vehicles arrived to help, and to take us to the Helms/Crivello homestead where I would spend the night. I jumped into a truck with a friendly Molokai guy whose Hawaiian name means “Rose,” and as we drove across open fields to the Kalamaula area of the island, Rose laughed and laughed at the story about our landing. He thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. “Your first canoe trip? HA, HA! HAAAA HAAAAHA!” He could barely contain himself.

Rose delivered me to a house and instructed me to go in and make myself at home. The other paddling women of the *Maka Koa*—Abbey, Ane, and Nicole—had not arrived, and so I entered a backyard scene a complete stranger to everyone.

There was a huge party going on. About a hundred Hawaiians were celebrating at long tables under a lighted, festive canopy, and there was food spread over a table as long as my house in Santa Barbara. After the day we'd had, I felt like an Arab who'd just landed in Mecca. I sat down at a table with a plate full of everything, across from two friendly Hawaiian women who asked where I came from. “You don't want to know,” I said, and then told them we had just crash-landed on Mo'omomi Beach. They laughed harder than Rose. One of the women, Allison Gendreau, jumped up to get me a beer. “Here!” she said, “You need this!”

I asked Allison what the celebration was about. She pointed to a table at the far end, where two Molokai men were singing with ukuleles. One of them, a small, muscular guy with shoulder-length hair, was bedecked in numerous leis.

“See the one with the leis?” Allison said. “That's Kekama Helm, just got back from the first leg of the *Hokule'a*—sailed Hawaii to the Marquesas. He just flew in from Tahiti today.”

I looked at Kekama. He was ripping it up, singing, smiling, happier than anything. He had just made a successful voyage of a jillion miles, and we had just crash-landed in their backyard. How could anyone miss the irony of this?

Abbey, Ane, and Nicole showed up, eventually followed by Jeff and Mike Spalding, who arrived with all the pieces of the *Maka Koa* safely on a truck. The next day the wounded boat would be shipped by barge from Molokai to Oahu for repairs. Spalding wanted it fixed for a Haleiwa-to-Kauai race the following weekend.

The three women went off to stay at a nearby house, and Jeff pitched me a tent at the far corner of the lawn behind the house where the party was going on. With ukuleles playing, men singing, children running wild, dogs barking, and everyone having a good time in the full-moon night, I crawled into the tent and in about ten minutes was fast asleep.

AT MID-DAY, THE NORTH SHORE LIFEGUARDS SHOWED UP along with an assortment of Helms and Crivellos for the lunch Shannon Crivello had been working on that morning. Joe Golonka, president of the North Shore Lifeguard Association, was on the island with fellow lifeguards Steve Machin and Kaleo Crivello to set up a junior life-saving program on Molokai.

Hooking up a trailered jet ski to Joe's truck and sorting out T-shirts and instruction forms, the three lifeguards talked about rescuing surfers at North Shore. One story was about rescuing a guy who had gone out to help a girl in 25-foot Pipeline. Another was about a girl and her boyfriend in trouble at Waimea during solid 20-25' conditions. The North Shore Lifeguard Association, founded in 1996 by the Honolulu City and County lifeguards who work in District Three (North Shore), had performed during the winter just past a hair-raising 236 rescues, plus assisted in 166 serious medical emergencies, and delivered 56,200 preventative warnings to beach-goers and surfers.

"The new lifeguarding is focused on prevention," Machin said. "You can see a problem before it happens," Golonka chimed in. "They've got the wrong board—that's the main thing—white skin, they're carrying their board the wrong way."

("What's the wrong way?" I later asked Jeff. "Backward?")

Jeff joked something about not dragging the board by the leash, but said, "The right way, the board is carried in balance, with the nose slightly down."

Macho facades don't work with North Shore lifeguards. Sitting in their orange towers at Sunset, Pipeline, Waimea, they can tell if a surfer has the inner jitters. Jeff, who has rescued a lot of surfers, swimmers,



JOHNSON COLLECTION

BEFORE 1975 THERE WERE NO LIFEGUARDS ON the North Shore, but there were guys like Jeff Johnson, Jose Angel, Peter Cole, and all the surfers who were regularly on the beaches surfing big waves were constantly called on for help. For Jeff, the business of rescuing people in trouble came about quite naturally—he lived on the beach, and frantic people banged on his door.

Sitting at his kitchen counter at his house on the beach at Pipeline, Jeff drank a beer and reminisced about some of the rescues he had been involved with.

"These guys came and knocked on my window just at daybreak," he said. "Their friend was out there—a young kid we happened to know from Town. He had paddled out at first light, without realizing how big it was. It was the biggest day I'd ever seen—it was breaking on the third reef—intermittent. Every 20 to 30



(left) Jeff Johnson, Pupukea, 1991.

(top) Jack Johnson, getting his drop on in the front yard. Backdoor Pipeline, 1991.

(above) Petey Johnson, same place, 1999.

minutes it'd look all right, but then it would start breaking a quarter mile out. These guys had paddled out and they were in trouble. I couldn't see them. Got the binoculars and looked from the beach—they were a half mile out there!" Jeff paddled out, got to the surfers, and tried to convince them to come back in.

"They wouldn't have anything to do with it," Jeff said. "They said, 'No, we'll just stay here and hope a boat comes by.' I finally convinced them to paddle in, and we came in at a spot on Pipeline."

What had frightened the bejezus out of these guys looked like fun to Jeff. "Chester Danbury and I went back out to surf it," Jeff recalled. "Chester got a wave, and I got wasted."

The biggest trouble, Jeff said, always comes from enormous backwashes that grab people, that create currents and rips that go out from shore like a river. This oceanic circumstance

always leads to a situation where "you can't get out, can't get in—it's the worst place to be."

"On certain days you know there are going to be a lot of rescues," Jeff said. "When there's a sandbar rip, someone is going to get caught."

Jeff's business as a building contractor has never exempted him from rescuing people in trouble—a lot of the houses he has built have been on or near the beach. He described working on a roof of a house at Log Cabins when a little girl got sucked into a shorebreak. Her father went out after her, and now neither of them could get back to the beach. "I had someone go back and round up hoses from houses," Jeff said. "I went out there and told the dad if he could get in, I'd get his daughter in. He got to the beach, his wife was scolding him and he looked like he was having a heart attack. An ambulance took him away. I swam with the girl a half an hour

and we weren't getting anywhere. Finally, we got pulled in by the hoses, with ten people pulling."

On another day, four kids on Boogie boards got sucked out to the rocks on the left side of Waimea Bay. Jeff and a friend, Mike Miller, went out, got ahold of two of them, while two lifeguards came out to get the remaining two. On another big day, Jeff paddled out to Outside Pupukea to get to a surfer in trouble, in "real big Cloudbreak conditions." He stayed with the guy until a helicopter arrived. At about this time, Jose Angel told Jeff a helicopter had pulled up a victim in a basket when "the clip unclipped."

"The guy dropped and was killed," Jeff said. "We learned something from that—if you are a rescuer, don't ever take a ride in a helicopter." In 1990, Jeff pioneered the use of jet skis for rescue, and helicopter rescues became a thing of the past.

The Johnson house at Pipeline is a warm family home, the hub of activity, a front-yard meeting place for surfers from all over the world. Here, there is something always going on. During the week I was there, Jeff's wife of 36 years, Patti, was running two telephones at once as she closed real estate deals and found rentals for friends and relatives. Their oldest son, Trent, an accomplished waterman, lives up the road, at Rocky Point, with his dark-haired wife, Lynn, and their two children, Kona and Jaclyn. In the style of his father, Trent is a builder of houses. At the time I was there, he was busy building beach

grandkids have been measured over the years in pencil marks from the floor up. The pencil markings were continued on a kitchen cupboard over in his parent's Pipeline home and stopped only when the boys were taller than the cupboard door. Now the grandchildren are being measured.

In his air-conditioned writing room, Petey was composing an article for *Transworld Surf* magazine for which he is the Hawaiian editor. Described by the magazine as an "absolute waterman of the Pipeline and G-land cartel," Petey had just bought a beachfront lot at Log Cabins.

In the room where Jack grew up, there is a jumble of silver surf trophies all thrown into a heap on top of his closet. "He wanted to throw them out," Patti said. "He doesn't go for that kind of thing. But I wouldn't let him throw them out." More important than silver surf trophies to Jack is his art—which is a combination of guitar playing, song writing, filmmaking, and at one time, oil painting. In his budding, kaleidoscopic career, he sometimes performs with the hot, new "Philadelphonic" group, G Love and Special Sauce, which has included one of his songs, "Rodeo Clowns," in a recent album.

The song had gotten a special notice in a recent *Billboard* magazine, and Jack was in the process of cutting his own album. He was also manning cameras for surf



Combination domicile, boatworks, clubhouse, and Luxury Box: The Johnson family's oceanfront house at Pipeline. (center) An all-star cast has squatting rights on the Johnson's lanai. (far right) Jack on location during the shooting of *Thicker than Water*.

houses for some of the top surfers in the world. The next oldest son, Pete Johnson (everyone calls him Petey), is an all-around waterman whose surfing feats grace the pages of numerous magazines and the cover of Don King's 1998 Stoked surfing calendar. Petey lifeguarded the North Shore until he started up his own business, Ke Nui Clothing, and with his wife, Jennifer, he lives in the same beach house his parents rented when they first moved to this part of the North Shore. "I'm stoked to live in the house I grew up in!" Petey said, opening the kitchen cupboard where the heights of all the Johnson kids and

The youngest of the Johnson boys is Jack, a Pipe groom who became a Pipe master, and who now, at the age of 25, lives in Santa Barbara with his wife, Kim. While in Hawaii, he racked up a bunch of surf honors, including being voted as one of the 39 best high school surfers in the U.S. He has been featured on the covers of *Groundswell*, *North Shore Magazine*, and the Japanese magazine *Surfin' Life*, and during the 1992 Marui Pipeline Masters he made the finals along with some of the world's top surfers, including Marvin Foster, Gerry Lopez, and Tony Muñoz.

Johnson family is nuts about each other, it's almost too good to be true—but it's true. One cannot help but think their close-knittedness is an inspiration to an outside world that needs more love, because as you hang out with them for a while you watch everyone scrambling to be near them. When *Thicker than Water*, an avant-garde around-the-world surf movie/book package made by Jack and partners Chris and Emmett Malloy, premiered in August at the Hollywood Key Club, fans from all over the place lined up around the block for a sold-out show. The brothers and parents flew in from



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videos, including the Greg Huglin documentary, *Hawaii Watermen* and more recently *September Sessions*, a video produced by Kelly Slater.

Everyone in the

Hawaii. During the evening, G Love's group took the stage and the energy level got pretty high. But when Jack took the stage to perform with the lead singer, there was an all-out frenzy, with the audience screaming, "Jack! Jack! Jack!"

In Jack's childhood room at the Johnson home on the North Shore, there are evidences everywhere of an embryonic artistic talent. He painted frescoes on the walls behind his bed. There are scribbles of poetry on the wall near his closet. In one corner of the room is a guitar he made, a scorpion lacquered on the side—a teenaged project he did with Kelly Slater. Patti remembered how the two boys had filled a bathtub with water and soaked the wood for bending.

Growing up as "Pipe groms" and graduating to wide and varied pursuits, the abilities of the Johnson boys—in or out of the ocean—is nearly scary. As for their mastery of enormous surf, Jeff said, "I didn't push them. Watching

people in trouble on the North Shore, said, "You develop a sixth sense for knowing who's going to have a problem."

Why do lifeguards do what they do? Going out in the scariest, hairiest ocean conditions imaginable to save a surfer in trouble has to require something beyond top-drawer physique and water skills. "It's a way of respecting the ocean and people," said Kaleo Crivello. "We grew up not judging. Helping one another is the true meaning of Aloha."

As Jeff drove me to the airport in Honolulu, we were talking about all this when we both saw at exactly the same time the *Maka Koa* coming the other way—on the back of a truck, mended, as good as new. It was to be entered in a Haleiwa-Kauai race the next day. Worlds had passed since we had shipwrecked on Molokai, but it had been a mere seven days. The



them, you'd lose track of your own safety. I let them go at their own pace. They played in the shorebreak a long time." The thought made him laugh. "That's the most dangerous place."

As a mother, did Patti ever worry about her kids? "No, I really didn't," she said. "I just didn't." However, she remembered a mother and father coming to their door, desperate for help. Their son was out there, stuck in humongous waves. Jeff wasn't home. She was wrestling with their fear and despair when Trent, age 15, came around the corner. He had heard the parents' cries for help.

"I can go get him," Trent said.

Patti described a moment of inner torment. She was looking at her teenaged son, and looking at the people in despair. "I knew he could save this guy, but he was 15 years old. I had to say no, but I couldn't say no to this desperate mother and father. Just then, Jeff came home."

wave that had wrecked the *Maka Koa* had deposited me into the world of Hawaiian heroes both alive and fallen, into the world of people who surf canoes down enormous waves, the lifeguards of the North Shore, the watermen of excellence. Into the world of people who sail and paddle between islands with an innate knowledge of winds, waves, depths and currents, a knowledge that sometimes fails to save them. Into the world of Eddie Aikau, Jose Angel, George Helm, and Kimo Mitchell.

And Aka Hemmings, who has extended me an invitation to go canoe surfing with him. "You come!" he said. "I never smash up!"

The certainty of his words sounds like an invitation to another *Ben Hur* reenactment. But who knows, I might just do it. Unexpected outcomes, just like unexpected waves from Mother Nature, are a lot of fun—just so long as you can get out alive. ❖