



When I first moved to New York to start college in 1984, people would look at my photo album and tell me that I was crazy because there were so many pictures of empty waves. Today, when I see images of the dirty, slate-gray tubes of Santa Monica State Beach, the greenish brown walls of Rincon, the long rights at Rattlesnake Point, the backlit tubes of Broken Head, and the cobalt blue mountains at Mokuleia, I see old friends. Not only did these waves have more predictable personalities than most people I knew, they were there for me when my mother, father, friends, and girlfriends were not.

These experiences and surfing's popular perception are impossible to reconcile. Behavior that today might earn a temporary restraining order or charges of hate crimes were then just part of California localism, strange regional prejudices every bit as inbred and paranoid as anything in Appalachia or the Ozarks. Growing up on the Southern California coast before it was completely overrun, my friends and I thumbed our collective noses at Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" because the Pacific Ocean, our frontier, was alive and well. We felt like pioneers, with the Pacific Rim as the Ponderosa of our imaginations. As William Langewiesche has pointed out in his book *The Outlaw Sea*, "the ocean is a realm that remains radically free."

Many mornings I left my house before sunrise and wound down Santa Monica Canyon on a bike or skateboard in time to see the coyotes scampering into the brush after gorging themselves on neighborhood cats. Once I got to the stairs at the top of the canyon, I could spy the waves through the eucalyptus trees. My board lived at a friend's house, and even with the ocean just a few hundred meters away, I could only surf with friends because it took two of us to carry one board. After we wrestled our surfboards down to the beach, we surfed until the "meatball" or blackball, no surfing flag was hoisted at 10 a.m. and then rode inflatable mats or bodysurfed for the rest of the day. Although the waves at State Beach were decidedly mediocre, I got to see another side of life there. Not only was it home to the world's best volleyball players, there were also resident winos, an openly gay beach, and some of the most physically beautiful people in the world.

Though we loved the ocean and riding the waves, there was a darker reason so many of us were drawn to surfing. Our parents were members of the "Me" generation, and while most of us came from solidly upper middle-class families, we were coming of age in the odd, rootless rubble of the 1960s. By the 1970s, the quest for utopia had given way to hedonism and narcissism. One neighbor had a primal scream room and another a bisexual butler who serviced both mom and dad. Our days at the beach were a welcome relief from big, lonely houses ruled by maids and nannies. Surfing was a refuge of sense: not only was there a distinct hierarchy with clear-cut rules, the sea provided a source of stability at an uncertain time in our young lives.

Peter Maguire on the marijuana trade that fueled the surfing and world travel of his youth



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Our extreme confidence in the ocean often translated to a dangerous sense of freedom and arrogance on land. At 14, I was busted by Customs at the Tijuana border trying to smuggle fireworks. At 16, I was sneaking onto private and government property to surf waves guarded by barbed-wire fences, no trespassing signs, and men with guns. At 19, I moved to Australia and never looked back. There was very little we were not willing to do if it enabled us to surf perfect, uncrowded waves.

Whether it was bringing a few cases of Canadian whiskey through the surf during Prohibition, poaching some illegal Mexican lobsters for mobsters in Vegas, working on the gambling boats anchored in international waters off Santa Monica Pier, or offloading a load of Thai marijuana, California surfers had always been part of the black market. Fast money bought time and freedom. As journalist Craig Stecyk has written, those who knew "both the lay of the land and the nuances of the sea always found lucrative employment functioning as guides, facilitators, and transporters in this underground economy."

Just as common as the "June Gloom" fog during my formative years of surfing in California was the distinctive smell of burning marijuana at the beach. In fourth grade, I saw my first bag of pot. My friends and I used to walk to our local surfboard shop to stare longingly at surfboards we would never own. Although Zeppelin or the Stones throbbed from large teak cabinet speakers, often there was not an



employee in sight, and not even the resin and coconut surfboard wax could mask the odor of marijuana smoke. One afternoon a long-haired, well-traveled surfer came into the shop, and after exchanging warm greetings and elaborate handshakes with the shopkeeper, he threw a big plastic bag filled with greenish-brown plant matter onto the counter and said, “Thai sticks, bro.” That same summer, my friend Alex Kecht* found his older neighbor’s stash of Thai sticks and stole one. It looked like a small cigar because the buds were so neatly and uniformly tied to a small bamboo stick with a thread of the plant’s fiber. We broke the stick in half, wrapped it in a piece of notebook paper, and began to puff away. The ensuing intoxication, though not unpleasant, was so intense that I did not smoke pot again for several years.

By 14 I was surfing well enough to cadge a ride up the coast with older surfers. I sat in the truck’s bed, and when the cab’s split rear window opened, they passed me a big, oily, burritolike joint of Thai that we smoked down to the roach. By the time we reached Westward Beach, I was so stoned that I felt like crawling under the truck and hiding. However, the combination of cold water, powerful waves, and peer pressure quickly sobered me up. By 16, marijuana was my daily bread, without which no surfing session was complete. Although there was a Western Surfing Association, a National Scholastic Surfing Association, a Christian Surfing Association, and probably even a Republican surfing organization, my peers and I were members of the Marijuana

Surfing Association. Not all surfers smoked pot—some were adamantly opposed to it—but for us, pot and surfing went hand in hand. Not only was smoking an anesthetic that dulled life’s sharp edges, it was, above all, an effective time killer for our endless waiting. Whether it was for a swell to come, the tide to drop, or the wind to change, we seemed to be always waiting for something.

I am old enough and honest enough to remember the Thai sticks that flooded my beachside town each summer—a surfer’s equivalent of the Beaujolais nouveau. What Yale’s Skull and Bones society once was to American politics, our subset of the Californian, Hawaiian, and Australian surfing tribes was to Thai marijuana smuggling. By the 1980s, the arrival of the Thai marijuana fleet in California marked the start of summer. Because so many watermen were employed in different aspects of the trade, we had Thai sticks before anyone else.

Thai pot was as important a part of our long summer surfing expeditions to Baja’s remote pointbreaks as wetsuits, surfboards, or sleeping bags. Because we knew we would be searched by the Mexican Army and federales at checkpoints up and down the peninsula, we rolled dozens of joints that we hid in the Speedos we wore under our swim trunks. We knew that while the macho Mexicans would frisk us, they would never touch our crotches. For as young and as stoned as we were, we held up well under questioning. One frustrated federales, after spending 45 minutes tearing my truck apart, stared into my friend’s bloodshot eyes and said, “You say you have no *mota*, but your eyes say yes.”

At a remote and windblown pointbreak far down the Baja peninsula, I saw a Cessna 172 land on a rough dirt strip and begin unloading surfboards. The pilot and his friend, skilled older surfers, rode waves for a few hours and then flew away. Every afternoon of the swell, the same Cessna flew in for the best waves of the day and returned to Cabo in time for happy hour. I asked my friend how they were able to winter on the North Shore and summer in Baja with no visible means of support. “Because,” he replied in a hushed and slightly reverential tone, “they’re scammers.” To us pot-smoking teenagers, scammers were heroic Robin Hood characters. They trafficked only in pot and surfed more world-class waves than anyone else.

While the pedestrian scammers paddled bales of pressed Mexican across the border, the elite had moved on to Southeast Asia, where the risk-to-reward ratio was much greater. Because of our proximity to the sources, it was very easy for surfers to make large amounts of money fast by middle-manning deals between the marijuana haves and have-nots. Like so many surfers, I was saving my money for an international surfing trek; although I had a full-time summer job, my income was supplemented by brokering pot deals. As criminally powerful as Crips and other black gangs were, they had a very hard time getting their hands on good pot because it was largely controlled by upper-middle-class white boys who refused to deal with them.

I had developed some deep ties through sports and work to powerful black families in the Venice and Crenshaw areas and foolishly believed that I somehow was immune to the rules of the game.

I would meet my surfer connection at a McDonald’s in Malibu, eat a burger, and leave with a duffle bag full of pot. From there I would drive down to the “Ghost Town” section of Venice. Formally known as Oakwood, Ghost Town is a black neighborhood less than a mile from the beach that had been set aside by Venice founding father Abbot Kinney as a neighborhood where blacks could own property. I had grown up playing sports with the scion of one of the most prominent criminal families there.

Kevin “KK” Jackson and I first met in Pop Warner Football as 10-year-olds and were reunited in high school, where we became close friends. By the 1960s, Oakwood was a ghetto and Jackson’s parents, aunts, and uncles had established their reputations as thugs and career criminals long before the Crips. The crime for which his family would become infamous occurred in 1965 when his mother, Uncle Bernard, and Aunt Shirley mugged and murdered a Santa Monica city councilman’s son. They were all arrested, tried, and sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

KK Jackson was raised by his grandparents, and most of his childhood weekends were spent driving from San Quentin, to Soledad, to Folsom, to Sybil Brand to visit family members. When his Uncle Bernard got out of prison, he was muscle-swollen and his second-floor apartment just off the strand in Venice was always full of tattooed musclemen doing curls in the living room and silicone-enhanced blondes they referred to as “freaks,” who looked like they had just stepped from the pages of *Hustler Magazine*. In this buzzing hive of criminal activity, KK and his brothers and cousins learned the rules of the game. “He methodically got all the kids my age at that time into drugs, because everybody was at his house,” Jackson recalled.

I was the only student in our school who was a regular visitor to Uncle Bernard’s; little did I know that I was on a first-name basis with the heaviest gangsters in Venice. “That whole crew hangin’ out at his place were cutthroats and killers. We didn’t know—we didn’t know we was in the lion’s mouth,” said Jackson.

By his senior year of high school, KK was one of West L.A.’s most promising point guards. Not only did he lead Crossroads High School to their first California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) basketball championship, he was named All-CIF, *L.A. Times* All-Westside, All-CIF Southern Section, Delphic League Player of the Year, and team MVP. Although he received a basketball scholarship to San Jose State, he was also a fast-rising member of the Venice Shoreline Crips. KK and Uncle Bernard would buy whatever pot I was willing to sell them, break it into minuscule half-gram bags, and make a small fortune. Nobody ever laid a finger on me because nobody wanted to kill the golden goose.



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KK was not my only inner-city connection. Other times I left the Malibu McDonald’s, took the Coast Highway south to the Santa Monica Freeway, got off in Crenshaw, near the Watts border, and drove to one of the tidy row houses, where my friend Rod Smith* lived with his parents. I met Rod when working as a construction laborer on the graveyard shift on a downtown Los Angeles high rise. Aside from the elevator operator, I was the only white person on the shift and got hired because of my father’s eminent position on the project. The previous summer I had been a lifeguard in Malibu Colony and had planned to lifeguard again, but after crashing a car, I owed my dad money, and he had other ideas about my summer job.

Rod’s father, LJ, was the foreman of our construction site. On one of our lunch breaks Rod pulled out a pinner joint while we were all sitting by our cars. I had been waiting for this moment. I turned to my colleagues, let out an arrogant snort, and said, “Put it away, Rod. Man—that’s not a joint.” I took a big fat Thai joint from my truck’s ashtray and handed it to him. “Now, *this* is a joint.” Suffice it to say that none of the others had ever smoked pot of this quality, and the rest of the shift was especially unproductive. Word got out that “Pete was connected,” and my first request for a big bag of pot, at cost plus, came from LJ.

After my summer job ended I was a regular visitor to the Smith house in Crenshaw. If my white Mustang was parked out front, it meant that they were open for business.



Caption



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My old foreman bought at least a quarter of whatever I brought at my cost—the tribute. His son broke up the rest into tiny nickel bags that he sold from the outdoor porch. Rod's parents had no problem with him selling pot, and there was nothing fleeting or furtive about it. Most nights we would drink beer and eat chicken or ribs as a steady stream of people came up on the porch. All of our customers were adults, most on their way home from work, and grateful for the opportunity to buy quality pot.

Between my full-time construction job and my drives to Crenshaw, I was able to save quite a bit of money and took an eight-month surfing trip to New Zealand, Australia, Nauru, Micronesia, Fiji, Rarotonga, and French Polynesia. One week after I returned to Southern California in the late summer of 1984, I decided I could never live there again. I managed to wrangle an eleventh-hour admission to a small Northeastern liberal arts college and for the first time in my life became a serious student. What shocked me about New York was that it was easier to get heroin than decent pot. After my freshman year, I returned to California and spent the summer working construction and surfing in Baja. As I was getting ready to drive back to New York for the fall semester, I decided to bring a quarter pound of pot.

I broke my quarter pound into smaller, heat-sealed bags that I carefully wiped down with gasoline in case of dogs. Those bags went inside a large plastic bag that was secured to the underside of my driver's seat. I was taught always to assume that you would be searched, and if the police could find your stash, you deserved to get busted. I rolled two joints for the drive and covered over 900 miles the first day. Closing in on the New Mexico–Texas border, I lit my last joint and after I'd taken a few puffs, I accidentally dropped it. I turned on the interior light to look for the still burning joint and unbeknownst to me, passed a New Mexico state policeman going 85 MPH. Finally, I found the joint on the floor, took a couple more hits, and then noticed red lights so far behind me that I figured they were for someone else.

The lights gained at an alarming rate, and suddenly a spotlight filled my Mustang's interior with harsh white light. "Pull over and keep your hands on the steering wheel," the policeman said over his loudspeaker. Because the joint was still in my hand and the car reeked of pot, I did neither and instead slid the roach into my sock and rolled down both electrical windows. In a vain attempt to air out the car, I took a suspiciously long time to slow and stop. In my rearview mirror, I saw the tall, lean state policeman

approaching with one hand on his flashlight and the other on his gun. The beam from his big Maglite found my eyes and although I was nearly blinded, the sound of gravel crunching underfoot grew louder and stopped next to my window. The officer took one look at my bloodshot eyes, caught a whiff of the car's interior, and asked, "Son, are you transporting narcotics across state lines?" Terrifying thoughts jumped into my head and my brain did quantum-speed calculus: more than four ounces + crossing state lines = Dad/lawyers/never live it down. Once I recognized my proximity to deep trouble, I remembered the advice of my elders—"It's not over until the cuffs are on"—and settled into character. It was time to stonewall.

"No sir," I barked like a nervous marine recruit at Paris Island.

"Son, I smell the fruity herbal aroma of marijuana, your eyes are bleeding, and you have a brown stain on your lip."

"No sir," I replied with even more conviction.

"Do I have your consent to search?"

Hoping to trip him up on a technicality, I did not reply and instead handed him the keys. He told me to get out of the car and open it or he would get a dog. I lifted the hatchback; the car was crammed with surfboards, duffle

bags, and boxes of books and papers. When he unzipped the first duffle bag and found bundles of slides wrapped in paper and duct tape, certain that he had hit the drug mother lode, he ordered me up against the car and told me to spread my hands and feet. I followed his instructions and said, "Sir they are just slides." The policeman opened a few packages of Kodachromes and resumed his search. When he found a dozen blocks of white surfboard wax, he ordered me up against the car again. "Coconut surfboard wax," I said. "Smell it."

After 20 minutes, half of my belongings were sitting in the red New Mexico dirt, and he hadn't found so much as a seed. Because the search started in the back of the car, he was still a long way from the pot stashed under the driver's seat. I could sense the cop's frustration as he lay facedown in the back of the car, sniffing like a dog. By now, even the smell of the joint had faded, and for the first time I thought, *I might get out of this after all*. In that moment, under the dark desert sky, I told myself that if I got out of this jam, I would never put myself in this position again. The policeman finally got out of the back of my car, straightened his uniform, looked me sternly in the eye, and said, "Son, we are going to strike a little deal," and paused. Although I managed to maintain my composure, my mind



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started to race: where was he going with this? When he said, “You keep it under 55 while you are in New Mexico and we’ll call it even,” I nearly collapsed. Now came the hardest part: not jumping in his arms and promising never to do anything so stupid again. Instead, I kept a straight face and said, “Yes, sir,” for the final time, and began putting my bags back in the car. Although I continued to smoke pot, I never trafficked it again.

After receiving my doctorate from Columbia University in 1993, I began working in Southeast Asia, documenting Khmer Rouge atrocities for a number of nonprofit organizations. During my first trip in 1994, I visited Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh, where approximately 15,000 to 20,000 men, women, and children entered and fewer than 20 survived. All were savagely tortured, and most were photographed in a series of eerie and sometimes gruesome portraits. Four Americans had been among those killed. When I found and read their confessions, I was stunned. Had I been a few years older, it could have been me. While some historians and journalists were speculating that they were CIA agents, I suspected they were pot smugglers.

The following summer, I went camping at Rattlesnake Point, a remote surf spot on the Baja peninsula. Isolated and lawless, it had once been a favorite hideout for surfers on the lam. One long afternoon during a flat spell, Ned, a quietly

impressive older surfer from Maui, stopped by our camp for a chat, and the conversation turned to my recent trip to Cambodia and the four Americans killed by the Khmer Rouge. Not only did he know two of them, he also confirmed they had been trying to smuggle pot. Although the details were hazy, Ned said that his friend Mike Ritter was living in Thailand at the time of their captures and knew more.

Ritter’s personal history is not unique. His life is in many ways a template for the surfer scammer. The Santa Barbara native smuggled his first hash from Afghanistan in 1968 and became a partner in a hash oil ring in 1970. By the mid-1970s, the Californian had found his calling—Thai sticks. Year after year, scam after scam, he had only limited financial success. Finally, in 1986, he earned \$5,000,000 from a successful Thai scam and retired. Now that he had the capital to enjoy “the surfing lifestyle,” he did not recognize it. Unlike himself and his peers, who were content to subsist on fish, rice, water, and perfect waves, the modern surfers he ran into in Indonesia traveled in climate-controlled yachts with satellite phones, full bars, and little cultural interest beyond watching the video highlights of their last surf session. After a decade of international surfing surfaris and exotic travel, Ritter grew bored. When he divorced at fifty, he felt as though his life of scamming was catching up with him. Above all, he did not want to lead a double life anymore. In an effort to maintain his cover, Ritter shunned people and as a result, he said, “My life became solitary and lonely. I was not learning anything new. I wanted a fuller life; I wanted deeper relationships with people.”

There had been a time when surfer smugglers were treated like heroes, but by the 1990s those days were over.

Not only was law enforcement successfully hunting them down, their history was being disavowed by many of their former coconspirators and old customers, who had traded pot for Prozac. Meanwhile, others had become SUV-driving Republicans. Despite the seismic shifts in the social landscape, Mike Ritter remained proud of how he and his peers had crossed oceans and war zones and overcome tremendous obstacles to return with this precious commodity. The smuggler wanted to talk about his past—the frustrations, the failures, the triumphs. Like the moonshiners of the north Georgia mountains, Ritter did not consider smuggling morally wrong, just illegal because of an arbitrary law.

Mike Ritter visited Cambodia as a tourist in 1997 and heard about my research on Tuol Sleng Prison at the bar of the Foreign Correspondents Club in Phnom Penh. My colleague Doug Niven and I had tracked down and interviewed the prison’s staff and survivors. Included in the mountains of evidence were the “confessions” of the four American sailors captured on yachts in Cambodian waters. Ritter remembered when they vanished and had wondered about their horrible fate for more than two decades. The retired smuggler had good reason to fear the Khmer Rouge. He had piloted numerous boatloads of marijuana in the Gulf of Thailand and on more than one occasion, in Cambodian waters.

Mike Ritter and I both happened to be at Rattlesnake Point to surf a large swell generated by Hurricane Nora in September 1997. I had just returned from another trip to Cambodia with new information about the captured Americans provided by one of the prison’s survivors. Ritter pulled up to a dusty cantina in a tricked-out dune buggy and introduced himself. Unlike some of the pot dealers I had met, the actual smugglers, those who moved the product, looked different. They were weatherbeaten, weary, and conspicuously inconspicuous. He was no exception. Although he was small and sinewy, he had the broad shoulders of a lifelong surfer and was remarkably fit for his age. With his wary eyes hidden behind sunglasses, Ritter was cool and noncommittal, but agreed to reach out to some old friends in Thailand and help me learn more. It would be many years before he told me that in 1978 he had been asked to supply one of the captured boats with marijuana. Within a month, Ritter confirmed that both boats had been on smuggling missions; he had found out who was running the operations and who probably supplied the marijuana.

That fall, Mike Ritter began interviewing retired smugglers to learn more about the Americans who had vanished off the Cambodian coast. I was amazed by the interviews Ritter wanted to better understand the historical currents that moved him and many of his generation to do what they did and asked for my help conducting a larger oral history of pot smuggling.

Because marijuana smuggling is illegal, it is impossible to assemble historical evidence in a traditional



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way. There are no smuggling archives, and state records only document the victories of law enforcement. The only records of success are the fading memories of the surviving participants. Though the marijuana dealer’s side of the story has been told many times, the smuggler’s story has never been told satisfactorily. Despite the inevitable inaccuracies of decades-old memories, oral history is of unique value in understanding the past; as the great Italian historian Alessandro Portelli points out, it “tells us less about the events as such than about their meaning.”

My relationship with Mike Ritter was tested and tempered by reversals of fortune that neither of us could have anticipated or imagined. But many people beyond those immediately involved played a part in this narrative, whether they were aware of it or not. Many Americans want to forget that pot smugglers helped shape contemporary culture. They established the corrosive relationship between generations of American middle- and upper-middle-class youth and law enforcement that eroded our respect for the state.

*The following is an excerpt from the new book **Thai Stick**, by Peter Maguire and Mike Ritter. An asterisk (*) marks where names have been changed.*

