

Surf legend makes boards in El Dorado County

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

The Sierra foothills seem an unlikely place to find a surf legend. But an “Endless Summer” vibe fills the Rescue workshops of Floyd Smith.

Four converted sheds built in a El Dorado County hillside pasture – one for foam, one for wood, two for finishing – serve as Smith’s artistic studios. As he’s done most of his life, Smith transforms large, plain “blanks” of foam or balsa wood into wave-riding art.

By hand, he shapes them into surfboards and inlays intricate detail. His works are coveted for their beauty as well as their dynamics.



Floyd Smith uses a hand plane to shape a balsa wood surfboard at his home in Rescue. Photo/Randall Benton/Sacramento Bee

World-renowned for his contributions to surfing, originally through his Gordon and Smith Surfboards and later with his signature brand, Smith is a shaper extraordinaire.

His relocation to the small town near Shingle Springs came as he tried to reshape his life.

After decades on the ocean, Smith brought his family inland for safety and sanity. That was 1985, and the San Diego beach scene – overrun at that time by what he remembers as thugs and drugs – was far from paradise. He bought a small country ranchette where he planned raise his children along with his family's food.

Smith, now 73, said he intended to leave surfing behind him.

"I quit," he recalled. "I wanted to do something else. But people wouldn't let me. They kept asking me to make boards."

So Smith complied. And he has continued making boards, enjoying every minute of it, never losing the love of his craft or the sea. Many consider his boards to be works of art, which he sees as a blessing and a curse.

"Most of the people who buy my boards now only ride them once," he lamented. "They give them a christening in the ocean, then hang them on the wall."

They're too pretty and too valuable to risk to the waves. A new Floyd Smith board costs \$1,500 to \$5,000.

Longboards – the 9- to 10-foot "big guns" favored by big-wave riders – are his handcrafted specialty.

He has made almost 8,000 signature boards.

"All my life, I've tried to perfect the longboard," said Smith, who makes at least one surfboard a month. "The longboard has a glide to it. When it goes over the water, there's no friction, no sound. It's just like riding on a sheet of ice, just sliding along, but with control."

Since the 1970s, shortboards have dominated the waves. Averaging 6 feet in length, these boards are light and

maneuverable.

“But you can’t slide on a short board; you just get that speed burst,” said Smith, whose original company helped usher in the shortboard revolution.

“Shortboards are fun. You get air. They’re made for aerials, for tricks. But that glide of a longboard, that’s real fun. It’s addictive.”

With six decades of shaping experience, Smith’s hands instinctively know the nuances of the board as he smooths it to perfection. A carpenter by trade, Smith still uses familiar tools such as wood planes and draw-knives that he started with as a teenager in San Diego.

“His work is fantastic,” said collector and fan Ed Bowman, who owns one of Smith’s boards along with a restored 1959 Ford woody. “He’s one of the best shapers around. He can close his eyes, run his hands along the sides of a board and just feel it, taking nothing – a blank – and making it really something.”

In the world of surfing, Smith is still revered. He pioneered the modern surfboard, molding greatness from slabs of foam and wood. In December, he was inducted into the International Surfboard Builders Hall of Fame.

At the surf festival during the recent Mavericks Invitational big wave contest at Half Moon Bay, hundreds of fans swarmed Smith as he demonstrated his old-school shaping skills. Frosty Hesson, the real-life surf mentor portrayed in the movie “Chasing Mavericks,” sought out Smith at the event.

“Both had the highest respect for each other,” recalled friend Robbie Jeremica, who helped at the demonstration. “Floyd is the most humble man. People just glom on to him. He really loves kids and will spend hours showing them how to shape. He wants to get every kid out there at the beach, surfing and

shaping.”

At their home on 6 acres in the country, his wife, Sherry Smith, created a “surf room” for Floyd’s collection of memorabilia. It’s packed with beautiful boards including a 10-foot, 100-pound Hawaiian plank board like those used by the original surfers.

“It took a special wave to ride a board that heavy,” Floyd said. “You had to be a real good waterman to ride it.”

Posters and photos of famous surfers line the walls. A large collection of surf books fills a bookcase.

“To me, Floyd is like no one out there,” said Sherry Smith, who met him in church. They married in 1978.

“There’s a resurgence in interest (in his work),” she said. “The early people are passing away. He has so much history.”

A native of San Diego, Smith made his first board in 1955 when he was still a teen. In 1961, he founded Gordon and Smith Surfboards with partner Larry Gordon after making boards for a few years in Gordon’s garage.

By the mid-1960s, Smith was a major influence in surfing in both the United States and Australia, where he worked for many years.

Mike Hynson, star of “The Endless Summer,” the seminal 1966 surf safari film, rode Gordon and Smith boards. So did several of the top pro surfers of that era including Skip Frye, Dale Dobson, Billy Hamilton, Butch Van Artsdalen, Barry Kanaiapuni and Australian legend Bobby Brown.

Today’s surfers owe their speed and grace to some of the innovations Smith and Gordon brought to the sport. They helped spearhead the board evolution from balsa to foam. Their innovative Hot Curl surfboard bridged the gap between longboards and shortboards (Gordon and Smith boards are still

being made by the company).

Smith still makes his boards pretty much the way he's always done it. He treasures the 40-pound planks of 10-foot balsa from Ecuador that he has stashed.

"Balsa wood has become too hard to get," said Smith, noting the decline in tropical forests. "It takes a lot of skill to work it."

A wooden custom board with inlays takes more than 40 hours to complete, he said. Foam boards can be finished in 10 hours, but require a special temperature-controlled environment.

Smith doesn't get to the beach often these days, but the pull is still there.

Recently, he visited Santa Cruz with his two sons and four grandsons – "three generations, all in the water at the same time," he said.

He's spent more of his life making boards than riding them, but he still feels the same joy gliding over waves that he did when he was a teen.

"It's like nothing else in the world," he said. "It feels so good. You want to do it over and over again. It never gets old."