

ENTERTAINMENT

Hundreds witness Santa Cruz homecoming of historic Hawaiian surfboards

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SANTA CRUZ >> Around 200, many wearing Hawaiian leis and snapping cellphone photos, clustered around a large truck outside the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History on Thursday to witness the arrival of two historic surfboards.

Over a century ago, three Hawaiian princes surfed Santa Cruz's San Lorenzo River mouth — the first instance of the sport on the U.S. mainland — riding "o'lo" boards shaped from Santa Cruz redwood. When the princes returned to Hawaii around 1890, they took the nearly 20-foot, 200-pound boards with them, kicking off a 40-year era of redwood surfing in Hawaii.

For decades, two of the three original boards were forgotten deep in a Honolulu museum archive, until discovered by staff in 2012. They have never been shown to the public, said Santa Cruz historian Geoffrey Dunn, who first heard the lore of the missing boards in the 1970s.

“When I heard they were coming, I wept. Just the story’s so beautiful,” Dunn said. “The circle of history keeps getting completed. The boards that were first built here 130 years ago, go to Hawaii and come back.”

Dunn worked with Kim Stoner of the Santa Cruz Surfing Club Preservation Society to bring the boards for the Santa Cruz museum show, which runs July 3 to Oct. 25.

Around 40 woodies, or vintage surf wagons, accompanied the surfboards on the last leg of their journey, leading a procession from the Pasatiempo parking lot Thursday.

The motorcade was greeted at the museum by Antioch resident Kumu Kau Peralto, a Hawaiian hula teacher who chanted blessings in her native tongue, meant to wake and welcome the spirits of the surfboards, she said. The thick crowd parted as workers hauled the long wooden crates off the truck and into the museum lobby.

Ellis Brandt, a 13 year old surfer from Alameda, videoed the pageant on his iPhone. He first read of the Hawaiian princes earlier this week at the Santa Cruz Surfing Museum.

“Oh my gosh, these are those boards. Wow, that’s really cool. These are more than just surfboards. They have a spiritual meaning too. They’re not just objects,” Ellis said.

Hushes and whispers filled the packed lobby, as workers lifted the crate lids to reveal the beautifully simple single-plank boards, which were naked, with no fins, paint or resin.

Bob Pearson, well-known Santa Cruz shaper and head of Pearson Arrow Surfboards, was part of the team responsible for the boards’ homecoming. He shaped replica o’lo redwood boards which will be part of the museum’s surfing exhibition at Cowell Beach July 19.

Pearson, who saw the historic boards for the first time Thursday, said he already knew their dimensions, but was surprised by how white and salt-stained the wood was.

“When they took these out of the box, my heart was fluttering,” Pearson said.

Redwood o’lo boards are long, narrow and “extremely, ridiculously heavy” — a different type of surfing, he said — hard to carry and paddle.

“I surfed a 9-foot redwood yesterday and I damn near needed a snorkel,” he said.

Princes of Surf

What: Exhibit of two historic redwood boards surfed by Hawaiian princes in Santa Cruz in the 1880s.

When: July 3 to Oct. 25.

Where: Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz

Cost: Free on first Friday of month or \$5.

Details: www.santacruzmah.org or 831-429-1964. Event includes a paddle-out featuring locals riding handcrafted Hawaiian style redwood boards 8 a.m. to 12 noon July 19 at Santa Cruz’s Cowells Beach and the Santa Cruz Main Beach. A 1 p.m. luau at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History will follow.