



Don James: Prewar Surfing Photographs

Don James, Matt Warshaw

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A strong sense of nostalgia and a yearning for a simpler life are the accompaniments to the images in Don James' *Pre-War Surfing Photographs*. At the end of the Depression and before the beginning of WWII, James and a small group of friends lived a charmed life in Southern California. When school was out, they roamed the undeveloped Eden-like coast from Malibu to San Onofre, scraping together gas money for their worn jalopies, lugging 90-pound wooden boards to the ocean, sleeping in lifeguard huts and makeshift tent camps in the sand. They lived hand-to-mouth, plucking an endless supply of abalone and lobster from the ocean and raiding nearby orange and avocado orchards at night. What spending money they had came from guiding rumrunners to secluded coves, selling fresh fish to local restaurants, life guarding in posh beach clubs in Santa Monica, or acting as stuntmen and extras for Hollywood films. At that time, there were fewer than 200 surfers in the entire state, and James and his friends were inventing a beach/surf culture that would endure for decades. In 1936, at 16 years old, James began chronicling those days with his father's folding Brownie camera. For water shots, he would place the camera in a homemade semi-waterproof pine box, rest the box atop his board, and paddle out to the calm water adjacent to the surf. Focal range of the Brownie was limited, and James preferred to keep his frame uncluttered, so many of the photographs have a similar weight and balance. The images in *Pre-War Surfing Photographs* are the result of his preliminary endeavors, the works that mark the beginning of James' career. Throughout his life, James continued to perfect his skills going on to take a multitude of elegant surfing photographs, for which he became famous, until his death in the 1990s.

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