Bethesda Surf Shop: Sunshine House History

Posted by Chris_Shaffer | 12 - Sep - 2012

In the late 1970s into the early 1980s, just about anywhere you saw teenagers around the DC area, you saw long-sleeved Sunshine House t-shirts. The flagship store of the Sunshine House empire was the Bethesda Surf Shop on Cordell Avenue in downtown Bethesda. The old house where the Bethesda Surf Shop was located is long gone now, as is the chain of surf shops. The history of the Bethesda Surf Shop parallels that of Bethesda (and Ocean City, MD, for that matter), a history in which rapid growth and development permanently altered both the landscape and the mindset of its denizens.

Part I

Jimmy Finigan seems way too mellow to be the man who at one time owned a six store chain that retailed surfboards and skateboards around the DC metro area and the DelMarVa shore. Upon further reflection, Finigan seems to perfectly embody the Do It Yourself spirit of early surfers and skateboarders as well as their cool. Why else would a young man studying for final exams at college in Missouri pack up, pre-finals, and ride with a friend to California in 1964? My father went nuts, said Finigan.

Retired now, Jimmy Finigan spends most of his free time with his horses in a rural area well outside the Beltway. In 1964, when he joined his friend on a road trip while forsaking final exams, he made a life altering decision that would eventually blossom into ownership of a chain of surf shops. Upon arriving in California, he got a job working for drag racer Mickey Thompson and started surfing Huntington Beach. Immediately enamored of surfing, Finigan started making surfboards in his free time.

He abandoned his cool California life and returned to Maryland in 1967 at the behest of his local draft board (not a type of surfboard). While serving in the Maryland National Guard, he pooled his money with partner C.V. Roberts (I think I had $2,500 and he had $3,000) to open Bethesda Surf Shop under the aegis of Finigan and Roberts Enterprises. It was one of the first inland surf shops in the eastern U.S. According to Jimmy Finigan, the goal was to sell the best surfboards we could findwe had boards from California, Hawaii and Australia.

When it opened in 1967, the Bethesda Surf Shop was located near the intersection of Bradley Boulevard and Arlington Road. In 1968, Finigan and Roberts Enterprises moved the store to its iconic Cordell Avenue location: a classic old house, painted in bright pastel colors. Finigan recalled that one day, while working in the shop in 1968 or 69, an elderly lady walked in and told him that the house had the first telephone exchange in Bethesda.

In 1969 Finigan and Roberts Enterprises opened a second store in Ocean City, MD near the old bridge downtown. Originally called The Enterprise II, the Ocean City store sported a logo of two fingers making a peace sign on its t-shirts. Later renamed Sunshine House, the store was relocated to 63rd Street on a property purchased for $28,000. The store did really well. It was located just one block north of what would become the Route 90 Bridge. I didnt realize it at the time, but all that high-rise development that came when the new bridge opened would eventually force me to close the store in 1992, said Finigan.

In the meantime another store opened in Falls Church, VA called Wave Craft. Jimmy Finigan was on his way to creating a surf store empire when skateboarding took off in the mid-1970s.

Next time: Part Two, Riding High: Skateboards and T-shirts

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