

Faster than a speeding locomotive

By Tim Keller – For The Comet | Posted: Tuesday, December 2, 2014 4:26 pm

Raton High School English teacher featured in new movie about skateboarding history

PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIFORNIA— My right foot is planted firmly on asphalt. My left foot is tentatively perched atop a short fiberglass plank with four fast wheels beneath it. Below me is a long ramp, the upper parking lot at Palisades High School. Generations of students have passed since the last time the blacktop was resurfaced, the cracks and debris a minefield for an old guy speeding down the ramp on wheels.

At the bottom of the hill, 100 yards below me, is a ten-member Hollywood film crew with their \$100,000 lens pointed up at me, ready to follow my descent for the film “Skateboarding’s First Wave.” I used to ride down this hill all day. That was a long time ago. The last time I stood atop a skateboard was 47 years ago. It’s now July 2014.

With my right foot, I push off and I’m speeding downhill toward the camera.

Like my father and grandfather before me, I used to nail metal wheels to the bottoms of 2x4s, attaching a vertical board to the front for control, then ride the “scooter” precariously down the sidewalk. Growing up in Pacific Palisades, California, I also had a pair of indoor shoe skates. My mom would drop me off at the roller rink on Santa Monica Pier for a Saturday afternoon of skating.

Somehow, around 1962, skateboards were born when kids switched out the metal wheels on their scooters in favor of indoor wheels with their better traction. The 2x4s were quickly jettisoned for thinner, wider boards that allowed more control. The Santa Monica Mountains come right to the ocean so the beach towns are built on hills. We kids were beginning surfers at the beaches in the mornings, then we turned into “sidewalk surfers” on our skateboards in the afternoons.

Within a year, Hobie Skateboards and Makaha Skateboards emerged and spread skateboarding across America. Each company launched its own skateboard team for exhibitions, advertising, and a rapidly



Tim Keller skateboarding back in California

Tim Keller now, making cutbacks down the upper hill at Palisades High School. Keller, an English teacher at Raton High School and contributor to the Comet is featured in the new documentary “Skateboarding’s First Wave.”

growing slate of competitions. The Palisades kids skating every day down the ramps of “Pali Hill” formed their own team and found a sponsor. I was the oldest, and the organizer. Soon Palisades Skateboards and the Palisades Skateboard Team were giving Hobie and Makaha a run for their money.

The mid-1960s skateboard boom exploded, peaking at the 1965 International Skateboard Championships in Anaheim, broadcast on ABC’s Wide World of Sports. Then it fizzled and disappeared. The invention of better wheels a decade later led to a resurrection of skateboarding by a bunch of young surf punks six miles down the beach, at Ocean Park and Venice, which they called Dogtown.

The documentary “Dogtown and the Z-Boys” hit the big screen in 2001 and the Hollywood feature film “Lords of Dogtown “ followed in 2005. The two films chronicled the skateboarding craze of the mid-1970’s in Ocean Park and Venice Beach, California. Skateboarding again exploded and now there are skateparks all around the country. Skateboarding’s new history books have given the sport’s 1960s emergence no more than a paragraph. In an effort to correct that, late last year I wrote a long story that caused a stir when it was given the entire front page of the Lifestyle section of the Palisadian-Post.

Almost a half-century after we last saw each other, ten members of the Palisades Skateboard Team reunited in late July at Pali Hill for a new documentary being made by team member Don Michael Burgess, Academy Award-nominated cinematographer for such films as “Forrest Gump”, “Cast Away”, “Spider-Man”, “42”, and “Flight.” My friend and teammate, Peter Burg, joined me from his home in Rye, Colorado, and we rode the Amtrak Southwest Chief round trip to Los Angeles for the reunion and filming.

Fewer than five months later, Peter and I are preparing to return to Los Angeles—we’re flying this time—for the invitation-only premiere screening of Don Burgess’s new film, which has taken the name of my article, “Skateboarding’s First Wave.” Meantime, the film has been entered at prestigious film festivals around the world, from South by Southwest to Sundance, from Berlin to Cannes.

With its cracked asphalt, and debris from towering eucalyptus and pine trees, upper Pali Hill is too steep and fast to ride anymore straight down at full speed. I’m cranking hard left and right cutbacks to control my speed as I drop down the ramp toward the big camera. My only concession to modern safety gear is shoes—we usually did this barefoot! Peter joins me as we cut in and out of each other’s arcs, giving Don’s film crew some humor as old best friends try to remember how to carve tight turns down a steep hill without flying out of control. We know that the years have made us more breakable.

The prospect of skateboarders in their 60s pulling out the old moves has brought a crowd. The Palisadian-Post and two skateboarding magazines have sent reporters and photographers who line the sides of the hill as Peter and I roll past. Members of the early Hobie and Makaha teams have come to watch, envious that they’re not in our film, which delights us because we were always envious of them.

The filming moves to the high school's outdoor corridors with their smooth concrete, a skateboarder's dream surface. Along with my brother, Terry Keller, we're joined by four women who were original members of our team. A full decade before Title IX mandated equal opportunity for girls in school sports, we had four girls competing right alongside the boys—and often winning.

One addition to the school corridors since our day is a prominent NO SKATEBOARDING sign. Don sets up a shot of the full team skating under the sign. We're spinning kick turns and making slalom runs in formation.

And then the filming ends. Thirty people head over to Don's nearby home for a reunion bash complete with food, drink, and 40 minutes of archival film of us in action 50 years ago. The film crew films us watching the old film, which will be combined with the new footage and interviews to make the documentary, accompanied by two dozen new surf guitar instrumentals written and recorded by Peter Burg for the soundtrack. (Web search "Skateboarding's First Wave" for the whole story.)

Two days later, Peter and I take an LA Metro bus downtown to Union Station and climb on the eastbound Amtrak Southwest Chief for the 24-hour ride home. From our windows high in the passenger train, it sometimes feels that the train isn't moving as fast as we were, rolling down Pali Hill cranking cutbacks to control our speed as we swooshed past the spectators and the photographers and the Hollywood film crew.