

Cal Porter

OLS Cal Porter was the heart and soul of the L.A. County Zuma Lifeguards. A pioneer surfer, an all-around waterman, Cal started his lifeguard service at the Venice Plunge at 33 cents an hour in 1939 at age 15. He served at Will Rogers for many of his early lifeguard years and was one of the first lifeguards to work at Zuma Beach where he became a lifeguard icon. OLS Cal Porter was probably the last living ocean lifeguard who started his service in the saltwater plunges. The Venice Plunge where Cal served was built in the beginning of the 20th century and closed its doors in the early 1940's. Cal retired in 1976.

Before his passing in 2019 at age 94, Cal documented his life and the early days of our lifeguard history. Here is his story:

I was born in the early 1920's before there was there such a thing as professional paid beach Lifeguards. The very first were Jim Reinhard in Hermosa Beach and George Wolfe in Venice in 1925. Before that time Lifeguards were either volunteers or worked in the saltwater plunges that existed then along the beaches. As a child I saw the first paid Lifeguards arrive on the sands at Playa Del Rey where I was born and raised. At first, they were either on foot patrol or scanning the water from a vehicle; there were no towers. Eventually the little, open, wooden towers were placed at intervals along the sand. I knew these Lifeguards. I looked up to them, for they were my heroes. At a very early age I vowed that someday I would join them; I would be a Lifeguard.

Swimming for the team at Venice High School, I got a job at the Venice plunge as a towel boy, then as a key boy and locker room boy. The day that the head Lifeguard called me aside and said he had been watching our swim meets and wanted me to join his crew and be a Lifeguard was a day that I will never forget. I was going to be a Lifeguard! And the pay was 35 cents an hour! Well, I was 15 or 16 years old, and you could buy a hamburger or hot dog for a nickel and go to the movies for 15 cents.

In a couple of years, I was old enough to work for the LA City Lifeguards with a huge raise to 75 cents an hour. In 1946 I took the LA County test and became a permanent guard at \$200.00 a month, enough to rent a house and get married.

I've worked almost all the beaches in LA County and enjoyed every minute of it. The camaraderie among Lifeguards is something very special, like no other job. Lifelong friendships are formed.

After finishing college and completing graduate school I became a teacher, and eventually served many years as a school principal. But I always looked forward to weekends, holidays, and vacations so I could continue to be a Lifeguard. I sometimes thought of my schoolwork as my moonlighting job and Lifeguarding as the real me, my first love.

I loved the beach and the ocean, and I loved being a Lifeguard and the satisfaction that comes from doing Lifeguard work. I'm well into my 80's now but at night I have constant dreams that I'm back in a tower, still a Lifeguard. To this day, wherever I go to a beach, a pool, or a lake, I find that I can't get away from it. I am still watching the water.