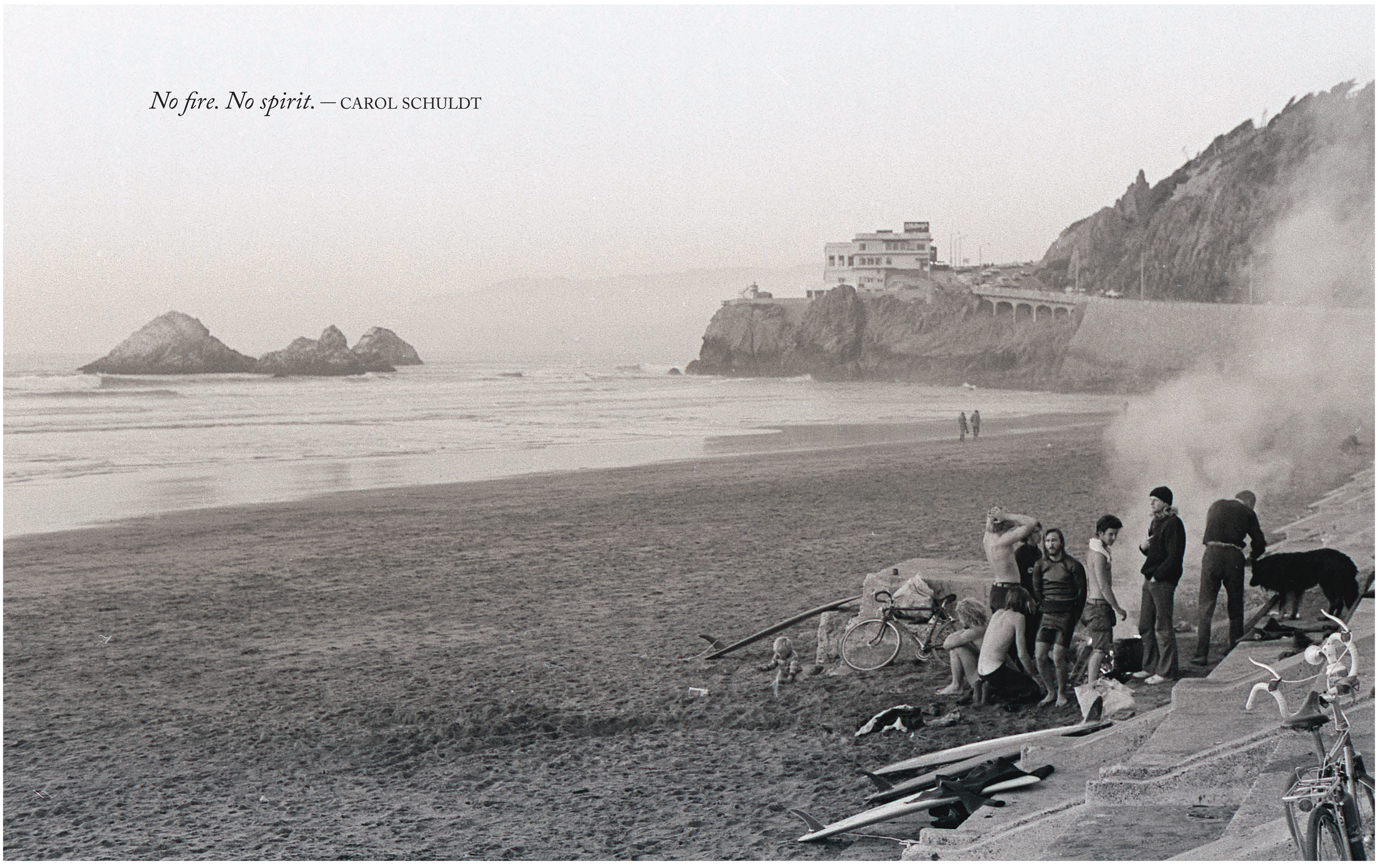
The Kelly's Bonfire



Huddling around the Kelly's Cove bonfire, 1970s. Photograph by Dennis O'Rorke.

Built of driftwood and sometimes old tires, the bonfire at Kelly's Cove was a gathering spot, a place to share a drink, to get warm after surfing or swimming in the cold Pacific Ocean.

After the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the National Park Service took over jurisdiction of Ocean Beach in the mid 1970s, fires were severely restricted.

For many teenagers, being accepted around the fire was a rite of passage.

I hung out a bit at the fire or at the sea wall. I was like a kelp fly. You know those kelp flies that come off Seal Rocks and they land on you? If you blow on 'em, they stand still and then you swat 'em. I hung out and lightly associated with these guys I'd grown up with in the neighborhood or through school. And what attracted me was that it was a very different kind of fraternity. Also, it was nature along with an air of adventure… it was the edge of the world socially and geographically. — PAUL JUDGE

At the annual Kelly's Cove reunion, community members who have passed away are remembered on slips of paper dropped in a small bonfire. Photograph by Dennis O'Rorke, 2013.

There's no wetsuits in my day… In those days the water was colder. We'd all collect the wood. That was kind of a ritual. We'd get the wood and we wouldn't light the fire until we came out of the water. — CAROL SCHULDT

When you come out of the water you're pretty much glued to that fire, and there were always fires. The fire would draw people even if they weren't cold. — JIM GALLAGHER

When they built those condos and started getting complaints, all the fires got stopped and the community slowed down and there were no more young kids coming down to stand around the fires to learn from the older guys and become part of the group slowly. That stopped. Without the fire you had no community. — ARNE WONG

outsidelands.org/kellys

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