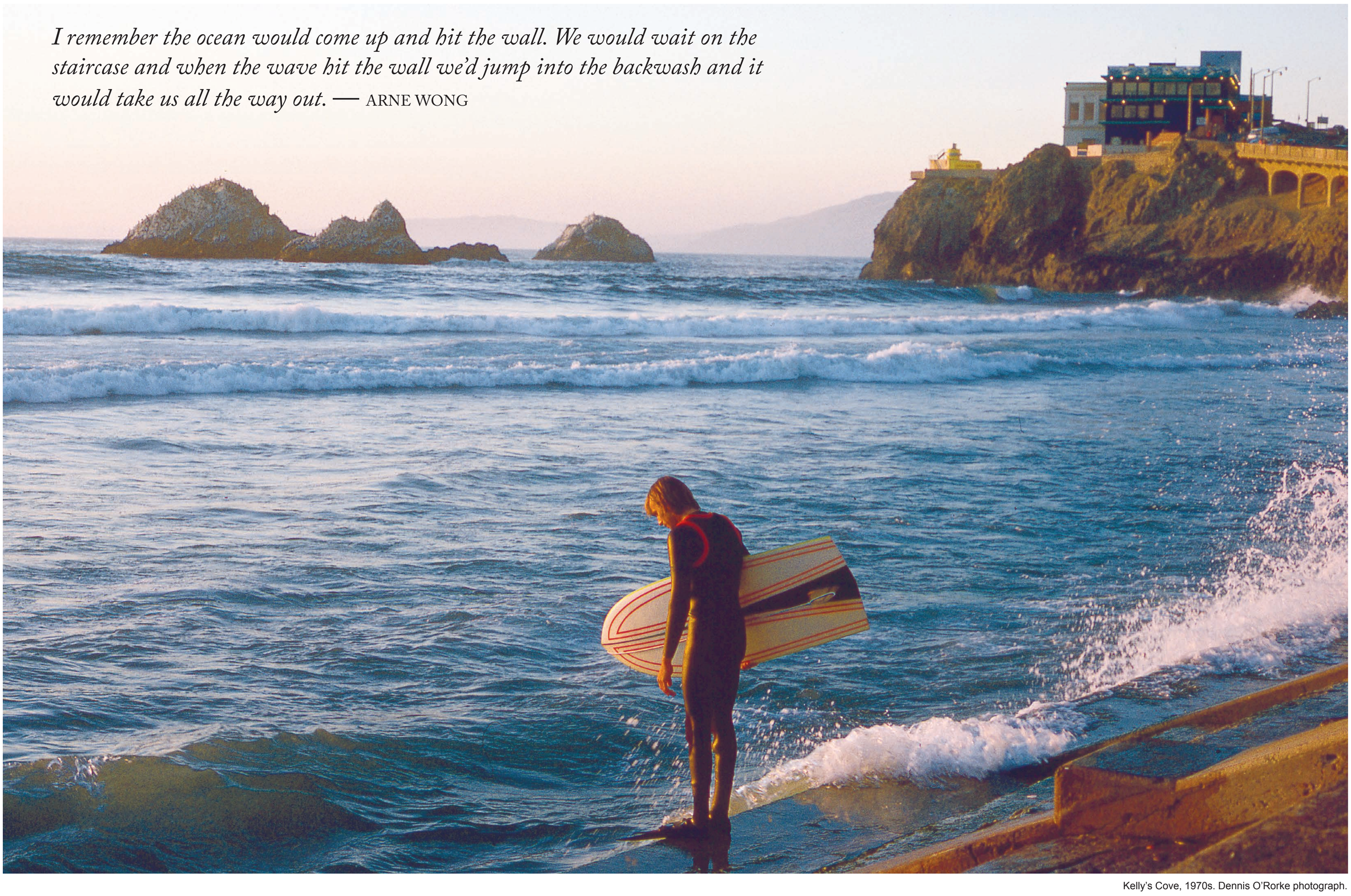
Kelly's Cove Origins

I remember the ocean would come up and hit the wall. We would wait on the staircase and when the wave hit the wall we'd jump into the backwash and it would take us all the way out. — ARNE WONG



Kelly's Cove, 1970s. Dennis O'Rorke photograph.

The north edge of San Francisco's Ocean Beach has been called Kelly's Cove since at least the 1940s. Sand levels used to be lower and the surf sometimes reached the seawall, creating a more defined arc or "cove."

Ocean Beach, 1920s. Kelly Tires billboard visible below Sutro Heights. Photograph courtesy of Mary Courtwright Collins.

While a popular site for Sunday visitors since the 1880s, the area also drew runners, swimmers, and practitioners of calisthenics long before exercise became a mainstream activity.

The name of the cove may have come from a 1920s Kelly Tires billboard across the Great Highway, but a more common story features "Old Man Kelly," a local character who kept a community bonfire and took daily swims around Seal Rocks.

He was referred to as Kelly. He was like a hermit. He lived in a makeshift wooden shelter hard up against the cliffs with a little fireplace and I think he lived there most of the year. Once in a while he'd take pity on us before we had our fire started and let us warm up. — PATRICK F. CUNNEEN

outsidelands.org/kellys

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