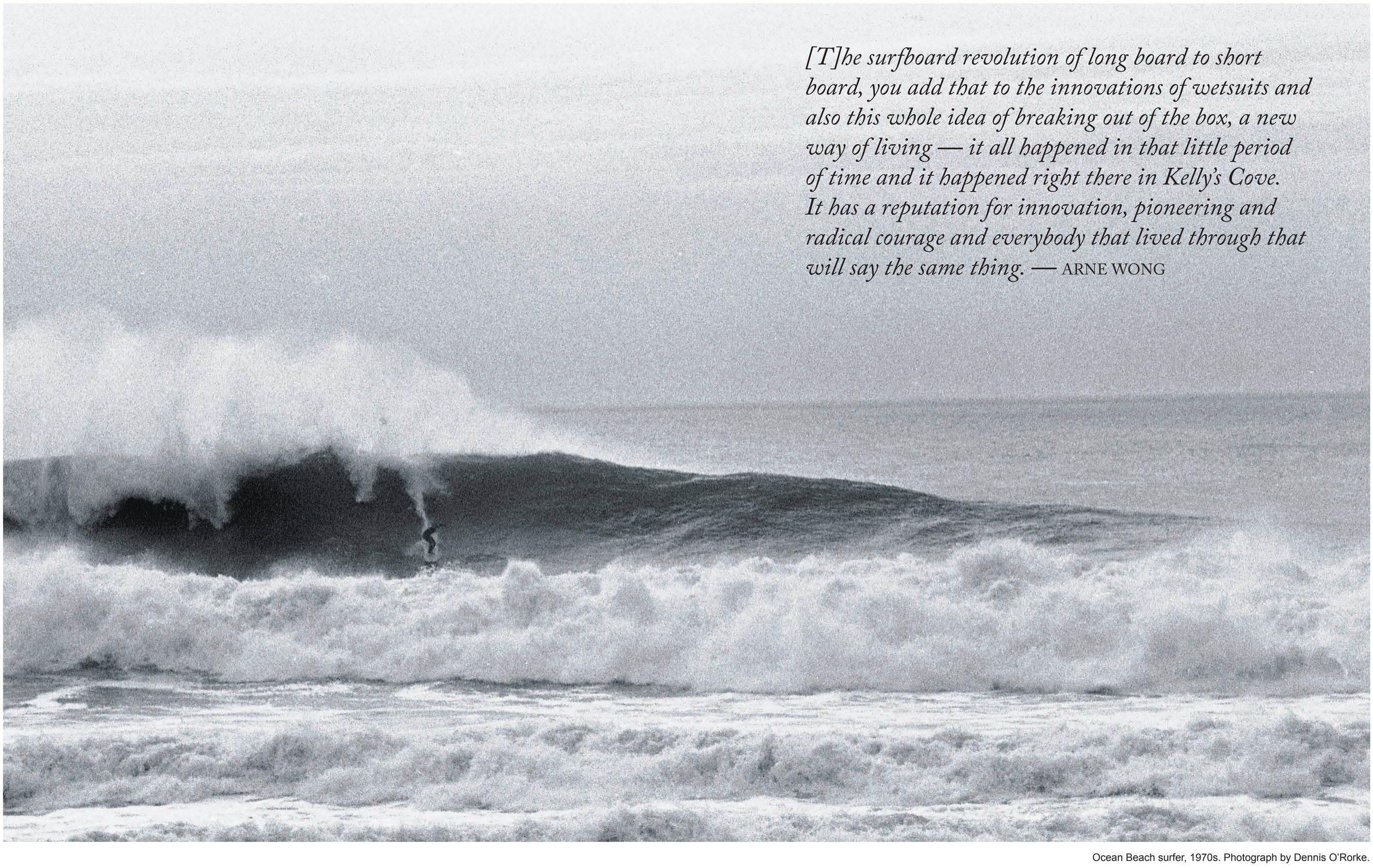
Surfing at Kelly's

[T]he surfboard revolution of long board to short board, you add that to the innovations of wetsuits and also this whole idea of breaking out of the box, a new way of living — it all happened in that little period of time and it happened right there in Kelly's Cove. It has a reputation for innovation, pioneering and radical courage and everybody that lived through that will say the same thing. — ARNE WONG



Ocean Beach surfer, 1970s. Photograph by Dennis O'Rorke.

Pioneering board surfers such as Mike Lewis, Al Peace, Frankie Freitas, and Rod Lundquist braved Kelly's Cove beginning in the 1940s.

Early surfboards, often homemade in garages, were large, heavy, and hard to control. Facing cold water and foggy days, Kelly's Cove surfers had to be tough.

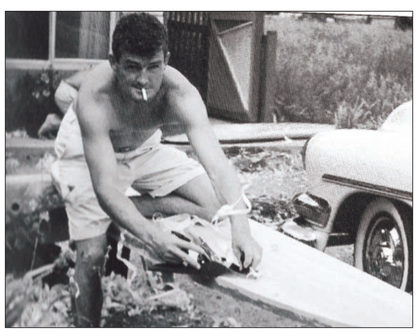
Jack O'Neill opened a surf shop on Wawona Street near Great Highway, and created some of the first commercial wetsuits to combat the frigid waters of Ocean Beach. Today, the O'Neill Company sells the majority of the world's wetsuits.

Some started making their own. You'd see a light on in a garage and a small knot of guys around sawhorses and the smell from the process of fiber-glassing just reeked. It's amazing that furnace pilot lights didn't ignite five or six of those houses. — PAUL JUDGE

Waldo Reesink, Frank Lewis, and Ken Groover, circa 1950. Photograph courtesy of Mike Lewis.

Jack recommended a talc power that was ultra soft and when sprinkled inside the suit (no zippers at this point) allowed greater ease of sliding the wetsuit over your head and shoulders. Since the talc power cost ninety cents for about twelve ounces, corn starch (quart size sold in supermarkets for about eight to ten cents) became standard usage. A few juveniles pilfered their mother's flour bin. — JIM GALLAGHER

Ocean Beach was a harsh mistress. As I got better at surfing, and began to make friends, that became my crew. All I wanted to do was surf. Every spare moment I was out there. — GARY SILBERSTEIN



Ted Pearson shaping a board in the 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Jim Gallagher.

Surfing was pretty much unknown in the early days, so it was a small cadre of people and many of 'em, you know, they were the square peg that didn't fit in the round hole. — PATRICK F. CUNNEEN

To me that was the start of the surfing in California. I felt it started at Kelly's. — SHAWNA MCGREW

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