IT WAS LIKE AN ETERNAL HOLIDAY. ‘NOBODY WORE A WATCH. NOBODY KNEW WHAT TIME IT WAS. NOBODY CARED WHAT THE MONTH WAS’

Left Dorian ‘Doc’ Paskowitz with his first eight children in the early 1960s: David, Jonathan, Abraham, Israel, Moses, Adam, Salvador and Navah – his only daughter. **Right** Doc, now 88, with Adam, Moses and David

LIFE’S A BEACH

Fifty years ago, Dr Dorian Paskowitz dropped out of society and embarked on a 14-year global surfing safari, raising nine children in a 24ft camper van, and catching every wave he could. He dreamt that they could all live untainted by money, school and fatty foods, and never imagined the wipeout that followed. By **Adam Higginbotham**. Photograph by **Joao Canziani**

Picking his way carefully across the hot sand of San Diego’s Pacific Beach, Dorian ‘Doc’ Paskowitz pauses for a moment and looks out to sea, where dozens of surfers bob in the gentle waves breaking between the point and the pier. ‘I have surfed here when I was the only person for a hundred miles,’ he says. ‘Now, there’s a hundred people for one mile.’

When he first came to Pacific Beach as a boy, there wasn’t a single building on the bluffs above us, where expensive homes now overlook the ocean, and when he wasn’t surfing he would dig in the cliff for fossils. In 1938 he first had his photograph taken beside a distinctive vertical hollow in the biscuit-coloured rock face. The fading black-and-white image shows a well-muscled young athlete at 17, a curly shock of dark hair, pre-war swimming trunks, and a 14ft longboard casting a deep shadow on the cliff. Every decade since, Paskowitz has posed for a similar portrait, in exactly the same place. The latest was taken two years ago, capturing the veteran surfer and his board at 87, leathery skin hanging loose on his skinny frame. Today, Paskowitz still rides waves when he can – although mostly he does it kneeling down – but suffers from prostate trouble, hyper-thyroidism, arthritis and a failing valve in his heart. ‘It’ll take a lot of work to get me here to have my picture taken in another 10 years,’ he admits.

One of the oldest surviving legends of surfing, Doc is renowned as an early pioneer of the sport, the founder of the long-running Paskowitz Surf Camp, which now takes place every summer in San Diego – and as the apparently indestructible patriarch of what he christened ‘the First Family of Surfing’. Doc and his children were recently made the subject of a documentary, *Surfwise*. The film explores Dorian Paskowitz’s long quest to live in harmony with the world around him, how he dropped out of society, married his third wife, Juliette, and spent 14 years raising their nine children in a 24ft camper van, travelling the globe and surfing every day they were within reach of the ocean. The story it tells is both inspirational and cautionary, its picture of an idyllic, simple existence more than balanced by the realities of bringing up a family of eight boys and one girl without the benefit of living space, money or formal education. Doc’s personal experiment in social engineering was lived out beneath the poverty line and required harsh discipline and ascetic dietary restrictions, enforced with dogmatic ruthlessness. Many of the now-adult children emerge from the film as seemingly deeply scarred by the experience, remaining angry with their father even decades later.

Joshua Paskowitz, at 34 the youngest of the children, says he loves the film. But when I ask him if he thinks the filmmakers left anything important out of the story, he has to think for a while. ‘It doesn’t have one per cent of how bad it was,’ he says. ‘Not even close.’

The odyssey of Dorian Paskowitz began in the island city of Galveston, Texas, where he was born in 1921. ‘I’m an island boy, with an island mentality… I’m a beach rat. That’s all I ever was,’ he tells me as we sit at a corner table in a San Diego branch of Denny’s. It is lunchtime, but Paskowitz orders only a glass of water. ‘Doc doesn’t eat lunch,’ Juliette explains; a few hours later, he will dine on a handful of fruit. Rigid in his belief that staying hungry is one of the keys to a long and healthy life, Paskowitz works hard to make sure that at 88 he has no more fat on his body than he did at 17: 14 per cent. Paskowitz’s mother held to ideas about food and health that were apparently decades ahead of their time, and these have been refined by her son into the philosophy that went on to dominate his own children’s upbringing, and by

COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA PICTURES

which he, at least, continues to abide: 'Eat clean, live clean, surf clean.'

Paskowitz began surfing at the age of 10 in the Gulf of Mexico, and when his family moved to Mission Beach near San Diego in 1934, he became a lifeguard – and part of the first generation of surfers in California. He was accepted as a student at San Diego State University, but had always dreamt of living in the islands where surfing had originated, and so transferred to the University of Hawaii. Riding a board, playing water polo and skin-diving, Paskowitz developed an extraordinary physique and remarkable agility. 'I used to love to stand around on my hands,' he says. 'I even got an offer to join the circus.' He chose instead to become a doctor, and graduated from the prestigious medical school at Stanford in 1945. Commissioned in the US Navy and posted to the Pacific, he witnessed the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in 1946. After two years in the Navy, he took a month off to brush up on his surfing and then returned to Hawaii to find a job.

Over the next few years, he acquired all the trappings of success due to a Stanford-educated physician in post-war America: he was appointed public health officer for the territory of Hawaii, took an apartment with a maid and a man to wash his car; he began breakfasting regularly with the governor; friends suggested he run for public office. But in spite of his achievements, inside he was unravelling. 'The only time in my life I was convinced I was living the wrong life was when I was fabulously successful,' he says now.

His first marriage failed, his second ended in divorce when he discovered his wife had been unfaithful, leaving him estranged from his first three children, and he began to suffer from insomnia and panic attacks. He had never liked the more visceral aspects of medical work ('Sick people made me nervous… I couldn't stand the sight of blood'), and developed a phobia of cardiac problems and even of his own stethoscope. Determined to resolve his problems, he moved to Los Angeles, took a new job at Mt Sinai Hospital in Beverly Hills and began consulting a psychiatrist twice a week; it didn't help. But when he began taking weekend surfing trips to San Onofre, camping on the beach with old friends, he found that for a few days afterwards he was a changed man.

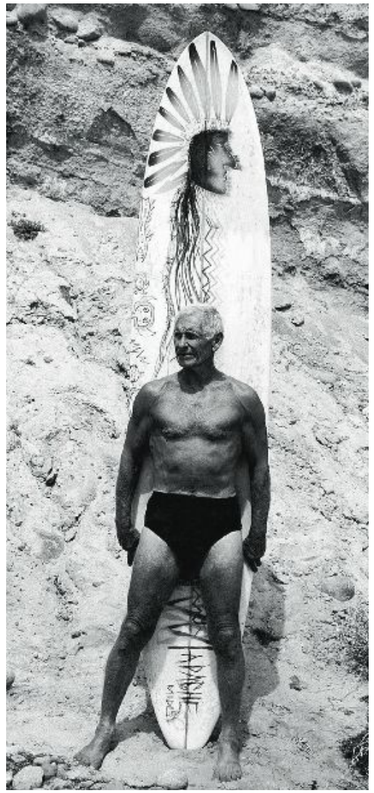
Finally, in 1956, he realised what was wrong. 'I looked in the mirror and said, "Paskowitz, you're a f***ing fraud. People think you're somebody, and you're just a beach bum."' That night, he moved out of his apartment and fired his maid. He bought an old timbered station wagon for $150, and made it his new home. He decided to dedicate himself to surfing, and take only enough medical work to pay for repairs to the car and the meals he cooked on a camping stove. 'I hoisted myself above the rim of my troubled lifestyle,' he wrote later. 'I tethered myself to one and only one directive – Paskowitz, be healthy, be happy.' He was 35.

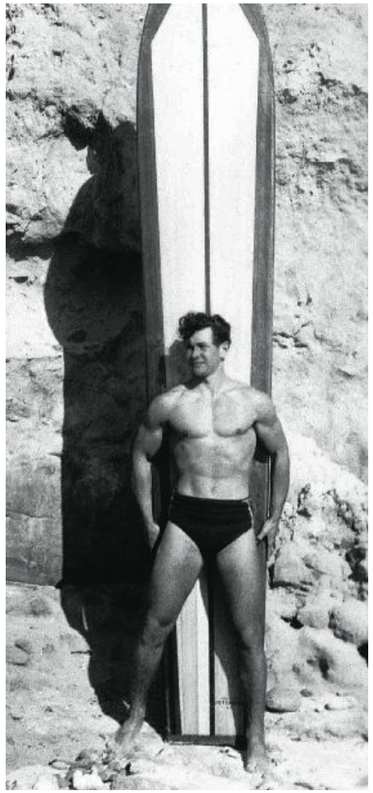
Later that year, expanding his plans for adventure, Paskowitz bought a ticket for the SS Zion, bound for Israel, where he planned to discover his Jewish roots. For a year he lived alone on the edge of the desert, sleeping on the beach and eating only fish he caught himself, and attaining a level of almost supernaturally raw health that would inform his thinking about diet and exercise for the rest of his life. Along the way, he also brought surfing to Tel Aviv, where he is still remembered as the man who introduced the sport to Israel. In an attempt to compensate for the failure of his first two marriages, Paskowitz next decided to improve the level of his carnal knowledge – by travelling the world and having sex with 100 different women, awarding each what he called a 'male deficit score', according to how much more they knew about sex than he did. Paskowitz never made it beyond the 25th girl. In June 1958, in a bar on Catalina Island in California, where he was working as the local doctor, he met Juliette. Classically trained as an opera singer, she was the daughter of Mexican parents living in Long Beach, California. 'You know,' he told her that night, 'one day you may be the mother of my seven sons.'

Juliette and Dorian began living together – in Doc's car, a 1949 Studebaker Champion – and married soon afterwards. Their first child, David, was born a little less than nine months later, in 1959. For the next decade, Juliette would either be pregnant or breastfeeding.

Left the Paskowitz children look for waves, even in the American Midwest, c1974. **Right** Doc Paskowitz on Pacific Beach, San Diego, two years ago. He first had his photograph taken at this spot in 1938, and has posed for a similar portrait every decade since

THE CHILDREN AROSE AT DAWN TO THE SOUND OF CHAIRMAN MAO'S 'WAKE-UP' SONG PLAYED ON AN OLD 45 SINGLE, AND WERE FED A SEVEN-GRAIN 'GRUEL' FOR BREAKFAST





'OUR PLAN WAS TO SURF ALL YEAR AND THAT'S WHAT WE DID. WE WENT ALWAYS WHERE THE WATER WAS WARM'

Dorian Paskowitz and Donna Shackledack at Pacific Beach, California, in the late 1930s

COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA PICTURES

Despite the prediction he made on that first night in 1958, Dorian and Juliette now say that having a large family wasn't part of any conscious plan, but simply the inevitable result of their enthusiasm for the mechanics of procreation. Age was the only thing that stopped them. 'We should have had more [children],' Paskowitz says, 'but I was too old.'

After many years in which the family was scattered across the United States, from Hawaii to New York, the nine Paskowitz offspring now all live within reach of their parents, spread out along the coast of Southern California between San Diego and Malibu. Dorian and Juliette's eight sons – David, Jonathan, Abraham, Israel, Moses, Adam, Salvador and Joshua – and one daughter, Navah, were born over the course of 15 years, and it is now more than two decades since the last of them left their parents' care. But each of them bears the unmistakable mark of their father's determination to produce a different breed of human being.

'We're supposed to be a better product,' explains David, the eldest at 50, sitting beside his electric-blue surfboard in the back garden of his sun-bleached suburban home in San Marcos. 'From the earth, of the earth, yet somehow with the ability to transcend and seamlessly blend into society. Obviously, that didn't work out the way it was supposed to…' David says he is now largely supported by his wife, a software executive, while he gets occasional work singing in local clubs. None of the Paskowitz children holds down a conventional nine-to-five job, and a few profess to barely make a living at all; yet all remain devoted to the metaphysical appeals of surfing, and the healing power of the wave. 'They're great guys, aren't they?' Doc asks me, once I have met five of his sons. 'We raised them to be great men, not successful men.'

Growing up the Paskowitz way meant adhering to simple principles: Doc wanted his children to take only what they needed from the world around them, and to surf every day. 'Our plan was to surf all year,' he says. 'And that's what we did. We went always where the water was warm.' When David was born, he was brought straight from the hospital to live in the Studebaker, and the couple's itinerant life continued: the beginning of the family's 300,000-mile journey around the world. A second son, Jonathan, was born in Hawaii in 1961, where Dorian was teaching Waikiki lifeguards about health and fitness. 'The kind of job he really enjoyed,' Juliette says. 'Nothing to do with blood and guts and vomit.'

For five years, Juliette gave birth every 13 months, and each child was introduced to the ocean as soon as possible: Jonathan was in the water at five weeks old; Israel was surfing by the age of six. 'I would say that I've surfed more than I've walked,' David says. 'We did not spend very much time out of the water – if it could be helped.'

Dorian Paskowitz did not want his children going to school, so he and Juliette taught them all they felt they needed to know at home; when they were under his supervision, Dorian governed the children with rigid, often physical, discipline. But when off on their own, playing in the ocean or roaming the beaches, they could do as they wished. Life seemed like an eternal holiday. 'We did not keep time in the truest sense of the word,' Jonathan, now 48, tells me. 'Nobody wore a watch. Nobody knew what time it was. Nobody cared what the month was.'

Dorian wanted his new family to live not as Americans did, but to pursue the more primal, holistic existence he had seen shared by other peoples he had spent time with in his travels across the globe. 'I lived with the Bedouin Arabs, but also with the South Sea Islanders and the Palo Indians of California… I found out what most people were doing, and that's what I did. I found out what most people in the world are eating, and that's what I ate.' Fatty foods and refined sugar were forbidden; the children arose at dawn to the sound of Chairman Mao's 'wake-up' song played on an old 45 single, and were fed a seven-grain 'gruel' for breakfast. When he noticed chimpanzees in San Diego zoo eating apples but discarding the peel, Doc decided that the chimps knew something that he didn't, and insisted that his children follow suit.

Paskowitz hated money, and often refused to take payment from patients who needed treatment in the remote places they stopped; he took paying work for only short periods, when they absolutely needed cash, so food was not always abundant. The family went fishing whenever they could, and in order to maintain a healthy balance of protein and calcium, Dorian insisted his children eat every last part of what they caught: skin, bones, eyes and all. When no fish were available, there were other stand-bys. 'We would eat sea-snails, and sand fleas – my mom would fry them up,' Salvador, 41, says. 'And they would dive for lobster. We would eat lobster until you were sick of it.'

After a few years living in Hawaii, the family resumed their epic road trip, which would take them from North Dakota to Florida, Venezuela to Israel. Often, all 11 Paskowitzes lived in a small, second-hand camper van, which allowed them three cubic feet of space each. But it wasn't always like that. 'It's an exaggeration to say that we grew up in a camper,' Salvador says. 'At times we were in cars.' At one point during the 1980s, seven of them spent a year living together in a '72 Chevrolet Impala. At night, Navah would dangle her hair through the open window, then roll it shut to keep her head upright while she slept.

Right Dorian, Juliette, their children and the camper van they all lived in, *c*1976. **Below** some of the Paskowitz offspring in 1992, clockwise from top: Jonathan, Moses, Salvador, Israel, Joshua, Navah and Abraham

THEIR VAGABOND UPBRINGING DID LITTLE TO PREPARE THE CHILDREN FOR REAL LIFE. 'WE'VE ALL GONE BANANAS,' SALVADOR SAYS

There was little room – or money – for personal possessions, and Paskowitz would intermittently throw away everything his children had managed to acquire. But Doc's overwhelming desire was to keep the family together, and with this in mind he launched the Paskowitz International Surf Camp in 1971. 'Mom and I wanted the kids around us. I wanted them to surf with me,' he says. Stopping their travels for three months each summer on the beach at San Onofre, the family took in surf students from around the world. The camp helped make them celebrities in the developing surfing subculture, and their apparently enviable escapist whole-earth lifestyle brought them national press and television attention. The boys' prowess as surfers meant that in the finals of some competitions, a Paskowitz would take first, second, third and fourth places. Jonathan remembers being 10 or 11, and driving down to San Onofre at 6am to take part in the annual surf contest there. 'We knew everybody,' he says, 'and I knew I was going to win. I just felt like we were gods.'

At the table in Denny's, Dorian glances at his wife, now 77, and considers what went wrong with the Paskowitz family experiment. 'When we raised little puppies, they were the greatest puppies in the world,' he says. 'But when they became young dogs, I was not the man that was necessary… I just didn't have what it took.'

A stubborn individualist raising a family of stubborn individualists, Paskowitz found the children increasingly difficult to control as they became older and stronger. 'Once we got into our late teens, we started to realise what we were missing,' Salvador says. In Doc's clean-living dictatorship, smoking, drinking and drugs were naturally forbidden – but each year at the surf camp, the Paskowitz children were given a three-month glimpse of life in a world beyond that defined by waves and gruel. They stole cooler boxes from other campsites, and gorged on salami, cheese and beer; surrounded by weekly rotations of young girls sent to the camp from around the world, and handed condoms by their father, they had sex and fell in love; making friends in nearby San Clemente, they stayed with more conventional families. 'Once you'd seen how the normal, everyday kid lived, it was hard to go back on the road in the camper,' Salvador says. When they began to take jobs to help support the family, their independence developed further. In Florida, at 14, Israel took a job working at a supermarket, and spent $4 of each pay-cheque gorging secretly on forbidden foods. 'I'd eat fried chicken until I was going to puke,' he says. But Jonathan's acts of teenage rebellion were the worst, culminating in an attempt to steal an Israeli tank from a kibbutz. When even Dorian's most extreme efforts – 'I tried to strangle Jonathan… do him in,' he says – failed to curb his antics, Doc bought his 16-year-old son a one-way ticket to Israel.

After that, the other children all left gradually: some simply wanted to try staying in one place long enough to go to school, others to get jobs, or live with relatives in the city. Israel remembers that he and Abraham left together after Dorian cut off Abraham's long, blond hair with a combat knife. David stuck with his father the longest – until he was 23, when he moved to New York and became a Johnny Mathis impersonator.

Eventually, Joshua was left alone with his parents in the camper van. For a while, they lived in Acapulco, where Doc worked with the sick in the city's slums, Juliette became chronically ill with brucellosis, and the three of them were bitten by a rabid dog. Josh first tried leaving at 12, because he wanted to go to school – 'That's when I started my first band, had my first foursome, did all my first things in life,' he says. When he returned a year later, with the family scattered, his father's commitment to his globetrotting alternative lifestyle had become more extreme than ever. 'He wanted to go further – instead of just pioneering surfing in Mexico, he wanted to pioneer surfing in Spain, or not have a camper any more, but just carry our shit.' Josh remembers wandering through the railway station in Madrid, weighed down by eight longboards in bags hanging around his neck, and waking up in a collapsed tent on a rain-lashed mountainside. 'On my 14th birthday,' he says, 'we were basically nomads in Europe, taking all our stuff by hand.'

Six months later, the last of the Paskowitz children finally left his parents behind: over the next few years, Josh would have little to do with his family, began taking heroin, and, for a while, slept on a couch under a freeway overpass. Dorian and Juliette carried on alone for another 12 years until, in 1998 or 1999, they left their last camper van in a field in Perris, California, and moved into a small apartment in Hawaii. By that time, Dorian Paskowitz was 77 years old. 'Well,' he says, leaning across the table to correct me, 'I was never old. I'm only old now because my heart's leaking.'

COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA PICTURES

'A PASKOWITZ IS AN EASY MARK FOR BEING A PUSHOVER... WE'RE PRETTY MUCH LOST IN OUR CHILDHOOD'

'That's a lot of water,' says Adam Paskowitz, looking out across the ocean from a patch of turf overlooking Pacific Beach, 'and taking little kids out into that day after day is not safe. It requires real expertise.' On the road behind him, Adam's brother Israel ('Izzy') is unloading a Ford pickup truck, filled with boards for the members of the week's class of the Paskowitz Surf Camp – 22 of them in all, ranging from two sisters from London, 11 and 13, to a 70 year-old retired estate agent from Texas, attending for his fourth year. Izzy has been running the camp since 1992, and today it remains as loosely organised and raggedly inclusive as it was when it started nearly 40 years ago; so far, it is the only enterprise the Paskowitzes have devised to successfully capitalise on their reputation as the 'First Family of Surfing'. Over the years, there have been other projects – a television drama series, a feature film, two clothing lines – that have stalled or failed. 'We have so much fame, but so little fortune among us,' Moses, 44, says.

When they left the camper van behind, many of the Paskowitz children discovered that their vagabond upbringing had done little to prepare them for the realities of adult life. Eventually, Izzy and Jonathan both had successful stints as professional surfers, and Joshua and Adam played together in a rock band that enjoyed a big chart hit in the early 1990s. But they often found themselves ill-equipped to deal with anyone but other Paskowitzes, a brood of guileless Peter Pans unable to deal with modern society. 'Generally,' Jonathan tells me, 'a Paskowitz is an easy mark for being a pushover… we're pretty much lost in our childhood.' At 23, David says he was able to navigate the streets of Manhattan readily enough, but in his personal and business relationships was hopelessly naive: 'I believed that adults told the truth – that lying and deception was a childhood thing and once you graduated to adulthood, you told the truth. So I was easily preyed upon by people who could see that and took advantage of me.'

The lack of conventional schooling also proved problematic: in his late teens, Abraham wanted to become a doctor like his father, but discovered it would take 10 years simply to make up for the education he had missed; by the time he was ready to start medical school, he would have already been 30 years old. Izzy says his schooling stopped when he was 11, and even today he finds it difficult to manage the financial side of the surf camp. 'Some of these kids here that are 12 years old know more about business than I do,' he tells me one evening. 'I graduated fifth grade… I'm still learning – at 45.' In the end, only Moses would manage to attend college, through a football scholarship at the University of New Mexico.

And those that did find an outlet for their talents often found stability hard to hold on to – 15 years ago, Abraham enjoyed a successful career as a chef and lived in a large house in San Clemente with his wife and daughter – but when he discovered his wife was having an affair, he took his brother Jonathan's car and ran off to San Francisco, where he began living in Golden Gate Park, an alcoholic stealing food from grocery shops to feed himself. 'We've all gone bananas,' Salvador says. 'Anyone who had a success always imploded.' Ten years ago, Salvador himself was earning a million dollars a year running his own graphic design company, but never saved any money and, given the opportunity to write a film script, simply ditched the whole business overnight. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the screenwriting didn't work out, and today he lives with his wife and daughter in a small apartment in Los Angeles. 'I have no money,' he tells me. 'Zero.' None the less, he says, he is enjoying his life more than he did when he was more prosperous. 'Now is a happy time. I have my head on straight. If and when I become solvent again, I have no plans to be frivolous with money.'

Navah is the only one of the Paskowitz children who will admit to wishing she had a more conventional upbringing: 'I'd rather we had stayed in Hawaii and gone to school and lived a more normal life. The fact that we had to go into society uneducated was, I think, really unfair.'

But none of her brothers would have had it any other way, and many share the conviction that Doc Paskowitz was simply decades ahead of his time. 'When I was two years old,' Josh says, 'my father gave away my only teddy bear to some Guatemalan chilli-eater in the f***in' Yucatán. But what did he give me in return? Knowledge of true meaningfulness. He's brilliant. He saw through the bullshit – and for 14, 16, 18 years, we had pure freedom.' ■