

PIRATE STREET SHIP

Buster, from my Island Road neighborhood, had a scooter that he called a “soap box scooter.” Buster’s dad had made it with a wooden fruit crate, some lumber, and an old skate. I thought a scooter like Buster’s would give me a place to carry it, extra film, my BB gun, and it would be fun to ride around the neighborhood. I also thought about using it as part of the initiation for the *Philly River Rats* club once I got it going. Soapbox scooters were the forerunner or first evolution to skateboards.



FIG. 1



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5

Fig 1. a typical soap box scooter with a wooden crate on base board with skate wheels.

Fig. 2. A decorated scooter with the owner on board.

Fig. 3. A 2X4 base board with skates from a skate nailed to it, front and back.

Fig. 4. An example of an early 1950s homemade skateboard.

Fig. 5. One metal skate from a pair of 1950s skates with a skate key.

Soon after I moved to the Horseshoe and built my soapbox scooter, several others appeared, and we would stage races. Elmwood Avenue, from the bridge at the crest of the hill, above fifty-ninth Street, the steepest hill in the area ran two long blocks, to the traffic light at fifty-Eighth Street. It was the best place for racing since most cars would drive outside the trolley tracks, making the asphalt there coarse, rough, bumpy,

and the untraveled asphalt in the center of the trolley tracks the perfectly flat racecourse. It also made for smooth sailing on my pirate street ship, and great fun, hands off the handlebars, standing on the baseboard, until a trolley came barreling down the hill.



A sidewalk scooter race

As surfing grew in California in the 1950s, for when the surf wasn't up, surfers removed the crates and, balancing on the baseboards as we had done on the Elmwood Avenue hill, began "sidewalk surfing."

Building a scooter wasn't difficult or expensive. Old metal skates came from the dump, 2 X 4 baseboard from a lumberyard's scrap heap, the wooden crate from a grocery store. Kids' skates were all metal and came with a skate key, shown in **Fig. 3**, that was used to adjust the skate to the user's foot and made separating the front and back wheels easy.

After I had assembled all the materials in my cellar, under Katie's scrutiny, I nailed the skate wheels to the underside, front and back ends of a weathered 2 X 4 board, about four feet long. On the front, topside, I nailed a wooden fruit crate Abe had given me. Across the top of the crate, I hammered one of Mom's broomsticks, sawed-off for the handlebars, on top of the crate, with black electrical tape on each end.

With colored pencils and paints from one of Mom's art class kits, I drew headlights and, instead of a grille, I copied from a pirates' book, sketched a reasonable facsimile of a skull. Below it were two pirates' cutlasses with a crucifix bisecting them where they intersected. On the front of the fruit box, across the top I printed **FILY PIRATE SHIP**. On each side I drew portholes with the pirate trappings below.