

UP FRONT

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Leaving a Mark

Graffiti rampage that tagged downtown Santa Cruz businesses during power outage points out costly local problem

by Diane Noland

ONCE CONFINED TO BIG CITIES, GRAFFITI is now an aggravation smaller towns like Santa Cruz must constantly deal with. Seldom seen while applying their paint, taggers leave their mark on parking meters or street signs and sometimes splash their emblems of identity on everything in sight.

A two-hour power outage in downtown Santa Cruz early on a recent Sunday morning provided an opportunity to smear store fronts, windows and signs all up and down Front Street and Pacific Avenue with crude, calligraphic-like markings called "tags."

"They went crazy and figured they could do anything," says Sgt. Rick Seiley, supervisor of Santa Cruz Police's property crime unit, of the "kids and young adults," who were downtown when the lights went out and who rampaged through the streets marring buildings.

"It looked like they had tagged every building or every other one on Front Street between the McPherson Museum and The Movie I and II and on Pacific Avenue between the Catalyst to Cooper Street," says Matt Kiernan, who is paid by the city of Santa Cruz to help property and business owners paint out and clean up graffiti.

The tagging spree was not the worst ever in Santa Cruz, Seiley says. He says graffiti rampages have been much worse in the past, though he believes abatement programs have "knocked it down 80 percent" in the past two years. Because property owners, volunteers and people like Kiernan are out cleaning it up as quickly as it appears, he thinks graffiti vandals aren't so likely to repeat it.

Name Recognition

"Tagging is a personal statement," Seiley says. "It's like putting their name up in neon lights. You do not allow them to get that publicity. The thrill isn't all in the tagging. The big thrill is the next day, (when they can say) 'Hey, that's my name up there!'"

While most taggers give up, some don't, Kiernan says.

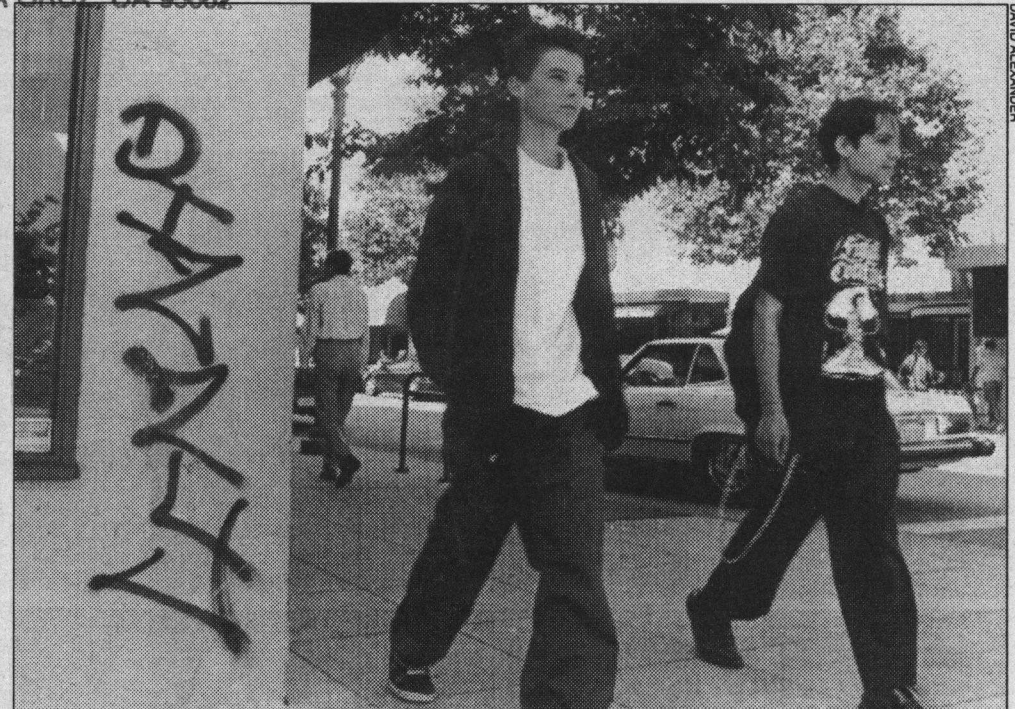
"They are just relentless. You can paint out their name a hundred times and they will do it again."

These uninvited and unwanted paint spray scrawls cost cities and towns a bundle.

"The USA spends \$8 billion annually in cleanup," says Jerry Shanahan, Santa Cruz County Graffiti Removal program coordinator. "It's real costly."

Shanahan, who recently attended an international graffiti abatement conference in Phoenix, Ariz., said it's a problem worldwide. People attended from Canada, Italy and the Philippines, eager to learn what others are doing to eliminate it.

Most taggers aren't caught and punished in Santa Cruz County, and for those who are, the penalties are not steep, say both Seiley and Shanahan.



Graffiti reading 'Dizzy' marks a building on Pacific Avenue. Graffiti abatement costs the city of Santa Cruz up to \$40,000 per year.

"They get a slap on the hands," Shanahan says.

Abatement programs in Santa Cruz County attempt to control the problem mainly through eradicating graffiti quickly. The city of Santa Cruz adopted its abatement program three years ago; on average the program costs \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year, says City Clerk Emma Solden, whose office has charge of the abatement program.

Costly Tags

The county's program, which costs \$54,000 per year, operates with Shanahan recruiting and coordinating volunteers for weekday and weekend paint-outs and cleanups, covering all the

unincorporated areas from Davenport to Watsonville and the San Lorenzo Valley. He also interfaces with CalTrans and Southern Pacific in removing graffiti from highway and railroad overpasses.

Watsonville hires a painting contractor, which costs between \$40,000 to \$45,000 per year, and is currently working on ways to lower the cost, says Eric Frost, administrative services director. Scotts Valley and Capitola also deal with graffiti through their public works and police departments.

"Tagging is a really big nuisance," says Shanahan. "It's not like San Jose or Los Angeles, but it's definitely a problem."

Good Times
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