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Henry Cowell Park: of blossoms and bodies



SANTA CRUZ — The Henry Cowell Park woodlands are "lovely, dark and deep" this spring, thrusting their redwoods into the sky to shade a carpet of soft Redwood Sorrell and Sugar Scoop that serve as delicate cups to their small flowers.

From the redwood roof, the broken splashes of sunlight play shades of yellow on moss-green logs that winter storms brought down. Pale lemon light plays catch among the white and yellow, and blue and purple flowers sequin the forest floor.

On a quiet weekday, maybe 30 off-season visitors will walk the path into Redwood Grove, the popular visitors' spot near park headquarters that wanders among the primitive trees in the northern panhandle of the park.

But, near Felton at the north, the grove path is more ordered and wanders past trees that lived in the days of the Caesars; trees that since have spawned a dozen sisters as great the mother tree.

As the visitor walks deeper into the grove, the silence grows and each step brings a sense of isolation that is caught between peace and unease. A sense that the park has something hidden. A darker side.

And then, the feeling is shaken off and the forested peace returns.

But, there is a truth to the feeling, for beautiful Henry Cowell Park has its dark side.

Being close to residential and urban areas with their highly transient populations, the park territory, covering a great sweep of land between Felton and Santa Cruz, has been the scene of murderous violence and a dumping ground for bodies the past two decades.

A little more than a year ago, on Jan. 4, 1983, Sheriff Deputy Michael Gray was fatally shot a block away from the entrance to Cowell Park. His murderer, Leslie Wyman, calmly walked away, heading toward the entrance to the Grove.

Before he reached to the entrance, a highway patrolman responded to the "officer down" call and shot it out with the killer. The patrolman was hit in the knee and Wyman escaped into the woods.

In there, alongside a fisherman's trail to the river, he committed suicide.

The chronicle of death begins in the fall of 1970, when a road near the upper park was staked out by deputies who were lying in wait for mass murderer John Linley Frazier. He had killed four members of the Dr. Victor Ohta family and Ohta's

secretary at the family home in the Soquel area.

Frazier had lived in a home along Gold Gulch Road that runs by Cowell Park and deputies believed he would return after the October murders. He wasn't caught that long night, but deputies believed he tried to get home however caught the scent of the hunt.

During the manhunt, Frazier abandoned a car at the south end of the park on the railroad tracks near Rincon Crossing.

It was in 1972, that the park fell victim to the worst of its violent visits when Herbert Mullin, a young man who had spent his youth in the area turned mass murderer.

That year and into 1973, Mullin killed at least 10 people, starting with a fatal clubbing of a man walking along Highway 9 by the park and ending with the shooting deaths of four young male campers on the west side of Highway 9 in park territory.

Mullin, it was said, heard voices from people who told him they were willing to be sacrificed to save the world from earthquakes and other catastrophic destruction.

Killed in or near the park by Mullin were 55-year-old Lawrence White and teen-ager campers Brian Card, Robert

Spector, David Olikier and Mark Dreibelbis.

Death again visited the park in the early summer of 1976 when two young women were taken to a heavily wooded spot off Highway 9 in park territory where they were fatally beaten and stabbed. Murdered were Vicki Bezore, 31, and Mary Gorman, 21.

Their bodies were discovered 48 days later. A jury convicted Richard Sommerhalder, an acquaintance, of the murders.

On Thanksgiving Day in 1979, the body of Diane Elizabeth Steffy, 21 years of age and a UCSC student, was found along a bridge path on the east border of the park. Her killer was never caught.

In the spring of 1981 UC Davis coed Ellen Marie Hansen and her companion Steven Haertle were hiking near Observation Deck in the park when a lone gunman fatally shot the young woman and wounded Haertle.

David Joseph Carpenter is on trial for that killing and of another woman whose body was found near Big Basin State Park.

The history of the park's dark side is long and unfortunate.

Unfitting to such a place of natural peace.