

Community with Love and Care

W **Caroline Buffon**

We planned to write a story about the California Grey Bears, and of course about the annual Christmas Dinner for Seniors which they sponsor. When I called to arrange this, their Director Marcia Margolin said, "Oh please, write about the dinner first. We're proud to sponsor it, and to be responsible for it, but we couldn't begin to do it without the unbelievable support and help we get from the people and businesses of the whole Santa Cruz area. It should be a tribute to them." Okay. So it shall be.

* * *

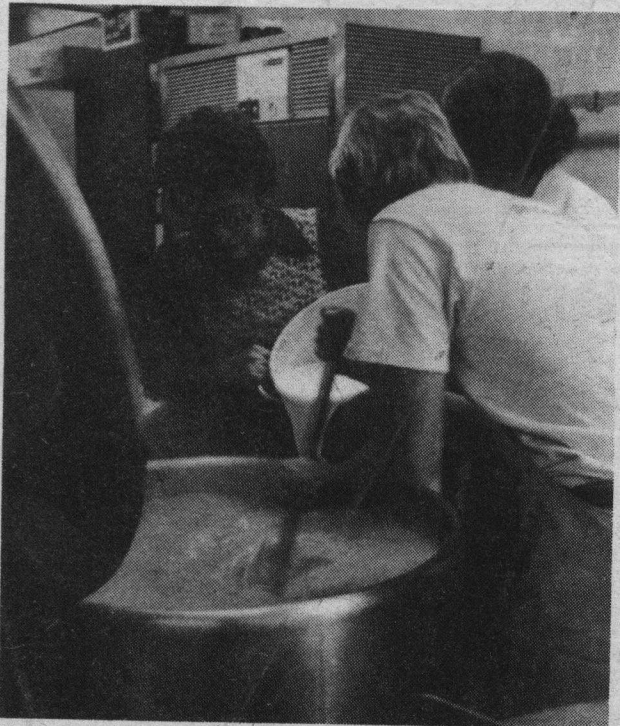
A few days later Marcia called and said they would have a meeting that evening of chairpersons of all the committees involved in the Christmas Dinner, and if I could attend I'd probably learn more listening to the plans and reports than in any other way. She was right. And since the Dinner is on Sunday, December 21, and this issue of the *Weekly* will be published on Wednesday, December 17, you'll know all about it ahead of time, and I'm just going to tell you what I learned about how to serve dinner to 3,000 guests, give or take a few, in a matter of four hours. It's pretty fantastic.

I arrived at the big Grey Bear building the evening of the meeting and walked through dark front offices into their warehouse headquarters, where usually Brown Bags are packed and food to put in them is stored. The room was brightly lit, set up with long tables and plenty of chairs, furnished with an easel containing a huge map of the Civic Auditorium floor space—and there were more than 30 people there! Remember, they were all chairmen of committees and some of these committees are pretty big, but even this fact will give you only a slight idea of how many people it takes to put the Christmas Dinner on and make it work.

Director Margolin called the meeting to order on time, and from then on it was all business. Marcia explained the procedure while her assistant, Susan Williams, pointed out on the map the areas being discussed. There were many questions asked and explanations made, and in some cases discussion of which was the best way to go about a given task. Experience helps here and many of these volunteers are "repeats," so as the Dinner gets bigger each year, it also gets better.

* * *

Let's play we're going to this special Dinner, and I'll try to give you some idea of how much help is needed,



ISN'T THERE A LINE ABOUT "TOO MANY COOKS..."? Feeding several thousand people does take a big soup pot and lots of patient helpers. It's all part of the Grey Bears Christmas Dinner booked for the Civic on December 21.

where it comes from, and how cheerfully it's given.

Right to begin with, the Dinner is held annually in the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, and its use for this occasion is donated by the City of Santa Cruz, and has been every one of the seven years the Dinner's been held.

Although it's a Christmas dinner held in December, it's such a huge undertaking, requiring so much help, that letters are sent out much earlier in the year, thanking people for past support, asking them for continued, increased, and/or new help (and for their suggestions, too). This work is all done by the Grey Bears.

This special Santa Cruz County event is primarily a get-together for all seniors of 60 years or over, so they may share this most beloved of our holidays with others. No "showing your driver's license and at least one national credit card" kind of nonsense before you're admitted. You are welcome here, and everyone wants you to know you are.

However, in the early years it became apparent that there were many seniors the right age who were nevertheless shut-in or homebound for one reason or another, and who couldn't "come to the party." The Grey Bears took this in stride, accepting it as just one more thing to do; and they in turn received the valued assistance of the Senior Information & Referral Service of Santa Cruz County, who offered to take care of all phone calls for these special arrangements.

So—if you can't be there but would like to have dinner, just call 462-1433 and tell them. Last year more than 500 shut-ins had their dinners delivered before the Auditorium doors were ever opened to incoming guests, and you must know how pleased these people were to be included.

Also, if you don't drive or have no transportation, or if you have transportation to offer or to share, Senior I & R will take this information too, and somehow get you all taken care of. And another valuable help has been added just this year: the services of the Dragon Slayers and their van with a wheelchair lift. So maybe you can "come to the party" after all (how exciting: in a van with a wheelchair lift, escorted by a Dragon Slayer!). Just call the Senior I & R (462-1433) if you can come this way.

* * *

Now let's get down to dinner itself. Getting hungry? Even one meal for so many people takes a lot of planning and preparation. All the food is directly donated, or furnished through cash donations, by the big-hearted people of Santa Cruz and their businesses. It is then prepared by a crew of experienced volunteers (many of them also "repeats" from one year after another) under the direction of Thelma Dalman, Director of Food Services of Santa Cruz City Schools.

The old County Hospital kitchens are made available, and this devoted group starts cooking at five in the morning, and doesn't stop until the job is done. Marcia laughingly told me she doubted that any of this crew had ever seen their finished product, dished up and served to a senior in the Auditorium. For them, all the action takes place in the kitchens, and they still think it's a great party.

As cooking is completed, the food is transported from the Hospital grounds to the Civic Auditorium by the National Guard, where it's held in mobile kitchen units furnished by the Forestry Department until it can be served. This arrangement is set up just outside the actual Civic building, at a designated door, and good weather always makes it a more pleasant task. Nearby, the Red Cross sets up an emergency first aid station and lends reassurance to the atmosphere. I told you everyone helped, didn't I?

* * *

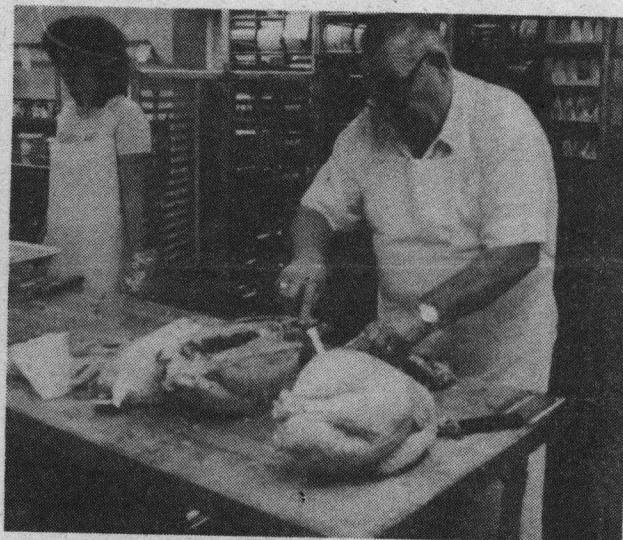
So now we know they're ready for us. Where do we start? The entrance door is on Church Street, and we walk right in. Did you ever see a Greeter-Seater before? Here is a host of them—all volunteers, many school

students—and one of them takes us over. We are greeted, we stop first to get a tag so others can not only say "Hi" but call us by name, then we visit Santa who gives us a Christmas present (donated by merchants and wrapped by those busy Grey Bears, what fun!).

Only then are we led into the main room, all aglow with lights and holiday decorations, and we are seated for Dinner. Our Greeter-Seater friend goes to find someone else to help, and we can look around. It's a beautiful sight, a room full of warmth and chatter, a room full of people caring and sharing. We know we're among friends, and we can smell that good dinner on its way to us.

You know, the Civic is a big building and decorating it has to be a task. Just as the cooking crew must work ahead of the meal, the big decorating committee must work all their magic the day before the party. And magic is the only word for it.

Director Margolin isn't a worrier, and that's good, but she said she had one experience which recurred every year. She always walked into the Civic Saturday morning, took one look, and said, "We'll never make it." And she always walked out that evening, looking back until she could no longer see it, saying, "Yes, I really think it's prettier than last year."



GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER. Grey Bear volunteers, like this gentleman, work their fingers to the bone turning out the annual Christmas Dinner for Seniors.

One other thing she told me which we both enjoyed, and maybe you will too. Three years ago all the Santa Cruz schools decided to donate to the Seniors' Dinner all the decorated trees in their classrooms when school closed for Christmas vacation, and this thoughtful contribution from young people lightened their decorating load considerably. I had a broad smile, maybe a grin, on my face by then, and she wanted to know why.

I told her I have one son who teaches in high school and who brought me his classroom tree four years ago, but that was the only time, and I had occasionally wondered what he did with them after that. Marcia was grinning too by then, and said, "Well, now you know. The Grey Bears got them, and they went to the Seniors' party!"

At this special Dinner, it isn't enough to be well fed: dinner comes with wine yet, furnished by merchants throughout the area. Did I tell you that?

We must be entertained too, by the very best. Chairman John Tuck has lined up at least eight groups to perform—probably more, including two string bands—and this will be presented throughout the afternoon. Oh Merry, Merry Christmas!

Desserts are sort of a "specialty of the house" for the Seniors' Dinner. What? You're stuffed? You can't eat any more? Well, wait until you see this array of home-baked goodies, made just for you. While food for the main dinner must be donated and prepared in the huge quantities required to serve everyone, most of the desserts are prepared and donated for the Seniors' Christ-

mas Dinner by individuals or small families.

One family group traditionally bakes 50 pies, just for the Seniors' Dinner, and this year they're making it 75—so you *have* to have a piece. What a world of thoughtfulness goes into this giving!

As you finish your dinner, a Greeter-Seater appears to escort you to "bleachers," really seating space all around the edges of the room where you can sit, continue watching entertainment and talk to friends as long as you wish. Meanwhile, someone else takes your place at the table.

This is the time and place to say something about the efficient seating and serving arrangements worked out by co-chairmen Ron and Carolyn Stephenson, who are by now "old hands" at this task. The Civic floor is divided into four sections, with wide aisles running the length and width of the room to separate them. Each section is then set up with the right number of long tables and chairs, then the tables are set.

Mission Linen adds to the efficiency of this system by providing settings in four different colors, one for each "quad" as the sections are affectionately called. Before serving begins, the right number of serving carts are then assigned to each quad and identified with the same color, so all the volunteer servers need to do is fill their carts and head for the right-colored tables—none of this business of being waylaid by someone who looks hungrier, or having a close-in table get better service than one in the far corner! It's a magnificent system.

At the planning meeting I attended some fun was poked at the Volunteer Coordinators, who have their own stations at this Dinner but who were saying they didn't know what they were supposed to do. I have a feeling this was a committee meeting in-joke, but they were told, just in case, and they are important to the efficiency of this whole operation. Each committee chairperson has volunteers assigned to him or her, the number requested in advance. Depending on the flow of guests to some extent, the need for these volunteers will fluctuate somewhat while the party's in progress.

Every chairperson is responsible for reporting to the Coordinator if he or she has—even temporarily—more help than needed, and for sending that help to the Coordinator's office for reassignment. Every chairperson is also responsible for letting the Coordinator know if and when he or she is short of help at all, and reinforcements will be sent. So you see, it's quite simple. These volunteers coordinate all the other volunteers, and everything runs smoothly.

I was told the Civic seats 500 at a time for a dinner like this. Math isn't my favorite subject, but I think I've finally figured out just how you serve 3,000 guests in a time span of four hours. You go through the whole hospitable procedure as outlined in this article, and when you've done it only six times—you're *through*! Until next year . . .

* * *

California Grey Bears was founded in 1974 by 20-year-old graduate of UCSC, Kristina Mailliard, and her friend, Gary Denny, and the first annual Dinner for Seniors was held in the Civic Auditorium that Christmas. They have both gone on to other work and I never had the pleasure of meeting them, but I'll bet you they were not only obviously young, they were idealistic and anxious to help this troubled world, and in their Grey Bear work they certainly succeeded.

* * *

So I saw it all in advance that night—on a huge map in a warehouse where the Grey Bears make their plans and do their good work for the elder citizens of Santa Cruz. I saw the Seventh Annual Christmas Dinner for *all* Seniors in this area being planned on a monumental caring basis, made possible by the generosity and complete cooperation of so many caring citizens of Santa Cruz. And I'm going to see it happen, too—on

Sunday, December 21, 1980

10:00 to 4:00 P.M. at
the Civic Auditorium

SEE YOU THERE.

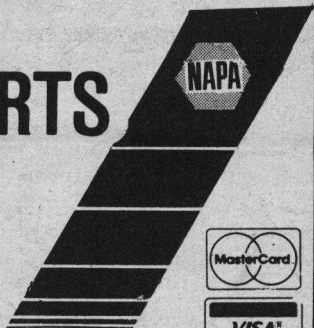
□

Season's Greetings from

**SEEBA'S
AUTO PARTS**

your local NAPA Dealer

- Wholesale—Retail
- New & Rebuilt
- Overnight Service on Non-Stocked Items



Foreign & Domestic

COMPLETE AUTO PARTS

8-5:30, Mon-Fri