

by Mel Anne Dinnell

Native Daughter Returns — Her Memoirs

All I got out of a job interview at Wrigley's recently was some good advice on how to market my skills elsewhere, with the redundant clause included about how "we consider whether or not you would be happy doing this work."

Nevertheless, I am very fond of Wrigley's.

When I was growing up living on Meder Street, a day when the wind blew North meant the air was filled with the sweet smell of fresh and unchewed gum. To me, it is a smell as tied with the feeling of being home as the smell of the sea is to others: and a lot more desirable at times, if you consider the former periodic invasion of the beaches here by very dead and red scallops.

People who have lived in Santa Cruz for any length of time tend to forget what an enchanted place it is and always has been. I left two years ago to experiment with life in other parts of California, and when I returned recently to walk the familiar streets and beaches and examine the state of my life, a flow of fond memories reminded me that although my love for the town is founded on the bias of a native, Santa Cruz is indeed a strange and special place.

When I was about twelve, and the world was becoming a nightmarish series of assassinations, violence and disputes in the streets over a far away war so horrible it was numbing, a small boat named "Shamrock" became stranded on the main beach in Santa Cruz. It became the focus of all our attention and even transcended into being an emotional issue. We drove by it regularly, took pictures, read reports on the progress of salvage attempts in the newspaper (there was only one of them) and eventually stood up on the boardwalk and watched it being slowly disassembled. Here in this magic place, where no evil could trespass, the destiny of that little craft was of the greatest significance.

Rummaging around my childhood memories, it seems not so long after the "Shamrock" incident when the old brick and stone ivy covered library was torn down.

A lot of people actually cried about that.

I remember my own mother saying, "I voted for it, but I guess I never thought they'd really do it."

I remember too the bitter pangs at seeing it demolished to a heap of formless rock; the feeling of helplessness and the thought that adults always wreck the good stuff so they can make more money. Later I was glad for the improvement and spent hundreds of fruitful hours in the new edition. At the time I saw my youth crumbling before my eyes.

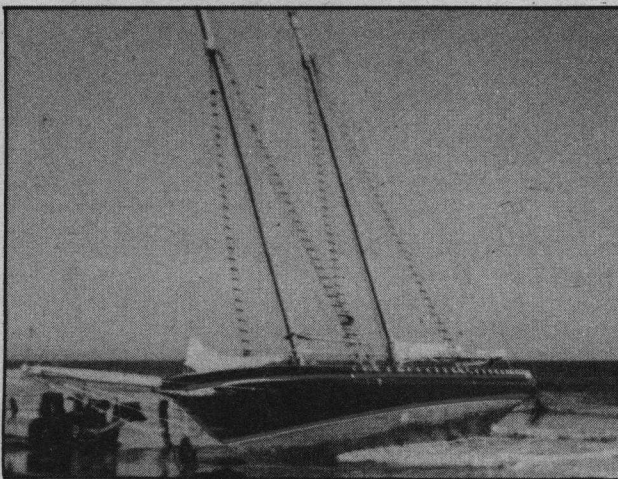
It seems that the whole time I was growing up, somebody was always talking about a cheap and effective way to levy the river. I was too young to remember "the flood", and only able to gather that it happened sometime around the same year I was born, but it was almost legendary. I heard many stories from people who had watched their drowning businesses from second story windows or walked the bridge all night with rifles guarding the business district against looters.

What I remember well is the controversy over whether of not to install the university in the side of the mountain. It came to my pre-adolescent ears, through adult conversation and the media, as "money and growth" versus "change and growth". It was built, and the town did grow, as both proponents and opponents had agreed it would. The population has more than tripled since then.

A man named Mr. Bertilluci will forever be a legend in my mind. It seems he didn't approve of the plans to construct that large and ugly but necessary courthouse which now stands along the river, and went out in a bulldozer to register his fierce protest. I always got the distinct impression that whatever anyone said, they had to

admire him. But the courthouse, which looked like a cheesecake when lit and a mausoleum when not, went up.

Santa Cruz natives are inclined to resist any type of



change as long as they possibly can, being the special people that they are — even though, in fact, many are merchants whose livelihood depends upon that very change.

This is a tourist town, after all. The nature of the town is to put its most attractive foot forward. When summer arrives, even the ocean seems to take on an added sparkle, and the trees a more pictorial shade of green. We

open our roads, stores and beaches to the tourists and, in fact, probably enjoy them. They are an integral part of what makes Santa Cruz unique.

Consider the "Pacific Garden Mall". It may be all there ever was for some, but most people remember when it was a wide and typical asphalt road. There were plans to replace it with a genuine, autoless garden mall. What we got was a poor compromise, because it was apparently necessary for cars to have access in order for business to be good. Everyone said it was ridiculous: they should have done it right or not at all. But in fact it worked, and we adjusted, and now it is affectionately ours. In the end it changed the whole nature of the trade. Now Santa Cruz wasn't just a beach town: it was quaint, and had art too.

Santa Cruz, I suppose, had changed more times than I will ever know about but I am convinced that from the time the salty waters receded and left this small basin exposed, it has been a magic spot. The world in its violent insanity does not succeed in destroying it, as the people here deal in their own fashion with little disasters and necessary changes.

No place is perfect. Santa Cruz, at least, is democratic in its madness. It wouldn't be Santa Cruz any other way.

To me, it is the Don Quixote of towns: undaunted, spirited, innocent and clearly, eccentric. Just the way I left it.

And just the way I will always, always love it. ■

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