Lydon, Sandy

War split community in the '60s ... the 1860s

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Hindsight

Sandy Lydon

A NUMBER OF my friends have expressed exasperation with the recent anti-war demonstrations in Santa Cruz County. Their statements have a common pattern — they begin with the disclaimer that everyone has a right to peaceably express their opinion, followed by the elaboration as to how that right does not include inconveniencing fellow citizens or destroying property. Finally, as they run down, they blame University of California students for all the disruptions.

Since my friends tend to be reasonable, right-thinking people (otherwise why would they be my friends?) and not prone to irrational, knee-jerk responses, this renewed spate of UCSC-bashing must mean that a new myth has taken root in the local collective wisdom.

The myth uses 1965 and the arrival of the university as a watershed date in Santa Cruz County history. Before the University (B.U.), Santa Cruz County was a lovely, quiet little place where "never was heard a discouraging word" and, like a Norman Rockwell small town on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post, folks joined ranks when the cause required it. Oh sure, there were problems, but folks knew how to behave: Blacks stayed up in the Circles, the Chinese stayed in Chinatown, and if a high school girl got pregnant she went to live with her aunt in Turlock.

After 1965 (A.U.), things went to hell. Disheveled youths arrived (all local youths were sheveled B.U.) to disrupt the peace, protest wars, question the draft,
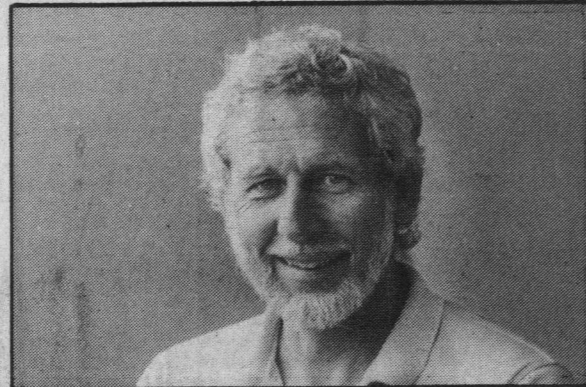
vote in blocks and, (can you imagine?) elect a Socialist to the City Council. Such things never happened here before 1965 goes the myth.

Wanna bet?

Since its founding in 1850, Santa Cruz County has been a place where divergent opinions grew and thrived, with the possible exception of notions about racial equality.

Please see LYDON — E5

California State Library collection

In this view from Mission Hill, liberty poles rise from Santa Cruz, circa 1864.

Lydon

Socialists? Fred R. Brentlinger, avowed Socialist, received a plurality for a seat on the Santa Cruz Town Council in 1911, but lost in a runoff to George Stone. Since there was no university in town at the time, many of Santa Cruz' pioneer forefathers must have supported socialism in 1911. Socialist candidates received 12 percent of the statewide vote in California elections in 1910, and socialism was popular all across the United States.

Opposition to war? There is a thread of anti-war protest running the entire length of Santa Cruz County history, beginning with the U.S. Civil War. The majority of Santa Cruz County residents supported the Union cause, but throughout the county there were pockets of Confederate sympathizers (known as Copperheads or "Cops") who cheered the news of every Confederate victory which came in on the telegraph wires.

Union army recruiters came into the county and eventually more than 200 men joined the Union forces. Ironically, most of them were sent to the Arizona desert to block any attempt by the Confederacy to make a run to the Pacific Ocean. The Santa Cruz Sentinel published many letters from the men waiting in the desert near Yuma, and the stories of scorpions, sand, dust and wind have an eerie, familiar ring to them. But the Confederate troops never showed up.

Copperheads continued to hold rallies in the hills behind Corralitos and Watsonville. Business and political leaders found these protests troublesome, and though they were helpless to prevent them, they worked very hard to show the outside world that the majority supported the Union. They did not want to be branded "Secesh" country — secessionist — as was the town of San Juan Bautista, which had, for a time, a pro-Confederate newspaper.

This is the era during which everything was named Union — Union Street in Santa Cruz and Watsonville, and Union School in Pleasant Valley, later renamed Pleasant Valley School. In fact you can generally assume that any regional place name including the word "union" was so named during the Civil War.

One distinctive way of showing loyalty to the Union cause was to put up a "Liberty Pole" in front of your business. By 1863 there were dozens of such poles throughout Santa Cruz. Business owners sought out straight trees, cut them, stripped the limbs and set the bare pole in front of the store. No flags. Just the pole. The taller the pole, the greater the loyalty. Many of the poles exceeded 100 feet in height.

The forest of liberty poles did not silence the local Copperheads. When Abraham Lincoln was shot in 1865, the Confederate sympathizers publicly rejoiced. The Union military commanders in San Francisco declared that "exulting" over Lincoln's death would not be tolerated, and when John McCoy of Soquel said he was happy that Lincoln was dead, he was arrested and taken off to federal prison. Similar arrests occurred in San Jose, Watsonville, San Juan Bautista and Monterey.

It is easy to understand the difference of opinion about the Civil War here given that the population of the place was drawn from states on both sides of the war. Later historians raked smooth the historical sand and left the impression that there was unanimity of support for the Union (the history rake is awarded to the winners of wars), but the contemporary record shows vigorous debate and discussion throughout the war. I find the Civil War discussion comforting, as Operation Desert Storm (why do I get the feeling that an advertising company is running this thing?) enters its second week.

Draft resistance B.U.? Of Santa Cruz County men who were eligible for the draft during World War I, more than 70 percent from sought exemptions. In my next column we'll take a look at the Great War as it was fought here in Santa Cruz County.

Sandy Lydon is a writer and lecturer on matters historical. He can be seen regularly on KCBA-TV 35's evening news discussing history and the weather.