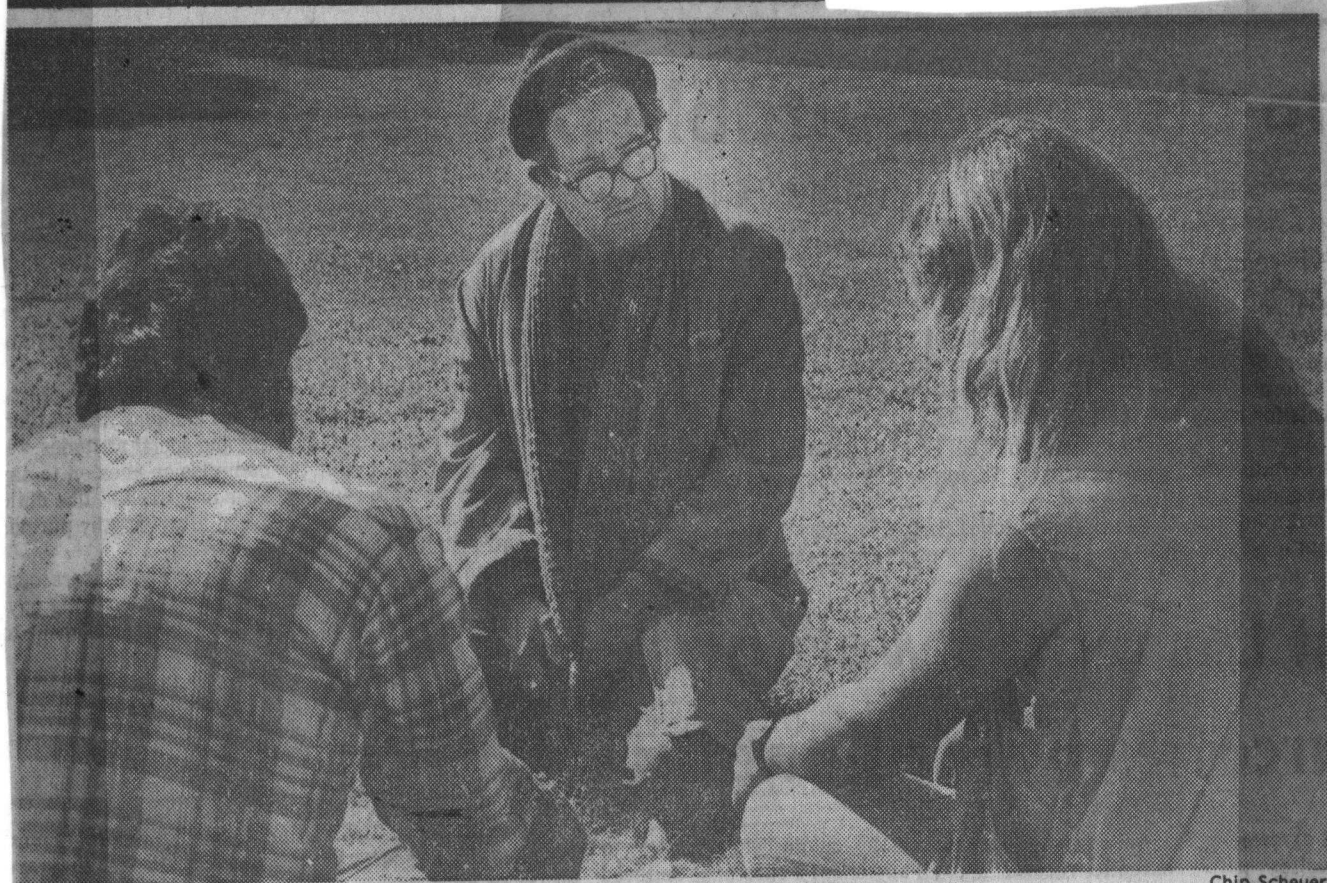


Life with the trolls



Chip Scheuer

Sentinel reporter Paul Beatty lived with the street people in Santa Cruz.

First of four articles

By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — I sit here in San Lorenzo Park shivering in my stinking wino clothes, cold from last night's coastal fog that caught me huddled in a single blanket on the ground.

Three drug dealers are quietly measuring gray-green marijuana into "dime" baggies, indifferent to the old drunk across the table who is playing his game of solitaire and keeping score on a small note pad.

It is Friday, my first day in the park.

The oldest of the all-male dealers, in his 20s with a puberty-scarred face, complains he got ripped off last night — strong-armed out of \$380 of his drug money. The rip-off magically grows to a loss of \$500 as other dealers come on the scene.

One of his friends assures him, "I didn't set you up, man. I didn't set you up."

No police report will be filed.

In the background, the park's ducks graze their noisy way from the hill where the dawn sun dried their rolling tear-shaped backs.

I will hear ducks quacking for 3½ days (perhaps the rest of my life) and promise myself to return with a record-

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ing of their most grating quacks to play back at 10 million decibels to drive them from their pond.

Within my first two hours in the park, I have two new friends.

One I call John, a drunk to whom I give a little money each day. It helps him drink his way into jail each night. He has broken his collar bone. It goes unattended.

The other friend I call "The Non Sequitur." For as Gerald (The Mayor of the Mall and Chief of the Trolls) explains, "He always talks in riddles."

The Non Sequitur tells me, "People die of cancer, heart attacks, emphysema and large tattoos." My first day, he tells me he is fixing his Corvair; the next day it is a Porsche Turbo and the third day they have mated and come to issue as twin Rolls Royces.

He is large, a burnished copper presence that mirrors an unfocused world.

He triggers my cowardice quickly with tales of his violence.

My friends and I are hungry. There are some raw yams left in the park from the night before; it seems there are always bits of food to be found by grazing the park each morning. But we have no matches to start a fire in a brazier. Minute-by-minute, we forget the damned yams.

I look up as a dealer is told, "Hey, Sean, there's a dimer at the curb asking for bud." "Bud" is the part of the leaf closest to the stem. It has more of the heady stuff that makes "good (or) gnarly smokes." God spare us the child's play of clandestine enterprise.

These customers are not the usual run of teen-agers from junior highs and high schools, but drive-in buyers in svelte cars who may be on their way to downtown offices.

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The dealers roll a powerful joint and nearly choke to death while coughing out praises of its mind-boggling effect.

I fear that the cops will come and arrest us all. In time, a city cop comes into the park and the drug dealers dump their coats and drugs onto the table and move away. I sit there playing my solitaire on a table set for a marijuana meal.

If the cop arrests me, my life on the street will be very short-lived.

The cop makes us nervous. He moves into the park from the upper path and moves toward us, looking us over. He stops and makes John pour out his beer. The cop leaves.

I sit there, the old bum that I am, wondering again if I can go through with this assignment.

* * *

The idea of spending time as a "street troll" started as a persistent itch after The Sentinel covered the murder of Raul the Sun-gazer on April 20.

Raul was thrown off the footbridge that connects San Lorenzo Park and the center of town. His friends on the streets, the trolls, were angered and saddened.

The first word on the street was that "the troll hunters" (young toughs who harass street people) killed him. As it turned out, the two men who were arrested also were living on the streets.

I began to wonder what it must be like to be a troll, a brand of the homeless who in Santa Cruz are given that name because they sleep under the bridges and scavenge the city to survive. It is estimated there are approximately 200 trolls in the city.

The editors agreed to let me try it.

Being 52 years old, I decided my best disguise was that of a wino.

I applied a little hair dye to throw off people who might know me and bought a velvet-collared dress coat and stocking cap at Mama Dawson's. At home, I got out my paint pants and a cowboy shirt I found in a back closet. I poured a bottle of Gallo Port on the coat and

shirt. I should have used Night Train.

I took a blanket and went downtown to sleep the first night in my daughter's yard. The fog that came in on little cat's feet clawed me to ribbons.

During the next four days for endless hours, I was to lie around San Lorenzo Park, the social and business hub of street life. As a wino, I would walk the downtown streets, eat food gleaned from the park and city dumpsters, eat at the soup kitchen and the Elm Street Mission. I would sleep in a troll's burrough and live with the street people as one of them.

I took \$1.56 in change. Later, I got four dollars more from my wife. I gave my money to street people.

I was afraid — middle-class fears of the street, certainly not without substance.

But, four days are nothing to someone who knows the streets.

* * *

Friday morning, I am playing away at solitaire and the dealers are gone. Non Sequitur is cruising the park, a

down-and-out St. Peter, the official greeter in this garden.

We are killing time until 11 o'clock when we can trek to the Catholic Soup Kitchen for lunch.

A lanky, middle-aged transient approaches my table. He has only upper teeth in his sunken mouth. He introduces himself and warmly shakes my hand.

"I was a cop, city cop in Santa Cruz, back in the '60s," he says when I begin to pay attention. He remembers the name of a local judge, now deceased.

He hangs around, wanting to say something more. Then he says, "There are a lot of good looking women who go through the park and I bet you think about them a lot."

He goes on, "I've been looking for my friend George. I need companionship. I want to make love to a man."

I tell him I've lost all interest in sex and I just live to lay out the deck. Call me "Mr. Solitaire," I tell him, thinking it will be colorful to pick up a

nickname.

"You're not that old," he says.

I'm terminal, I assure him.

He looks puzzled and wanders off.

Now, I have to face the trip to the soup kitchen at the north of town and I am ashamed of the way I look. All morning, I have seen myself reflected in the faces of the joggers, bicyclists and walkers — those few who see the trolls.

I take a circuitous route to avoid the Mall, and I feel like those I call the "hermit crabs," morning derelicts who carry their worldly goods on their backs.

At the Catholic soup kitchen, founder Peter Carota and Sister Grace and others know me, and I wonder if I can get by without being recognized. I manage it by keeping my head down.

At the freshly layed table, I feel down and out. The guy next to me is shirtless and stinks and my middle-class nose is offended. A young woman complains, "These beans ain't done. Is it OK to pour my bowl back?" She

dumps the beans into the common pot after a man tells her, "I don't give a damn what you do."

Outside, I meet Carota who is setting up the garbage cans.

I stand before him for a moment, and he looks puzzled. Then says, "Paul? Paul, is that you? What are you doing?"

I tell him.

"How is it?"

Horrible.

"I've wanted to do it," Carota says, asking "what's the worst part?"

So many people have so few redeeming qualities, I tell him.

"I know," says the man who feeds them.

I force myself to return to the park. I am angry.

At about two o'clock, I have to get away. I go to my daughter's yard to find peace.

Tomorrow, I will join Gerald, a real-life troll, and begin a short trip that changes me.