

# THOMAS L. McHUGH / Adjectives were made for him

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**BROOKDALE** — Cantankerous. Irascible. Bellicose. Feisty.

Adjectives were made for Thomas L. McHugh, San Lorenzo Valley historian, genealogist, publisher and longtime hellraiser who died at his Brookdale home last Tuesday. He was 77.

McHugh was a curmudgeon from way back; an iconoclastic newspaperman (he eschewed the title "journalist") who served time for criminal libel.

McHugh was a man of principle. And when he thought he was right — which was always — woe unto whoever was the target of his pejoratives.

On the softer side, he loved children and he put in many volunteer hours at the Holy Orthodox Christian Church in Ben Lomond, where his services will be held 2 p.m. today.

McHugh came to Santa Cruz County from Pennsylvania in 1915. He attended Santa Cruz High School — it's unclear if he graduated — and held a number of jobs on an oil tanker, in a lumber mill, in a cannery.

He got a job as a printer's apprentice and was a reporter for the Santa Cruz Evening News, the precursor of the Sentinel, in 1928; he worked on the Oakland Tribune in 1934. He was in the service briefly during World War II, but once told this reporter he hated war. "I could have made money in a munitions factory but I would not do anything that would harm people," he said.

McHugh was best known as editor of Riptide and the Penny Press, in which McHugh regaled taxation and government officials in the 1950s.

He coined the phrase "county Board of Stupidvisors," called the city manager the "city damager" and accused city employees of perfidy in prose filled with nineteenth-century slang.

People who lived in Santa Cruz then remembered the Penny Press as a newspaper that had a run of 1,000 copies and a readership of 30,000.

"As soon as it would come out, we'd pass it all around," said one Sentinel employee, noting, "If McHugh couldn't think of anything to print, he'd make some thing up, and dare you to prove him wrong."

Alas, McHugh's penchant for froth over facts got him in trouble. In 1955 he lost a \$25,000 suit to Santa Cruz Postmaster Orin Howard, who McHugh implied was a Communist. His house on Mission Street was sold to pay the fine.

Two years later, he was convicted on six of seven counts of criminal libel for charges he printed about various public officials. He claimed that the city manager had accepted a bribe to keep quiet about corruption at City Hall; that the mayor had stolen \$40,000 from a special city fund; that the city clerk was involved in embezzlement and that a local judge was a liar whose family came from "the scum of Asia and Africa."

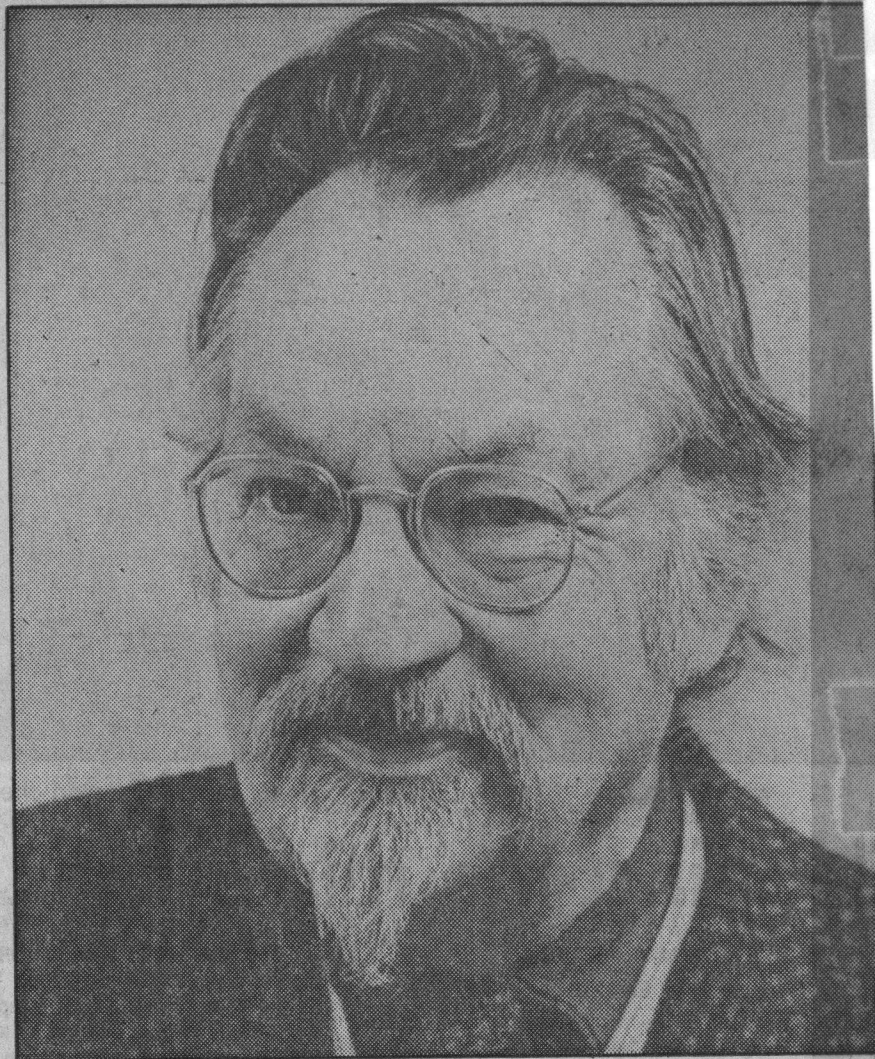
He spent seven months in County Jail.

At about the same time McHugh had a scuffle with the assistant chief of police, who shoved him around and knocked his glasses off to keep McHugh from distributing the Penny Press in downtown Santa Cruz. Battery charges against the officer were dismissed when the jury was unable to reach a decision.

When McHugh wasn't raising hell in the Penny Press, he was raising hell in the courtroom. He filed lawsuits to stop construction of a business district bypass and the San Lorenzo River flood control project. He tried to have the City Manager arrested when the City Council cut off his water for non-payment. He refused to pay a business license fee for his Santa Cruz print shop because he didn't think "the businessmen were getting anything for their money."

Lifelong valley resident Alice Earl Wilder said McHugh was a man who was "very set in his ways. He was eloquent, he worked hard, and he only did something because he thought it was right."

Wilder said McHugh believed that other people acted out of a desire to make money, while McHugh acted out of principle. "He wanted to help people get some-



Tom McHugh in the mid-60s.

thing they wouldn't normally have gotten," she added.

Opal Marshall, a friend for 35 years, said, "Tom was one of the freest souls I have ever met — a man who would follow his ideals regardless of the cost."

McHugh moved to Brookdale in 1967. With a crewcut that stuck up like the bristles of a shaving brush, his black horn-

rimmed glasses and worn, blue-collar clothes, McHugh was a regular sight along Highway 9, where he hitch-hiked to the Felton Bowl. His car had broken years before, making him "a shank's mare" — McHugh's word for a pedestrian.

"He came in here almost every day for 14 years," recalled owner Red Elkins. "A

lot of the customers knew him so he didn't have any trouble getting rides. I picked him up myself a number of times."

Talking to McHugh was like coming across a pair of high-button shoes in a closet full of Nikes. He not only lived in turn-of-the-century America, he insisted the rest of the world join him there.

In later editions of the Riptide, he described UCSC as "a school concentrating on liberal arts, appealing to the worst side of young people uncertain about their future under the pretense of free expression" which had "expoused conditions that have led to the saturation with dope of every school in the county."

McHugh scoffed at the idea of growth control. The only way to control the population, he wrote, "is to put the men at the North Pole and the women at the South Pole and tie their hands so they can't build kayaks."

He ran for Fifth District supervisor in 1972, 1978 and 1980 and had announced his intentions to run again this year.

"No matter where one looks in Santa Cruz County government, it is nuts!" he

wrote in a letter to the Sentinel declaring his candidacy.

McHugh was considered a dark horse candidate in 1980, when he ran against incumbent Pat Liberty and Joe Cucchiara (whom McHugh persisted in calling "Joe Cucharacha."

Nevertheless he received 1,514 votes, forcing Liberty and Cucchiara into a runoff election.

I first met McHugh in 1979, when I interviewed him at his ramshackle Brookdale home. The front yard was covered (at times, knee-deep) with old newspapers. McHugh like to print on recycled newspaper, for both ecological and economical reasons.

In person he was the soul of courtesy, and talked with a reverence for women and babies, whom he called "the kids in three-corner pants."

"I like a good fight," McHugh told me. "A good fight keeps the blood circulating."

It kept him circulating until last week. The valley's story-tellers will be poorer for his passing.