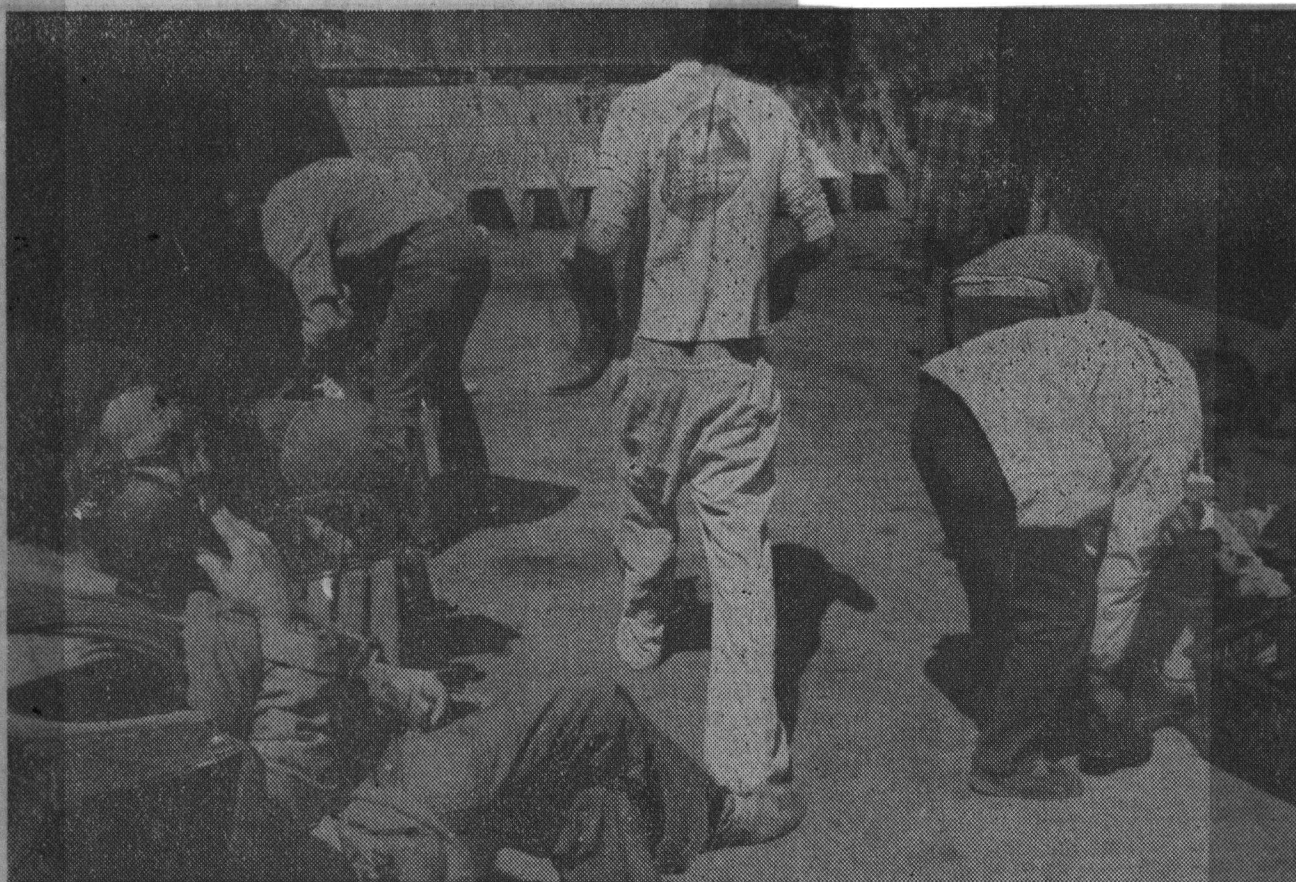


Life with the trolls



Chip Scheuer

Sentinel reporter Paul Beatty, left, waits for a meal at the Catholic soup kitchen.

Second of four articles

By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — It is six o'clock in the morning and San Lorenzo Park is at peace this Saturday.

It is a healing peace.

I'm living my second day as a Santa Cruz troll, one of the town's homeless who survive on food stamps, dumpster diving, the soup kitchen and the Elm Street Mission. Others receive disabled benefits and are considered fortunate.

They are the homeless who burrow into the corners of the city each night and spend their days on the streets and in the parks. San Lorenzo Park is a favorite.

The morning sun is helping me recover from yesterday's depression that came from playing the role of a wino-style troll.

I welcome the quiet touch of this small urban park; verdant in its morning shower that rains from a sprinkler system that follows me around.

I am sitting on the concrete curb of one of the sandbox areas, updating my notes. I have discovered that the sandboxes are natural solar collectors, out of the treeline, and warm to the old bones. They also collect wandering insomniacs and hungover winos who get to the park early.

I'm involved in turning the blackening bird when I look up into the eyes of a young family, probably on their way to breakfast at a nice cafe. They are looking at me with distaste and hatred. The moment stuns me.

One of the town's "civilized people" comes into my sandbox to work out. A young athlete ignores the wasted old wino and goes about his exercises. Twice I am in his way and twice I move to other sides of the play area. I am writing and he is bouncing around me.

Soon, his intense exertion makes me weary and I grow impatient of this panting, brainless narcissist. And envious.

I move eastward, back to the "dealers' table" where Friday I spent a miserable first day among the winos, wanderers and the curb-side dealers of marijuana.

I go on writing, stopping to nod pleasantly to the park attendant who also ignores me. Such disrespect for a U.S. citizen.

Each morning, a nicely dressed woman named Rosie comes to the park to pick up litter. The park's few early-morning regulars know her and yell their hellos.

Yesterday, she left a sack on the lawn and my friend John checked it out. He came back to our bench with two donuts, still tight in their cellophane wrappings. We each ate one while he yelled to the empty city, "Praise the Lord," while laughing uproariously. He confessed there are those who say he's blasphemous, but they are failing to recognize a true believer.

After I've moved from my sandbox,

Please see back of section

REFERENCE

APR 18 1984
LIBRARY
APR 18 1984

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL
June 18, 1984

Continued from Page A1
my second friend hurries into the cleared area by the table. He is a park socialite I call The Non Sequitur in praise of his ingenious view of the world.

He announces he's found "14 pounds of chicken, the good parts, the shoulders" that someone left somewhere. I don't ask questions about its origin.

He goes off in search of firewood and returns with newspapers and pieces of a cardboard box. He lays the fire and then drops a sticky handful of thighs and breasts on the brazier. It's grill is darkly coated with congealed drippings from better meals.

The blazing paper and cardboard do things to the chicken that some say Lucifer will do to the worst of us.

As the chicken merrily crackles, I lay out a hand of solitaire. My friend goes for more fuel and I leave my cards to turn the burning chicken with a sharp wooden stick found on the ground.

I'm involved in turning the blackening bird when I look up into the eyes of a young family, probably on their way to breakfast at a nice cafe. They are looking at me with distaste and hatred.

The moment stuns me.

John arrives. He slept inside again last night. Jailed for public drunkenness.

He's in pain from his broken collarbone and goes around saying, "I've

got to quit drinking, man. I've got to quit drinking."

It's your choice, I tell him, quit drinking or die.

"I know, I know," he says.

He teaches me the game of spades and takes delight in humiliating me. Later, when I beat him at his own game, he explains it away, "Hey, you learned from the master, remember."

He begins calling me his "spade buddy."

He gets edgy and asks for money to get some beer. I give him my \$1.56, and tell him to get me some food if there's any money left.

I'm hungry.

The only food I can depend on is the Elm Street Mission dinner tonight at 6:30. A long wait. I've had moments of panic since this began because it comes home in my mind that I can't eat whenever I choose.

Even so, it is with a feeling of gratitude that I hear my friend stealthily eating his scorched chicken shoulders behind my back. He says he can eat only the outer layer that got cooked. God bless his selfishness this morning.

Later he offers the raw parts for others to cook.

John returns with a beer and some oriental nut mix for me. I can't eat that kind of junk, but it is delicious when I do.

As soon as I can, I plan to get away from the dealers' table and get in touch with Gerald. He's a street person I met

in April when doing the story on Raul the Sun-gazer. Raul was thrown from the San Lorenzo footbridge to his death. Two men were arrested and charged.

Gerald has 17 years on the street and will recognize me, I'm sure.

He arrives totting his large portable radio, a "ghetto blaster," and settles down at his favorite spot under the sycamore tree on the knoll by the footbridge.

I saunter up the hill, one of my blankets in a plastic bag marked "Marriotts" tucked under my arm. He's laying out and I kneel so that he can see me.

"Do I know you? (pause) Haight-Ashbury? Frisco? (pause) Oh, you're the reporter. Are you here on assignment?"

The idea of a reporter on assignment captures his imagination and he says more of us should do it. He lets me hang around and I know it's going to be OK. Later he tells me how he always wanted to be in a newspaper story.

When we are at Elm Street Mission later, a missionary asks Gerald why he's never been in the newspaper since he's so well known. He's called the Mayor of the Mall and the Chief of the Trolls, but repudiates those titles as nonsense.

Gerald looked at the missionary and at me and said for all to hear, "How can I be in the paper? There aren't any reporters here. Does anyone see any reporters here?"

Saturday morning drags along as other friendships and tolerance groups begin to cluster upon the greensward.

An alien-green frisbee slides through the air. A lavender-bikini'd woman walks into our daydreams. A little gnarly pot is choked down and the classical-rock music of KHIP in Hollister pulses into the park.

There are those among us who are unashamedly sexist — anatomical-minded and open in their remarks.

I urge control, not wanting to get hauled in for sexual harassment (a hot item in Santa Cruz) but my friends look at me as though I need hormone shots.

A gaunt young man plunks down his skinny butt. He's found a new scam to get food. It's a good one. Yesterday when he fainted, they took him to the hospital where he got a good meal.

"Then they hurried me out."

Today, he's going to save the town the cost of the ambulance and just walk out to the hospital and ask outright for another meal.

He doesn't understand he is starving.

One touring man who lives in San Jose gives plasma twice a week to make \$20. He says I should go over the hill and tell the plasma bank he sent me. He'll get a \$5 bonus and then if I come back on Thursday, he will give me \$2.50 of it.

Another arrival is asked if he is still making those long-distance calls for people.

"I found out how to do it," he says,

"and I'm charging a fee." He suddenly breaks into the telephone song, "Reach out, reach out and touch someone."

Young kids walk by and ask, "Have you got some smoke?"

Gerald and I turn off KHIP and walk over to the top of the Mall. Then we head down to the Elm Street Mission.

Thirty-four of us tramps and bums and hippies and fallen bikers stand around shooting the breeze, sharing street gossip. We wait on a concrete and dirt lot in back of the cyclone fence that keeps us out of the mission building.

We have 15 minutes to wait, then five, then the gate opens at precisely 6:30. We hurry into the sermon room.

The place is being renovated and we sit down in an ambiance of folding chairs and drywall. We bow our heads in opening prayer, then open our song books to "Amazing Grace" and then to "What a Friend we have in Jesus."

I fear we sorely strain that friendship with our singing.

The preacher lectures us about proper behavior at the mission and I find out that last week a drunk wanted to debate a certain religious doctrine. As a result, the dinner was nearly canceled.

We can't let that happen and are on our best behavior. Hungry bellies make easy converts. Feed me and I'll believe it.

The word on the street is that the mission in Santa Cruz is a fair shake. It

costs only half an hour of ear-banging compared to others in Northern California that charge an hour. Time is cheap on the streets, at any rate.

The preacher tells us not to try to negotiate our salvation — to be ready to go when we are called.

"You say you love Jesus, but will you give up drugs? You say you love Jesus, but will you give up the bottle?"

As the final prayer ends, we rush to the door where a missionary is handing out bag lunches.

They contain two sandwiches — bread and viscera — and a cup of soup. Saturday, they had a doughnut. Mine was olive green.

The "boys" eat outside in the compound, standing in line to get servings of the main casserole. Saturday was fish and Sunday was lasagne.

I settle for the soup, but priggishly wish the potato had been peeled.

I didn't dare ask Gerald what was on my sandwich, but I was certain that at some point in its miserable life it had clotted.

Gerald said if I didn't like the food to give it to him, or anyone else on the street, for it was good food and must not be wasted.

Even as I thought it was god-awful, I knew it was a godsend. Bless the missionaries who provide it.

Gerald is a wise and wholesome person.

I have just two more days with the trolls.