

Forest of enchantment

Elfland

Students, pagans find spiritual peace in embattled Elfland

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Near the Den of Judgment in the heart of Elfland, a small altar sits in the center of a dark circle of trees, calling upon the Archangel Uriel and King Ghob for protection.

The missive is hand-lettered on a paper surrounding the drawing of a saint, along with candles, glitter, money and ashes, left at the base of the altar.

"Lord of the gnomes and earth elements, let your kingdom of little people surround this area, forming a cordon to protect and defend it from interlopers, developers, Realtors, construction, vandalism, ruin and assassination," the message reads.

Welcome to the battle of Elfland.

On a map, Elfland is nothing more than a gently sloping area of wooded hills, springs and meadows on the UC Santa Cruz campus across from the Student Health Center. It is on the edge of the future site of Colleges Nine and Ten, and is otherwise unspectacular and unmarked.

Parts of the area have been cleared for logging, which could start over the Christmas holidays.

But to students and some pagan groups, Elfland is much more than unmarked land. It is a kingdom in the realm of the spirit, a place of worship and refuge.

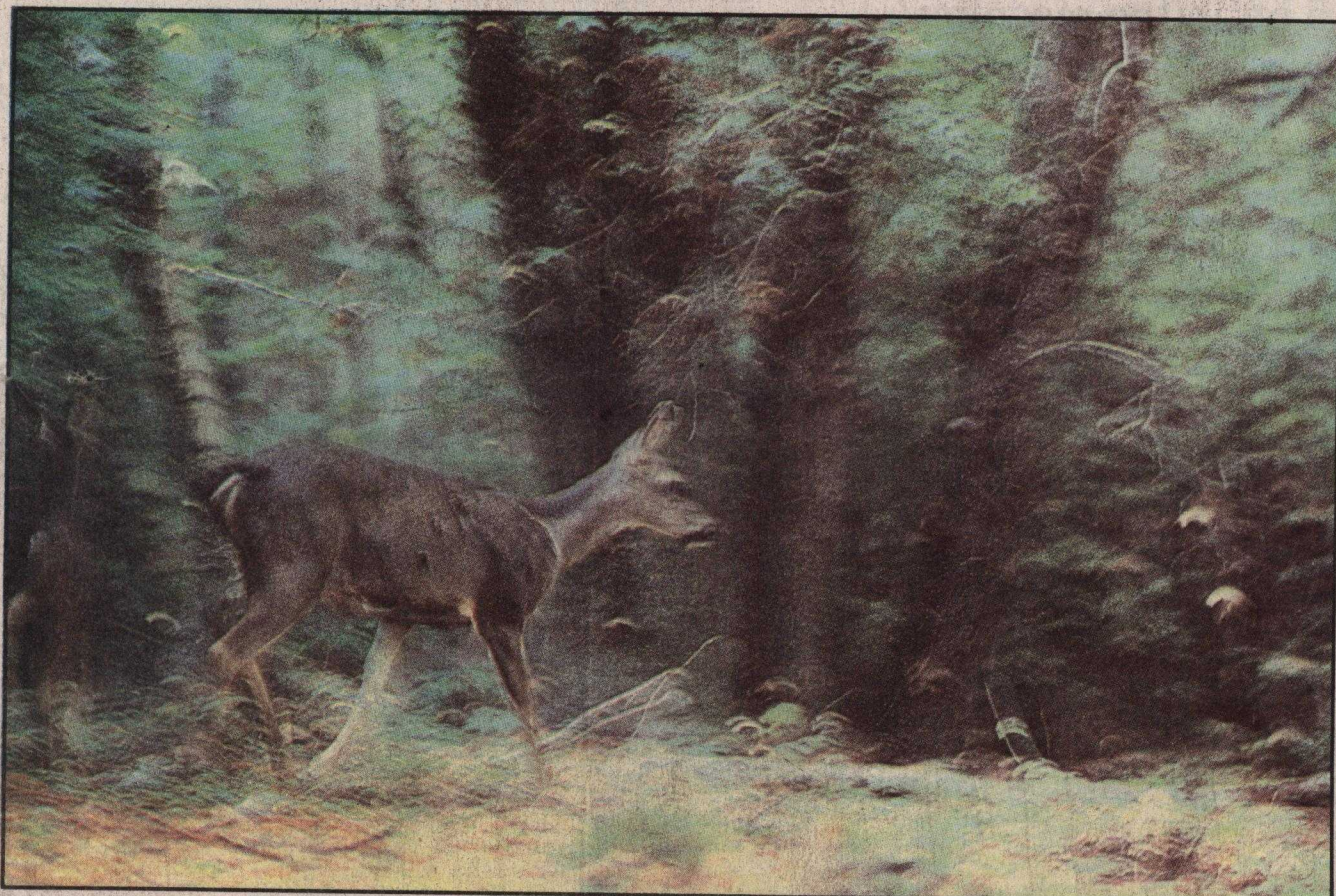
"I was brought here for the first time at night by a friend," said Dawn Atkins, a member of the Circle of 13 Moons, a pagan group. "He came here as a child. ... We use the area for rituals. A pagan ritual can be anything from five minutes of meditation to elaborate feasts and candle rituals, much like a Christian prayer."

The pagan ceremonies, according to Atkins, are life-affirming celebrations of nature, the changing seasons and spirits around them. The roots of many of the rituals are traced back to pre-Christian times.

"A lot of people say the Santa Cruz Mountains have a lot of magic," said Heather Withycombe, another member of the group. "We have true devotion to this area."

There is more to Elfland than pagan rituals.

The area has an unusual beauty, marked by rings of trees that grow in perfect circles along the perimeters where great redwoods once stood. The



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Deer, as well as students, find refuge in UCSC's Elfland, now targeted for development.

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trees reach like fingers grasping toward the sky, forming small circular cathedrals.

In the middle of the tree rings, shelters and altars have been built of redwood burls and branches, some taking spiral shell shapes, others like huts and yurts.

Scattered through acres of forest are hidden shelters, some delightful, others cold and dark. Most are named, and have "offerings" of notes, ribbons, candles and drawings left behind.

The names include Shell Circle, Den



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Elfland totem pole was carved by students during the '60s.

of Judgment and the Hollow. Many have secret names that cannot be written, Atkins said.

She and her friend built a circle named Cats Cradle where she buried

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her cat. Other pet animals are buried in the area, placed during small spontaneous rituals and remembered by notes and carvings.

The history of Elfland begins in the 1960s when students began to frequent the area, both as a place of refuge and gathering spot for small parties. They began building small structures and rings, including a carved totem pole, a tepee and a labyrinth which was later dismantled.

Many of the structures are now in ruins, giving rise to Elfland legends.

Winfield Kelly, now a chiropractor on the East Coast, lived in a lean-to in Elfland while a student in the early 70s.

"It was the most idyllic place I have ever lived — it was gorgeous," Kelly said. "I would get up in the morning, walk around in the groves of trees, there would be deer standing in the grass, sunlight beaming down, birds chirping and all these little animals."

Kelly was not drawn to the area by spiritual desires, but by cheapness.

"I just wanted to save money," he said. "I never had a dorm room. I worked in the dining hall and paid my tuition that way. I was a total gym rat. I played basketball every day."

Kelly left Elfland to move in with a girlfriend, but said plans to build a college in the area are a betrayal of the ideals of the campus when he attended. It is a common complaint among many former students.



Chris Carothers/Sentinel

"It's totally contrary to the whole initial philosophy (of UCSC)," Kelly said. "Of small colleges and not cutting down any redwoods."

The proposal to build the colleges, which would actually be on the edge of Elfland, has angered many who say it will destroy the special nature of the area.

The county had been fighting the proposal, but its appeal of a recently OK'd logging plan was refused by the state on technical grounds after it was found the county had failed to attend a required hearing. Wednesday, the county asked the state to reconsider the appeal.

The university has not set a logging date, but has said it would prefer to have it done while school is out of session, such as over the Christmas Holiday.

Atkins said that just because it is a holiday, that doesn't mean there won't be resistance to logging.

"We'll fight them one tree at a time," she said.

Another member of the Circle of 13 Moons said that should construction start on the site, that the earth will seek retribution for what has been done.

"My belief is that there are some spirits we call elves that live here and this is their house," said Atkins. "You can gain wisdom of the earth from them."

At the entrance to Elfland there is a carved stone which appeared this week with letters etched perfectly into granite reading: "You are entering a land of magical creation. A place where we can leave our skepticism behind and play. Walk here with respect and remember that your spirit is only as clean as the path you leave behind."

In Elfland, the heart of the matter is more than what can be marked on a map, and the path is, not always obvious.