

A BRIDGE TOO MARRED



Graffiti fighter defends Riverside Avenue span

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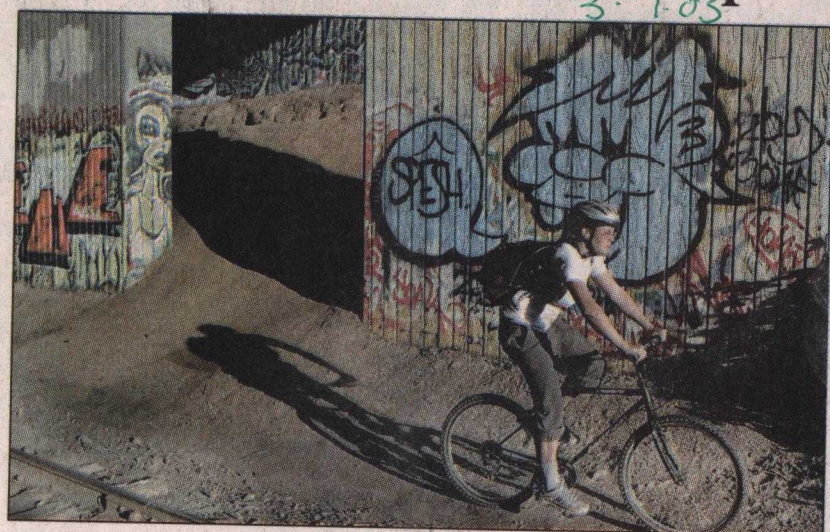
Paul Martin is the lonesome defender of Riverside Avenue bridge. He's Don Quixote, tilting at graffiti with a brush and paint bucket.

Most every day, he rides a bike along the San Lorenzo River levee to check for graffiti. He doesn't care if it's red, blue, political or gang-related. If he sees it, it's history.

"It's a personal affront, you know?" said the self-employed auto mechanic and Lower Ocean resident. "I grew up in the East Bay. Someone would beat the living blank out of you (if you sprayed graffiti.) I never wanted to defile the rest of the world because of my anger."

Martin, who is single with a 25-year-old son, has more time to fight graffiti now that he's slowing down his business.

He said that if graffiti isn't fought, "cars are left abandoned, bottles break at night, trash builds up, and you start to see condoms and



TOP: Paul Martin paints over graffiti tags on the railroad trestle above the San Lorenzo River on Wednesday.

ABOVE: A bicyclist passes large displays of graffiti along the railroad right of way just east of the trestle.

needles. You get entropy. I'm a property owner here."

Martin, a Santa Cruz resident since 1966, was once a lone ranger, painting the town beige. Late last summer he teamed with the city's 35-

person volunteer shock troops against graffiti.

Since September, he's probably smeared 5 gallons on levee walls,

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though levee vandalism has declined during the past months.

"Maybe they can't get paint so easily?" he said. "Could it be the economic downturn?"

Whatever the reason, "It has made me happier that now I'm on top of it, knock on wood."

The worst example of late wasn't gang-related.

"Right after the peace march (last month) someone took it upon themselves to put a lot of graffiti under the Soquel Avenue bridge, and write on the courthouse with a stencil of George W. Bush, and some nonflattering words."

He hits Riverside bridge so hard, some believe the bridge never gets tagged, said Julie Hendee of the city Redevelopment Agency. Martin also adopted the Laurel Street bridge and wiped out 200 pieces of levee graffiti all the way up to the Highway 1 overpass.

Volunteer graffiti fighters obliterated 450 tags while "adopting" Windsor, Bay, National and Owens streets. An estimated

\$13,500 in redevelopment fees buy buckets, graffiti removal spray, scrub brushes, face masks, gloves, goggles, rags and paint.

Martin makes use of these tools, but can't bring himself to wipe out street art. One day beneath Murray Street overpass near East Cliff Drive, Martin ran into spray-paint apparitions: a blue lady glaring like Cruella DeVil; a fat boy smiling; 3D pop-art hieroglyphics stretched across a wall.

Martin hated to destroy all this, and besides "There was just too much of it. It would take four men days and days to paint it."

Mostly he sees ugly "X3s and X4s," gang markings he calls "intimidating and vicious."

Sometimes there are rudimentary pictures, a hand with a little finger and a big thumb sticking out, and real sharp, long fingernails.

Martin can only speculate why people put hideous things near a place where poppies and wildflowers grow, in a levee where people jog and ride bikes.

"I'm sure it's broken families, MTV, all the rap, the degradation of ethical values. Apathy, anger, angst, all down the list."

Martin believes his paint war helps force drugs and alcohol out of his neighborhood.

"Like a cross to a vampire, they'll want to go somewhere else where it's a little more seedy."

"Graffiti Free Santa Cruz," sponsored by the city, and administered by the Volunteer Center, meets this month at the Santa Cruz Central Library's upstairs meeting room on 224 Church St. on March 17, 7-8 p.m.; March 18, 11 am.-12 p.m.; March 21, 1-2 p.m.; March 24, 7-8 p.m.

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