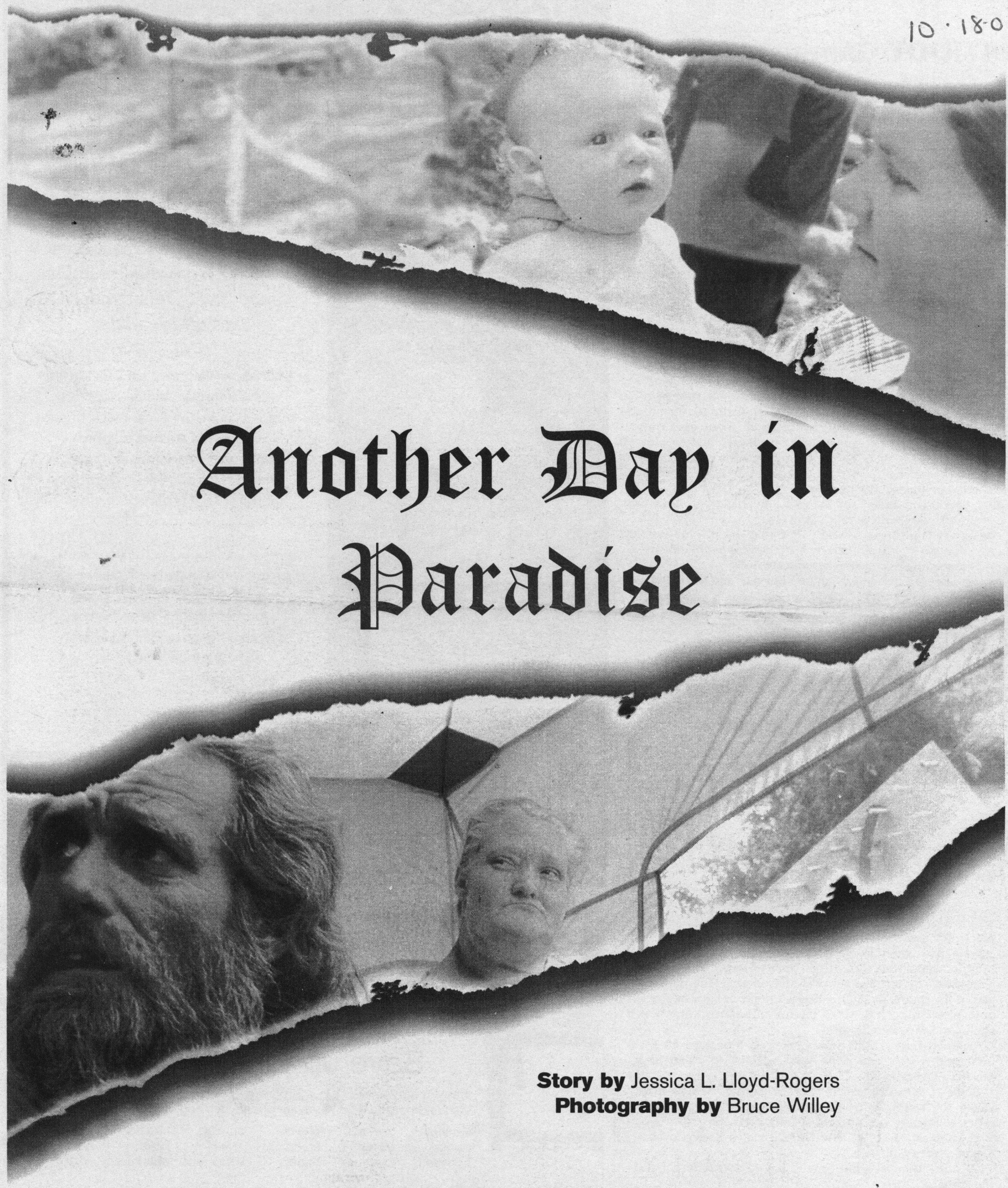


Homeless - 2000

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# Another Day in Paradise

**Story by** Jessica L. Lloyd-Rogers  
**Photography by** Bruce Willey

**Statistics and Facts: ...any man with a little means and no fear of work can make himself a home in Santa Cruz County."**

—from "History of Santa Cruz County," published by Phil Francis in the 1890s to entice Easterners to come settle in the county.

**T**he homeless pray with open eyes. Even when communing with the Creator, street life requires a certain vigilance. Within the boundaries of Camp Paradise, believers hold on to this protective habit during Sunday church services.

And they have reason to pray, because Camp Paradise is living on borrowed time.

Established in January of this year, this makeshift community of tents and tarps, perched on public land along the San Lorenzo River, is home to a group of people whose numbers fluctuate daily, but hover between 60 and 70 adults and children. This is where they live; they have nowhere else to go.

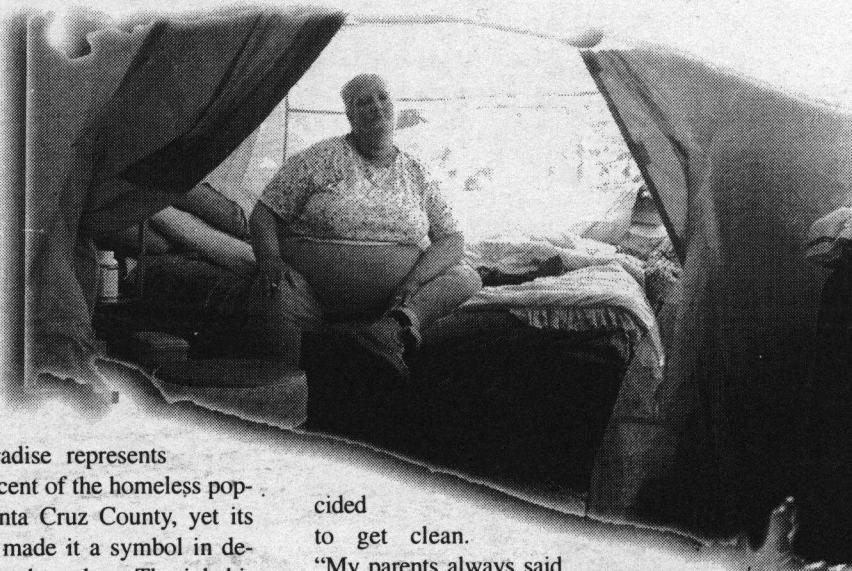
However, for nine months, the campers have been violating a city ordinance outlawing sleeping outside, and city, county, state and federal policies that protect riparian habitats. The site also unlawfully sits in a flood zone.

"So the city, now faced with the apparently irreconcilable schism between its rules and the reality of the camp, seems to have no option but enforcement," lamented Councilmember Mark Primack at the Sept. 18 Santa Cruz City Council meeting.

On Sept. 25, the City Council gave Camp Paradise residents a 30-day respite so an informal group of interested community members, including some of the campers, can find a new location for the camp. But next week, the City Council, bound by the city's laws, seems poised to force the campers to surrender their ground, whether or not a new site is found. And it seems unlikely that any more reprieves will be granted before clearing the camp.

Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice is clear about one thing — the camp cannot remain at its current location.

**Home Sweet Home:**  
Kay Phillips relaxes in her tent house of canvas.



Camp Paradise represents roughly 2 percent of the homeless population in Santa Cruz County, yet its visibility has made it a symbol in debates about the homeless. The inhabitants of this clean and sober, self-managed neighborhood have been both deified and demonized by citizens of Santa Cruz.

Some community members see the campers as pioneers of sorts, settlers who have carved out their own slice of the American frontier, claimed it as their own, and have created a peaceful, orderly community, the likes of which could be a creative solution to homelessness. Others see them as outlaws who are breaking the law, putting the environment and themselves at risk.

For every person who expresses concern about the camp location, another counters with the simple question: Where will they go?

## Paradise Founded

Just 486 steps from the green recycling container at the end of Felker Street lies the bridge that marks the formal entrance to Camp Paradise. My first contact with the campers comes on a Sunday afternoon. Some 40 adults are wielding brooms, rakes and wheelbarrows as they clean up Felker Street in a volunteer effort to demonstrate that they are good neighbors.

I'm introduced to Larry Templeton, 41, the leader and founder of the camp. Templeton has been pitching his tent along the San Lorenzo since 1984, when the area was known as Heroin Alley and the ground was covered with used hypodermic needles. He's been in and out of jail all his life, mostly for drug charges.

"I was doing an 8-ball of crack [about the size of a golf ball] and meth every day," he says. During his last stint in jail, both his parents died. That's when he de-

cidated to get clean.

"My parents always said they would pray for a miracle to turn my life around," he says. "I just didn't think it would be their deaths."

In January, when Templeton got out of jail, he returned to the encampment and declared it a clean and sober place — and anyone who didn't like it could leave. He set up three rules: no drugs, no alcohol, and no fighting. Several people left immediately. But others remained and used the encampment rules to begin their recovery from substance abuse. Since then, more campers have been drawn in with the promise of a drug and alcohol-free environment.

Templeton leads me on a tour, pointing with pride to the church — a white tarp canopy fronted by a lectern made of a clear plastic retail case covered by a gray woven blanket.

He also shows me the garden, the generator, which provides light at night, and the River Rats Bike Factory, where campers repair bicycles to be sold or used for transportation.

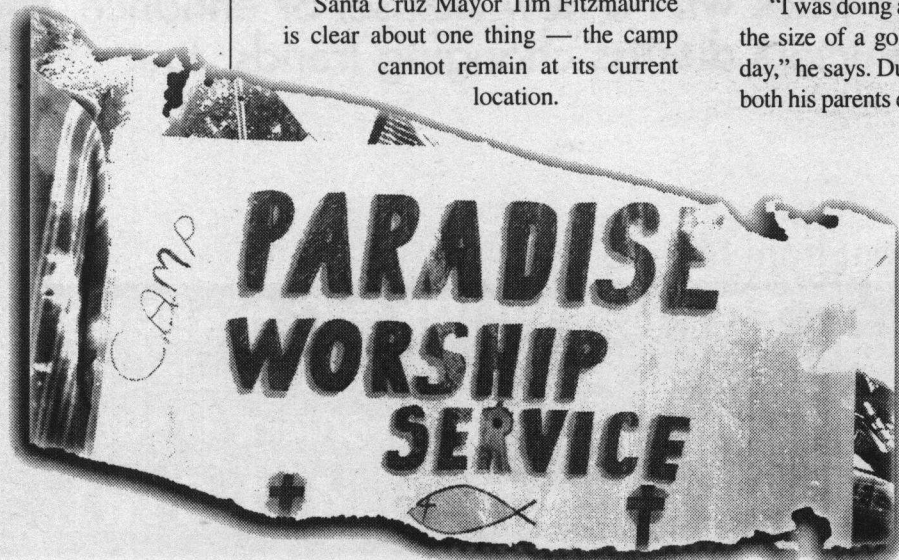
My accommodations for the evening consist of a tent housing a single bed made up of a futon supported by four flip-top storage boxes. A down sleeping bag rests atop an iridescent green bedspread that hangs to the ground. I have also been given a chair, four empty storage boxes and a portable potty.

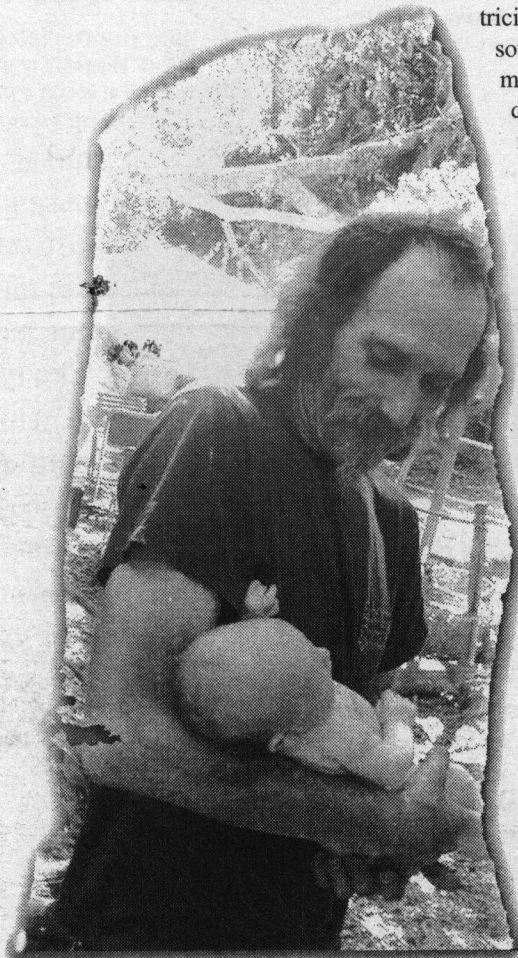
Don "Dirtclod" Alden, 47, is second-in-command. He shows me how the potty works and leaves me a gallon of drinking water. As Alden exits the tent, he points out a hole near the door about eight inches off the ground. "You will probably hear rats in the night," he says, "but don't worry, they can't get in." And on that comforting note, I settle in for my first night at Camp Paradise.

**"In fact, the whole county is dotted with delightful spots in which to hammer tent-pins, and the real use and pleasure of this sort of life can be enjoyed by the poorest."**

—Phil Francis, History of Santa Cruz County, published in the

1005 31 190730 ZAMT 000 1890s.





**Larry Templeton** (with baby Lance)  
is the undisputed leader of Camp Paradise.

The generator, which provides electricity for the camp at night, and sounded so welcoming as I picked my way along the path in the dark, quickly becomes a mind-numbing roar. Finally, at 1:11 a.m., someone shuts it off.

I wake around 6 a.m. to singing birds interspersed with the sound of croupy coughs, a refrain that echoes in the background throughout my time at the camp. The damp air coming off the river combined with the close living quarters makes the camp an incubator for colds and viruses. Still, the camp is surprisingly quiet. Except for the constant roar of traffic from the highway, this could be any campground.

Instead, it's a neighborhood made of tents. Often, when people return to the camp, they speak of coming "home," and if you are lucky, you might be invited to someone's "house." Antoinette Kelly, mother of 1-month-old Lance, says she and her husband spent two weeks in a motel after the baby was born,

"and then we came home to Camp Paradise. This is our home."

## Below the Law

Though the only one presenting itself as alcohol and drug free, Camp Paradise is only one of several illegal encampments that have been established around the county. There are others on the San Lorenzo River, up in the Pogonip and in the hills around Emeline Avenue.

While it might be understandable that displaced people would retreat to the woods, that doesn't fly with environmentalists, who say that the campers are disturbing rare and threatened wildlife species, which live along the river.

Moreover, the city's anti-sleeping ordinances combined with the lack of shelter space may have criminalized homelessness. According to local ordinances, it's illegal to sleep outside or in a vehicle between the hours of 11 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. Camping within the city limits is also illegal and "any campsite established in the City ... shall be declared a public nuisance," according to city law.

Given the scope of the restrictions, homeless people are forced into the position

of breaking the law.

People at Camp Paradise have been repeatedly warned that they are in violation of the camping ban. They know that their camp is illegal, but most feel they have no choice. Ask anyone in camp about alternatives, and they answer with a question. "Where will we go?"

"We go to the shelter and it's full. We go to the churches and they are full. We can't sleep without breaking the law. What are we supposed to do?" asks Jay Jay Roller. He and his wife, Gypsy, have lived in Santa Cruz for 15 years.

Former homeless resource center client advocate Karin Brock is blunt. "The camping ban has to go. It's a direct attack on a physiological necessity of life. And maintaining such a ban is just cruel. Apparently the hope is that people will just disappear if it is made difficult enough for them.

"But," she adds, "these people live here and they are part of our community. We cannot legislate them out of existence. We have to overturn the ban."

Mayor Fitzmaurice acknowledges the problem, but says there is no easy solution. "We work on this situation everyday," he says. "But, Camp Paradise is not my focus. There are many people in our county who are dispossessed in one way or another. And

**"A law that makes poverty a crime and a poor man a felon, after those very laws have made poverty inevitable, is not only cruel and oppressive, but absurd.**

— William Heighon, 1830

I've seen no serious efforts on the part of Camp Paradise to address the many issues that have been raised."

As for the general issues of housing the homeless, the mayor says, "We are trying to find solutions for the homeless, but there are many elements involved and we are constantly running into roadblocks."

For example, in early August, Fitzmaurice wrote to the Army National Guard in an attempt to get the Armory, which serves as winter shelter for the homeless, opened earlier than the usual Oct. 15 date. His request was denied.

And for three years, the city has been planning a joint public/private campaign to raise \$3 million for a makeover and expansion of the current homeless shelter on Coral Street. But the going has been slow.

However, many homeless people feel that politicians and businesspeople simply want to see street people disappear. During one afternoon conversation, several campers were suggesting ways to educate the councilmembers and critics about the camp and the realities of daily life for the un-housed.

"We need to put them out on the street at noon and make them stay until noon the next day," says one woman.

"And they can't get into the shelter or the churches because there won't be any room," adds another woman.

## It Makes a Village

Some squatters living in Camp Paradise are just stopping over. Others come to the camp after drug and alcohol addictions turned them out on the streets. But, an increasing number — currently about one-third — of the campers are there as a direct result of the rising rents and the lack of affordable housing.

Erin and James, both 20, came to Camp Paradise after moving 18 times in one week. They have been homeless for two years. James is a roofer waiting on a job he has been promised. Erin is pregnant. They heard of Camp Paradise on the street.

Pam, 38, is Templeton's girlfriend. She doesn't technically live in the camp, though she spends a majority of her time there. She has two children, including a 14-year-old daughter, who live with her. She rents a motel room to house her daughter, an honor-roll student, shielded from the streets.

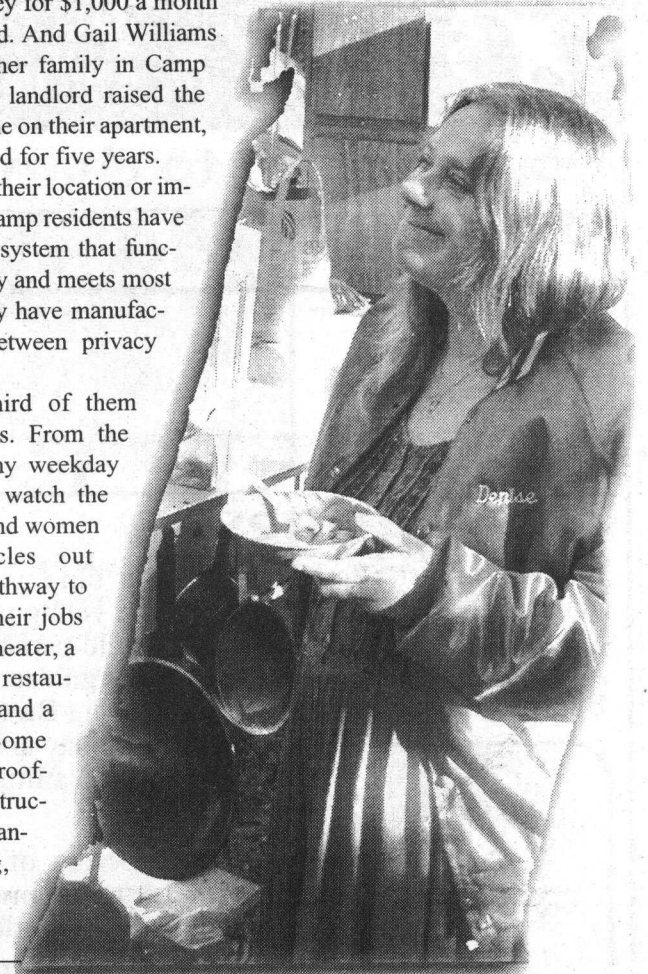
She worked for 20 years and now gets a monthly disability pension. "I make more money than most of the people here [in Camp Paradise] and I have enough money saved to rent an apartment," she says. "But, landlords want you to earn three times the rent, and since I don't have a job, I can't meet that requirement."

Randy and her partner Sean were renting a

room in Scotts Valley for \$1,000 a month before being evicted. And Gail Williams found herself and her family in Camp Paradise after their landlord raised the rent for the third time on their apartment, where they had lived for five years.

However illegal their location or imperfect the model, camp residents have crafted a workable system that functions like a little city and meets most of their needs. They have manufactured a balance between privacy and community.

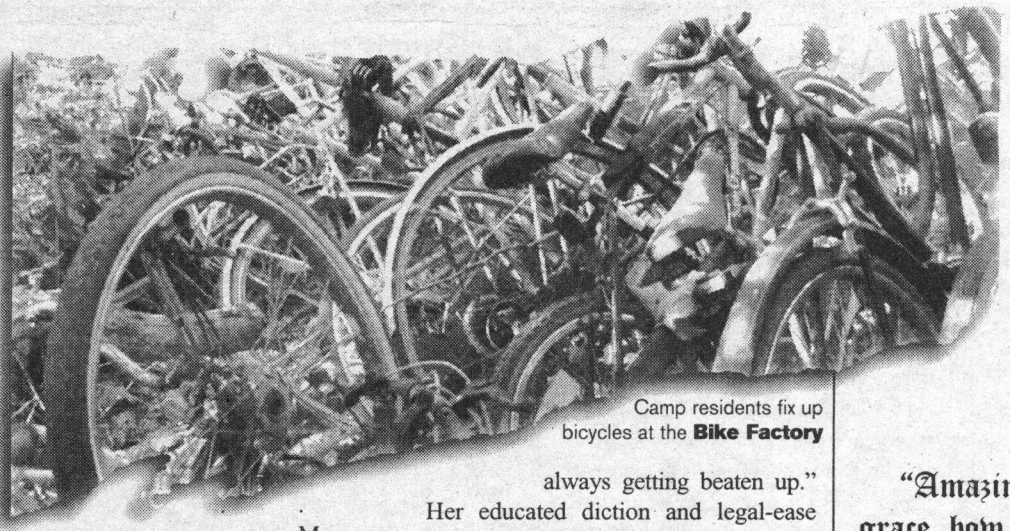
Roughly one-third of them have full-time jobs. From the kitchen area on any weekday morning, you can watch the commute as men and women walk their bicycles out along the sandy pathway to the day's work. Their jobs include work at a theater, a computer store, a restaurant, a feed store, and a bicycle shop. Some work part-time in roofing and other construction jobs, as mechanics, in fencing, window washing and fishing.



Pam, a part-time camper, rents a motel room for her daughter.

**"Camp life is such a universal thing in this part of California that the tiniest tent in the loneliest dell attracts no attention, and the occupants are perfectly secure from dangers of any sort."**

— Phil Francis, "History of Santa Cruz County."



Camp residents fix up bicycles at the **Bike Factory**

Many others go out each day to pick up day labor.

For those who don't go off to jobs, days in the camp are a mixture of diligence and leisure. While some sit around chatting, others are cleaning up the kitchen area, doing the daily water run, or working around the campsite. Nearly every afternoon finds men working on bicycles in the Bike Factory.

Templeton is the undisputed leader, but the camp is also guided by a nine-member elected council. Most campers pay \$1 per day in rent or contribute in other ways.

If someone is caught openly drinking or doing drugs (most campers do not consider marijuana to be a drug) within the confines of camp, that person will be warned once. The next time he or she will be thrown out of camp.

People in recovery say Camp Paradise is crucial to their ability to stay clean. "It's just too easy to get pulled in out on the street," said Kris, who is committed to her recovery. "I remember waking up each morning and having to hustle \$1.56 to buy two cans of Natural Ice which I would slam one after the other just to stop the shakes."

## Sanctuary

Life on the street can be brutal, but residents of Camp Paradise have created a community of support where everyone feels safe. "We look out for each other," Templeton says.

The fear and shame surrounding homelessness is felt by both the housed and the un-housed, but they feel it in different ways.

"The homeless don't know what it's like to live without fear," says Kris, a former attorney brought to the streets by alcohol and crack cocaine combined with "any kind of pills available." Clear-eyed and articulate, it's not difficult to see her as a hard-driving civil litigator before her fall.

"The shame makes us isolate ourselves. We know what the housed think of us, and we become ghosts in our own community," Kris says. "I was terrified all the time."

Because she looked like a professional, "People on the street thought I was an informant or an undercover cop. I was

always getting beaten up." Her educated diction and legal-ease meant she "talked funny" to those around her. She didn't know street slang and began to write it down so she could learn to fit in. "When they saw me writing, they were convinced I was a narc," she says.

Being on the street, Kris says, forces one to "strip away the smoke and mirrors that so many of us operate within our daily lives." There is no masking of intent. "If someone wants to beat you up, they just tell you what they are going to do and do it," she says. "The street strips away everything."

For Kris, a lesbian, nothing matches the first time her lover "pimped her out." She said her lover introduced her to a man and told her, "This is my friend and I want you to sleep with him." When Kris balked, she was told, "That's the way it is on the street. Nothing's free."

When she got out of that relationship, she decided to hook up with a man. "I figured it would be safer." Instead, she was beaten repeatedly, ending up in the hospital several times. When she finally got a restraining order, the man stalked her for several months.

Finally, friends referred her to Camp Paradise, where she was promised protection. "Camp Paradise saved my life," she says.

Vicki illustrates the sharp contrast between the protective tribal shelter of Camp Paradise and the brutality of the street. She has lived under the overpass, just beyond where Camp Paradise now stands, for many years. She has a mental age somewhere around 10 or 12, and is often seen carrying stuffed animals with her. An alcoholic, she refuses to live by the camp's rules and is not allowed to live there.

Vicki has become an easy target for men looking for sex. Earlier this year, after Templeton and a couple of other campers heard her scream and stopped a man who was attempting to rape her, Templeton gave her a whistle to call for help.

## Searching for Solutions

At the next City Council meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 23, the fate of Camp Paradise is scheduled to be determined.

**"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."**

**"The poor have no laws; the laws are made by the rich and of course for the rich."**

*— William Heigh-ton, 1821*



**Road to  
Camp Paradise**  
is paved with good intentions

Meanwhile community members and the campers themselves are searching for an alternative location for the camp.

"Many people are making a concerted effort to find either one or a series of sites for 'small campgrounds that would be specific to the homeless,'" says Councilmember Mark Primack.

Primack has joined with others, such as Paul Lee — who worked to start the first public shelter in Santa Cruz in 1985 — in proposing that Camp Paradise residents be enrolled in a volunteer service corps, similar to the old Civilian Conservation Corps. The corps would work on conservation projects and live in supervised camps.

"We're in a situation where there is some way that we can be compassionate and helpful at the same time, and work towards integrating people into our society," Primack says. "This is the way."

While some members of the camp like the idea of a voluntary corps, they balk at the idea of government-supervised living quarters. "We still want our privacy and our individuality," said Gail Williams. "We're not drunk or lazy and we don't need someone telling us to be in by 5 p.m. [referring to the shelter's deadline for the night's housing]. We lose enough by being homeless, and they want to take privacy away too."

Some community members think Camp Paradise is working as it is. On Sept. 18, Paul Brindel, who heads the Shelter Project for the Community Action Board, told the City Council that Camp Paradise was "an almost tribal system that might be modified into a programmatic model."

"If the city is unwilling to shelter homeless people," he said, "We must allow them to shelter themselves."

## A Wing and a Prayer

Even as the Camp Paradise residents face an uncertain future, everyday life goes on. For those who are struggling to stay clean, spirituality plays an important part of camp life. Most, but not all of the campers are practicing Christians.

Rev. Jeff Lilley holds services in the camp each Sunday. A big man, Lilley sports shapely women tattooed on both arms and legs. He volunteered to tend the flock after Templeton told him about visiting five churches in an effort to get someone to hold services at the camp. "They all wanted us to go to their church," says Templeton. "Most of us don't have the clothes for church and would feel uncomfortable. The reverend understood."

At the service, even the non-believers sit quietly in the background, some puffing the "roll-your-own" cigarettes favored by the un-housed because, at half the price, the homemade kind provide twice the smokes.

Off to the side of the congregation, I notice "Dirtclod" standing next to his wife, Kay. Earlier he told me, "I've had five wives, but she's a keeper. My other ones never lasted more than a couple of years. I guess I just had a knack for picking broken down women who had been abused. I'd treat 'em good and build up their self-esteem, and then they would move on. I don't mind being a launching pad for them, but Kay, she courted *me*. I didn't even realize it. But, I'm lucky to be with her."

I watch as he places his hand on the top of her head, smooths her hair and gently strokes her cheek. She flashes a smile up at him and he grins back, then they both turn their attention back to the preacher.

Yes, I think to myself, he is a lucky man.