

# Don't cross the border

Gangs

## Gangs fight for streets

By JOHN ROBINSON  
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SANTA CRUZ — Carlo, Shorty and Long Boy left their names in blue paint on the corrugated steel fence behind the Villa San Carlos housing complex in Live Oak.

To most people, the fence appears little more than a dilapidated barrier, but to gang members it is a border marking VSC (Villa San Carlos gang) turf. Like other such walls and fences throughout the county, it is both a totem to those in the gang and a tribal warning against enemies passing through.

"It is like countries within countries," said Glen Smith, a counselor at Youth Services in Watsonville. "They see borders, and these borders are streets. If you cross the border, you're invading someone else's country."

According to law enforcement officials, Santa Cruz County has more than 500 gang members and six major gang groups, with dozens of subsets and cliques. They form a sub-world that most people pass through without notice — a world of subtle barriers that extend from the Westside of Santa Cruz and West Cliff Drive to farm encampments near Watsonville.

The major gang groups include Northside, Poorside and City Hall in Watsonville; Westside Santa Cruz, Eastside Santa Cruz and Villa San Carlos.

Each gang has its own network of alliances, specific acronyms, symbols and hand signals.

Keeping track of who's who in the gang world, and what group is warring with each other is a full-time job for law officers. Alliances often change, and turfs overlap.

"People think that it is clear-cut, but it isn't," said Henry Robles, Watsonville police gang investigator. "It is not black and white. Unlike some cities, Watsonville is not divided into rigid territories. But if a gang member wanders into the wrong area there will be trouble."

### Who's who

In Santa Cruz County, as in the rest of the state, street gangs fall into two general alliances — either Norteno or Sureno.

The Nortenos, which include gangs such as the Northsiders and Westside Santa Cruz, claim the color red and number 14 as identifying symbols. They are loosely associated with the Nuestra Familia, a prison gang that started in 1965 in Soledad. The number 14 stands for the 14th letter of the alphabet: N for Norte.

Sureno identified gangs include the Poorside Watsonville and Eastside Santa Cruz. They claim the color blue and number 13 — which represents the letter M — and the Mexican Mafia prison gang, which started in Tracy in 1958.

The Sureños usually speak Spanish, consider themselves Mexican nationals and have often been in the United States for a shorter time than the Nortenos.

Most gang battles are between Norteno and Sureno groups. For example, a Northsider will often fight a Poorsider on sight. But it is not always so clearly defined. Some subsets will battle each other. The Northsiders and City Hall members, both allied with Nortenos, have had repeated conflicts.

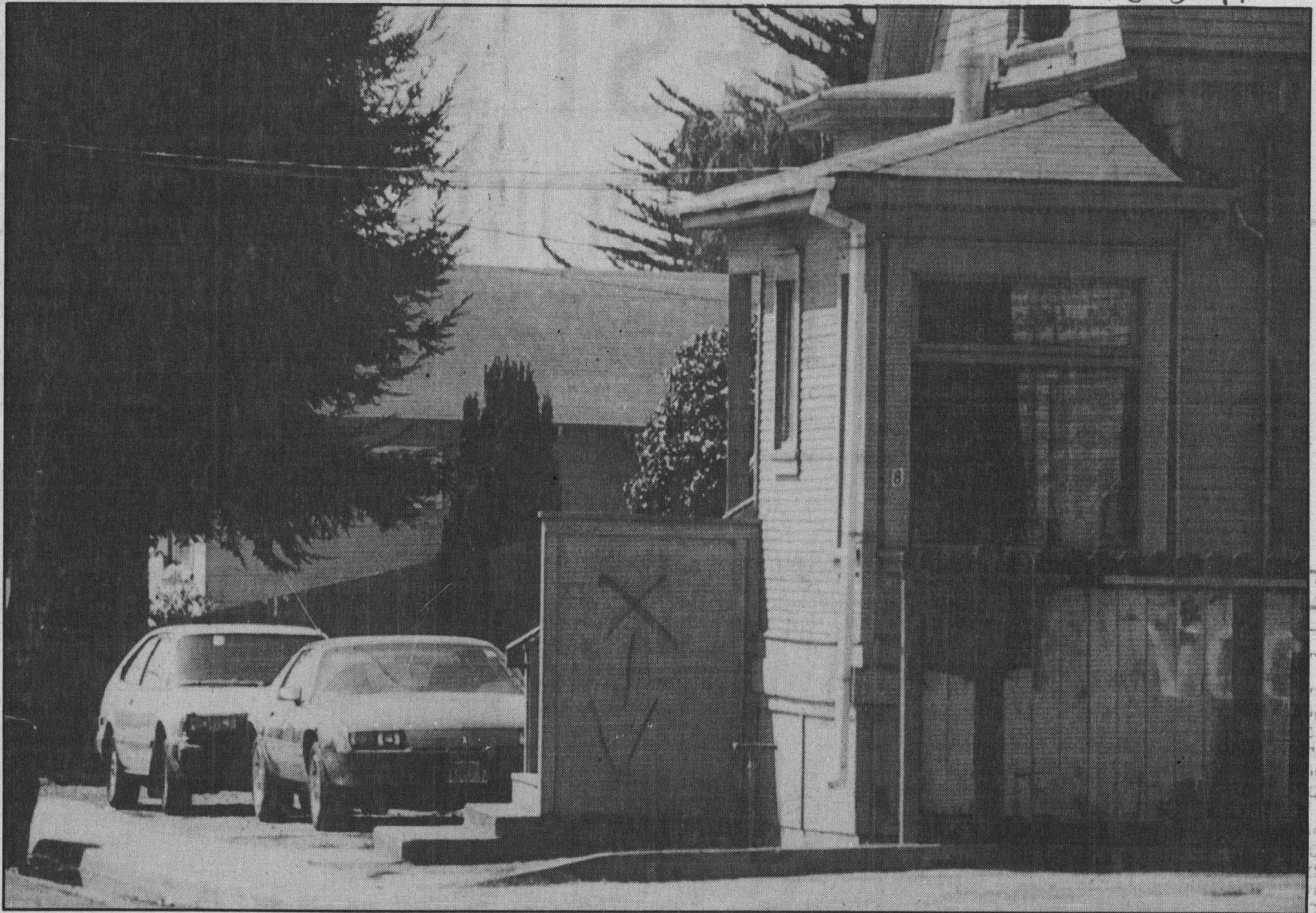
The following are the main Norteno-identified gangs in Santa Cruz County, including their membership numbers, acronyms and territories.

### • NORTHSIDE

**WATSONVILLE** — (NSW) The Northsiders are the largest and oldest gang in the county with an estimated 300 to 400 members and more than 10 subsets of affiliated gangs.

Their territory includes nearly all of northern Watsonville and Freedom, including the Pinto Lake area. Many of their subsets are based at low-income housing projects in the Watsonville area.

Some of the main Northsider subsets, and their acronyms are as follows: Northside Locos (NSW); Northside Chicas (NSC); Clifford



Gang symbol marks neighborhood off Freedom Boulevard outside Watsonville as Northsider territory.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

**'If you cross the border, you're invading someone else's country.'**

— Glen Smith,  
counselor

**'You don't see too many blue Christmas lights on the houses around here.'**

— Len Lafano,  
gang expert

Valley (VGV).

• **CITY HALL** — (CHW) City Hall gang was once associated with the Northsiders, but broke off in the late 1970s. They have an estimated 150 members, and for years gathered at Watsonville City Hall before police chased them away.

The City Hall gang, while loosely associated with the Northsiders, recently has been at war with everyone, according to law officers. Their territory is mainly in neighborhoods around the City Hall, the police station and part of the Pajaro River levee.

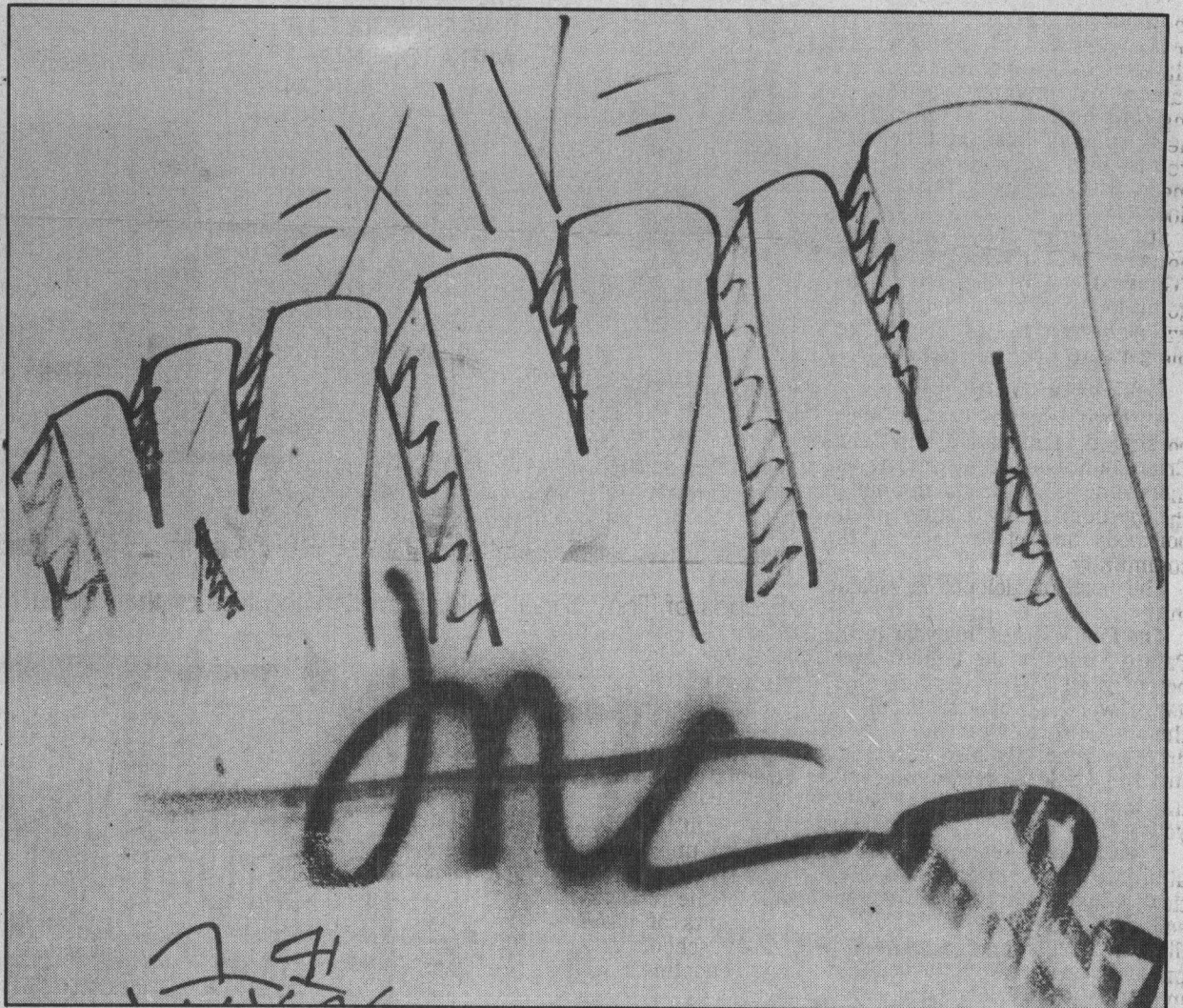
• **WESTSIDE SANTA CRUZ** — (WS) Westside Santa Cruz began in the "circles" area around Walk Circle and Garfield Park. The gang is not considered large by police, though membership is unknown. The gang was more active in the early 1980s, according to police, but died down when many of its original members were sent to prison.

The group has resurfaced in recent years. Membership includes youths born and raised in Santa Cruz and includes Latino and Anglo youths, including some surfers.

These are the main Sureno-identified gangs.

• **POORSIDE WATSONVILLE** — (PSW) The Poorside gang began in the early 1980s, mainly among immigrant farm worker youths who banded together to protect themselves from attacks by Northsiders.

It has an estimated 100 members. Their territory includes pockets of



Gang graffiti and numbers, above, is distinct from the scrawls of non-gang 'tag bangers.'

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

as areas of Pajaro San Andreas and Buena Vista labor camps.

• **EASTSIDE SANTA CRUZ** — (ES) Eastside Santa Cruz is centered in the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz and extends roughly to the Corcoran Lagoon apartment area in Live Oak.

Membership totals are unknown, according to gang officers, who said many members move around. Police speculate that Eastside gang members are involved in the Beach Flats area cocaine and heroin trade and control many of the street dealers. Most members come from the Mexican state of Michoacan, according to gang specialists.

• **VILLA SAN CARLOS** — (VSC) The gang is named after the 22-year-old housing project on Soquel Drive, next to the Sky View drive-in.

The size of the gang is not known, but sheriff's gang experts say the group includes gang members from other areas who moved into the complex. It was one of the

and Latino members.

### Writing on the wall

Gang territory is usually marked by names and symbols spray-painted on walls and fences that can be easily read by those in the gang lifestyle.

For example, the number 14, often written in Roman numerals as XIV, designates the area or painter as associated with a Norteno-affiliated gang. Usually a number will be followed by the initials of a subset, such as VGV for Varrio Green Valley, along with the street name of those who painted the message or were there.

The graffiti can issue a challenge or serve as a tribute to a gang member or incident.

Gang graffiti are distinct to those who have learned to recognize it. Most graffiti in the county are the work of "tag-bangers" who delight in leaving their names wherever they can, and not of gang members, gang experts say.

other gang's turf can lead to a serious beating or worse.

Police say innocent people have been beaten for wearing red shirts as they walk through the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz, where Eastside gang members claim the color blue. Latinos leaving the adjacent Boardwalk amusement park in red cars have been pelted with stones and boards by gang members incensed that someone would bring the color of their rivals into their neighborhood.

In some neighborhoods, such as Mesa Village in Freedom, the gang colors spill over into family life. Few blue cars are parked in front of residences, while some families buy only red cars, according to gang experts.

The colors even extend to Christmas decorations.

"You don't see too many blue Christmas lights on the houses around here," Sheriff's Office gang expert Len Lafano said during a drive through Mesa Village. "You



all of northern Watsonville and Freedom, including the Pinto Lake area. Many of their subsets are based at low-income housing projects in the Watsonville area.

Some of the main Northsider subsets, and their acronyms are as follows: Northside Locos (NSW); Northside Chicas (NSC); Clifford Manor Locos (CLM); East Lake Boys (ELB); and the Varrio Green

● **POORSIDE WATSONVILLE** — (PSW) The Poorside gang began in the early 1980s, mainly among immigrant farm worker youths who banded together to protect themselves from attacks by Northsiders.

It has an estimated 100 members. Their territory includes pockets of south Watsonville and the trailer park around Second Street as well

22-year-old housing project on Soquel Drive, next to the Sky View drive-in.

The size of the gang is not known, but sheriff's gang experts say the group includes gang members from other areas who moved into the complex. It was one of the first multiracial gangs in the county with Anglo, African-American

member or incident.

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Flashing the wrong hand signs or wearing the wrong color in an-

gang experts.

The colors even extend to Christmas decorations.

"You don't see too many blue Christmas lights on the houses around here," Sheriff's Office gang expert Len Lafano said during a drive through Mesa Village. "You know how hard it is to find only red Christmas lights?"