

# Reaction To Esquire Magazine

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Good neighbors don't wash their dirty laundry in public.

Maybe that's why a number of Santa Cruzans think that a local author was being less than neighborly with his account of the old hometown that recently appeared in a national magazine.

Page Stegner, writer and UCSC literature professor, said earlier this week that he was surprised by the local controversy that followed publication of his article "The Limits Of Tolerance" in the July issue of Esquire magazine.

But Stegner defended the piece, accusing its critics of "incredible parochialism, if not boosterism."

The 5,000-word article was excerpted from the forthcoming book "American Places" co-written by Stegner and his father, Wallace Stegner. The issue of Esquire in which it appeared quickly sold out at most local newsstands.

The article describes social changes that have taken place in Santa Cruz during the last 15 years from a perspective that is part-sociological and part-subjective. It deals with "the street scene" on the Pacific Garden Mall, the impact of UCSC on the community, the influx of transients disenfranchised from their middle class roots, and a rash of mass murders in the early '70s that had some people calling Santa Cruz "the murder capital of the world."

Stegner's writing has generated strong local reactions, both pro and con, including a lengthy letter by City Councilman Bert Muhly to Esquire's editor Phillip Moffitt. In the letter Muhly describes the article as "at least part . . . fiction" and "a disservice to the citizens of our community."

Stegner, contacted at his vacation home in Vermont, reported that he had only received favorable responses to the release of the story, from throughout Santa Cruz County and from elsewhere in the state, from Berkeley to Los Angeles.

"The only reactions I got were from people calling up and saying I was right on," he said. "I didn't get any hostile folks

— the hostile reactions were saved for the underground press."

He was alluding to a columnist in a local weekly newspaper who compared his writing ability unfavorably to that of his Pulitzer Prize-winning father, before dismissing the entire piece as "lousy . . . a cheap shot, journalistically speaking."

Stegner said, "The point of the article was not to detract from Santa Cruz, but to talk about something far more broad." It's not a special local problem, but an issue that's happening here and there."

In the story — which, Stegner said, received its title and editorial focus from the Esquire editors — he describes moving to Santa Cruz, "because it was still possible, in the 1960's, to entertain the

illusion of living with, and off, the land... There was a real sense when I first came here, that the immediate environment provided just about everything anybody could want, and very few of those things that one didn't want: like industry, traffic, night life, pollution, disco, live sex acts onstage and a lot of other people on the path."

He acknowledges that "much of what made this part of the country so attractive in the '50s and '60s still exists." But Stegner saw a drastic change in the lifestyle brought about by the "thumb trippers passing through on their ways to points south," who were soon to discover that Santa Cruz "would accommodate almost anything in the way of oddball

## Article Surprises

### Stegner

behavior and was, therefore, a potential mecca for transients."

Stegner describes the impact of the transients on the Mall from the vantage point of a table at the Cooper House. The band "Warmth," dancers on the sidewalk, people selling puppies, a postural integrationist, members of a motorcycle gang, "women take back the night" advocates, a sinsemilla salesman in the men's room, Timothy Leary and "the usual panoply of drunks, junkies, lawyers and overage teenyboppers" all find their ways into his somewhat satirical description.

The description of the Mall scene prompted Muhly to label the account

"pure fiction," saying Stegner has "telescoped an accumulation of incidents into a one person, one-luncheon visit to the Mall . . . that does a disservice to the citizens of our community."

While acknowledging that he has witnessed incidents of bizarre behavior on the Mall from "from time to time," Muhly characterized the downtown scene as "one of the liveliest, most interesting and economically successful public malls in the United States, regardless of its problems."

"That's why all the downtown merchants are continually up in arms about it — that's why the city Council had to appoint a special committee for it," countered Stegner. "If the Mall were such a wonderful place to stroll around, you'd think the economy would be booming. But if Bert Muhly thinks this is fiction, he doesn't read his hometown newspaper."

In Muhly's letter, he does in fact invite Stegner "to sit in on our city's Mall

Commission where he could pitch in at any time." Muhly sees "a problem larger and more fundamental than that street people in Santa Cruz (in) the flood of people who have come to our community over the past 15 years who take the beauty and livability of our city for granted. They assume a right to it and give nothing in return. Characterizing them as "affluent and self-indulgent," Muhly makes a place in the latter category for Stegner, saying members of this group "are not heard from unless something rattles their cage or attempts to 'slither into their garden.'"

In tracing the evolution from the "whittle-and-spit, boats-for-hire, quiet backwater of beach cottages, funky stores, old hotels and family restaurants owned by the Italians and Portugese and Greeks and Chinese who settled it in the first place," Stegner cites as causes rising real estate values, the arrival of UCSC, the generational clashes of the '60s and the inability of law enforcement to deal

with new social permissiveness.

The story recalls the social unrest of the '60s, stating, "as rhetoric gave way to burning ghettos, besieged universities, bank bombings, political conventions turned to riot, and, finally, the spectacle of Ohio National Guardsmen firing on fellow citizens, the country was forced to take a long look at some of its uninspected assumptions, not only about minorities but about its sons and daughters as well."

This, it continues, led first to "gestapo tactics championed by the Nixon administration," before creating a backlash of greater permissiveness, when most Americans found these tactics "morally unacceptable" and unworkable.

Noting a local relaxation of law enforcement regarding victimless crime, vagrancy and panhandling, Stegner writes, "the concept of an individual's civil rights began to eclipse the assumption of community standards of behavior."

While generally applauding many aspects of this "new permissiveness" as "long overdue," Stegner's analysis suggests, "for a few people it seemed that public restraints were the only measure of personal restraint." This leads to a recapitulation of several of the mass murders that rocked Santa Cruz in the early '70s.

Muhly takes issue with this analysis, stating that the problems of alienated street people and some related police problems "do not represent an evil force of the exaggerated dimensions described by Stegner." Referring to "the unfortunate murders that took place in Santa Cruz County and nearby counties nine years ago," he contends, "for him (Stegner) to use these tragic incidents of long ago to reinforce his contrived scenario that society in general is going to hell starting with Santa Cruz, is indeed a distortion of reality."

Stegner on the other hand, "wonders sometimes whether I am simply paranoid, or whether this will be the shape not only of the decade past but of the rest of the century to come.

"Santa Cruz looks to some like an open-air lunatic assylum with a growing population of the criminally insane," his article continues, finding uniqueness in the facts that "if you don't need a house (or much of one), and if you don't want a job, and if the apex of your ambition is to hang out in a mild climate and get as stoned as possible for as long as possible, and if the only responsibility you care to assume is to get yourself to the methadone center every week for your fix, and to the post office once a month for your food stamps, and to the secret little patch of ground you found back in the mountains behind town to water your weed — well, then this is the place."

The thrust of the story, said Stegner by phone, was not to single out Santa Cruz so much as it was to explore a social phenomenon that can be found elsewhere as well. Expressing the view that the social environment is "endangered," the article concludes, "it is as possible to destroy it with a resurgent barbarism as it is with a bulldozer's blade."

Speaking of the article, Stegner concluded, "it doesn't pretend to tell the whole Santa Cruz story. There's much more to be said, many different kinds of things to be said — but you can only do so much in 5,000 words."

Stegner said he still finds Santa Cruz "a great place to live — but it's not the Garden of Eden. If I had been writing about someplace else, no one in Santa Cruz would have disagreed with anything I said.

"But no matter where you're talking about, there will be people there who think they know more about it than you do."