

"The first noticeable change simply reflected a new application of an old American institution: capitalism . . ."

The Greening of Santa Cruz

by Terry McDonell

Santa Cruz looks like the ultimate Coke/Pepsi television commercial. There's a whole new way of living: young girls riding bareback on the beach, surfboards, kites, a bunch of students painting an old lady's Victorian house, big happy dogs, bicycles, wild flowers, sail boats, balloons, tree houses, and a rope swing over a creek. It's the real thing.

Another beautiful spring day in Santa Cruz. A soft wind brushes through the eucalyptus and redwoods, the sun bounces deep blue sparkles off the ocean, and wild flowers spatter vacant lots. A car pulls over for a hitchhiker.

"Far out," says the young man, "far out. Santa Cruz is just too far out to believe." In San Francisco he would be an anachronism with his long hair, beads and leather fringe. His girl friend even has flowers in her hair, reminiscent of Golden Gate Park in 1967. He is an artist he says, "a craftsman really." He works with leather. "What is really far out," he says, "is that we're winning. Santa Cruz is really our place."

"Far out," says the girl.

Hyperbole is the language of the hip, and "far out" at best is punctuation; at worst, simply noise. But if they think they're winning, what is the prize? There is an old adage about believing being half the battle.

Ten years ago downtown Santa Cruz was on the verge of collapse. Pacific Avenue was a traditional small town main street, it looked terrible and was losing business to the shopping centers springing up around the county. The beaches were as splendid as ever, drawing their normal gaggle of tourists, and the rickety old Big Dipper roller coaster

still wowed the adolescents on the Boardwalk, but the town that had been a watering hole for the rich at the turn of the century and through the 1920s, was falling into trailer-park obscurity as more and more lower-middle-class people chose this area in which to retire. Santa Cruz might have looked depressed everywhere except on its beautiful beaches—but it was ripe for change.

The area had been passed over by the first waves of recreational develop-

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ment, making the price of beautiful beach and mountain property very attractive, especially to an upper-middle-class retirement and second-home clientele who had seen the price of equivalent property in other areas skyrocket. The investment possibilities were also turning the heads of more than one major land-development outfit.

Enter the University of California. Santa Cruz had always drawn the young, though, except for a lucky few who lived there, most were limited to vacation flings and weekends on the beaches. There was an established surfing subculture—the first people to let their hair grow anywhere—but they were considered a fringe element in the eyes of most people who traditionally lived in the area. Suddenly the surfers were joined by a large, liberal university contingent of students, faculty, and various education groupies.

Ecology was not yet a household word, but a confrontation over land use was inevitable.

The first noticeable changes, however, simply reflected a new application of an old American institution: capitalism. It was as if all the refugees from that generation bent on either turning-on or overturning the system, showed up in Santa Cruz believing in a manifest destiny that they had rejected in the school-book version of Western history. The area was ideal: all the vacant little cabins and summer homes in the mountains, and a lot of cheap housing in Santa Cruz and neighboring little towns like Capitola. Once settled, these newcomers looked around for a way to live, many starting their own hip businesses: head shops, organic food stores, shops that sold used records, books and clothes, and import stores. Others stayed in the hills and made candles or macrame or belts that they would sell through sympathetic little shops. The University community had money to spend on such things and pretty soon what can almost be called an underground economy was mushrooming.

When the downtown merchants turned Pacific Avenue into the Pacific Garden Mall, in 1970, many of the more affluent hip businesses moved downtown, to join others already there. The result was a booming street life to rival Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley or Haight Street here, when every long-hair in the country was trying to spend the summer in San Francisco. People were no longer coming to Santa Cruz just to go to the beach; some were coming to shop, or just to hang out.

A second-hand furniture shop on Soquel Avenue that had once sported a

"The result was a booming street life to rival Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley..."

sign warning "No Hippies Allowed," was now being run, and lived in, by a young couple who had once been thrown out of the place. Organic restaurants were opening up, and there were rumors of marijuana plantations in the mountains. The times were definitely changing.

In an effort to find-out what was happening, the city hired a high-powered consultant. The consultant's report laid the responsibility on what it called the "undesirable transient element," or "U.T.E.s" as they were called in the local papers. Within a week, long-hairs were parading around town in T-shirts with "U.T.E." stenciled on the front.

"A couple of years ago," says Santa Cruz City Manager David Koester, "I thought we were going to out-do Berkeley. But I no longer think we're going to become a counter-culture community."

Koester has been city manager for 12 years, and he's noticed a strange thing about the hip and near-hip. "They like material but they hate materialism. They don't want to spend their whole lives in the back of VW buses. When they start to make a little money, they start acting like businessmen."

Take David Hirsch, for example, who started Santa Cruz Imports in 1970. He simply drove a van down to Mexico with a thousand dollars or so, loaded up on muslin peasant shirts, colorful serapes, sandals, and various other cheap handmade items and offered them for sale in a store on the Mall. At present, Santa Cruz Imports is a million-dollar business with seven retail stores (two in Illinois), an international wholesale division and plans for factories in places like Afghanistan and Mexico. Mr. Hirsch is definitely a businessman, no matter how long his hair is.

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City Manager Koester would like to see what he calls a more "balanced community." He says Santa Cruz is "deficient" in one major area: an economically sound middle class. Close to 90 per cent of the area's population is either under 30 or over 45. Historically there have been few straight middle-class jobs in Santa Cruz and a good percentage of

the people between 30 and 45 now work over the hill in the Santa Clara Valley.

If daily life on the Mall subtly illustrates Koester's point—with the long-hairs hanging out, a Hari Krishna contingent whooping it up, and a jazz group serenading the local literary crowd at an outdoor cafe—it is an event known as the Spring Fair that drives it home like a cavalry charge. The Fair started several years ago as Earth Day and grew to a full-blown street market and carnival—with mime and puppet shows, music, and long-hairs by the hundreds coming down from the hills to set their crafts out on the sidewalk for sale. Last year, the Mall was jammed to the point that it was literally difficult to move, nearby parking was impossible and the older merchants who had gone along with the event in prior years found that nice middle-class consumers couldn't even get to their front doors, even if they were out there somewhere in that great sea of long hair.

"Some of the old merchants are very bitter..."

"Some of the old merchants are very bitter," says Koester. "The Fair is a symbol of something that could kill the downtown for them—the downtown filling with people, youth, who are not good customers in terms of traditional stores."

Under pressure from the traditional merchants, this year's Spring Fair will not be held on the Mall. It has been moved across the San Lorenzo River, just south of the Mall, to a large open field. The concept, however, is expanding. What Fair supporters are talking about now is a weekly event they are calling the Saturday Market, which would afford all the local craftsmen, organic farmers and flea-marketeers a place to sell.

One of the key movers and shakers in Santa Cruz these days, and a supporter of both the Spring Fair and the Saturday Market, is Max Walden. He used to develop shopping centers for outfits like Safeway, then he put together Old Town, a complex of shops and artists' studios in Los Gatos. Now he is in Santa Cruz. He has taken over the old, abandoned Court House, where Cooper Street runs into the Mall, and turned it into Cooperhouse, renting out shops in the beautiful old brick building to various craft-oriented businesses and hardcore nostalgia merchants. Cooperhouse did over \$2 million worth of business last year, and you can bet it wasn't all to the street kids.

"What I try to do is protect and preserve the heritage of the place as a



Jim Gerhardt

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spawning ground for private enterprise," Walden says, sitting with friends at a table in his Oak Room Saloon, on the ground floor of Cooperhouse. "From in front, this town was built on energy—why destroy your forefather's energy by tearing something down to build something else? The kids understand that, while the old guard doesn't know what is happening."

Outside, the adjoining outdoor cafe is filling up and the afternoon music, that Max tries to provide every spring and summer afternoon, is starting.

"I didn't know what community was till I was 49 and came to Santa Cruz," Max says, gesturing toward the activity on the Mall, "but now I know, and things like the Spring Fair and the Saturday Market are part of it. People come here to relate to that feeling and spirit of community."

"That's right," says Al Johnson, a potter Walden's age who teaches at the University and also runs a successful pottery north of town, where his old Bo-

hemian buddies, like George Hitchcock, sometimes hold poetry readings. "Every week, two or three people call or write me to ask for help setting themselves up as craftsmen in the area. And there are literally hundreds here already."

Max grins. "We're an island," he says, "where a person can come and work and separate himself from the bullshit."

"Santa Cruz," agrees Johnson, "is reflecting the new life style, where success is not measured in the old money terms but in the satisfaction of working with your hands and being close to the land."

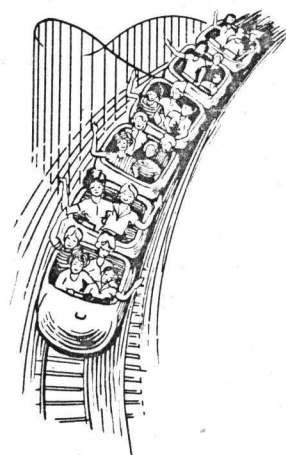
If these two middle-aged men sound like true believers in the greening of Santa Cruz, you have only to ask one of the kids on the street to find out that Santa Cruz is already into Phase Two of the Age of Aquarius.

Funny thing about these Aquarians though; they don't always walk it like they talk it. University students grumble about housing for the area's poor, but it was their arrival that boosted rents on modest single-family homes from, say, \$75 to \$200 per month as they teamed up and split rents.

And it didn't take long for most of the newcomers to develop the same possessive feelings for the area that the Establishment folks and retired people had long harbored. Patrick Fox, editor-in-chief of *Sundaze*, one of the two free tabloid weeklies that primarily serve the

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hip community, calls it "geocentric chauvinism"; which translates "you can visit our lovely area but we don't want you to live here." Which is exactly what the older folks were telling *them* a couple of years ago. There is even some bitterness between the young who have been here for a while (primarily surfers) and more recent arrivals.

Jim Ryan came to Santa Cruz in the early 1960s as a surfer, and isn't all that happy about what's happened to "his" town. "There is a definite sense of 'in' and 'out' and a lot of attempted hipness in Santa Cruz these days," he says. "Everybody seems to think he's a guru or hot-shot psychologist. A guy who makes candles will call himself an artist." Ryan sticks around only because, as he puts it, "there's no place better to go."

Ryan gets nothing but agreement on that point. The area supports an active intellectual community, aside from the University, and Cabrillo, the local junior college, both of which offer full programs of dance, drama, music and the like. Close to twenty writers and poets, who really publish books, live in the area. There are two professional theaters, a symphony orchestra and a wide range of clubs, bars and coffee houses offering live music almost every night. If such offerings are a bit below big-city standards, so what? Santa Cruz is not a

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big city; it's one of the most beautiful places in the state and that's enough for anybody.

Nobody in the Santa Cruz area wants to see rapid growth. The environmental battles within the community are between those who believe that controlled growth will be a good thing for the areas' economy and those who think things aren't too bad now, the ones who don't want to see anybody mucking about with the environment *at all*.

Various loose coalitions are always springing up in opposition to continuing propositions to alter the area, and they have been consistently successful. There was an attempt to widen Highway 17, the four-lane road that runs over the mountains from San Jose. Those in favor thought it would bring added business and allow for a faster commute to San Jose. Residents, especially the long-hairs, started yelling about not becoming a bedroom community for San Jose, a suburb some of them even said, and the highway was not widened.

Then there was the battle over the benchlands, rolling meadow terraces, wooded ravines and wild arroyos that



Phyllis Grossman

became known as Wilder Ranch, on the county's north coast. The Moroto Investment Company, based in the Bahamas, in conjunction with the Hollywood Turf Club and others, acquired the land and planned a village cluster-community built around centers of community activity such as schools and shopping areas, with lots of open land around. The proposal was based upon the most advanced planning concepts, but there were a lot of people who weren't going for it. A group of Santa Cruz liberals and community activists hired a Saul Alinsky-trained organizer and solicited public support under the banner of Operation Wilder. The public hearings were tumultuous, and the developers sued Operation Wilder for libel, but public sentiment against the development was forthcoming and ultimately the area in question was purchased by the state for eventual use as a park.

A present controversy involves the open, oak-filled meadows on the beach cliff just north of town. The view from the cliffs includes the entire Monterey Bay. Perfect for a luxury hotel and convention center, say the developers. Wrong, according to another loose coalition of opponents. The first public meeting on the proposed convention center drew a standing-room-only crowd, and right now the safe money is riding against the development—in spite of what it might mean to the community in terms of revenue and employment.

"Some people go so far on the ecology kick," says Tanner Wilson, who came home from Stanford in 1938 to work in the family real estate business, "that they go overboard and it becomes a game. Developers come in and see what they're up against and say 'forget it.'" As if in empathy with the developers, Wil-

son throws his hands in the air. "It offends me to see first-class developers discouraged to the point that they go away."

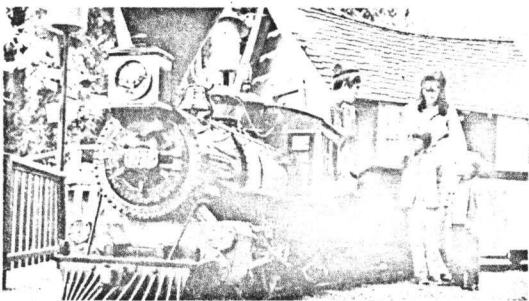
Jay Shore came to Santa Cruz to work for the *Sentinel*, but left the paper to do more of his own writing and to start the *Santa Cruz Times*, a classy little tabloid weekly that falls somewhere between his former employer's publication and the more radical and unprofessional *Sundaze*. His paper has comprehensively covered all the environmental issues that have popped up since it started 18 months ago. "There is a strong environmental concern among people who are here for no other reason than it's such a nice place, and that's almost everybody. A lot of them have seen what's happened in other places and they are determined not to let it happen here."

What is happening, of course, is that everybody from the developers to the radical street people want it *their* way. One group can hardly be called more selfish than the other when you consider the area as a common pool resource; a resource that is owned upon capture. Everyone who wants a piece of Santa Cruz and its beaches knows that individual restraint in no way guarantees similar action by anyone else.

Spend a weekend in Santa Cruz and you'll see what I mean. It's a great place to visit and you would probably like to live there. Or better, go and check out the beach house that Supervisor Dianne Feinstein is building on the ocean in an older development at the southern end of the county called Pajaro Dunes. It is real rich territory, enough to make almost anyone greedy. □



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