

# It's not your average town

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What can you say about a small American town that has been called "the murder capital of the world" and just last month had a man "pray" \$4 million into his checking account at the altar of an automatic teller?

A little town that hosts the Miss California Pageant and has a socialist mayor while all the other little towns have capitalist mayors and no pageants.

Where a few Easers back, a naked lady covered herself with chocolate and appeared as the Easter Bunny at the door of her handsome, but elusive neighbor.

It's the same little town that last week sent forth its Republican congressional candidate to meet the president of the United States and seek his party boss's blessing.

Instead, the candidate picked a fight with the president and the president had to tell him to "shut up!" The candidate, Gary Richard Arnold, hasn't quit talking since.

One thing you have to say about the little town is that it's not just "anywhere, U.S.A."

No, It's not your average American town.

We, of course, know it's Santa Cruz and that it's not that different from anywhere else. But it does have more than its share of strangely-flavored news, and the outside world must by now have formed some unusual opinions.

In a quick survey of world travelers on the Santa Cruz Mall, it appears the town has earned such sobriquets as "Santa Kook" and "Santa Woo Woo, California." And, everybody knows "we're laid back and flaky."

We are that town that's gone from the sunny side to the funny side of Monterey Bay.

Somewhat like Hemingway's moveable feast that was Paris, Santa Cruz must appear to have a moveable salad bar, to be a Disneyland of strange and often violent creatures.

The little town hasn't only suffered from one statistical mass murder, it had a mass of mass murders. In days since, it appears that other murderers drop in and play Santa Cruz as old-time comedians played the palace.

Little Santa Cruz was boosted in its reputation of oddness in July, 1981, in a beautifully written piece in Esquire Magazine.

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Its author, Page Stegner, described the magnetism of Santa Cruz in the '60s and '70s and the variety of humanity that was attracted.

"I walked down toward the bookstore through the usual panoply of drunks, junkies, lawyers, and overage teenyboppers outdoing one another in a spandex display of mammae and mammilla . . .

"The difference between a long-haired English major in surplus fatigues and flip-flops and a blown-out meth freak with a red, runny nose in drawstring pants was not immediately apparent.

"Something ominous was slithering into the garden."

Stegner's article infuriated the town fathers and they took him to task for messing his and their own nests.

Mostly Stegner hurt us because he hit the nerve of a rotten truth.

For the downtown Pacific Avenue Mall does have a couple of hundred of its own live-ins and when you toss them with the politicitically and religiously troubled, and the tourists and town attorneys and the "normal folks" who hardly notice it all any more — you have to say, "It's — it's just not your average little American town — that's all."

The teaser on the Esquire article that described Stegner's message was very hard for the town to live with:

The author, it said, "thought he had found a little outpost of Eden for himself, but soon a murderous unresisted evil came to haunt the town.

"Now he wonders if this will be the shape of things to come for all America."

It was in the resisting of that evil that it penetrated deeper and Santa Cruz made the national news wires again when six of its police officers were charged with police brutality.

They allegedly tried to drive street people and others who never quite make it to the market place out of town by assaulting them.

Maybe at this moment the nation sees us as being in transition from the days of carnage to a time when we're still just a little bit flaky and the police can keep us in line with a few beatings.

Stegner seemed to feel that the town's high-threshold of tolerance was the welcome mat for the barbarian.

"It has become increasingly uncool to be caught in the act of passing judgment on fellow creatures.

"At least in Santa Cruz, we have lost the capacity to be outraged by almost anything short of a Charles Manson.

"Hey, like whatever!" we say with a shrug."

There are two problems with Stegner's article and the news articles that creates the nation's image of Santa Cruz.

They do not convey the reality of what is around the "nut" — the mall and our moveable feast of aberrants; around it is a husk of Americana that is barely distinguishable from Omaha, Neb.

Well, perhaps more tolerant.

For the vast majority of Santa Cruzans, in and outside the city, go to work all the time, go to church on Saturday and Sunday, make themselves look ridiculous at Little League games and brag that they prefer Barney Miller to Three's Company.

They react to the Santa Cruz-iness in about the same way as their counterparts in Omaha, and now and then probably feel the town is getting a bum rap.

The mall is a wonderful place to walk along and after a year or so, everybody just looks like a human being.

And, the police and town itself are cleaning their own house and a local legislative aide said this week "who knows how many other small towns could use the same type cleaning."

As for Gary Richard Arnold, the congressional candidate who sassed the president, Santa Cruz County got credit for him, but it was the only county out of the four in the 16th District to defeat him in the primary.

And on the other hand, Monterey gets credit for the highly-respected Democratic congressman Leon Panetta and this county is his voting stronghold. Not that he's weak in any other county.

There's a feeling that Santa Cruz's folly is not at all negative. Costly in public image and forcing us to grow with each other — but not negative.

A businessman in Felton said the whole thing reminded him of the Welsh poet's town of Llareggub.

In writing of Llareggub (yes, that's what it spells backwards), Dylan Thomas was going to compare the town's manners and its townsfolk to the rest of the world.

Because Llareggub was peopled with eccentrics and individualists who went about life in their own ways and with a high degree of tolerance for each other.

The outside world wanted them all committed to a lunatic asylum.

Captain Cat, the closest thing to a leader, demanded the sanity of the town be put on trial.

The trial is held and in its last minutes, the outside world's prosecutor sums up by describing precisely what types of people and attitudes make up the absolutely sane town.

At that, the people Llareggub withdraw their defense and demanded they be cordoned off from the rest of the world.

Probably, today, President Ronald Reagan would be willing to lay the first brick of the wall.