

Pacific Garden
Mall - 1980 Oct 16, 1989

Life with the trolls



Chip Scheuer

Sentinel reporter Paul Beatty and his new friend, Gerald, mayor of the Mall.

Third of four articles

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SANTA CRUZ — Gerald and I are standing at the park-side entrance to the San Lorenzo River footbridge, looking every bit the 1960s hippie and the old wino.

The weather is grand on this Christian Sabbath day.

Gerald is calming my nerves after a wild-eyed young drunk cursed me out, telling me "to get the f--- out of my f--- way." I got out of his way, moving up to the bridge which offers a flight path. The drunk has passed out.

Gerald lets me know that a falling-down-drunk isn't much of a threat and that this drunk especially "is all right when he's sober."

A young woman with a little girl in hand approaches. The woman is carrying a black book — a missal or a Bible — and bends to the child and tells her something.

As they walk on — a Norman Rockwell portrait fading away — I turn to my friend and ask if he heard what she told the child.

"She told her not to look at us."

What?

"She said, 'Don't look at them.'"

* * *

Like Garbo, Gerald likes to be left alone.

It doesn't work for him. He attracts people.

Without trying, he is a counselor to

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frightened newcomers and forgetful old-timers who rely on his experience to make it on the streets. They find solace in his endurance.

"I'm tired of nurse-maiding them. These kids were in diapers when I was in Haight-Ashbury. It's tough nurse-maiding them year after year," he complains.

They keep coming year after year: kids on the run, the mentally disabled, people in crisis, the albies and a handful who make a career-by-choice of living on the streets.

Gerald is one of the last small group.

I sought him out also, sensing a humanness in him, a wholesomeness that survived a brutal childhood and 17 tough years on the street.

Gerald is a native Californian of Sicilian stock. A 32-year-old hippie who is generally satisfied with his station in life. A man who goes by only his first name.

Kicked out of an unloving home in 1967

when his mother died, Gerald at 15 hitchhiked 75 miles south and walked into the Summer of Love in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco.

For a kid with fresh memories of beatings and lock-ins, the carnival atmosphere of the Haight with its free food and summer-long love was a trip never to be let go.

"The streets are my escape," he realizes.

A few times he's had jobs and lived in houses. "But, I could never hold onto them for long. I'm allergic to houses."

He's stayed in Santa Cruz the past three years and found that "Santa Cruz is a good place to be on the streets."

Looking up from the streets, he thinks "this is a rich town."

Gerald is a familiar character downtown and takes a ribbing about being the "Mayor of the Mall" and "Chief of the Trolls." He doesn't sit still for either title.

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But, he doesn't dodge them successfully, either.

Santa Cruz street people were tagged as "trolls" awhile back and while Gerald doesn't look like the big bad trolls who chase the good little gnomes, in a squeeze he could fill in as one of Santa's elves — on the California route.

He's 5-7, stocky and a little bulgy in the middle from all that junk food he eats while sitting around the park. "He has a kindly face," my wife said, after Gerald assured her that with his help, I would survive the streets.

He finds ways to keep clean and brushes after every meal. "You don't have to be dirty to be on the streets," he told me when he was gently urging me to find a place where I could take a shower.

"Santa Cruz is a good place to be when you're on the streets," Gerald says, "but there's a big need for a place to leave our stuff and take a shower."

The street people need a building that will shelter up to 100 of them, with showers and safe storage space for bedrolls. A de-lousing station wouldn't hurt.

He thinks the School Street Adobe would make a good shelter for the homeless. "It shouldn't be wasted by turning it into a museum," Gerald says of the building and the \$1.5 million that will go into restoring it to its native American state.

Gerald is well-off. He has a place to store his bedroll so he doesn't have to carry it all day. He keeps in good, clean clothing. His great wealth is his radio, a blaster that on the streets is equal to a home recreation center in Rio del Mar.

"My radio keeps me company when I'm alone." However now it's beginning to fall apart; a coat-hanger replaces a broken antenna. It flops around, but without the hanger we can't get KHIP's rock music, God forbid.

"When my radios quit working, I just chuck them in the river."

When one of the young men in the park wants to rent the blaster, Gerald refuses him. "What does he want a radio for? He's got a girlfriend."

I suggest a trade.

"I'd rather have the radio; I don't get along with women that well."

He had a girlfriend when he was 24 and she was 17. "She ran around all night with other men ... and lied to me." That will do it, I tell him.

Gerald is a Christian and when one of his buddies showed him a book titled "Path" by a well-known swami I can't remember, Gerald asks, "How do you know it isn't one of those false religions?"

The friend looks smug. "Because it quotes John Lennon," he says.

As a punk rocker passes, Gerald tells me, "A woman who cuts or shaves her hair disgraces her hair, the Bible says."

On a bench on Pacific Garden Mall, my hippie friend says, "I don't have much trouble with the merchants because I'm not on the Mall that much."

Downtown merchants are of a general conviction that the trolls are eyesores who drive away good customers.

Gerald believes there are tourists who come to Santa Cruz just to see the trolls.

"We're part of their trip," he says as he settles back in his cartooned T-shirt, blue down vest and denim pants — a postcard Rockwell missed and Rolling Stones caught.

Street people say it's a good life, whenever they're not talking about its hardships. They boast of each year they survive.

"When the earthquake comes, the civilized people out there will be depending on us to show them how to live on the

streets," Gerald says.

He's known some drop-outs who had a long way to fall — men with college degrees and good jobs. He's been their instructor on the streets.

There are nights — in his sleeping bag, under the trees and alone — that his world comes down on him. "I think of my childhood and that's when I cry."

He has a hundred tales of this little city.

There's the man called the Garbage Collector who finally got on food stamps, but he can't stop going through the downtown garbage cans. "It's his trade," says a laughing Gerald.

There is the woman who sleeps in restrooms on good nights and bikes around the streets all night when she can't stay in the stalls.

An older woman walks every night of her life away, stopping for coffee and junk food at the all-nighters. She's afraid that if she stops, the attackers will get her. She drives us all away with her sharp tongue the next day.

Gerald tells me what it's like to spend the terrible, rainy nights under a bridge or a downtown awning and then to slip into the warmth of the library the next day.

He talks of the town drunk who was a chaplain in the Korean war and the

enterprising panhandler who advertises downtown with a paper-plate sign that begs: "Change, Cigarettes or Pot."

Finally, there is the bawdy tale of the moral reformer who jumped into the pond at San Lorenzo Park one spring day to disengage a pair of mating ducks.

The angry quacking from the interrupted ducks, coupled with the yells of the puritan and the crowd-showering cascades of water, brought the police. They arrested the offended man.

"Then his wife went down on the Mall and with hand-puppets told about her husband and the ducks and how he got arrested. She raised \$50 with her show," Gerald recalls.

Gerald gets by on \$76 a month in food stamps (tramp stamps, on the street) and supplements his diet weekdays with lunches at the soup kitchen and dinners at the Elm Street Mission. Salvation Army gives away some lunches.

There are also the dumpsters.

Gerald says he's not afraid of the food found by dumpster diving. "I know bad food when I see it and I won't eat it."

Many of the major stores put locks on their refuse bins. Gerald complains, "There's little children in this world with swollen bellies and America is throwing

away tons of edible food."

One day, he found an 80-year-old woman trapped in a dumpster. Her Social Security money was spent so she went looking for food. "I rescued her or she would have had to stay until morning. Imagine finding an 80-year-old woman in a dumpster."

He doesn't panhandle. "I can't get into it."

As our time runs out, Gerald can't seem to forget the woman who told her daughter on the footbridge not to look at us. He is bothered and embarrassed that I experienced it with him.

He touches on it like a sore tooth but will only say, "It happens sometimes." Silence for a while. But then a bit accusingly he says, "So you're going back to civilization."

Our conversation is beginning to falter and I know that Gerald is leaving me even as we sit together. He's going back to the streets without me.

He makes his only demand before he leaves.

"When you write your story, tell them I'm a human being, too."

"I don't have a car and a home and a nice wife like you do, but I'm a human being, too."

I told them for you, Gerald.