

Long before the "mallization" of Pacific Avenue, before the hip boutiques, the fern bars and the chic eateries, there was the St. George Hotel. But what was once a luxury spot for well-heeled tourists now stands as a sort of living monument to bygone elegance.

First built in 1895, the George retains vestiges of her former beauty. Still remaining are the two large bay windows supplied with finials, the turned columns and the bas-relief plaques depicting helmeted conquistadors. Even though the facade has recently been painted a muddy brown, its decorative features clearly belong to that design known as "Spanish Colonial Revival," so much in vogue at the turn of the century.

But it is inside where one can learn most about local history — for that is where the people live. Of the 122 rooms there, more than half are occupied by full-time residents, mostly elderly, who call the George their home.

Nick Vidnovic is a big man, possessing the kind of ruggedly handsome face you sometimes see on old WPA posters or cigarette ads. As assistant hotel manager, damn little gets by him. He'll tell you that there isn't much he hasn't seen happen over the 11 years of his tenure at the George. His working class demeanor and quietly commanding voice are perhaps his two greatest professional assets (when Nick speaks — people listen). And although he is good humored and familiar with everyone, there's never any doubt as to who's in charge.

Two long-haired men and a barefooted woman approach the checkout desk where Nick sits. One man asks, "Have you seen a kind of crazy-looking guy come through here this morning?"

Nick pauses for a moment, then deadpans, "Nah, we don't let crazy people in here."

"Ah well, this guy is *really* crazy, man. You'd know it if you saw him. He was just let out of a half-way house. We were supposed to meet him there earlier, but he split."

The barefooted woman then hands Nick two half-finished oil paintings and asks him to watch them while the threesome goes back to the street.

"Sure, I'll do that for you," he says. "But I hope they're not family heirlooms — I may have to hock them."

A few minutes later another woman, pretty and girlishly flirtatious, comes to the desk and tries to panhandle: "C'mon Nick, all I need is 50 cents."

A short laugh from Nick. "If I had that much spare change I'd leave town tomorrow," he says. "Now go on back upstairs and talk to someone who's got it."

Having given up smoking years



PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

Voices from the George

Patrick Burnson

ago, Nick now buys Robert Burns cigars and chews them instead. It's a bit disconcerting when you realize that he never spits any of it out. He just sticks it in and, in the course of an hour or so, it disappears. He carefully removes one from its cellophane wrapping, rolls it to the side of his mouth and begins a story.

"When I first came to this town back in 1971, I thought I'd like to continue working in TV. That's when I still had ambition. But there wasn't much opportunity around here — except to work at the university, and that was too specialized, too confining.

"In the early days of TV, we were

allowed to do everything — staging, camera work, editing — but that's all in the past. I'm not cut out for doing just one thing. I like to be able to do a job that allows more freedom."

Nick's job at the George certainly permits that much. Since he only has to punch in three days a week, he now has enough leisure

Manager Nick Vidnovic of the St. George Hotel

hours to pursue his guiding passion: betting on the horses. Whether Nick plans to drive up to the track or not, you can always find him with a racing form under his arm — and he'll also have a solid tip on at least one of the day's longshots.

For a man in his sixties, Nick appears remarkably fit, a blessing he attributes to his easy temperament and luck. Luck, of course, is a major part of any horse player's make-up. He has other reasons to believe in it as well. Nick was among the first troops to land on the beaches at Normandy during WW II and was seriously wounded in the Battle of the Bulge. Luck, he will tell you, is what saved him.

But Nick is no American Legionnaire. Even though he was decorated for valor, he is reluctant to discuss this part of his past. "This story should be about the history of the hotel," he says, "not about me."

Sidney Canepa, who is 75 years old, has lived in Santa Cruz all his life and remembers when streetcars stopped in front of the George to let off passengers. His fondest memories though, are of the '30s when he was working as a jazz drummer. He was in demand then, playing with the Dorsey band, Glenn Miller and Guy Lombardo whenever they came through town.

"I could have been the greatest drummer that there ever was," he says. "If only I had learned to read music, I could've been the best... everyone used to tell me that. I was a natural. But I never went to school."

Besides playing with visiting shows, Sidney led several of his own small bands here in town, gigging at some of the many nightclubs and gambling houses that existed back then.

"I played for burlesque too when I was a kid. Sally Rand used to perform down the street and I was the house drummer. The Snake Dance, the Fan Dance, striptease — you name it — she did it. I was pulling in \$5 a week back then and I thought I was a millionaire."

Up in his third floor room are photographs and mementos of his show business career, including a publicity portrait of him leading his last band, The Harbor Lites. Retired for the past ten years, Sidney spends most of his time now walking in the downtown area, visiting his friends and family. He sounds coy and wistful when he describes the old days, but a bitter tone infects his voice when he speaks of the Mall today.

"I don't enjoy walking the streets anymore. Since the Mall has been put in, it's turned into a jungle," he says. "A Mall... that's a laugh. A Mall shouldn't allow cars to drive through. A Mall should be for people to sit outside and enjoy the

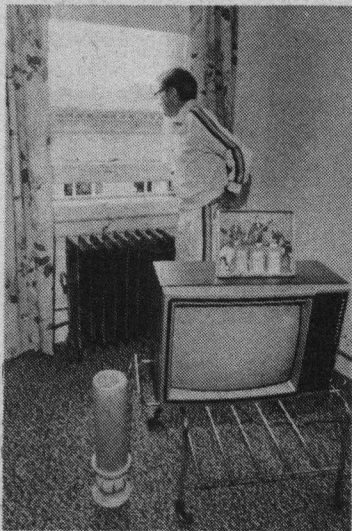


PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

sunshine. There should be palm trees and umbrellas for us to sit under. They've ruined this hotel too. This whole area was once a wonderful place."

Mary Vitali is perhaps the hotel's most celebrated guest. She's been the subject of countless paintings, sketches and photographs and her picture even adorns one of Jill Croston's old record albums. She will be 95 years old this September — an achievement of which she is fiercely proud.

"Until the man upstairs calls me, I'm staying right here," she says. "There must be a reason for me to stick around."

Clear-eyed tenacity is her most salient characteristic and it is that which makes her the matriarch of the George. Mary sees everything. Sitting in her heavy oak throne, she spends most mornings in the lobby gazing out the window, passing judgment on people in the sidewalk procession.

"So many hippies," she says. "Don't these people ever go to work? I used to walk down to the Bakery every day and get a cup of coffee — but no more. Not since I was knocked down by some kid on a skateboard. He cracked my spine. I've got to be careful now. Another fall like that will make me a cripple."

Twice a year Mary returns to Fresno, where she grew up and where her family still lives. After spending most of her life working for a winery and caring for her kids, she moved to Santa Cruz to stage out the final acts of life. That was 24 years ago.

Although she left Italy when she was just a child, her accent is still thick and her values are of the old world. "We've got to do the best we can, you know. Nobody's taking care of us here," she says. "We've got to do it ourselves."

Dorothy Howe occupies one of the more expensive rooms on the second floor and, except for a brief sojourn across the street for lunch or a few afternoon hours in the lobby, she spends most of her time there.

"I have my own bath and sink in my room," she says, "so once I'm back up there, I usually stay put. There's never any reason to leave."

Dorothy is 81 years old and has stayed in the George for the past 17 years. She says she likes it here because of the central location and the privacy it affords. "At my age, I like everything to be close by," she says. "My legs aren't as strong as they once were, but I never have to travel far to get what I need."

"Of course, there's nicer places to live in this town," she says, "but it's hard to find a hotel where people will just let you be. Here, I can be left alone when I want it that way."

Having spent most of her life as a hospital worker may have given Dorothy a strong independent bent. However, her stoicism is softened by a sweet and engaging manner that puts everyone at ease.

"I try to get along with all the oldtimers here," she says. "I say hello to everybody. Nick and me — we're great friends. But I don't mix with many of the young people or guests who have just arrived. You know, you've got to be careful too. The other night, I heard a commotion outside my door, but I never opened it. You can't ever be sure of what you might find. We get some bad characters up here sometimes."

While the threat of violence or robbery is not terribly severe at the George, there have been enough cases to warrant caution. Since the hotel caters to a large portion of the transient population, long-time residents are wary of newcomers and generally guard one another

says. "In fact, I've made a lot of friends with these kids. Some of them call me 'Mother' because they feel I've adopted them. And that's good, because some of my older friends are dying off."

She pauses for a moment and lowers her eyes reflectively. "I really did enjoy working here, but after 68 years on earth, I felt it was time to retire. I think I could describe every corner of every room in this place — and I remember most of the people who stayed with us too."

"Old John Brockton stayed in room 302. He was an artist and never like to have his stuff moved. His room was always cluttered with canvasses and oils and paint rags. But that was the way he liked it," she says. "I miss him too — especially that laugh of his. He died of cancer a few months ago."

"There were some bad times, sure. When there's a suicide here or a drug overdose or someone dies of a heart attack, it's the maid who usually discovers the body." Fran raps her knuckles on the wooden arm of her easy chair: "But I've been fortunate. Only once did I find a suicide. The other times, it was my day off or another maid got there first. I'm thankful for that."

With the coming of night, the hotel's first floor is again transformed by a shift of its habits. At five o'clock, the TV is put on and, for the next six hours, it becomes the heartbeat of the lobby. Most of the women return to their rooms and the men gather around the box to smoke



PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

Mary Vitali

worked and lived at the George for six and a half years, often pays a call each week to rekindle his ties with this community.

"The St. George Hotel is probably the most misunderstood place in Santa Cruz... and so are the guests who stay here," he says. "When I tell people that I once lived here and actually enjoyed it,

months. There are very few environments as supportive and emotionally secure as the one in this hotel. For the most part, people here hold one another up. They live with a kind of courage that is almost contagious."

"And there is also a certain level of adventure you can tap into here," he says. "While I was a desk clerk, I met people from all walks of life, not just the usual tourist."

However, Bill is not shy about mentioning some of the less uplifting moments of his job here. He remembers the many ill and elderly acquaintances who, because they were no longer able to care for themselves, were carted away in stretchers and wheelchairs — never to be heard from again.

"We would get more than our share of disturbed people here too," he says. "Some of them came straight from jail or mental institutions. But we never tolerated rowdy behavior here and we almost always managed to settle a problem without help from the police."

A squad car prowls slowly past the hotel. It's 11 o'clock and the lobby TV is snapped off, its happy talk and canned laughter replaced by the soft hissing of old radiators. Bill and Nick are the last to leave. Nick steps into the elevator and, with a rolled newspaper in one hand, waves goodnight. Bill gives a mock salute and turns to face the door.

He pushes out into the cool night air, turns his head both ways and gives the street a hard appraising glance. "Sometimes this Mall hardly seems real," Bill says. "At least the George has a soul — I'll give it that much." □



PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

Sidney Canepa

against harm.

Fran Jensen, who worked as a maid off and on at the George for 20 years, says that one of her unofficial duties was to look after tenants and keep an eye on potential trouble.

"When I worked here, most of the part-time guests were OK," she

and socialize. Lloyd Hartman, the refined and hirsute gentleman in the back of the room, chats amiably with a derbied oldtimer. Nick and a friend (whom he calls "the Indian") sit together on the divan by the front window. It's at this time that many friends and former residents fall by to visit. Bill Best, who

they seem amazed."

Certainly part of the reason is that Bill is still a young man, well-educated and employed as a youth counselor for the County — hardly the composite St. Georger.

"Let's face it," he says, "we live in a town where most relationships tend to dissolve within a few