

UCSC turns 20

The Hill and the City: Page Smith Looks Back

STEPHEN KESSLER

Around this time in 1965, the University of California Santa Cruz campus opened its doors — or, perhaps more accurately, circled its wagons — on the hill overlooking this little city. With Cowell College still under construction, a small but adventurous band of students and teachers gathered in trailers and rustic meadows to discover each other and chase the elusive grail known as a liberal education. A mile away, the downtown community was beginning to change from a sleepy seaside resort and retirement center to an outpost of what would soon come to be known as the counterculture.

In the intervening decades, both the university and the city of Santa Cruz have gone through some radical transformations. The campus seemingly has striven to become a center of science and high-tech enterprise. While the town's attraction as a tourist magnet has increased dramatically, its cultural life has flourished with almost cosmopolitan vigor, and the political climate has shifted from a fairly reserved conservatism to an atmosphere of progressive experimentation.

What relationships can be traced between the university's arrival 20 years ago and the new shapes life in Santa Cruz has taken? In search of informed, opinionated perspectives on this subject, the *Express* approached Page Smith — one of the founders of UCSC, teacher, historian and community activist — for his views on the debatable dynamics between the campus and the changing town.

Currently at work on the closing chapters of the eighth and final volume of his monumental *People's History of the United States* (Volume VII, *America Enters the World*, is recently out from McGraw-Hill), Smith was at first reluctant to venture any observations on this local theme, but once we got started talking a number of unexpected insights began to emerge.

"Santa Cruz is full of people that 50 years ago wouldn't have been caught dead in a small town," said Smith. "But I think the university had relatively little to do with this. Cabrillo College is really much more important in terms of sowing the seeds of a cultural and intellectual renaissance in Santa Cruz."

"When I got here, in 1964, the Hip Pocket Bookstore was flourishing. Norm Lezin, who had been head of the NAACP, was mayor of Santa Cruz. There was already that strange conjunction of the underground and the intelligentsia. The Hip Pocket Bookstore was where the counterculture hung out, and

there were also 'criminal' types hanging out there.

"As soon as the first groups of students began to graduate, a little residue of them stayed here, but that was not until '69 or '70. And the character of the community as a countercultural center was pretty well established by then. Furthermore," he added, "the faculty remained very aloof from the community — the university faculty, as opposed (to some extent) to the Cabrillo faculty — they were not immediately and actively involved in the intellectual and cultural life of the community, and by and large still aren't."

Asked what the ideal relationship might be between the university and the community, Smith replied, "I think universities are vulnerable to the charge that they are a world apart. Marvelous as the setting of the campus is, if it were my doing, it seems to me that the university should have been in the town of Santa Cruz, or Watsonville; just that physical separation has very considerable psychological implications or consequences."

"You see, the academic world is not really an intellectual world, it's a professional world"

"If anybody had decided to have the university in the town — if the faculty felt it was an important part of their own conception of their function to be actively involved in the life of the community — it would already be an indication that they didn't need to be in the town. If they thought of themselves as part of the town, then it wouldn't matter particularly where they were."

So, culturally and intellectually, in Smith's view, the presence of UCSC has been merely incidental to the evolution of Santa Cruz over the last two decades. Economically, however, it's another story. "I mean it's provided an important stimulus economically to the community," Smith said. "Students obviously spend a good deal of money here," in addition to the jobs the campus provides for local workers in various clerical and service capacities.

But outside the campus, according to Smith, "it's kind of a funny situation because it is a community that you can't stay in unless you're willing to make substantial financial sacrifices. There's just not enough employment here to make it worthwhile for certain talented people. I know dozens of people in New York City who'd much rather live in Santa Cruz — some of whom tried for five or 10 years to do it — and it's not just the money that keeps them in New York, it's the opportunity to have an interesting job. I think people care about having a sense that their capacities are utilized."

But what about the many individuals — a significant portion of the *Express* staff, for example — who initially came to Santa Cruz as university students and stayed to start small businesses or become involved in local cultural institutions? "It's relatively inconsequential in terms of the overall economy of the county," says Smith. "It would be interesting to have a sociologist take some groups of several hundred people and look at their role in the community's cultural and intellectual life and then calculate how many of them were here because of the university connection initially."

"I'm sure there are quite a few and that it's more evident in certain areas than in others — certainly in the arts community I would think that probably as high a percentage as a third or a half were graduates of the University."

"But, then again, the arts community is such a special case because the people in it have no reason to believe they'd do better in New York or Los Angeles or anywhere else — it's just a hand to mouth existence at best."

Smith feels that the most important impact UCSC students have had on the community has been in the political realm. That they tend to vote liberal on political issues, and that the university's presence tends to attract politically liberal kinds of people to the area, are more significant factors in the life of Santa Cruz than any contribution the campus makes in the area of culture.

"When you look at the Cultural Council," Smith observes, "there are very few university people on it. And if you take somebody like [County Supervisor] Gary Patton, who's a staunch liberal on most political issues, Gary isn't really very interested or knowledgeable in the arts. The person who's been most helpful in the realm of the arts over the years, I think, has been Dan Forbus. And Marilyn Liddicoat, when she was a Supervisor, was much more

sympathetic and responsive to the arts than some of the more politically liberal members of the board."

Looking ahead, we asked Smith what, if any, changes he foresees in the evolution of the university or its relation to Santa Cruz. "I think there are some hopeful signs or possibilities," he said. "There is a strong group of older faculty and emeriti faculty and ex-chancellors who are anxious to do everything in their power to move the campus back more toward some of the ideals that were held in its early years. So I think there's a possibility of that happening. I don't know how good the odds are."

"But at the same time, I think that for there to be any real change in the relationship between the academic community and the town — the county, the natives — there'd have to be a very profound change in the academic world's notion of what its role in the world is, or what scholarship and learning and teaching and so on are all about."

"When I was at Dartmouth, my great teacher, Rosenstock-Huessy, got faculty and students together to talk about the relationship between the inside and the outside, between the academic community and the world — or the setting, the particular community. And I didn't know any better, it didn't seem to me a novel or revolutionary idea, but just getting faculty and students together to talk about an issue like this, I realize now, in retrospect, was extraordinary."

"And yet, in all that time I haven't seen anything to indicate that that idea, which he was so committed to, has come any closer. It couldn't get much further away, but I certainly haven't seen any substantial change. You see, the academic world is not really an intellectual world, it's a professional world."

Like other professional worlds, the academic community has become specialized and isolated from the surrounding reality, or so Smith sees it. But this doesn't necessarily mean that all educational institutions have to fit this pattern. "The junior colleges," he notes, "have appeared in almost every community of any size with any intellectual get-up-and-go, and are much more interesting, much more responsible, much more vigorous, or contain much more potential than the universities because they're not locked into all these crazy academic pieties."

"I think there's an inherent snobishness that we all partake of, whether we are conscious of it or not, that the university is the big stuff and Cabrillo is the small stuff. But if you consider the issue of Cabrillo and UCSC and the community, as you think about it and talk about it with various people, you may come to the conclusion that Cabrillo has been the more interesting and that it remains the more promising institution in regard to this matter of change."

During the 19th century, Smith said, when the American character was flowering and some of our greatest thinkers were spreading their ideas, there wasn't the same separation we now experience between scholarly or intellectual and popular consciousness. Philosophers such as Emerson took their thoughts to the people. But in the 1920s, in Smith's reading of history, "a new kind of intellectual class formed, and that class felt very much against the mass of Americans," and that split has never entirely healed.

"To me," says Smith, "the real issue is, what is the character of American life? How do intellectuals relate to it? What is the role that they play?"



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