



Larry Minden

So, What Is Santa Cruz?

BY ERIC HOFFMAN

So much of it would seem scandalous or downright depressing anywhere else: socialists on the city council; a gay mayor; north of the city, the longest stretch of clothing-optional beaches in America; a hotbed for feminist groups; a police department whose members spent the better part of three months on trial for abusing the civil rights of transients; seemingly normal high school students, now known as "the bazooka boys," who nearly killed a long-haired, unemployed cab driver in their transient-eradication program. Not to mention the possibility that voter fraud by university students may unseat a city councilwoman in a pending court battle; nor the often-cited

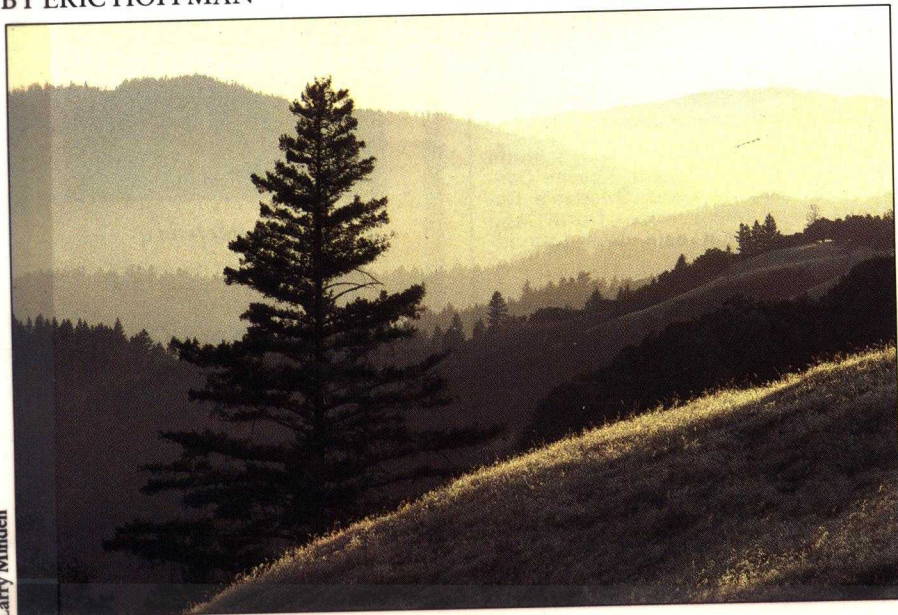
quote by a former district attorney that "Santa Cruz is the murder capital of the world." And, as if divine punishment were at hand, for two winters ('82 and '83), the entire county was declared a natural-disaster area.

This is the Santa Cruz that has drawn a great deal of media attention in the last decade. Unfortunately, this collection of vivid but disassociated events does more to accentuate Santa Cruz than describe it. In point of fact, Santa Cruz is probably the healthiest it's been in over thirty years.

The main act in town, the Santa Cruz Beach and Boardwalk and Cocoanut Grove, has undergone a \$10,000,000 renovation and has a clean bill of health that should take it well into the next century. Most of the city's proud Victorians have been saved from decay and redevelopment. The city council has put \$3,000,000 into revitalizing the municipal wharf. The shops on the Pacific Garden Mall — with a zero-vacancy factor — have just had the best retail sales year ever.

Even the public schools are bucking the national trends, with increasing enrollment. And believe it or not, Santa Cruz City and County never came close to being a murder capital, not even during the mass murder days of the early 1970s. The city had only one murder in 1982 and 1983 and the county's per capita violent crime rate for the last five years has been consistently average, by violent American standards, far below Salinas, many parts of the Bay Area, and even Ogden, Utah.

This doesn't mean Santa Cruz is without its quirks. Like any entity whose identity is complex, its essence is subject to as many interpretations as there are people willing to pass judgment. Glass artist John Forbes put it this way, "Santa Cruz is like viewing a movie through a kaleidoscope. The images are fractured, incomplete and often misleading, but always interesting and constantly changing." For newcomers trying to get a fix on things, stereotyping rarely works; nor does relying on the complacency of conformity because individuality, irreverence, and diversity are more the rule than the exception.



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Few communities five times the size can rival Santa Cruz for artistic and creative talent. Artists, writers, and creative builders abound. Santa Cruz and its adjoining turf was once the retreat for Alfred Hitchcock, and is the current home of pianist George Winston, comedian Dick Smothers, science fiction author Robert Heinlein, playwright Thomas Rickman, writers, Page Stegner, Page Smith, James Houston, Alan Grasso, and Gwyn Smith, to name a few. Internationally recognized boat designers and manufacturers, Bill Lee, Ron Moore, and George Olsen's Santa Cruz-launched ultralight boats have rewritten the rules in ocean races and influenced sailing around the world.

In the city and nearby hills there are dozens of attractive and innovative do-it-yourself homes: restored churches and train depots, converted water towers, and warehouses renovated as residences.

Santa Cruz has attracted tourists for most of this century, and what began as a trickle has become a tidal wave. Annually, almost a million people tread the beach and Boardwalk. To deviate from weekday commutes on Bay Area freeways, they creep over vapor-locking Highway 17, crawl down Ocean Street for a day of whirling and swooshing on the likes of the Giant Dipper, broil their pasty bodies on the sand, jump about in the surf, and at day's end commute back again. To about four million other visitors, Santa Cruz is the beaches north and south of town and the inland parks in the redwoods.

To 10,000 students, faculty and staff, Santa Cruz is the "City on a Hill," as the University of California at Santa Cruz's campus newspaper calls itself. To many of the townspeople the "City on a Hill" is a city apart that only joins the city on election day and tips the balance with a large block of votes.

It is within the context of the weekend and summer onslaught, the university and its off-shoots, the stigma of the transient population, and the perennial issue of controlling growth that Santa Cruz is laboring to define itself.

Retiree Bernie Smith, a long-time



Steve Kurtz

resident of this city of 42,000, sums up Santa Cruz's demographics: "We are in a permanent state of invasion. There are the regular tourists who bring money but leave garbage on the beaches. Then there are the university students who bring money and always vote for the most liberal candidates, no matter what he stands for, before graduating and moving away. Then there are the bums. They're living garbage. All three groups are transient, it's just a question of what each group has to offer. But Santa Cruz is still a damn nice place to be, especially in the off-season."

The marriage of tourism and Santa Cruz began at the turn of the century when people trekked into the area to soak in salt water baths. In addition,

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*Charles Canfield
at the Cocoanut Grove*



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the Boardwalk, built in 1907, was the first of many beachside amusement parks that dotted the Pacific Coast from Portland to San Diego. The Santa Cruz Boardwalk is the only one still in operation. Its survival is attributable to Laurence Canfield who became involved in the Seaside Company, which owns the Boardwalk, in the 1930s. In 1952 he bought a controlling interest and as the company's president, steered it through tough as well as good times until his death this year. Canfield's formula to outlast the other classic amusement parks and compete with new-age parks was simple enough: plow the profits back into the business and whenever possible upgrade the facilities.

In the late 1970s he undertook a \$10 million restoration of the Cocoanut Grove and construction of the spectacular 6,000-square-foot Sun Room, complete with a multi-section motorized glass canopy that is adjusted to allow varying degrees of sea breeze into a ballroom dance or formal dinner.

Charles Canfield, who has taken over where his father left off, describes the ambitious restoration.

"We wanted to diversify, be more than an amusement park and offer the concert audience and conventioners something, too. We took pride in the undertaking and are grateful to local tradesmen whose extra effort finished the project in one

winter. We probably showed too much pride... because we ended up overshooting our budget by quite a bit. But, we think it will be worth it in the long run." Again the marquee flashes the likes of Count Basie, who first played the Cocoanut Grove in the 1930s.

On the other side of town is the Pacific Garden Mall, the revitalized center of the business community. Its resurgence started twenty years ago when *Arizona Highways* photographer Chuck Abbott rolled into town in the mid 1960s. Recently retired, Abbott looked around, decided he loved the place and began thinking of ways to improve it.

At the time, Santa Cruz was a sleepy little resort town with a parochial way of doing things. Longtime-resident families controlled a good portion of the business real estate. The economic base had always been the transfusion of the tourist dollar. By 1966, the heart of the Pacific Avenue business district had twenty-two vacancies and the future for surviving businesses looked dismal.

Drawing from his experience on

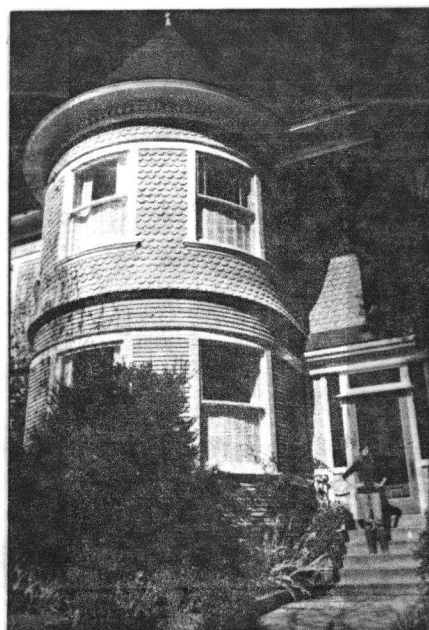
the Planning Commission in Miami Beach, Abbott knew how to get things done. He had collected photographs of mall areas from across the United States. He organized a group of landscape architects, business leaders, and university instructors. He talked merchants into forming a special assessment district, met HUD Secretary George Romney, got a commitment for federal funds, and after months of wrangling with local government and store owners, submitted a plan for the revitalization that resulted in the Pacific Garden Mall.

Manny Shafer, a realtor, former university environmental professor, and planning commission member, worked with Abbott. "Chuck Abbott took all this on when he was nearly eighty years old and he was tireless. He'd keep going when the rest of us had had enough. But by the time we finished the mall, we had become an inspiration for other cities facing similar problems."

While the business district was being transformed, the Abbotts set about buying rundown Victorians in the downtown area and restoring them. Others followed Abbott's lead and, in time, the Downtown Neighbors organization sprang up — a group dedicated to preserving old houses' integrity and generally improving the neighborhoods. Under the banner "livable neighborhoods," they've stopped the incursion of commercial interests in neighborhoods, planted trees, and changed bus routes.

Becky Niven, a Texas transplant who bought a three-story Queen Anne, moved in only to realize an express bus raced by her home, shaking windows in the house every half hour. "I got together with my neighbors and was surprised by how fast the transit authorities responded. Anywhere else would have taken a great deal more effort." Niven also likes the special quality of the downtown neighborhood. "There's so much variety in people. There's no segregation by income, education or lifestyle. I've noticed people who need a high degree of conformity are uncomfortable amidst all the diversity, but I love it. It sure beats the dull sameness of the suburbs."

As for the different governmental bodies, there is change of another



Becky Niven

sort. Practically every philosophy in America is represented on the city council and was marked by name calling, posturing, and putting personalities before issues. Today a degree of civility has emerged. One city management staffer, who also works with the county supervisors, says, "The diversity of the city council, and to some degree the supervisors, is as great as it ever was but we've moved from negative behavior to people working for what they believe in. They have learned that disagreeing is okay."

Some city council members carry controversial self-imposed labels—socialist, feminist, and gay. But beyond the labels a different picture emerges. Gay or not, Mayor John Laird gets high marks for dedication and sincerity from longtime members of the business community, as well as the numerous groups focused on social and environmental concerns. And socialist-feminist Councilman Mike Rotkin votes as a fiscal conservative as a member of the transit board.

A more telling measure of the difference between real and imagined discord within the city council is its unanimity on most agenda items.

Half the city's annual \$40 million budget falls into the general fund which can be spent however the office holders see fit. Only about two percent of this money is actually haggled over on anything approaching philosophical grounds. The council may go far afield and vote about their feelings on El Salvador or whales, but the nuts and bolts of providing fire protection, good sewers, etc., calls for the kind of practical thinking that doesn't allow global views to play a part.

So what is Santa Cruz? It's a cauldron of values and ideas that bubbles and stews and sometimes boils over. But through it all, there are the beaches, meadows, redwoods, and the reassurance that individualism and diversity are alive and well.