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Police say old news isn't good news; they are tired of troll-busting stories

By MARK BERGSTROM

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SANTA CRUZ — It's a case of all the news that's fit to print ... and print and print and print.

Police say they're tired of — and perplexed by — the rehashing of a story about "troll busters," who, according to the various media, roam the city looking for transients to beat.

"It seems to me the story was covered very well by The Sentinel during the time these events were happening," says Police Chief Jack Bassett. He refers to stories last September about a series of random beatings of transients, followed by the sale of "Troll Buster" T-shirts at a downtown clothing store.

The T-shirts, Bassett says, were a "flash in the pan," with several

thousand reportedly sold in a matter of days.

The attacks on transients, too, mostly occurred during a short period of time after the story about the T-shirts.

"Then everything died out," says Bassett, until late October when a Los Angeles Times reporter came up and interviewed Bassett, Detective Sgt. Bill Aluffi and others in town about the beatings.

"I told him (the reporter), I thought it was very peculiar that the Los Angeles Times would want to do a story that was old news," says Bassett.

Reporter Eric Bailey did do the story and it was prominently displayed in the Times.

"After that, we were deluged by calls from the national media," says Bassett.

"It was like E.F. Hutton ... when the L.A. Times speaks, everybody listens," adds Aluffi. The Times story was sent across the country.

Readers in Mankato, Minn., could pick up their local newspaper and read: "Troll Buster T-shirts displaying a boozed-out bum in the center of a slashed red circle are being sported by residents of this coastal resort, where hostility toward vagrants has boiled over into at least 19 attacks on drifters, police said Friday."

Right away, the phones began ringing at the Police Department. "I got a half dozen calls right away from the Bay Area TV stations and even from CBS News in New York," he recalls.

San Francisco-area TV crews bumped into each other filming "trolls" on the Pacific Garden Mall.

Bassett believes all the media attention was triggered by the phrase "Troll Busters," rather than the attacks on transients. "I think they (the media) got hung up on the T-shirts," he says.

"The beating of transients never was national news," insists Bassett. "I'm not trying to downplay the seriousness of the attacks, but when compared to all the assaults in the city, it was a small percentage," he says.

Bassett did take the transient beatings seriously and ordered a special file be kept on the cases. After the flurry of media attention in October, the "Troll Buster" issue died down again. As of last Friday, Aluffi had added only two cases of suspected transient beatings to the file.

Last Friday morning, the San Fran-

cisco Chronicle prominently displayed a story proclaiming: "'Trollbusting' — Santa Cruz Youth Gangs' Vicious Pursuit."

According to the story: "Gangs of youths armed with sticks and bats are ambushing homeless street people and pounding into them the message that they should get out of town."

It didn't take long for Aluffi's phone to ring again. Another San Francisco Bay Area TV station wanted another interview and that night Aluffi's face again was in the news.

The video crew filmed the Pacific Garden Mall and searched to buy one of the once-popular "Troll Buster" T-shirts, which, according to the stories, just about everyone in town is wearing. When none could be found, the crew filmed a picture of one of the T-shirts.

Aluffi is not surprised the TV crew couldn't find a T-shirt. Of the thousands of T-shirts supposedly sold in Santa Cruz, Aluffi says he's only seen two being worn.

Friday's coverage was nothing more than "regurgitation of old news. I don't know what triggers the media to come down here and do stories that are not news. We're getting pretty sick of it," says Bassett.



Samples of troll-busting stories.

Pete Amos/Sentinel

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