

Trouble at Ramsay Park

Will a crackdown on beer-drinking change things?

By DAN YOUNG

A dozen youngsters shout crude remarks at each other as they slowly toss the ball around at the Pony League field, warming up for their late-morning practice.

Across the way, a woman's giggles drift out from a bushy area, where she and her family are enjoying a lazy day in the sun.

A group of about 50 youngsters and their day-camp supervisors can be seen marching in single-file toward the Rec Center, where they will prepare for lunch.

An aggressive three-on-three game is in progress on the basketball court — with a cooler of sodas and beers by the sidelines.

And in the main parking lot — over where the tall trees cast a cool shadow on the hot day — four young men stand around their lowrider, rapping and sipping a beer while they pass around a marijuana cigarette.

A typical day at Ramsay Park — but that may be changing quickly.

The people will always be

welcome, but the beer and pot are on the way out.

A group of citizens formed a committee not long ago, and — led by Sister Marie Veronica Wagner of the Catholic Social Services office — took their concerns over Ramsay Park to Police Chief Ray Belgard and the City Council.

People were beginning to fear going to the park during evening hours (the park is closed at 11 p.m.), they said, because of problems of violence. And it wasn't all that pleasant during daytime hours — given the insufficient restroom facilities and the littered condition of the park.

They associated those problems with the growing number of beer-drinkers and "youth-gang types" hanging out at the park, and they were concerned that those undesirable types would have an unwanted influence on their children.

Then, two weeks ago today, one young man was killed and another seriously injured during a late-night fight that began in Ramsay's back parking lot area.

That incident strongly reaffirmed the belief that Ramsay Park's problems were getting out of hand.

City officials decided that, indeed, there was a problem, and steps should be taken to resolve the situation.

It's noon now.

A lone man eats his lunch among the trees alongside the soccer field — the small wooded area littered with cans and wrappers left by previous picnickers.

Several construction workers gather in the back parking lot, some eating, others standing about, waving their hands as they engage in a lively dialogue.

A picnic area behind the Pony League field — completely empty only moments earlier — begins buzzing with young mothers and their children who have come for an outdoors lunch.

The day-camp children and their supervisors have settled for lunch under a small grove of trees next to the main parking lot — not 20 feet from the quartet of beer-drinkers who earlier were smoking the mari-

juana. But each group acts as if the other isn't even there.

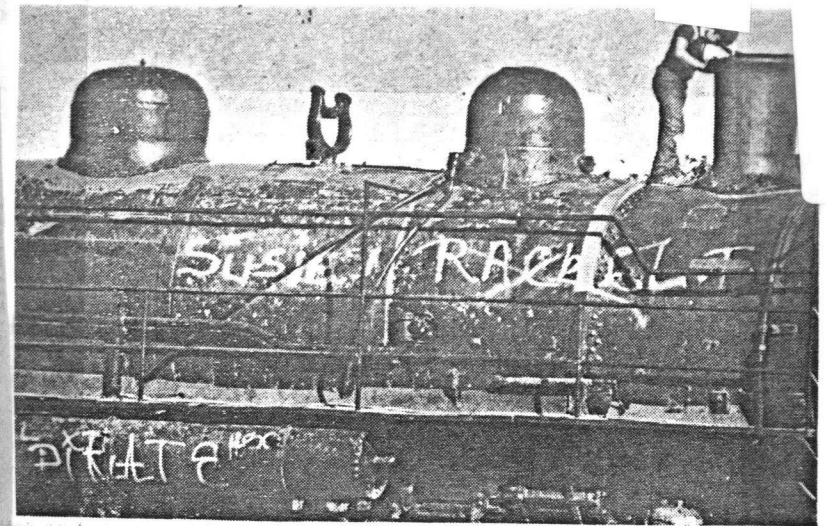
"I haven't seen any problems at all since we started day camp (four days earlier), and we've been instructed to call the police if we see anyone drinking beer — but so far, I haven't," said day camp supervisor Dennis Gluhan, unaware that beer was being inconspicuously consumed just a few feet away.

"I saw some guy drinking beer the other day, but he wasn't bothering anybody, so I didn't say anything," said one of Gluhan's young assistants — a bubbly young woman who obviously felt the "call-the-police" rule was unnecessary.

It's the close proximity between the children and the beer-drinkers that is creating the most concern.

"The city has an ordinance against drinking beer in the park, and we think it should be enforced," said Sister Marie Veronica. Her committee was formed last fall after she and several members of the church

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Omnipresent graffiti is another park problem.

began informally discussing problems in the park.

Drinking, broken glass, unsanitary restrooms and car break-ins were their major concern.

The group complained of experiences — during both daylight and evening hours — of confrontations with young men hanging out in the parking lot drinking, using profanity and urinating on trees and bushes.

It's getting to be about 5 p.m. — game time — at the park.

The littlest of Little Leaguers are warming up, as are the Pony Leaguers. The Pony League contest is for the first-half championship, and the game has drawn quite a crowd.

Out in the parking lot, a group of young men who have just completed a late-afternoon game of basketball are standing around their cars, eating chips and sloshing down a few brews.

Over by the Little League diamond, some of the parents have retreated to the hillside next to the diamond — where they can pull a beer from their cooler without drawing the ire of the league officials.

A group of teenagers who might easily be perceived as gang-types are standing around a car in the parking lot beyond the Little League diamond — a 6-pack plopped on the roof for all to see.

Police Chief Belgard sees putting foot-patrol officers in the park during "peak" hours as the first step in cleaning up the park.

The second step is going to please the aforementioned concerned parents — but it may not make the policemen very popular with some of the park's regulars: the foot-patrol officers, as of today, will be first warning, and then ticketing those found drinking any alcoholic beverage at the park.



Photo by Kurt Ellison

When the sun goes down, some people are reluctant to come out to Ramsay Park.

And that means everybody from the parents watching their kids play baseball to the young punks making trouble.

Belgard sympathizes with the easy-going beer drinker, but says he can't play favorites when it comes to upholding the law.

"The city ordinance prohibits drinking in parks, and we can't have double standards," Belgard says.

The chief says the police will not come charging into the park "like the Gestapo" to reel off ticket after ticket.

"As opposed to going up to someone and saying 'I don't give a damn that you've been doing this for years — here's a ticket,' we'll be asking them to go somewhere else — say to someone's house — to do their drinking," the chief says.

"We want to do this as diplomatically as possible."

Belgard hopes the casual approach will influence the majority to go along with the project voluntarily.

"If people cooperate, then we can narrow it (the beer-drinking problem) down to the six to eight percent of those who just want to take on the world."

Other steps have already been taken to gain control of the problems facing Ramsay:

—The City Council has agreed to form a committee to meet with Sister Marie Veronica's group — to address the concerns. That committee will include Belgard, City Manager John Radin, Public Works Director John Cooper, and Pat Donohue, Recreation Department director.

—A hill that guarded the entrance to the park has been leveled, giving passing police officers and motorists a good view of the front parking lot — where much of the drinking has taken place.

"We've trimmed some trees, too, but we don't want to cut down too many more trees," says Belgard. "We don't want the park to look like a giant parking lot."

—The gates to the park — which had been left open during the winter to allow passage to the often-flooded Harkins Slough road area — will be faithfully closed on time nightly.

"If you keep the cars out, you keep a lot of the trouble out," says Belgard.

The police chief agrees it shouldn't be too much to ask that people entering the park at night feel safe about it.

"People going in there (in the past) might be a little concerned, seeing a bunch of guys sitting around drinking beer. Some might realize that you're just some ball players sitting around drinking beer, talking about the game; but others might think you're a bunch of toughs.

"It's a perception thing, and there's a real concern on a lot of people's part," Belgard says.

"The fights that do occur are usually among (the kids) themselves, but the perception is there (that the park is a dangerous place).

"We have had our major incidents happening late at night, but the people out there at that time are not your typical citizens," he adds.

As aware that he is that there is a problem at Ramsay, the chief is also positive about the future of the park.

"We're going to change things out there — we're going to clean it up," he says.