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Psychedelic Palo Alto

Locals recall their long, strange trip through the '60s

by Blair Tindall

Take a walk down the University Avenue of 1963. What you know as Bella Luna Restaurant was once Bennington's Cafeteria. Walgreens was J.C. Penney, downtown's big department store. Copeland's Sports was Rapp's Shoes, while Boudin Bakery was The Corset Shop.

Home Chef burned this past December, but in 1963, local guitarist Jerry Garcia bought picks and strings there at Swain's Music Store. The hair salon up by Tasso Street housed Lockheed Space and Missile Company, just down from where Terry June's Finishing School and Modeling Agency used to be. Over on Hamilton, Osteria Restaurant was the old U.S. Army Recruiting Service.

As the '60s dawned, the community enjoyed its comfortable economy, nourished by military and aerospace technology research at companies like Lockheed, Stanford Research Institute, and Watkins-Johnson. A three-bedroom house in Crescent Park went for \$26,950, while a two-bedroom College Terrace apartment rented for \$150. Junior typist jobs--advertised specifically for women applicants--paid \$230 a week, and a two-door BMW coupe cost \$2,553.

Palo Alto was also entering a decade of social change, influenced by the Vietnam War, feminism, LSD, and rock 'n' roll. With riots, communes, living-off-the-land, psychedelia, and love-ins, the university town drew a hip counterculture despite its mainstream population. But the revolutionary thinking of activism, free love, and sharing eventually subsided to make way for the city's current status as the monied epicenter of the high-tech explosion, forcing out many who could no longer afford it here.

Back in the mid-1950s, Palo Alto was a town in transition. The Stanford Shopping Center, built in 1955, sucked much of downtown's business district away, leaving a ghost town. Empty storefronts abounded on University Avenue, where traffic lights flashed yellow all day. With few cars, there was no need for lights at all on Lytton and Hamilton avenues.

"You could shoot a cannon down University Avenue and not hit a thing," said Vernon Gates, who opened the first incarnation of his caf., St. Michael's Alley, in 1959.

But beneath this desolation rumbled tremors of a revolution that shook the nation, and was especially felt in Northern California.

As the 1950s ended, McCarthyism crumbled and boomers grew, while divorce and homicide statistics fell. Prosperity reigned in the suburbs, but young people found they could not identify with the materialism and political complacency of the era.

Elvis Presley gyrated for the first time on the Milton Berle show in 1956, while Pete Seeger was cited for contempt after refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Herb Caen coined the term, "beatnik," in 1957. American schoolchildren crouched under desks during air raid drills, while the USSR launched Sputnik, complete with canine cargo. Suddenly, nothing seemed out of the question.

In 1960, the civil rights movement entered the national consciousness with the Greensboro, N.C. lunch counter sit-ins, while women found a different freedom with Enovid, the first oral contraceptive. Psychedelics, a different family of drugs, were just catching the attention of Harvard's Timothy Leary.

The atom bomb brought about new global awareness, and in 1962 America nervously watched the first U.S. Army support companies arrive in Saigon. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" elevated environmental concerns, while Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" launched the feminist movement in 1963. The Beatles came to America. A rigid era was being dismantled with great optimism and idealism.

By 1965, more than 40,200 young men were being called to the

draft every month, and some fled to Canada. Through television, all eyes were on the 1968 Tet Offensive, in which the Viet Cong attacked 100 South Vietnamese cities as student protests across the U.S.escalated. A coveted item in 1969 Palo Alto was a marijuana bong fashioned from a spent tear gas canister, and the town teetered on the wild abandon of Berkeley.

But just as Berkeley reached the apex of its liberal orbit, high-tech derailed the counterculture here. Former Palo Alto scholar and activist Stewart Burns sees a connection the old and new in Palo Alto, as radicals shared a vision of personal computer ownership as a democratizing force in society.

"All we could see when looking at Silicon Valley was defense research," he said. "We had no idea that what was really happening when we pursued the revolution against war, another revolution was taking place in those very buildings, the emergence of the personal computer."

Many counterculture participants remain, looking remembering the era as halcyon days. They are hard to find behind the noisy hubbub of Silicon Valley, but they are here, writing, practicing psychology, creating art, and spearheading activist groups. These are people who held fast to their idealism and zest for a new way of life. These are the people who can tell their tale of the '60s to a new generation.

Because Palo Alto lacked hot spots in 1959, the crowds at St. Michael's Alley were large when it opened April Fool's Day. So large, in fact, that Gates locked the doors by noon. Before long, he became an impresario, presiding over a host of beat poets, intellectuals and local musicians like Joan Baez, The Jefferson Airplane, and the Warlocks, a band soon to call itself "The Grateful Dead."

Robert Hunter washed dishes in the back, and Jerry Garcia picked his banjo out front. Certain customers loitered with a 25-cent purchase. "Jerry used to come in, nurse one cup of coffee all day, and pick up all the chicks," said Gates.

Performances and gatherings at St. Michael's Alley were the first stirrings of a counterculture that would roil Palo Alto in the 1960s

and early 1970s. Gates quickly came under suspicion of attracting homosexuals and drug dealers, two groups largely considered scandalous at the time.

"About this time, Timothy Leary was sending LSD all over the country," said Gates. "He was getting it from the Swiss pharmaceutical firm, Sandoz, and had hit lists all over the country targeting university centers. He sent out couriers with the stuff, and a lot of them came here. The police tried to close me down, saying I was a hangout for drug dealers." Leary's plan to inundate campuses with then-legal LSD put Stanford high on the list.

Gates, however, said he always abided by the letter of the law.

The time was ripe in Palo Alto for experimentation. Psychologist and author Jim Spencer, whose work is featured in "The Best American Short Stories, 1999," was here, too.

"Drugs were there, and people were looking for a new way, of expanded consciousness and imagination," he said. "It got people to move off in a creative direction they hadn't thought of before."

The Central Intelligence Agency tested LSD for use as a nonlethal weapon, a truth serum, or a brainwashing agent. They paid guinea pigs \$75 a trip at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital. In 1959, it was an attractive proposition for psychology graduate student Vic Lovell, who paid \$60 rent for his house adjacent to campus on Menlo Park's Perry Avenue, called Perry Lane by its Bohemian residents because of its rustic, narrow appearance. Though adjacent to campus, the area was more rural then, and Lovell's dinner often included crayfish and frogs' legs caught in a nearby creek.

The drug test could be an epiphany or a bore. Lovell never knew what drug, or placebo, he would receive. "Every hour they would come in and collect urine and blood samples," he said. And under those circumstances, a trip could be frustrating.

"I was all turned on, with no place to go," said Lovell, now 65 and a retired Ph.D psychologist.

Lovell took his tales back to a Bohemian enclave of graduate

students, intellectuals, artists and academics clustered on the one-block-long Perry Lane. One day, he signed up Ken Kesey.

Kesey, a writer and athlete from Oregon, was a new Stegner Fellow at Stanford. Newly married to Faye Kesey, he welcomed the quick cash. Kesey also worked the VA night shift. When it was late, it was quiet. While the breathing of psychiatric patients echoed down the halls, Kesey finished his best-seller, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

He dedicated it to Lovell, "who told me dragons did not exist, then led me to their lair."

At the same time, drugs found their way back to Kesey's famous venison stew on Perry Lane. Suddenly, a universe of kaleidoscopic constellations entertained mind-blown graduate students, resting in the fork of an ancient oak tree. Writer Ed McClanahan, who lived on the lane for a time, described the scene.

"The commonplace would become marvelous, you could take the pulse of a rock, listen to the heartbeat of a tree," he said breathlessly. "The ecstatic, ubiquitous 'far out!' rang oft upon the air.

"It wasn't something we did just to get wasted," he said. "It was a learning thing -- we'd decide to take acid and prepare for it, set up games and things to do."

McClanahan's voice grew soft. "I've never been sorry for a minute about doing that," he said. "I felt like I came out of it with a greater appreciation for art, colors seemed better and different, and music sounded better and cleaner, something more ethereal than before."

Lovell said it was a unique time and place.

"It was like we had a magic lamp. The experience is not repeatable," he said.

Kesey was a born leader, something of an American guru. When he bought a house in nearby La Honda, his entourage followed him. The group developed a canon of weird behavior, Day-Glo

clothing, and sexual escapades that fertilized much of the psychedelic style. For a time, the Hell's Angels became regulars at Kesey's parties, finding fraternity in the outrage.

Calling themselves "The Merry Pranksters," Kesey's group "tootled the multitudes" on their coast-to-coast bus trip, in costume, in character, handing out acid from a wildly decorated 1939 Harvester school bus labeled "Furthur" on the front and "Weird Load" on the back. Kesey said they used psychedelics to learn the conditioned responses of people and then, in a language all his own, "to prank them." Journalist Tom Wolfe chronicled the group's adventures in his "Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test."

But before the Pranksters got on their now-famous bus, they treated the Peninsula to public acid tests. Spencer, a Perry Lane resident, was at the first one, in a warehouse down by the mudflats off Bayshore Road. He said it was the Grateful Dead's first big public performance.

"Thousands came. There were punch bowls with a lot of acid in them. Some didn't know. Not far into the evening, people started screaming, someone was freaking out. There were so many doing it, people enhanced each other's experience by the critical mass."

Adefiant energy was unleashed in Palo Alto.

In 1965, the Midpeninsula Free University opened in Menlo Park, offering a curriculum of interpretive psychedelic dancing, Ping-Pong for the proletariat, enigmatically described "nude-in costume parties," yoga, bee-raising, bread-making bake-ins, trust-touch-and-tenderness and meditation. Roy Kepler, of Kepler's Books, taught courses on non-violence, and Dorothy Bender, currently a Stanford data manager, taught an early computer course--in 1969.

Tuition was free. The organization maintained a bail fund, a legal-defense guild, and a bad-trip intervention center--"24-hour assistance by experienced people if you run into a bummer."

"My favorite class was 'Naked Tantric Yoga Sex on Acid,'" said Spencer.

About this time, local antiwar activism started to gel.

"The war expressed the hollowness of the American materialist lifestyle," said Spencer. Students were horrified by films of Vietnamese devastation. When contrasted with the profit from weapons research in their own backyard, they felt personally responsible.

"Students were aware, driven by desperation to make the older generation in denial see us," said Lowell. "We could behave outrageously and just be ignored."

On April 3, 1969, Stanford students organized what later became known as The April 3rd Movement, culminating six days later in one of the largest building occupations ever at an American university, at Stanford's Applied Electronics Lab.

It reached a boil one month later behind troops of National Guardsmen at the Stanford Research Institute's Hanover Street facility. More than 90 were arrested, and Ed McClanahan was there with his friend, activist Lenny Siegel.

"When the cops came down on us, I was running along next to Lenny, and he was wearing a glove on one hand," said McClanahan. "I couldn't figure it out until he reached down, scooped up a tear gas canister, made a 360 and fired it right through the shiny plate glass window of the facility. It was an amazing moment."

Joan Baez and her mentor, Ira Sandperl, moved their Center for the Study of Non-Violence from Carmel Valley to Palo Alto. Around 1969, Baez started a commune called "Struggle Mountain" on 9.5 acres of rented property in the hills behind Stanford. Nearby, a group of draft resisters, pacifists, and other communal groups formed a 750-acre anarchical community dubbed "The Land." Hidden dwellings made from reclaimed lumber and other simple materials popped up.

Rain Burns lived both places for a time.

"If Palo Alto officials ever saw aerial photos of homes built in the backlands, they'd never believe it," said Burns.

Downtown had its share of communes as well.

Practitioners and enthusiasts of a therapeutic discipline called psychodrama had their own commune at 1001 Forest Avenue, living downstairs from an enclave of Venceremos, a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist group. There was a medical commune, and even a law commune, located at 347 Alma St., now a Shell Station.

Lovell, who lived in the psychodrama commune, said people were outraged that a half dozen of Palo Alto's finest mansions were being rented for communal living, when small families could not afford them. At the time, a city ordinance prohibited more than four unrelated people from living together.

"The building inspector would show up with armed police in raids at night," said Lovell. "But we were warned and moved everyone out--to this day, I don't know how we knew--we must have had a mole."

The law commune supported six attorneys, six legal workers, four children and four spouses. In 1972, each was paid \$165 per month plus car insurance, rent and utilities. One attorney, James Wolpman, told the Palo Alto Times in 1972 that he gave up a corporate salary of \$16,000 to bring his family of four here. The attorneys took any kind of case, but wouldn't represent landlords, rich businessmen, employers or corporations.

In 1970, Palo Alto's City Council was forced to deal with with riots, drugs, protests and what the mainstream population considered deviant behavior.

By comparison, today's City Council agenda is sedate.

"It was like the circus just left town one day," says Lovell. Those who remain are an introspective group, many of whom became psychologists, writers, artists, and activists, providing an enduring consonance beneath the buzz of the computer industry. Most share a sense of irretrievable loss.

"I feel like an Indian now, that my cult is gone, totally gone," said Spencer.

"Living in this extremely affluent valley is a wonderful test of

inner light," Spencer added quietly.

Many struggle financially in the burgeoning dot-com economy.

Gates closed the original St. Michael's Alley at 436 University Ave. in 1966 and then reopened at 806 Emerson St. in 1973. He sold it to Rob Levitsky, a younger Deadhead who kept it open with live music and then sold it to a friend. The rents spiraled, causing management to abandon live entertainment to make space for the extra tables needed to turn a profit.

After retirement, Gates pursued his love of all things creative, compiling a collection of his poetry. He's also seeking a publisher for his 1,152-page memoirs, "Confessions of a Bohemian Ontologist." Dressed impeccably in white shirt and trousers, he seemed wise as a shaman, his own watercolor paintings on the wall behind him at today's St. Michael's Alley, where the young staff treated him with affection.

But Gates glanced at an amorous young couple nearby. "These kids have so much money, they'll order a glass of wine, pay for it with a twenty and walk away, not even ask for the change!"

He struggles to cover his \$1,425 rent on Social Security. This Gates says he cannot imagine what a young person without a Microsoft-sized income would do here to survive.

"No one recognizes me--people just don't care. I feel like I'm being left behind by a flood of greedy people."

McClanahan packed it in 26 years ago. He bought a house at 951 Bryant St.--in fact, a house that sheltered Ken Kesey from the law for a time--in 1973 for \$45,000. His ex-wife sold it four years later for \$125,000, and he estimates it would sell for well over \$1 million today. McClanahan fled to his native Kentucky, where he lives on an inheritance and occasional teaching jobs.

Vic Lovell wants to migrate far north within five years.

What of the people at The Land and Struggle Mountain? The tipis on The Land were razed in 1976 to make way for the Monte Bello Open Space Preserve.

Burns said she felt entitled to live on that land while residing there, but has since changed her mind.

"One of the predominant reasons I liked living up there for 15 years was the hills and forests," said Burns. "But now I'm glad the park has all that land."

Burns came down the mountain in the early 1980s for a high-tech job, later moving to a start-up.

"I knew I was on the edge of the wave," she said. "I thought Palo Alto was the center of the universe then, and I still do."

Her former husband, Stewart Burns--who authored "Social Movements of the 1960s"--moved to Mendocino, founding the Center for Social Healing and teaching at the College of the Redwoods.

The residents of Struggle Mountain eventually bought their property and now live quietly as a cooperative. Among them is 72-year-old Purusha Obluda, who hosts a weekly radio show called "Purusha's Views" on KKUP at 91.5FM Wednesdays from 9-10 a.m. He also stays active with groups like Food Not Bombs and the War Resisters' League.

Winter Dellenbach came down from Struggle Mountain years ago, continuing her work as an attorney with the Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing. She's well-versed in the cost of living in Palo Alto.

"In the next census, we'll see a mass migration off the Peninsula, the likes of which has never been seen," she predicted. Palo Alto's average home price is \$1.2 million today, according to the San Jose Mercury News. Dellenbach heard of a house in North Palo Alto that went for \$1 million more than advertised.

But some of the old guard coexists with the new.

Chloe Scott took a sentimental walk down Perry Lane recently, pointing out where Kesey's house and two others were razed to build sterile 1960s-style homes. The developer paid \$57,000 for all three properties in 1963. Scott lived in two houses on Perry Lane, starting in 1956. One rented for \$80, the other for \$50.

Moving from New York City's Upper East Side, Scott was thrilled.

"Two little rooms! A little living room, a little kitchen, on this lovely street, and it was just perfect!" Her eyes lit up like a 10-year-old's, and she nearly broke into an enthusiastic jig.

The night before the houses were torn down, the neighbors and their entourage partied the final party, destroying an upright piano with an ax--a piano that would have met its fate in the jaws of the bulldozer anyway.

Scott stood in the middle of the lane, describing the scene.

"It twanged and banged and thwanged, it was horrible," she said. "But the death of an old piano was somehow fitting." Lovell added that trashing pianos was a fad of the times--perhaps the only unoriginal action on Perry Lane. Three of the postwar, saltbox-style cabins with 1930s-style rock chimneys still stand. The oak tree in whose arms zonked students nestled in 1960 is still there, its branches twisting toward the sky. The few cars that come here must go around it on either side.

Scott, who moved from Perry Lane in 1961, says she still feels a sense of community here, and recognizes the old days couldn't last forever. She's come to terms with the area's new wealth.

"We had a good run for our money," she said. "But now it's time to get on with it." She continues performing with Dymaxion Dance Company, which she founded in the 1960s.

Harry Ely, 80, also said he is unaffected by Silicon Valley wealth and attitudes, living in the same house on Lois Lane bought for \$43,000 in the 1940s.

He'd come to Berkeley on the GI Bill, later moving to Stanford with his wife and four children. He taught high school for a while, then worked in several local libraries. One of his children took guitar lessons from Jerry Garcia.

"When the '60s came around, I was pretty interested in LSD," said Ely. "And I finally found some. There was a lot of bad press

on the subject, but when I took it, I was absolutely delighted," he added.

Ely's wife, LaVerne LeRoy, brought in a tray with three cups of steaming tea and a ceramic bowl of dried pears. The sunlight grew reddish. Rainbows danced through the crystals in the window, playing across LeRoy's face.

"Everyone was this big wonderful soup of change and it was just part of the scene," she said. "There were the be-ins-people sharing food, sunshine, dancing together, babies were everywhere, it was just this atmosphere of free joy. There was a great change in consciousness."

"Actually, consciousness was a later development," said Ely wryly.

Although the seat-of-your-pants living is gone forever in Palo Alto, some involved in the counterculture keep the spirit alive in subtle ways.

"I have a good life now in Palo Alto," Ely said. "I play the hammer dulcimer at the Farmers' Market, people I see there may be big-time rich people, but they give me a dollar here and there. I see them buying organic fruits and vegetables, their children are interested in the hammer dulcimer. I spent my life here, we don't really notice the change."

"I don't really miss the crazy acid culture, because my wife is here, and she's very surprising, interesting and tender, so I'm very happy." Harry and LaVerne married in the early 1990s, after living together for 22 years.

Ely picked up two dulcimer mallets, shaped like tiny wooden reapers. Beside him, bamboo flutes, ocarinas, Jews harps and various small percussion instruments spilled out of an old wooden box that once held a bottle of Bollinger's champagne. Bony hands and scythes flew over the instrument. A couple of strings were slightly out of tune, but his improvisation spiraled faster and faster, phrases rising, falling singing, taking on a life of their own.

Ely personifies the the last of Palo Alto counterculture. It takes a

sharp ear to hear his music, but it is an important and moving tune woven through Silicon Valley's high-tech revolution.

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