

Changing Times Bring Conflict to the Haight

Older groups try to preserve a way of life; other residents want a safer place for their families.

Free food tables continue serving. See page 7

By John R. Moses

The Summer of Love was actually a war between conservative and liberal factions, established Haight residents and newcomers with new lifestyles.

History is repeating itself 21 years later, but in reverse, as old and new Haight neighborhood groups war over the texture of the district's social fabric.

The established groups say yuppies are driving up home prices, and the newcomers lack social consciousness and neighborhood history because they're trying to get the homeless out of the Haight-Ashbury.

The new groups say they want a safe neighborhood, and are the target of a smear campaign by people who don't even know what their groups stand for.

Both sides agree on one point:

The conflict between the liberal Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council, and the get-tough Cole Valley and Haight Ashbury improvement associations are replays of the battles fought when the Summer of Love began.

A Changing Haight

From letters to the editor in the daily papers to police in riot gear shutting down a free food stand in Golden Gate Park, longtime activists complain they don't like the signs of change.

Some use the "G" word - gentrification - to describe the social changes that are fast turning the spiritual melting pot of the sixties into a car-clogged, trendy and upscale district populated by well-off white professionals.

"Those are pitched battles over small issues that lead to the central issue, the gentrification of the community," said Joel Ventresca, president of the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council.

"Those are easy words. 'Gentrification,' 'yuppification,' what do they mean?" asked Alan Merbaum, president of the year-old Cole Valley Improvement Association. "If you're saying yuppies drive BMW's and drink fine wines, I don't fit into that group and I don't think you'll find many of us who do."

Perhaps what is meant, he said is "someone who can pay the rent, and maybe doesn't wear a tie-dyed T-shirt and doesn't wear a rainbow-colored knit hat," Merbaum continued.

"If gentrification means homogenization, they're wrong.

See Haight, page 7

Free Food Tables Won't Move Out

Neighborhood tensions created by a political group's free food table in the Haight-Ashbury District could lead to a "backlash" against the homeless living in the park, a city official told food table organizers Monday.

The warning came from Bob Prentice, the mayor's homeless coordinator, who tried unsuccessfully to convince Food Not Bombs group leaders to move the food and literature table from the park to a temporary indoor site.

Food Not Bombs spokesman Keith McHenry said the push to get homeless people out of the park will go on with or without the tables, so they'll be back again next Monday morning.

Two vocal Haight-area neighborhood groups, the Health Department and some residents are against the food tables, which police say attract panhandlers and drug abusers to the corner of Haight and Stryan streets.

Prentice said the tables only aggravate the already-high neighborhood tensions, and should be moved indoors.

Last week, nine of the group's servers were arrested on a list of infractions, including violation of city health codes and posting banners in the park.

Police this week did not arrest those who set up the tables - in violation of a police order - but police said Tuesday the servers could be arrested again if they set up Monday.

Food Not Bombs organizers turned-down the offer to move temporarily to Hamilton Methodist Church on Waller Street, saying they depend on public visibility for donations to print literature and buy food.

A spokesman for the Cole Valley Improvement Association, a group leading the push for last month's ouster of bus and van dwellers from Haight district streets, said politics, not food, is the issue for Food Not Bombs.

The political group's leaders "play on the polarized neighborhood," Cole Valley Improvement Association president Alan Merbaum said.

The park "is not a very pleasant place to walk through. I've been solicited to buy drugs. I've seen people drunk. I don't take my children through there," Merbaum said.

Merbaum said the political group is "confrontational," and is alienating much of the neighborhood with its tactics and literature. "We don't need to see posters all over the telephone

poles calling the police Nazis. That's passe."

Jim Rhoads of the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council said people must draw a distinction between homeless Haight residents and "transients" who cause trouble.

"The automatic linkage between homelessness and criminal activity is disturbing," Rhoads said.

Last week, roughly 20 police officers swept through the food giveaway area.

The police held off Monday, in large part because the city did not want to send a message to the public through the throng of attendant media that it arrests people for trying to feed the hungry, Prentice said.

Prentice, the mayor's homeless program coordinator, said he knew nothing of last week's arrests until after they happened, and said the mayor's office did not order the arrests.

Prentice said instances of organized neighborhood or merchants groups protesting food giveaway programs because of the people they attract is a citywide problem. It happens in United Nations Plaza, Union Square and other areas, he said.

Haight
from page 1

It's very diverse and we like it that way. The things we're asking for are not out of bounds, by any means," Merbaum said.

Another definition of "gentrification" comes from Jim Rhoads, president of the Haight Ashbury Preservation Society and a member of the 30-year-old Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council.

"In this neighborhood it's the escalation or skyrocketing of property values. And (some of) the people who are living in the neighborhood are trying to change the neighborhood to match the inflated property values," Rhoads said.

The more conservative associations, the Cole Valley one and the more than 20-year-old Haight Ashbury Improvement Association, applied enough political pressure recently to cause the July police crackdown of people who lived in buses and vans on the Panhandle.

Those groups see the Haight as a crime and drug-plagued area and a dumping ground for many of the city's social ills, and seek to make the neighborhood safer for families.

The battleground has shifted now to Golden Gate Park, where a food table funded in part by the liberal Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council sets up in the park each Monday to feed homeless people who live in and near the park.

Nine of the table's servers were arrested last week for giving out food in violation of health and park codes.

The council, which Ventresca and Rhoads belong to,

funded the political group "Food Not Bombs" with a \$500 grant from the \$50,000 per year annual income of the council's recycling enterprise.

The money made from the recycling center is put back into the community as grants, and paid to the center's workers.

The grant program, which gives grants to other programs and charities, is one reason members of the council group feel they have more of a stake in the community than the other groups.

The two improvement associations are "trying to kick out our neighborhood's homeless and low income people. And they're picking symbolic issues they think they can win on," Ventresca said.

Change, a hallmark of the decades that shaped the Haight, now threatens the continuation of the neighborhood's progressive tradition, Ventresca said.

Statistics on Change

Ventresca has compiled a mountain of statistics on the racial and economic changes in the district between 1970 and 1985. He gathered the statistics, tabulations of census data and a marketing company's projections, for a masters thesis.

The figures indicate that there was a 50 percent increase in the number of professionals moving into the Haight between 1970 and 1980.

During the same decade, the black population in the Haight decreased by 50 percent, the number of families dropped by 38 percent and the number of families living below the poverty level dropped by 46 percent.

Perhaps equally significant

was the amount of change in households. In 1980, 28 percent of the Haight's residents had not been in their homes longer than five years, according to Ventresca's data. Median home values increased by 360 percent.

According to the marketing firm's surveys of school populations, automobile registration changes and other indicators, by 1985 the district became 77 percent white, and 63 percent of residents earned more than \$15,000 per year.

The firm's projections for the year 1989 predict a district that will be 84 percent white, and where 73 percent of the residents will earn over \$15,000 per year.

"Basically you have a neighborhood that has a history of diversity and compassion, and we're losing all of that," Ventresca said.

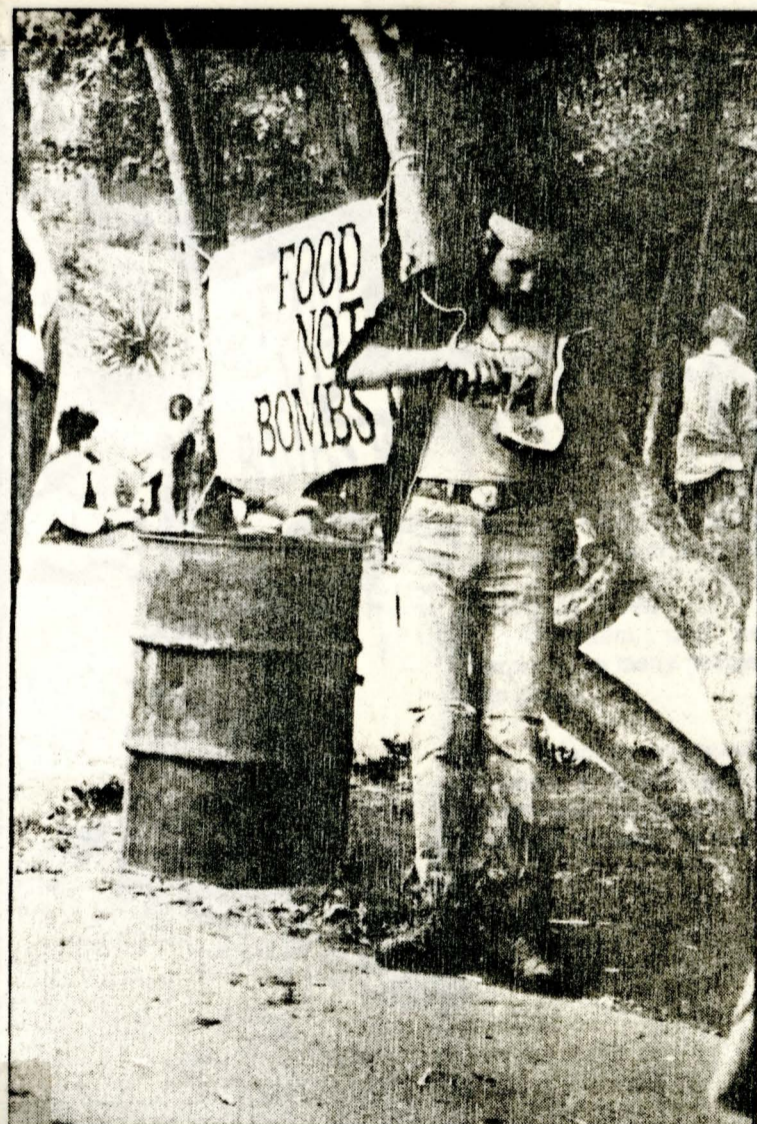
Citing a federal study of tenant displacements due to gentrification in Hayes Valley, just to the northeast of the Haight, Ventresca said one out of every four displacements of tenants there was an involuntary displacement. He predicted that the Haight's rate is higher.

The people coming in, Ventresca said "don't understand the history or the tradition of the neighborhood. They have no history here."

Instant Replay?

Established community activists see creeping trendiness on the Haight Street business strip and a vocal new community group as a threat to the Haight's world-famous reputation for liberalism and co-existence.

Many merchants, who would not go on record, say gentrification in the 1970s and early 1980s saved the business strip, which had reached a high point of 28 vacant store fronts in



Many of the homeless in Golden Gate Park, like this man, get free meals from the Food Not Bombs organization.

1978.

Merchant Joaquin Sanchez, a partner in La Rosa Formal Wear on Haight Street, sees the neighborhood as changing for the better while retaining its eclectic mix.

"Business has been fairly good for everybody, from what I hear," Sanchez said, due in part to

richer newcomers and in part to tourists who come to the street.

While the stores are starting to cater to upscale clients, Sanchez said "there are more belligerent people on the streets. This is a tolerant neighborhood... people have to live. You can not

See Haight, page 10

PHOTO BY JOHN MOSES

PHOTO BY RICK GERHARTER

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See Haight, page 7

Haight

from page 7

kill them, or ship them to Oakland."

Sanchez, who lives and works in the Haight, said he's neutral on the issue of the food tables in the park. "It's tough enough for people to be on the streets. We have to live and let live - period."

Merbaum, of the Cole Valley Improvement Association, sees the Haight as a sometimes dangerous place, a place where drug abusers approach him for money, and shout foul words at he and his children when a donation is not forthcoming.

He and other residents see the increase in the area's homeless as the beginning of the kind of trend that led to violence and drug problems in the district, when the hippies gave way to the junkies and crime increased.

They say they will pressure the mayor to help set things right

in the district, even in the face of political pressure and "mudslinging" by established liberal groups they say do not represent the neighborhood.

"What's really going on here is political activists using our neighborhood as a soapbox," said Merbaum, an eight-year Haight resident and president of the Cole Valley Improvement Association.

"The Haight-Ashbury did not begin in 1967, it's been here since the 1900s," said Merbaum.

Merbaum said characterizations of his group as a bunch of homeowners who only care about property values is unfair and untrue. He also disputes charges they are trying to "gentrify" the area.

Merbaum characterized his group as left of center, but not far left.

Most of the attacks came because the Cole Valley Improvement Association and the Haight Ashbury Improvement Association were the most vocal

groups in the campaign to get Mayor Art Agnos to order homeless vehicular residents out of the Haight.

Merbaum said he feels the district should shoulder its fair share of social programs, and that its residents should help out in those programs. A special area for people to sleep in their vehicles is a good alternative to the homeless crisis, he said.

"But the concept of just sleeping in a car, not knowing who the people are, and having it just ordained in one neighborhood - that's unfair," he said.

The Cole Valley group began as a Safety and Awareness for Everyone (SAFE) community crime prevention block club.

The media discovered the club's views on vehicular residents in January, when Mayor Art Agnos announced amnesty for people living in buses and vans along Fell and Oak streets, Merbaum said.

Like-minded neighbors

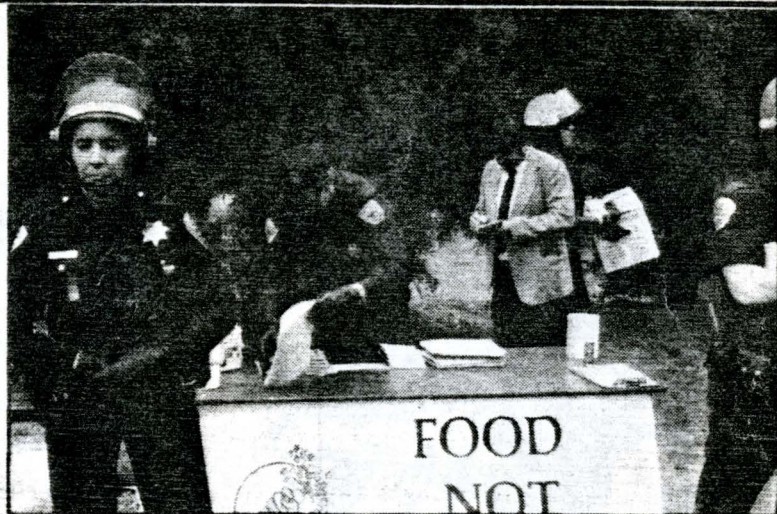


PHOTO BY JOHN MOSES

The previous Monday, police confiscated food and pamphlets from the free food tables and arrested nine of the organizers.

joined in until the group swelled to 97 households, some of which also belong to the well-established Haight Ashbury Improvement Association.

The Haight improvement association was a leader in the calls for police crackdown on youth activities in the Haight

during the 1960s.

Merbaum said he was surprised so many people joined the group.

"I never expected it to become a full-fledged, many-membered organization. We're filling a vacuum," he said.