

Homesteading in Santa Cruz

By F. John LaBarba

I know that a frog is an amphibian and a lizard is a reptile. But if it were possible to mix the two, you'd come close to what we saw slinking from behind the desk of T. Lester Burns, the day that we visited his office. We were to meet with him to discuss the details of us buying the property we were presently renting for \$80.00 a month since September of 1973. I can't really say what kind of man T. Lester was; only that we were young, and he scared the shit out of us. He had been a Santa Cruz judge, but in his later years, had gone back to private practice. His eyes were beady and calculating, and while they shifted from left to right, there was always some premeditation before he would speak. His puffy cheeks were laced with the late stages of rosacea. This, combined with the deep wrinkles that pierced his face gave him the look of an old toad. "Ten Thousand dollars is not much money for a piece of property," the toad chirped. Then he searched our faces for a response. I guess he could see the honesty in who we were, and that the whole property thing was new to us. He didn't mention it again, and ultimately the deal went through.

Lester was the attorney representing Mr. & Mrs. Harrison, who were now residing in New Mexico. His office was on the second floor of the Wells Fargo building, located at 74 River St. The structure built in the late 1960's, exemplified a time in the nation when the demolition of the "old and outdated" was extremely popular, and quickly being replaced by the "new." It seemed to be a feverish craze that was in the air at that time. Modern and new was good, and old seemed to be nothing but bad, ugly, and unwanted. Under the influence of urban renewal, or just being "modern," old wooden structures from the Victorian era were being replaced with cast cantilevered concrete and glass structures. The Wells Fargo building being a prime example of one and replaced part of what had once been the area of the former Chinatown in Santa Cruz, an enclave of old Victorian and lesser buildings, residing next to the San Lorenzo

River. A Buddhist temple finished up the grouping of the distressed wood, peeling paint, and partially rotted structures.

I don't think the city fathers missed any of the old Chinatown. A retired Santa Cruz County Sheriff, Al Bachtel, had once told me a story of how he had to close down the Chinese Fan Tan (Gambling) house located next to the river on Front street. The site of the former Longs Drugs, now CVS. Apparently one of the offspring from a prominent local family had lost a bundle gambling there. Don't remember if it was the Leask's, the Haber's or who it was. Consequently, the family was hell bent on closing down the place. The local Santa Cruz Police would not touch it, so they subcontracted the task to the sheriff's department, which at the time only had 9 deputies.

Beth Ann had spoken to Mrs. Harrison in New Mexico by mail and agreed on the sum of \$10,000.00. We had been renting the property for over two years. We first found the place back in August of 1973, through our friend Diane. Prior to that, we had been living out of our trucks. I came with a 1960 Ford F-100 pick up, with an aluminum cab high shell on the back. Beth Ann had a 1956 Chevy step side Apache pick up. With the help of another Los Angeles Artist, Dennis Handy, we created an "Over the cab", aged wood, rustic manifestation of the era. Beth Ann commonly referred to it as her Gypsy Wagon. Most the summer of '73 we would park at night against the tree line in a large field in Felton located on Highway Nine, in-between the Quick Stop market, and what was once a plumbing shop. Now it's a discount carpet place, the former field is now filled up with several buildings. During our entire stay there, no one ever said a word to us. Neither land owner or sheriff.

The house was in such bad shape when we arrived that we spent several months cleaning it up, connecting utilities, and sleeping in our campers. Not knowing who the owners were, we just squatted there. One day a couple showed up very angry, wanting to know why we were there. They later came back with the owners brother, a guy name Bob Agnew. He saw me, carpenter pencil in hand, replacing the bath room sub

floor with new lumber, as the old had rotted out. After checking things out, Bob said to us, “ I’m not going to decide this, you need to call my sister in New Mexico, and work things out with her, here’s the number.

The mountain cabin, located on a little less the half acre, included an old Redwood septic tank, as was common in the Santa Cruz Mountains back then. There were no proper studs in the walls. The single story walls were built from 1” by 12” redwood planks, running from floor to ceiling. The only 2” by 4’ framing was at the intersection of the floor to the walls and the same condition at the ceiling, with a little framing around the door and window openings.

The building had grown from a series of gabled roof structures. A flat roof covered with red colored rolled sheet roofing connected them all together. This area of the roof would become very familiar to me, as frequent visits with a can of wet patch roof cement and a putty knife, were to teach me at a young age the disadvantages of having a flat roof over your head. The floors were either unfinished Douglas fir boards, or covered with old marbled linoleum flooring.

Bikers had been living in the house and abandoned it months before we found the place. The water line, from what we would later learn was a feeble example of a water well, had been disconnected. The main wall in the kitchen was white washed redwood planking and had become some kind of bulletin board for the previous occupants.

A used Tampax hung from its string on a nail, along with various names and profanities that adorned the wall there. The inscription of “ Subway Sam was here “was emblazed somewhere in the middle of it all. Looking back I guess this was not all that strange for the era. In less than ten years previous, the Summer of Love, Woodstock, and the film Easy rider had all occurred. So hippies and bikers alike, were occupying old farmhouses, or anything else they could find in the country. The term “back to the land”

seemed to be everyone's mantra, and we were no exception to the movement. Finding a piece of land, and building you own house was one of the goals. Growing your own food, and being self-sufficient was a way of freeing yourself from the "establishment", and is something I still long for today.

After we closed the deal with the Harrison's and bought the property on Redwood Drive, Beth Ann got the money from her deaf father, Bernie, who was a typesetter for a newspaper in Cincinnati, Ohio. I won't get into the details about her father, but he had been divorced from Beth's mother since she was 5 years old. Bernie wore scars on the right side of his face, along with sporting a glass eye. Rumor has it he was peeing in an alley while taking advantage of the view into the bathroom of the adjacent house. Whether he was actually seeing some one in the nude was never ascertained, but the occupant responded with a shotgun blast full of rock salt, sending him to the hospital. The eye was lost as a result.

When living in the country, the basic things that you have taken for granted while living in the city abruptly become your responsibility. Like water and sewage treatment. After living in the front house for two years, we moved to the rear little cabin, and rented it to Sally, a woman recently separated from her husband, and her daughter Becky. Becky went to school with our daughter Kim, which is how we established the relationship.

All was well, or at least we thought it was. We were trying our hand at being landlords, and with my part time carpentry jobs, we were managing to pay our bills. It wasn't long after we rented the house that the wet spot appeared on the bank below the corner of the house, and about four feet above the road. Every day the spot became larger until finally a stream of egg smelling effluent started seeping from the center of the spot, ultimately running down onto Redwood drive. This whole thing had really puzzled us, as it was only a month before that we had dug up the old wooden septic tank, and had Comstock Service suck it out. "The Comstock Load" was printed in quotes on the sides of Mr. Comstock's old tan 1960

Ford, cab over engine truck. The tank mounted on back of the truck, along with the hydraulic pump, showed the signs of the many years of service pumping and discharging the contents from countless septic tanks around the county.

If you can imagine W. C. Fields zipped up in a jump suit, then you were looking at Mr. Comstock. He even sounded a little like Fields. His sidekick, Chuck, a skinny beanpole type, operated the grease caked leavers of the hydraulic pump located at the back end of the tank. Comstock stirred the foul contents inside the Redwood box using a 9-foot long wooden handled spoon like tool. The sucker hose lunging and gasping as it was pulled in and out of the thick caustic soup. Occasionally the hose would clog up, chocking on a thick chunk of the stuff. Every time the line clogged, smoke would start to belch from the old hydraulic pump and Comstock would yell . "Hey Chuck! Chuck! Shut it down, Chuck!"

We thought the job was finished. But now we had a foul smelling stream running down Redwood Road.

My friend Geo and I went down to the county building and asked the environmental health department if there were any records concerning the property. To our surprise the clerk handed us a copy of a crudely drawn plan of the front yard showing the placement of the leach line with dimensions. As crude as the drawing was, we found the dimensions to be accurate. We started digging at the south end of the line furthest from the tank. Within a foot or so of soil we hit the tarpaper membrane protecting the drain field. After another few inches of digging through the $\frac{3}{4}$ " drain rock, we saw the top of the pipe.

It was then known as "Orange-burg Pipe," made of ground cellulose (wood) fibers that were bound together with a special water resistant adhesive, and impregnated with liquefied coal black tar pitch. This was an innovation in the industry, and replaced the heavier and more expensive

steel and terra cotta pipes in sewer application. During the post war years of 1948 and on, the building boom brought production of the pipe to its zenith. The largest producer was located in Orange-burg, New York, hence the name. Later, with the invention of PVC pipe in the 1960's, the production of Orange-burg pipe stopped in 1972, being replaced by the cheaper, stronger, and lighter competitor.

Another characteristic of the strange pipe was that it started to deform when buried and not compacted just right. In fact, most of the Orange-burg pipe that I've exhumed in my career seemed to suffer from this affliction, making it more oval in shape, then round. With the walls of the pipe being relatively soft, we were able to bust through it using a hammer. To our surprise, what we witnessed inside the pipe was a dry, clean inner lining, only being occasionally interrupted by very small white colored plant roots. From there we dug just above the tarpaper membrane, following the line for 40 feet or so. According to the drawing, the leach line ended within another ten or more feet from where we had stopped digging our shallow trench. We figured it was another place that we should inspect, and busted through the top section of the asphalt-based product. Here again, the same condition revealed itself.

Earlier that day we had dropped by the local tool rental place, and rented a power actuated drain cleaning snake. Gail, the owner, may have had a thing for me at that time, as she always seemed to reveal it slightly in some something she would say, and or certain look in her eye as we would complete our rental transaction. The Snake, as commonly referred, would prepare us for the unknown conditions that we would surly encounter. . At that point it was time to initiate the tool we had rented, so up the line toward the septic tank we drove our oscillating probe. Upon reaching the tank we hit the solid wall of Redwood and started to extract our much appreciated mechanical helper. A popping sound came from the inside of the pipe as I pulled the end of the snake out. Attached to the spring shaped end was a full sized Wonder Bread bag, whose contents we would latter find out were used sanitary napkins.

Following the popping sound came a deep guttural noise from within the composite conduit. It was loud enough to capture our attention, causing us to look down and then jump back. What started to emerge from the broken end of the pipe was no less than a 4 inch diameter, black turd whose extruded mass revealed itself like toothpaste squeezed from its tube. Ling straight up, it wavered like a black cobra ready to attack. The anomaly stood there momentarily, then fell over, breaking up into random sections. The salubrious mass lay there undulating as if it had a life of its own. The parade of sewage accelerated, only to be followed by yet another uncorking, as a black liquid came rushing out from the pipe. What saved us that day from the black scourge was the stream, which followed the low point of our ditch creating a 40-foot long rushing unnatural creek that disappeared at the end of our ditch down the first hole we made in the pipe.

Later that day, after patching the pipe and membrane, covering up the ditch, and hosing every thing down, we set out to exhume our septic tank again. Upon lifting the Redwood 2" by 8" tongue and grooved boards that made up the top of the tank, the whole incident became clear to us. The baffle in the tank was made up of 1" by 6" boards, and the top one had worked its way loose. This allowed anything floating in the first compartment to float its way over to the second chamber. The bread bag must have floated over and lodged itself somewhere along the discharge end of the pipe. The dam this created stopped any effluent from reaching our leach field, emerging in the soil near the road. We never asked Sally or her daughter who flushed the bag, and to this day can't figure out how they ever got it to go down the toilet.

Our friend "Bruce the poet" was a very talented at what he did, and would never miss a chance to remind you of this. He was one of the few people to gain the accolade of being 86ed from both the old Catalyst located on Front Street, and the later version built on Pacific Ave. I don't know if it was because of his knack for getting in your face to press

whatever issue he felt was important at the moment, or his standing on tables with his friend Barney, tearing up dollar bills to prove that money didn't matter to him. I think he got the idea from his frequent reading of Rambo.

Bruce's normal scenario was to stay with friends, or people he would meet, eat, drink and abuse as long as he could be tolerated. Then after being kicked out, he would find his way to your doorstep, drunk, marooned, and begging for a place to stay, only to start the cycle over again. We were one of the few people that maintained a relationship with Bruce for over 35 years, before finally throwing in the towel. I think your tolerance for putting up with abusive behavior starts to run thin, as you get older.

He did have his redeeming qualities though. Bruce was capable of being a nice, sensitive, intelligent person, and a hard worker, when it came to physical tasks. We did have many pleasant times together while working and relaxing. There will always be a warm place in our hearts for him, and many fond memories of the good times that we did share together. At a recent memorial for a close friend and neighbor of 39 years, Bruce read a poem paying tribute to the man's life. With all the alcoholism, and crap that has gone on in his life, Bruce hasn't lost his touch for putting poetry to paper.

When not engulfed in the throngs of an alcoholic bender, he would bury himself into Christianity. It is probably the one thing that has kept him alive. Bruce was constantly meeting and using people. Many of his "friends" at that time, would cross the street in order to avoid him. If he was standing in front of the old Cooper House, they'd wait until he was gone before approaching the place. But still he'd manage to find people to hang out with. It was one of these interactions that would ultimately bring Rambling Jack Elliot to our humble, unfinished cabin one evening.

It was after we had bought the property on Redwood drive, and we were living in a small cabin behind the main house. We had rented out the main house to help pay our debts. John, a teacher at Cabrillo College, and Dora a hippy violinist, with her little son, Kuwana, rented the main house from us. It was our second attempt at being a landlord there, and turned out to be just as unfruitful as our first attempt with Sally.

Bruce, the poet had been by our place earlier in the week, and was with a fellow who said he was a friend to Jack Elliot. Bruce seemed determined to have us meet Jack, I think he may have even used our encounter with Dylan to entice him, I don't really know. One evening we decided to have a small party, and I started an open fire in front of our tiny cabin. The fire was contained by a square stack of used bricks, and an old refrigerator shelf that doubled as a barbecue grate. Red Snapper sizzled on the grill.

We had invited a few folks, Bruce the poet, being invited of course. My boss, also named Bruce, was Bruce Gambee. He and his wife Sandra had arrived, our close friend Geo, with beer bottle in hand was there, and a few others that I can't seem to remember. Before long, we had consumed the fish, and drank ourselves into a jolly state. Upon the 2" x 8" unfinished wood floor of our cabin, I sat in an old style, spring loaded office chair, next to an old pine farm table our friend Steven had given us. Geo, sitting across from me at the table, leaned into his chair taking in the night's energy. We had found the office chair along with a the better part of a blue steel child's petal toy that was in the shape of a 1950's style rocket ship. Thoughts of Flash Gordon passed through my mind as I pulled it from a pile of junk at the "AS IS" portion of the Goodwill collection yard that was located just off Encinal Street in Santa Cruz.

The pair of doors on our shack were open, so from my vantage point I could see all our friends sitting fireside, and hear what was going on. From the dark emerged Bruce, his new made friend, and Jack Elliot. After a brief introduction, Jack came in and sat at the table with my friend Geo and I. We had just opened a half pint on I W Harper, and I was quick to offer it

to our new guest. He reciprocated, and the bottle went around between the three of us until it was empty.

Outside in the fire light, Bruce the poet started to recite, "The fox sniffs the edges of the woodlands," he went on, using his poet like staccato phrasing, and making hand gestures to enunciate his spoken words. Upon finishing, we all clapped acknowledging Bruce's artistry. After several more, Beth Ann grabbed her guitar and started to sing. I was 24 years old, and happy to be alive. My wife's voice rang out into the night enhancing the good feelings we all shared. Jack leaned over towards me and made a hand jester toward my boss Bruce Gambee, who was sitting outside.

Bruce Gambee was an unusual looking man. He combed his hair straight back, and used a type of butch wax to keep it that way. To me it was a personification of photos I had seen of men in the 1920's and 30's. Standing over six foot tall, he would walk with a stature of confidence, spouting off his observations, and nodding his head while presenting his point of view. He was not a lot older than us, but it felt like he was due to his look and mannerisms. He had a space between his two front teeth, button type checks, and always wore long sleeve shirts. He continued to roll up the cuffs of his jeans that were too long, something I hadn't seen since the 1950's. Later on I came to realize that my former boss bore a striking resemblance to Doc Ricketts, of Steinbeck's fame. It was a strange set of circumstance that Bruce was the first person to tell me to read *Tortilla Flat*, and *Cannery Row*.

When he spoke, his voice was high-pitched, winy, and could be raised a few octaves when fueled with excitement. While talking he'd use terms like, "How goes the war," or "That's better than a sharp stick in the eye." He told us about the days when he worked with a framing crew. A grazing blow with the hammer sent a 16-penny nail straight into his eye. He pulled the nail out but had to keep a finger on it while traveling to the hospital to keep the inner fluid from leaking out. He had participated in and won several championships in duet roller skating in the Monterey Bay area. Skating in pairs, similar to ice skating routines. I was told that's what started his butch wax hair treatment as a means of keeping the hair in place while performing his act.

Bruce had worked in construction since he was a boy. An old time contractor in Carmel Valley, Hal Porter, had taken him under his wing, and through Hal, Bruce had become accomplished builder in his own right. We looked up to him, and learned a lot from him, but there were times he treated us badly, down right dysfunctional for that matter. He would delegate a task to one or more of us, knowing that we were unsure how to execute it. Then when we would screw up, he would verbally brow beat us, and enjoy himself while doing so. This would happen on a regular basis. He would also create a pecking order among us when the crews where larger, sending our friend Steven off crying at least once that I can remember. Years later when I was on my own, I would call Bruce for advice, as I still respected him, but it would be several years before I got rid of the chip on my shoulder his ridicule had put there.

The night of our party Bruce Gambee wore a dark blue windbreaker, with the name of his jeep club silk screened on the back. Bruce's over all look gave Rambling Jack the creeps, and he asked me if Bruce was a narc.

I assured Jack that he was my boss and not a cop. Later that evening we managed to get of the subject of land ownership. Jack was getting ready to buy a piece of land in Santa Cruz, I think off Old San Jose Road, but I'm not sure.

I don't know if that was Jack's first piece of property, but he was quite troubled at the thought of owning land. "It's really no but deal," I told him. "No big deal at all," Here I was just a kid, comforting a man who was not only older than me, but much more worldly as well. It felt awkward, but I did the best I could to console him. "You just own it and deal with it, that's all, " I said with conviction. Jack looked over at me and I wasn't sure if what I had said had sunk in. That was the end of the conversation on land though, and we never went back to it. The music went on and the night ended peacefully, but I can't remember when Jack, Bruce the poet, my boss, or anyone else left. The next morning I woke up to find Geo on the floor in the corner by where we kept our shoes, in his sleeping bag sawing logs

The fire had long since gone out, and Rambling Jack's visit already just a memory.

END

Cuts

Life can be stranger than fiction, or at least I've heard it said. If I was to pick an occasion in my life where the adage applied, I think that this would be the one. We had