

Santa Cruz, The Ultimate Destination

By F. John LaBarba

It was 1969, I was in my sophomore year in high school, and I knew nothing about Santa Cruz. The hippy movement had saved my life, and freed me from the constraints of the straight, jock filled existence at school. I had hated school my whole life, only enjoying Art Classes, Wood Shop, and Mechanical drawing. We had just moved back to what is known as the " South Bay, " in Southern California, an area comprised of three beach Cities; Manhattan, Hermosa and Redondo Beaches. I was born in Santa Monica, lived in Venice, and mostly grew up in Manhattan Beach. My family had come back from a failed attempt to move to Naples Italy. My Father was one of the first GI's allowed to marry an Italian citizen during the final stages of the Italian Campaign in 1944, where he married my mother. He, Fidel LaBarba, had suffered a heart attack two years prior to us leaving California, and we had been barely getting by on his social security payments, food stamps, and financial aid. Italy seemed like a place where we could live on less money, but we never made it there! After getting as far as Asbury Park New Jersey, where my aunt Nina and her daughter Mary Ann lived, my dad got cold feet, thinking we'd never make it back to the states. He cashed in our boat tickets, and back to California we ultimately went.

We stayed in Asbury Park for around a month, while my parents figured out their next move. My cousin, Mary Ann, was a few years older than I and a full blown hippy. She took me around to all her hippy friends and the local hippy hang-out park in the adjacent town known as Long Branch. Coming from California I was used to acquiring large " Lids " (usually three fingers worth) of pot in a plastic sandwich bag for around ten bucks. Things were different in Jersey. We visited an Irish family living in a flat above a department store in the downtown area. One of the sons, Patrick, pulled a very small manilla colored envelope out of his shirt pocket that contained a few, measly (by California standards) Marijuana cigarettes. There seemed to be some excitement about his scoring the pot, and we shared a few hits each of his new found catch.

My older sister Vicki and I grew up under the fleeting notoriety of our father's fame. In 1924 my father, at age 18, won the Olympic Gold medal in Paris,

France, as a Fly Weight Boxer. His win also gave the US boxing team the team gold metal as well. By 1927 he had become the World's Fly Weight Boxing Champ. Later that year he was the only boxer in history to give up his undefeated title in order to attend Stanford University. After successfully finishing his freshman year, he went back to Los Angeles to bury his recently deceased father, my grandfather, Dominic LaBarba. He stayed in top shape while attending Stanford, boxing students in all the weight classes, playing junior football, etc. He was 21 years old and he had \$250,000.00 in the bank, (equal to 4 million in today's valuation), only to be lost a few years later in the 1929 stock market crash. For some reason, he decided to go back to the boxing game, where he continued until 1933 after losing an eye preparing for Feather Weight title fight being held at the Madison Square Garden. After boxing he fell back on a second career as a writer, publishing articles for Ring magazine, Colliers, and with the help of Ernest Hemingway, had an article in Esquire (DAMON VS. PYTHIAS AT 112 LBS.). In the 1930's he went to work for Daryl F. Zanuck, giving him daily boxing lessons, writing, and advising him while viewing the " daily rushes." (the days filming).

So while we were growing up, someone would notice our last name and ask us if we were related to the famous boxer. Vestiges from his past life would often show up at our front door. Former Heavy Weight Champ and Hollywood actor Primo Carnera, the actress Mae West, and an assortment of cauliflower-eared men too numerous to name or remember. Back in the South Bay, I wasted no time experimenting with drugs. One evening my friend Alan, two others, and myself, drove around all night in his dad's 1958 baby blue & white Ford Edsel where we thoroughly dosed on Orange Sunshine (LSD) that had recently been introduced to our area. We were on the other side of peaking when at 4:00AM a Palos Verdes police squad car pulled us over. While the main cop questioned Alan and called his dad to make sure we had permission to use the car, the other cop came up to the shot gun side of the car and knocked on the window. He asked for my ID. Looking up to the officer I saw a dark haired younger man with what seemed to be a week's long razor stubble. It may have been the acid affecting my perception, I'm not really sure. In a very thick New York accent he said to me without hesitation "...Are ya Gonna follow in your Fatha's footsteps?"

I replied. "No I'm planning on being an artist." He handed me back the driver's license, said noting to our rear passengers, and off we went down the road into the cosmos.

The next year I convinced my dad to allow me to leave the straight high school, (Mira Costa) and be enrolled in the adjacent alternative school located in the ravine below the high school. Pacific Shores was it's name, and it was the first public Continuation school in the state of California. It was there that my teachers first told me about Santa Cruz, and all about UCSC. They said I would be perfect for the place. No letter grades, the Ocean, Redwoods, and the alternative lifestyle. It would be at least another year before I would come close to finding out what this place called Santa Cruz was all about. When my family first came back to California from Jersey, we lived in an apartment for six months, after which we moved to another one about a half mile away. Ironically, the first apartment was located less than a block away from the woman that would become my sole mate for life, and I would later migrate to Santa Cruz with her. But at that time I had never seen her, nor knew anything about her.

1971 was a crazy action packed year for me. Pot and Psychedelics had become my drugs of choice. I had met Bert Seal at the alternative high school. He was two years older than me, but he managed to pass enough classes to keep from being kicked out. He was short with a slight build, and very wiry. He donned long shoulder length brown hair with a full well trimmed beard. Bert was capable of being a smart ass at times. He was also an expert mountain climber, hiker, and outdoorsman. The winter before we had camped in a large summer time tent on the floor of Yosemite Valley. There were probably eight or ten of us high school students that would huddle close in our mummy bags on the floor of the tent with nothing but our insulation pads below us. December is a chilly place in the Yosemite Valley.

While we camped there Bert, my friend Chris and I decided to climb to the top of Yosemite Falls. The day hikers had blazed a trail in the snow to the bottom of the first falls. From there we let Bert lead the way, as he had hiked the route many times in the summer months, and knew roughly where the trail was. At times we would sink into the snow to our crouches, as we missed the trail and ended up hiking over bushes. By night fall we made it to the top. Considering the wind chill factor, it must of been close to zero degrees up there. We pulled out

our cooking pots, and started making a three foot tall, C shaped, compacted snow brick wall around a large coniferous tree. We cut a limb off the tree, (Taboo in a National Park) laid it across the freshly built wall and finished our night time shelter securing a plastic aluminized space blanket over the top. We lit a fire at the base of the coniferous tree, just outside the shelter, and after sinking about six inches in the ice, the ground below appeared. The fire gave us plenty of reflected heat, allowed us to cook a meal, smoke a joint, and fall asleep in our newly constructed assemblage.

We must have been exhausted as we didn't wake up until at least noon the next day. To our surprise, day hikers had followed our trail up, and were trying to look over the upper falls. You had to approach the edge crawling on your belly, as the normally 3 foot high or so pipe hand rail, only stuck out above the ice and snow about 6 inches. After eating a quick breakfast, we looked across the Valley noting that blizzard conditions were brewing over at Glacier point, and we better go back down while we could. We packed everything thing back into our Kelty Back packs, dropped a hit of acid each, and made it down to the valley floor by night fall. Never felt the acid that much, but it made the down hill jaunt go a lot easier..

That summer (1971) Bert and I traversed some of Yosemite, stayed in a Victorian (LSD) house located near the corner of Divisadero Street and Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco, hiked in the Six Rivers National Forest, around Mount Hood in Oregon, and in the Giant Redwoods in Humboldt County. While hitchhiking past Mill Valley, the author Richard Brautigan picked us up and took us over the Panoramic Highway. Bert had recently read Trout Fishing In America, and asked Brautigan if he really threw the frogs over the cliff. Brautigan never answered, and dropped us off at Stinson Beach. It was on the way back to Los Angeles from that trip that I got my first glimpse of Santa Cruz, well Kinda. Bert and I had hitchhiked down Highway One from San Francisco, down Mission street, and started hitching again at the top of Mission Hill, where the freeway starts.

I never saw the downtown area nor did I know it existed. It was a pivotal moment for me. Bert and I had graduated Pacific Shores, and I had to decide to leave LA for the mountains now, or go back for a while and

attend El Camino Junior college majoring in Art. The Jefferson Starship song from the Volunteers album kept racing through my head as I stood at the end of Mission street. Grace Slick's words "*Join the Revolution...or else you stay...*" kept going through my head.

It would not be until the next April that I finally made it back to visit Santa Cruz. A friend I had met at El Camino College, Kipp Berry, was going to be attending UCSC in the fall of 1973, and we hitch hiked back up the coast to check things out. During that trip we toured the down town, the UCSC campus and secretly camped on site off Coolidge Drive until the university police caught us, and kicked us off. Went to the old Catalyst located on Pacific ave, where at 8:00 PM we were kicked out of there for being under age, spent the night at a youth hostel located at a Christian Church near Cabrillo College, and made our way to several addresses that Kipp had obtained as places where he might be able to stay while attending school.

The one I remember most was the home of artist John Forbes. Stacked around the yard were large ceramic pots built by Matthew Leeds. At the time I couldn't figure the connection, as only a few months prior I had seen the same work at the West Adams Pottery, located in LA. I had befriended another art student at El Camino, his name was Daryl, he was black and lived near Watts. His mother really shunned me the one time he took me home. I don't think it was because I was white, it was more like she viewed me as a long haired hippy and a bad influence for her son. Daryl had gotten a side job working for Leeds loading and unloading pots at the pottery. Daryl was quite inspired by Leeds' work. The one time Daryl took me to see the pottery, Leeds unloaded on him barking that he had not done the work he had agreed to do.

There seemed to be many migrants in Santa Cruz who's origins were from Southern California. Stone Mason Micheal Eckerman, Artist Manny Santana, and the Leeds Brothers, to name a few. During the next year I continued producing Art at the facilities at El Camino, which exceeded both UCSC and Cabrillo's combined. Also, that year I met Beth Ann, my future wife and sole mate. We were both headed in the same directions, readers of the Dome books, the *Be Here Now* book, and all the others

indicative of the era. We had set our sites on moving to Santa Cruz, and before long we were there living out of our trucks.

Looking back, those times seem crazy now. Between 1973 and '75 we had had an interlude with Bob Dylan, Rambling Jack Elliot had been to our house, met and hung out with Leon Tabory, the former Merry Prankster, and founder of the Scotts Valley Barn, Ken Kesey's former Dentist, Dr. Smith, was working on our teeth, and we ended up sitting in the living room of a 1950's style stucco house in Scotts Valley with Dr. Richard Alpert (Aka Baba Ram Das) and Bhagavan Das. We were interacting with Folks we had only read about in books. Things like that seemed to happen all the time back then.

T Mike Walker once asked us if our experience with Psychedelic drugs had an influence on our life, and the choices we ultimately made. I can only answer with a resounding *Yes!*