

From the January 25-31, 2006 issue of the North Bay Bohemian.



Photograph by Robbi Pengelly

**Grove Groove:** Teaching assistant Penny Hamilton has happily lived in her 150-square-foot trailer for the last 18 years.

## Home, Sweet Trailer

### Fighting for the soul of Sonoma Grove

By Patricia Lynn Henley

**S**trolling through Sonoma Grove Trailer Park on an overcast day in mid-December left a pleasantly surreal impression. A second-story addition sat perched atop the aerodynamic lines of a 1950s Airstream trailer. Nearby, a patio table and chairs waited invitingly under the overhang of a more modern fifth-wheel rig. A long, lean black cat strolled along a street empty of cars or other moving vehicles. Tall trees soared overhead, and lush foliage was everywhere. It felt a bit like a campground, except that the ragtag collection of RVs and vintage trailers were firmly anchored by wooden decks, small entry halls, whimsical stepping stones, assorted outdoor decorations and other signs of permanent residence.

Situated on Cristobal Road just off East Cotati Avenue in

southern Sonoma County, the Grove is surrounded by the sharp angles and straight lines of a neighboring strip mall, condominiums and tract homes. With only its tall canopy of trees visible over its wooden fence, the 152-unit trailer park is an oasis of organically laid-back, funky serenity among the carefully schemed sections of Rohnert Park, one of the first preplanned communities in the United States.

A month later, taking the same walk in mid-January, much of the Grove's charm remains, but several of the compound's aging trailers are gone; left in their wake is churned-up mud and the discarded boards that once formed steps, decks or other embellishments. Some diseased willow trees have been cut down, as have several tall pines. A few trailers sit empty, "For Sale" or "For Rent" signs posted in their windows. The majority of the unusual homes are still occupied, but many have lost their accoutrements, because residents were forced to remove any touches that didn't meet newly enforced regulations.

What a difference a month--and a real estate transaction--makes.

In the Grove, Sonoma County's free-for-all hippie past is colliding with its bottom-line yuppie present. The end result is still unknown, although the Rohnert Park City Council is taking steps to preserve the park's affordability, and Grove residents aren't giving up without a fight. This is a tale of tales. The history of the Grove itself and the impact of recent changes by new owners are intricately woven together with the personal stories of the Grove's many residents and the small, eccentric community they call home.

If this diverse group of students, artists, seniors and other low-income semi-eccentrics are forced out of their longtime haven in the Grove, as they fear they might be, where in the high-priced North Bay will they be welcome? While the Grove is not the last bastion of alternative lifestyles in the area, it may be part of a vanishing local breed--low-cost islands where those who can't or won't fit into a corporate and suburban cookie-cutter world can carve out a small space of their own.

## Outward Bound

Tents, vans and converted school buses--that's what Sonoma Grove evolved from, a rag-tag encampment of some 40 Sonoma State students and others in the early 1970s. Inspired by the idea that ownership of land is just an illusion, they occupied an open space called Benson's Grove, located across the street from the campus, just east of where a Taco Bell is today. Eventually, the health department declared the site a hazard; it lacked electricity and running water, and the only facilities were in the form of rented Port-a-Pottys. Officials closed the place down, but not before a flurry of media reports about this alternative lifestyle attracted the attention of developer Alexis Tellis, then president of the San Franciscobased Octagon Company.

In 1972, Tellis bought a five-acre parcel of land among the open fields along East Cotati Avenue, and Sonoma Grove was born. Streets named for Tellis and his friends were laid out. Rents were low and the communal spirit was high. In the early days, the place was run by a council of five residents, and there was a community store where Grove denizens could buy bulk-purchased produce and other items.

Abundant trees and shrubs were planted. A large, sturdy but graceful barn-style community building was erected, with thick beams soaring overhead, stained glass in the top cupola windows and a floor created from a mosaic pattern of thin "bricks" of sliced wood, which have aged with a rich patina of wear. A laundry room occupies one end of the community building. Two bathhouses were built, each providing toilets, sinks and showers (each also boasts a groovy outdoor shower). Outdoor sinks were constructed around the Grove, for those who didn't have kitchens in their various living spaces.

**I** fell in love with this place. It's so magical," says Jenn Hoff, 24. "You walk into Sonoma Grove, and you're not in Rohnert Park anymore, you're not in the world anymore. You're in the Grove." Two years ago, Hoff paid \$5,000 for her 1951 trailer, complete with an inviting wooden front porch, a skylight and an

upstairs sleeping loft where one wall is a large window. "You can see the full moon [from the bed] sometimes," she says. Hoff's trailer has a small kitchen area but no toilet or shower. That's not important, because she lives next to one of the park's two bathhouses.

Hoff was enrolled at Santa Rosa Junior College when she moved into the Grove, but she now works full-time as an assistant manager at a retail store. "I never plan on leaving. I love it here. I never want to move," she declares. An array of colorful music posters decorates her walls. She has a toaster oven and a microwave, but no stovetop or burners. Scanning her small domain, she adds with pride in her voice, "This is my home. I own it."

## Housing Students

Over the years, the Grove's original vans, tents and whimsically converted school buses disappeared, and trailers and RVs of various vintages proved to make the most durable living spaces. Also gone are the open fields around the trailer park, replaced by stores, apartments, condominiums and tract homes. Sonoma Grove has been officially anointed as low-cost student housing for Sonoma State University and Santa Rosa Junior College, although many folks continue living there long after they either graduate or drop out.

Calling the trailer park an "eyesore" and "the last bastion of hippies," Rohnert Park city leaders staged an unsuccessful bid in 1990 to raze Sonoma Grove and replace it with new student housing. The Grove's residents rallied, and their alternative lifestyle survived. A tall fence was erected around the Grove's five acres, screening them from outside view. The fence also created a nurturing cocoon where the trailer dwellers could live in peace.

At some point--collective memories are a bit hazy about exact dates--it was decreed that dogs would not be allowed inside the Grove. Cars must be parked outside, creating a quiet, vehicle-free environment where the streets belong to pedestrians and roaming felines. The trees planted by the Grove's founders have matured into a lush canopy, attracting migrating songbirds as

well as owls and hawks. The city even included the Grove in its current general plan, pledging to preserve the trailer park as low-income housing.

**A** great deal of cozy living is squeezed into the 8-by-20-foot 1950s trailer that is Penny Hamilton's home. A rose-colored loveseat offers comfortable seating in the tiny living room. One side of the room is the kitchen area, smaller than a ship's galley, and next to that, a dinky bathroom. Tucked in the back is Penny's bedroom, the center for many of her activities.

"I do everything on my bed--artwork, reading, eating, sleeping," Hamilton explains. "They say you shouldn't do that, but it's the only space I have." Hamilton's total living area is about 150 square feet. It's decorated with a softly floral theme in rose and green. Artwork, craft items and various found objects are on display almost everywhere, creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Tiny as it is, this is clearly a well-loved home.

Years ago, Hamilton lived in a summer cottage behind Stanford University previously occupied by the spiritual leader Ram Dass. When the cottages were sold, Hamilton decided to attend SSU. She moved into Sonoma Grove 18 years ago. About five years later, she bought her trailer for \$500 and fixed it up. In 1991, she graduated with a major in English literature. For 13 years, she was employed by Sonoma County Regional Parks; for the last five, she's worked in Sonoma County schools as a teaching assistant for autistic children.

Hamilton, now 59, loves her job, although it doesn't come with a high-powered salary. On average, she earns less than \$1,100 a month. The extremely low space rents at the Grove make it possible for her to live on her teaching assistant's salary.

## Don't Call 'em Trailers

Last fall, Grove residents heard rumors that the place was in escrow, that longtime owner Tellis, now reportedly in his 80s, had sold to someone new. That was confirmed on an evening in

early December, a day several residents refer to as Black Friday, when new contracts were attached to the front door of each trailer. The multipage document listed rents going up 84 percent to 130 percent, based on size, effective Feb. 1. The cost for a 20- to 30-foot-long site, for example, is scheduled to rise from roughly \$230 to \$450 a month. That may still seem low, but for some Grove residents who live on SSI or other fixed incomes of about \$750 a month, it's a massive increase.

The revised contract also includes a host of new rules: dogs, for instance, are now allowed, but must be on a leash; there may be no more than two cats per trailer, and they must also be leashed when outside; and residents must pull their trailers out and leave every nine months, but are allowed to return.

Other regulations followed, and a series of inspections commenced to ensure that each site adhered to all the rules, including one saying that landscaping may not block the ability to remove a trailer from the site. The new contract, however, doesn't call them trailers; it refers to them only as RVs. Sonoma Grove is zoned as a trailer and RV park, making it currently exempt from Rohnert Park's ordinance that covers mobile home parks and includes rent control.

Uncertain of the impact and enforcement of the various new rules, and concerned that many simply can't afford the increase, Grove residents began speaking out at Rohnert Park City Council meetings and contacting lawyers who assist low-income tenants. The nonprofit Save the Grove was set up to raise money for legal fees and other expenses. Residents are holding meetings, taking the first steps toward forming a homeowners' association and assembling committees to facilitate communications, publicity and rounding up support. But some Grove residents, unable to come up with the money for the Feb. 1 rent increase or just bothered by the many changes, have already moved out or are planning to leave.

**F**or several years, a family of six has lived comfortably in a 40-foot trailer at one end of the Grove. A large deck, built at a cost of more than \$1,000, has provided a place for the couple's four

children to play under their mother's watchful eye. Although the structure was approved by a previous manager, it was larger than allowed under park regulations. The new management ordered the deck removed. The same went for the family's whimsical concrete fountains at the front of their trailer, and for all the outside touches they had added to make their space feel like a home.

Disturbed by these sudden changes, the family sought and received approval for a home loan. But they can't afford to buy anything in Sonoma County; the mother is seeking a transfer to her company's office in Reno, Nev., where the family is eyeing a four-bedroom, one-bath home on sale for \$280,000.

Their next-door neighbor has already departed. Loren Press, 76, lived in the Grove for 23 years, almost a third of his life. In mid-December, his area was filled with moss-covered stepping stones and an array of carefully nurtured plants. A well-used wooden garden shed clung to a nearby fence. In January, all the foliage was gone, either given away or ripped out because it didn't conform to the new park rules. The changes and the threat of the impending rent increase were too much.

Having sold his tiny, tidy home to someone who restores vintage trailers, Press quietly prepared to move to Washington state to live with relatives. "I'm very bitter--very, very bitter about a number of things," he told a visitor, his soft, cultured voice quivering with anger but also with deep regret.

## Absentee Ownership

Sonoma Grove was purchased Nov. 2, 2005, by Houser Holdings LLC, a company reportedly owned by Theresa Thurman and her sisters. When the new rents and rules were announced, residents were instructed to submit any questions in writing to Thurman. Some received answers, some did not. Thurman's attorney sent letters to the city of Rohnert Park, contesting the idea that the Grove might be included under the city's mobile home rent-control ordinance, but Thurman herself did not comment either in writing or at the public meetings. The *Bohemian* made repeated requests to speak directly with the owners or manager to get their perspective on the current

situation and the future of Sonoma Grove, but got no response.

The scant information that's available about Thurman's track record isn't promising. Attorney Angelica Millan of Legal Services of Northern California, the legal aid office for Mendocino and Lake counties, is currently working with a tenant facing eviction in a Willits trailer park that Thurman purchased last spring. Andy Rossoff is an attorney with the Senior Law Project in Lake County, where Thurman was involved with the recent purchase of a trailer park, reportedly resulting in mass evictions. "The tenants that I talked to were presented with a notice to vacate and a letter that said if you don't vacate then your rent is going up from about \$250, I believe, to about \$1,500 a month."

**A** 24-year resident of the Grove, Alice McAdams says she doesn't want to join in the general animosity against the new owners. "You have to get rid of your anger so you can do things right," she says practically. The city of Rohnert Park had to approve the sale, and McAdams says that is when local officials should have protected the Grove's affordable-housing status. McAdams is one of those who submitted specific written questions to Thurman and got prompt replies. She also believes that the Grove was losing money in the last few years, especially since rents haven't been raised since 2001.

But for all her understanding, McAdams is worried about the changes. She lives in a 38-foot trailer with her two black cats. A wooden shed out back serves as a meditation room, reachable by a stone path that picks its way through the picturesque garden adorning one side of her trailer. McAdams was working on a master's degree at SSU when she moved into the Grove, but she never completed the program.

Three years ago she got cancer. She has no health insurance, and her bills total more than \$1 million. Legally, she's responsible for 20 percent of that, but it's a debt she'll never be able to pay. She's living on SSI and disability, so her income is less than \$800 a month. The rent increase on Feb. 1 is more than she can afford, but she intends to stay if she can. Her

memories are here, and she wants to make more.

"The Grove is a magical place, and the most magical time here for me is graduation. A lot of [students] live here because they don't have a lot of money. Their parents are so proud of them," McAdams says. "I've watched many people from here get an education and go on to succeed. This is not just about us. This is about this community and communities like ours throughout the United States."

**H**elp may be on the way. Rohnert Park City Council members have appeared highly sympathetic to the plight of the Grove residents. Staff have arranged a meeting with the owner and her attorney to discuss phasing in the rent increases instead of having them hit so steeply on Feb. 1. Council members also raised the possibility of having the city buy the property and turn it over to a nonprofit to manage, as it did with the Las Casitas and Rancho Feliz mobile home parks. But officials also warn that the city will not subsidize substandard housing; if it purchases the Grove, the trailer homes would have to be brought up to code.

Grove residents are pursuing every possible angle. They've met with lawyers and discussed the possibility of paying their old rents on Feb. 1 but not including the increase. They're doing their best to raise money and to get the word out.

"I sent out a memo to 88 of my friends and acquaintances," says Candace Birchfield, who has lived in the Grove since 1983. Birchfield recalls the time residents barricaded the then-managers at the front gate because they had absconded with the rent monies. Her memories go on: parties, dances and poetry readings in the community building; everyone coming to the aid of terminally ill patients; and all the people who spent the last years of their lives within the Grove community.

Birchfield is determined not to leave her 19-foot trailer, which she says is up to code, but her resources are limited. She works three part-time jobs, she says, referring to her "casserole career." For the last 15 years, she's been a ceramics instructor

at the Rohnert Park Community Center. She helps another Sonoma County potter produce her work, and Birchfield has her own crafts business, selling at festivals and fairs. This is her chosen lifestyle. She's worried that the Grove is changing all around her, but she's determined it won't be destroyed, that she and other residents will be able to stay. "We believe in our existence here. We're going to hang on to it with everything we've got."

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