

By Sean McDonald

**T**he mobile society stops moving at El Rio Mobile Home Park.

Founded in the 1920s as a car campground, El Rio snoozed undisturbed while buildings went up, roads were widened, population doubled and the decades passed.

Some people at El Rio have lived here for 30 years, or 40 years or 50 years, depending on who you talk to. "I think I was born here," says one woman who has lived in her 35-foot-coach by the river since 1956.

There are several people who remember the 1955 flood.

At the entrance at the end of North Pacific, just past Lenz Arts, a sign is posted:

PRIVATE PROPERTY  
NOT OPEN TO  
THE GENERAL PUBLIC

But there is little here to demand exclusivity. No Olympic-size swimming pools, no golf links, no jacuzzis, no clubhouses like I have seen at other mobile home parks in other cities.

"To be honest with you, this is a funky little old park," Jim Harrington, the manager, concedes.

What is being protected are the less tangible things that are almost universally important to people here: quiet, order, neatness, familiarity, streets free from passing cars.

All the curbs and scalloped cement borders are painted white, as are the small fences that outline certain yards. The signs are hand-lettered, including the street signs which bear the names of old-time residents: Alen Way, for Alice Alen; Gettis Road, for Earl Gettis; Howlett Avenue, for Edith Howlett. The recreation hall is named for a Mr. and Mrs. Butler whose first

names have faded into history.

By the office a bulletin board announces community events and the minutes from the latest residents association meeting. Someone has posted a handwritten warning entitled, "My Bad Experience" with a certain mobile home dealer.

The coaches themselves are mobile-home history. There is a tan-and-white Paramount, vintage 1956; a turquoise Flamingo, 1958; a shotgun-style Angelus (45 feet long by only 8 feet wide), 1957; and a stately if slightly broken-down Styleliner, circa 1965. A squat gray coach once owned by Earl Gettis is the lone survivor of the 1955 flood.

There's a pink one and blue one, and a green one and a yellow one and they're all made out of metal and no two of them look just the same.

There are no "sumptuous" triple-wides, as one dealer who had mistaken me for a customer described them. There are only two double-wides in a park with 90 coaches.

Many have been added on to. Decks have been constructed, awnings rolled out, patios laid and gardens planted. Most show some signs of improvement and those that don't are spotlessly clean.

As I walk through the park I see a middle-aged man in bikini bathing suit sunning on a chaise lounge. He holds a spray bottle and his gold chains flicker as he shifts sides. A surfer refinishes the bottom of his board. A woman in a straw hat works her garden. A boy dogs me endlessly on his bicycle. And through the window of Butler Hall, I see Earl Gettis, the senior resident (he has lived here more than 35 years), sitting as if for an Andrew Wyeth painting on the ragged community couch.

I had entered an oasis.

Last summer residents heard rumblings from the River Task Force, the advisory committee responsible for San Lorenzo River development plans, about widening the river near El Rio and establishing benches to bring back natural vegetation and wildlife. Residents would have to be relocated.

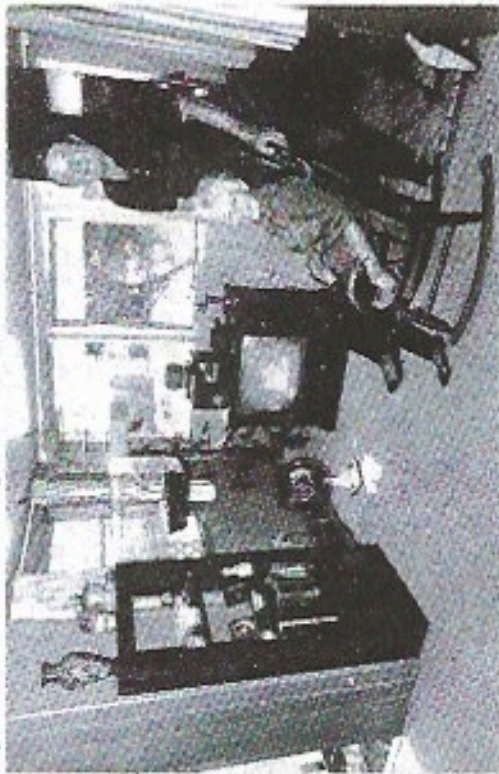
The plan, which has since been modified to leave El Rio intact, was not the first or the last for the area in and around the El Rio site.

The three-story River Street West Condominiums went up adjacent to El Rio in 1986. Later, another plan for

"From the town clock to the freeway will be an area of major change in the next decade because it's a major entry to the city and it's not up to its potential economically," says Bruce Van Allen of the River Task Force.

The latest plan for the river leaves El Rio land basically untouched, but El Rio residents are not calmed. In fact, they're more vigilant than ever.

Shortly after hearing about the river-widening plan a year ago, Sue Marcus got the idea for the first residents association in El Rio history. She got together with other residents



Park managers Seena and Jim Harrington

and drew up by-laws, set meeting times, and began sending out "resident alerts" to get people to meetings.

If nothing else, El Rio residents would have a voice in plans that might affect the park, she thought.

The association credits itself with halting plans for more condos adjacent to the park and for altering river plans that would have displaced El

35-year El Rio resident Earl Gettis

Rio. "We didn't know anything about River Street West [condominiums, which overshadow the park and cause noise, according to some residents] until after the building started. Now the planning department informs tenants, not just owners, about building plans in the area," says Marcus.

Currently, residents own their homes but only rent the land underneath them. Theoretically, the valuable three or so downtown riverfront acres could be sold out from under them for development or other use.

But since last year residents have held yard-sale fundraisers for the association, circulated petitions, gone door to door to drum up support,

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attended city council meetings, and embarked on an effort to buy the park.

Working together with the Santa Cruz Community Housing Corporation (SCCHC)—a nonprofit group that helps low-income tenants purchase their housing—the association has located financing and obtained a signed purchase agreement from Westland Investments of Los Gatos, the current owner of the park.

"They've already paid for the park many times over so this time they