

How Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue Suffered

The protests were not all about Vietnam. The war was just a symptom of a rotten society that had to go—in its entirety. In parts of Berkeley, it went. Consider the Telegraph troubles, which lasted from 1968 through 1969 and helped put Berkeley on the national map as a city where anything goes.

Thanks to its reputation developed in the sixties, Telegraph remains a nationwide symbol of live-and-let-live, despite city crackdowns against homeless people sprawled on the sidewalk. It's attracted several generations of proto-punks, post-punks, neo-hippies, hip-hoppers, and occasional Goths, and they keep coming, as do artisans, street musicians, and preachers.

Every hippie in the Bay Area attended the Fourth of July celebration in 1968. Despite pleas from businesses, churches, and the hippies themselves, the city wouldn't close the street for a party. Still, fifteen thousand people crowded in, hanging from rooftops, legs dangling from ledges. They listened to rock bands and watched street theater and fireworks. Temperatures climbed to 90 degrees, but the evening passed peacefully.

But on August 30, also a hot night, kids roamed town after an antiwar rally. Then “a man said by spectators to be in a state

1970s: A Hare Krishna devotee made his way along Telegraph Avenue in the '70s. Photographer Kim Cranney.



of hysteria” broke a window at the Bank of America on Telegraph Avenue—and the police poured in. Riots followed the next night, a state of emergency declared, and a curfew imposed.¹

Pat and Fred Cody, whose Cody's Books was a focal point of Telegraph Avenue for decades, described the almost daily “games” between hippies and cops with their tear gas canisters.

“First the gathering of a group, then their darting forward closer to the police, then the rush toward the crowd by the police and the rain of canisters. As these landed and a staccato ‘pop,’ ‘pop,’ ‘pop’ punctuated their arched descent, some were hurled back along with rocks and missiles at charging police. Then, as the police charged, the street was filled with a yelling mass of



c. 1940s: Telegraph Avenue seemed like any commercial street anywhere in the days before World War II. Postcard courtesy of Sarah Wikander.

hurtling bodies. The police then resumed a stationary position and the pause before the next round began.”²

The Codys, whose political sympathies were to the left (Pat had helped found Women for Peace in 1961), bristled in 1967 when hippies who set up permanent encampments in front of their door accused Fred of being “a prime example of capitalist rapacity.”³

Places

The Caffe Med, 2475 Telegraph, remains as welcoming to all comers as it was back in the sixties.

The accuser, a young man named Hajji, served tea and cakes from a samovar gaily arrayed on a Persian rug on the sidewalk. Hajji would often climb a tree, the better to speechify. Once he performed a wedding in front of the bookstore.

Shortly before he was deported, Hajji made his good-byes. “Well, capitalist Cody,” he said to Fred, hugging him, “this is a summer you will not forget, eh?”⁴

1983: A bamboo-flute maker tries out his wares from his spot in front of Cody’s Books in 1983. Street merchants have made Telegraph Avenue a tourist spot for decades. Courtesy of the Berkeley Historical Society, 414-198-3506.



How Berkeley Battled for a Park

Perhaps nothing better symbolizes Berkeley’s pioneering role in shifting power from grand institutions to the community than People’s Park. The power was the university, and the community was made up largely of hippies, students, and street people, which only makes the example stronger.

Architect John Kenyon had watched sadly in the mid-1950s as university expansion gobbled up the Southside neighborhood where he lived.

“All around us between 1956 and 1960, great numbers of splendid Shingle Style villas were torn down and replaced by bland shoebox apartment buildings . . . whole frontages of delightful ‘obsolescent’ houses along Bowditch and Dwight Way, considered a hippie nuisance by the university, were bulldozed down to create a problematic building site that later became the pathetic and ultimately futile People’s Park.”¹

Thanks in part to the GI Bill, Cal’s enrollment more than doubled between 1945 and 1948 to more than twenty-five thousand. So the university slated the 2.8-acre lot for student housing and then for recreation. But, in fact, the lot sat idle until early 1969, when the community moved in, planted trees and flowers, and built swings and benches. Many slept there.

“The park was our continuous, glorious toy,” wrote Stew Albert. “We played all week and like Silly Putty the park changed with our imagination. It was the greatest joy most of us ever gave our labor to—unqualified goodness.”²

What ensued, however, proved the saddest tale from Telegraph’s Troubles—and one of the most historically

important. Today, most social theorists would agree with a man named Hate, a resident of the park who spoke to the *Chronicle* nearly forty years after the events in question. “The park is a symbol around the world of people standing up to government,” he said.³

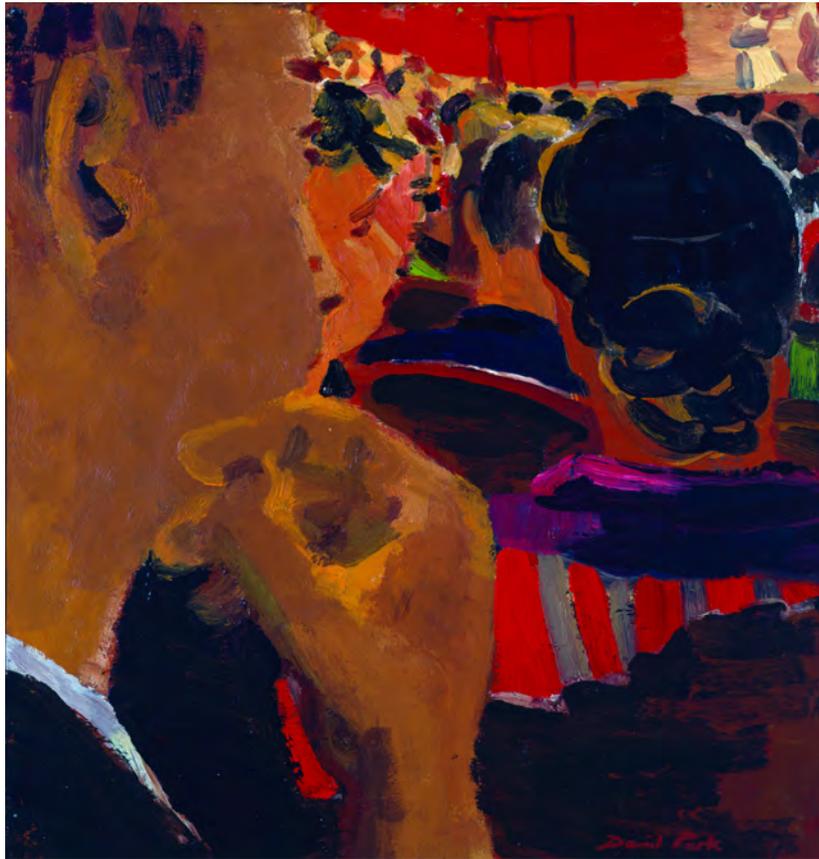
But that’s not how it seemed at the time to Mayor Wallace Johnson, who despaired when he read such missives from People’s Park supporters as: “Fight for a revolutionary Berkeley with your friends, your dope, your guns,” or “We will make Telegraph Avenue and the South Campus a strategic free territory for revolution.”⁴

The university told park supporters to clear out—but also promised not to shut the park without notice. But that’s exactly what they did at 3 a.m. on May 15, 1969, “Bloody Thursday,” when three hundred cops arrived. With them was Mayor Johnson. “There were no occupants that morning except two or three small males, stoned, sitting in the yoga lotus position,” he said.⁵ They were lifted by their elbows and removed. By late morning, fifty supporters gathered in the park. Most left when asked; a few were arrested.

Reporter Joe Pichirallo of the *Daily Cal* watched cops loll on the grass and sit on the swings. Crews began fencing off the park at 6 a.m.

At noon, a rally at Sproul Plaza ended when incoming student government president Dan Siegel offered up a few alternatives to a crowd of three thousand. When he came to the alternative “go to the park now,” Pichirallo reported, that’s all folks needed to hear. Off they went, to be met by police from many jurisdictions.

Someone opened a fire hydrant. A cop trying to close it was stoned from a nearby rooftop. A county sheriff’s deputy “immediately whirled around and without warning fired a round of birdshot,” Pichirallo reported.⁶ Among the hundreds of young people on the roofs were a contingent from



c. 1953: Throughout its history, Berkeley has remained a serious art town. David Park's painting *Audience* exemplifies the Bay Area Figurative Movement that flourished from the 1950s. Park painted in Berkeley, and taught at the university. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California.

Throughout the afternoon, crowds of people were driven back by police; perhaps three dozen people were hit by shot. "The blood streaming down the faces of participants and observers was not the result of clubbing," Pichirallo wrote, "but was caused by shot from police guns."

Over the next two days, Berkeley was an occupied town. Mayor Johnson went to the hospital to visit Rector, who had lost his spleen, portions of his pancreas and bowels, and left

kidney. His heart stopped the next day.

The day after that, three thousand people, who gathered for what was billed as a peaceful day of mourning for Rector, were pepper-gassed by copters. "Up on the Plaza," Stew Albert wrote, "the helicopter was spraying solid white fire into the lungs of sorority girls who never marched in anything but loyalty parades." Weeks of street battles followed.

The city council, liberal though it was, "didn't even have the temerity to tell outside police to stop shooting their citizens," the *Barb* wrote.⁸ Councilman Ron Dellums's proposal to send the National Guard home failed for lack of a second. "Even John

Swingle's innocuous suggestion to have the Guards put the sheaths back on their bayonets failed," the *Barb* said.

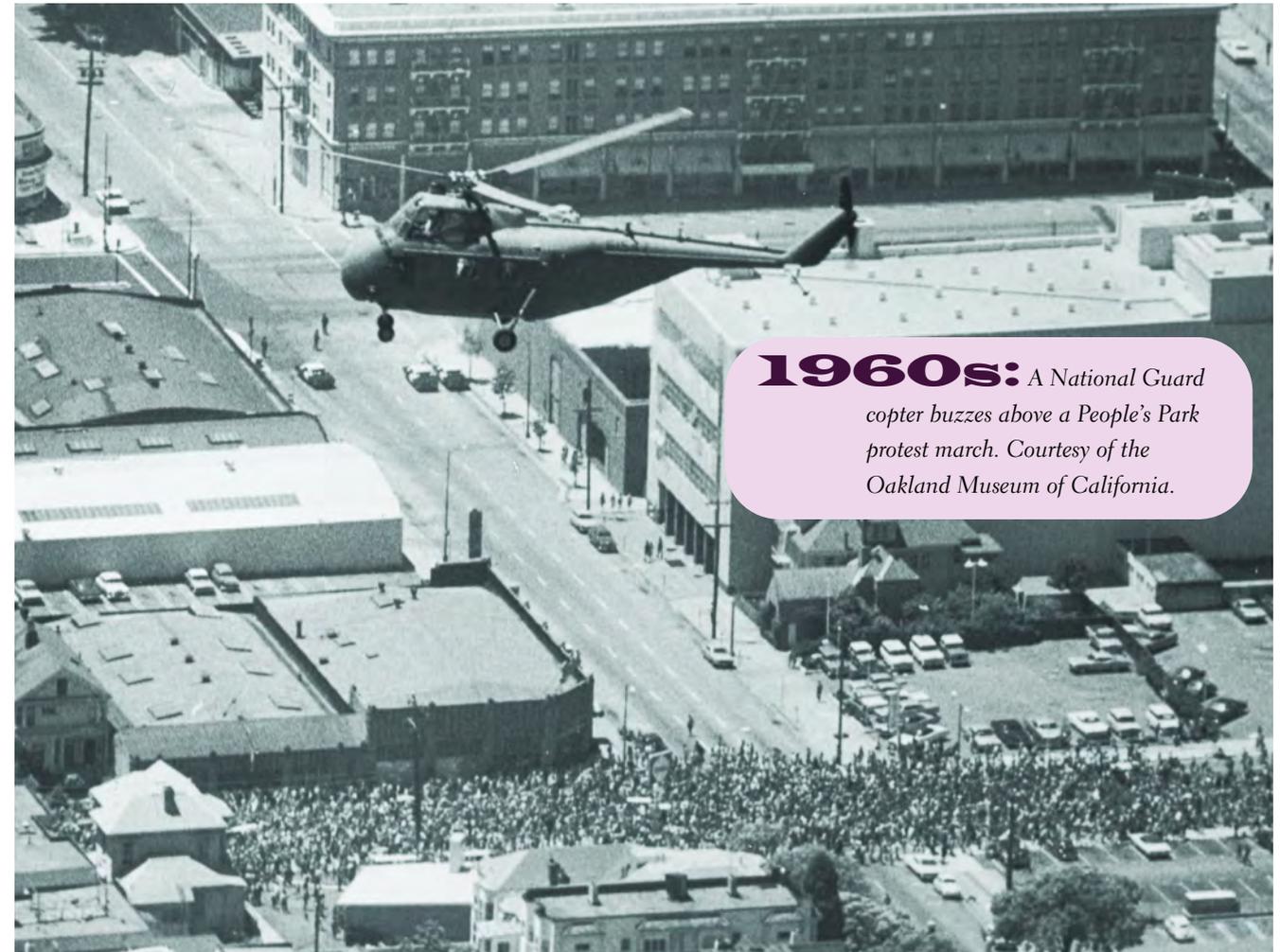
But spirits remained high, Albert reported. "You can walk down the Berkeley streets and almost everybody smiles and nods—people will share cigarettes, candy, grass and speculation. We have learned to live existentially—at any moment a lurching pig car pulls up and we

Places

Down from the People's Park, at Telegraph and Haste, is the People's Park mural by Osha Neumann.

are clubbed and arrested—yet we learn to love each other as we stand on our bloody sidewalks and plan revenge."

Almost forty years later, People's Park was still a people's park, complete with a stage, a free-box, pickup basketball games, groves of evergreens, picnickers, avid supporters, and encampments of hippies and homeless.



1960s: A National Guard copter buzzes above a People's Park protest march. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California.

the Telegraph Rep cinema, including owner George Pauley and manager Allen Blanchard. Just before the gunshot, the *Berkeley Barb* reported, Blanchard had been "trying to persuade a more violent brother to lay down the brick he was going to throw at the pigs in the street."

Pauley and Blanchard were hit by the deputy's buckshot. Pauley's injuries were relatively minor. Blanchard was hit in both eyes, losing one immediately and losing most of the sight in the other. Others were hit in the torso, chest, and limbs, including James Rector, who was visiting from San Jose. "I guess he didn't duck fast enough," a friend said.⁷