

Palo Alto revives cry of 'Just, say no'



Adult video shop renews porn war

By Carolyn Jung
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Not so long ago in Palo Alto, women could be seen scuttling across El Camino Real to a taco stand at lunchtime, wearing little more than G-strings and see-through robes.

They came from places such as the Streaker, Pleasure Palace, The Foxy Lady and Behind the Green Door, four of 19 massage parlors and adult theaters that made the city's red-light district red hot in the 1970s.

Those places came and went, closed by a torrent of court-ordered police arrests and seizures.

End of an era?

Residents thought that when H&R Bookstore, the last adult bookstore in the city, closed in 1982, so, too, closed the final chapter of a part of Palo Alto's more flamboyant history.

Little did they know that wouldn't be the case.

Eight years later, the same man who operated H&R Bookstore, Rocci Borrelli, opened the adults-only H&R Video, just yards away from his old store's location.

Now, some residents who live nearby say they are worried that infamous part of the city's history has come back to haunt them.

"To a lot of residents, this video store signifies a beginning," said Kristine Farber, who used to live around the corner from six massage parlors. "If one business like this comes in and gets accepted, what's to stop another and another?"

Other residents, who say they believe adult businesses should be allowed to open if they meet city requirements, called that scenario far-fetched.

"People are getting hysterical over this for no reason," said Marty Klein, a licensed marriage and family counselor in Palo Alto. "Pornography does not breed crime. There are plenty of other activities that bring drugs and crime, like the San Francisco Giants, for instance."

Crime rate rose

Still — when Palo Alto was awash with adult bookstores, massage parlors and theaters — robberies, thefts, and assaults and batteries were common occurrences in the red-light district, Police Chief Chris Durkin said.

A detective then, Durkin was responsible for closing 18 of the establishments, including the live-entertainment Copenhagen Theater on El Camino Real, owned by Borrelli.

"There was a lot of illegal activity in these places," Durkin said. "We'd arrest women there regularly for solicitation."

It didn't take much detective work to figure out where many of the woman came from. The Nevada license plates on cars that crowded the parking lots were a dead giveaway. A number of the women were prostitutes from the Mustang Ranch in Nevada.

In the mid-1970s, nine adult entertainment establishments lined South El Camino Real, six clustered around California Avenue and four were scattered downtown.

Storefronts were decorated with garish posters, residents said. And mirrored windows camouflaged what went on inside.

Even so, passers-by got quite an eyeful, especially when women employees would sunbathe on the sidewalks in skimpy bikinis, and front doors to the establishments were left ajar, affording a view of scantily clad women lounging on sofas, police said.

A reputation

"Palo Alto had the reputation for having the



Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

RED-LINING — Bob Moss at El Camino and Curtner with a map of forbidden zones.

highest concentration of adult businesses in the county," said Bob Moss, longtime resident of Barron Park, a neighborhood near the old red-light district. "It was the place to come for a massage — plus."

Women in the neighborhood were afraid to walk past the businesses, because men there would yell suggestive remarks to them.

"It was a very tense time back then," said Denny Petrosian, who lived near the red-light district. "You felt violated just having to look at these places."

Residents said the adult businesses degraded the neighborhood and kept other businesses away.

"Nobody wanted to put a decent store nearby," Moss said. "I mean, you wouldn't get a futon shop moving next door to those places."

At the urging of residents, the city council took a strong stance against the adult businesses. From December 1974 to June 1976, massage parlors were on the agenda at 11 council meetings as elected officials debated what action to take.

In September 1976, the city passed a law banning adult entertainment businesses from within 250 feet of homes or schools. The law also required that sexually explicit paraphernalia constitute less than 20 percent of a store's merchandise.

City staff drew up a map, pinpointing the areas in Palo Alto where adult businesses could set up shop legally. The corner of Curtner Avenue and El Camino Real, where H&R Video opened last week, is not shown as one of those areas.

But a few other places surprisingly are, including the locations of City Hall and the Stanford Shopping Center.

Meeting today

At a meeting at 7:30 p.m. today, city council members will consider strengthening the ordinance regulating adult businesses by explicitly mentioning video tapes and laser discs, which were not widely available when the law took effect 13 years ago.

As the city takes steps to ensure that H&R Video complies with the law, residents wonder what the future of that section of South El Camino will be. Despite being cited by the city for operating without an adult entertainment license and for building code violations, H&R Video can remain open unless a court decides otherwise. Neither Borrelli nor his attorney could be reached for comment.

Some residents say they believe that each day the store remains open, a part of the past they want to put behind them becomes more ingrained.

"We've tried real hard to get this area going in the right direction, and this comes along," Farber said. "This is like a giant step backwards."