

Graffiti Vigilante Never Ceases His Patrol

Palo Alto man has scrubbed or repainted 2,000 tags

By Bill Workman
Chronicle Peninsula Bureau

Bob Moss has never met any graffiti he did not despise.

"I can't think of one that could even remotely be considered art, no matter how many colors they use," said Moss, Palo Alto's leading anti-graffiti warrior.

While most people are dismayed at the visual vandalism that increasingly assaults the eye these days, Moss is out daily laboring to restore an urban ambience he worries is losing ground to the despoilers.

Since Christmas Day 1992, the 60-year-old spacecraft materials designer has, by his own count, taken on the task of painting over or scrubbing off nearly 2,000 examples of graffiti from fences, mailboxes, telephone booths, storefronts, warehouse walls, windows, poles and signs.

Some of the handiwork that Moss has tackled has spread across the length of a building. Others were little more than squiggles.

Most of his voluntary graffiti removal takes place in and around his Barron Park neighborhood, in south Palo Alto between El Camino Real and the Gunn High School campus. But he is just as likely to pull over his

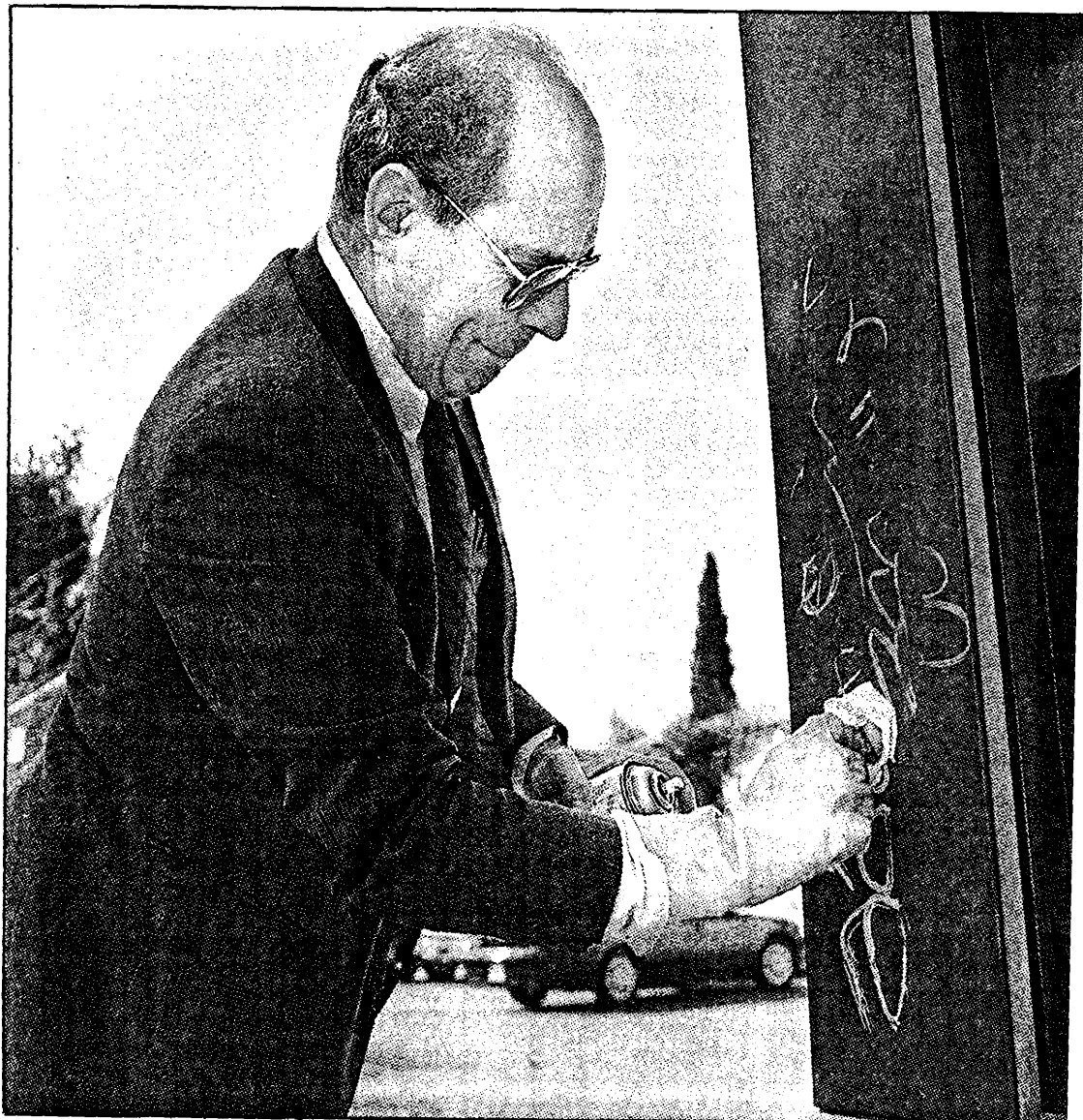
car anywhere he spots a defaced wall, haul out his customized cleanup kit of paint remover, mineral oil, sponges and matching-color spray paints, and go to work.

So far, Palo Alto seems to have escaped the epidemic of gang-related "tagging" that has plagued San Francisco, Oakland and other Bay Area urban centers.

Instead, Moss shares the view of Palo Alto police that perhaps as few as three dozen youths are responsible for much of his city's graffiti problem, most of them gang "wannabes" and troubled youngsters lashing out at authority.

Nonetheless, the mounting vandalism in some of Palo Alto's upscale neighborhoods and business districts convinced the City Council last month to invest \$125,000 in a citywide cleanup program. It includes a graffiti telephone hotline and distribution of anti-graffiti kits similar to the one Moss totes around to volunteers throughout the community.

City officials credit Moss and his Barron Park neighbors with setting an example to the rest of



BY LEA SUZUKI/THE CH

Bob Moss dug out the cleanup kit he carries with him at all times and rubbed out graffiti he spotted on a phone booth in Palo Alto

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the city with their anti-graffiti patrols and a \$100 reward program that helped lead to the arrest of two taggers last year.

"We could use a hundred Bob Mosses to demonstrate that graffiti is something this community will not tolerate," said Councilman Ron Anderson.

The key to an effective campaign against the blight, Moss advises, is to paint over or remove it right away. If other vandals discover it and add their copycat markings, it can become "a big mess in a hurry."

"There's a certain amount of 'in your face' when you get the stuff

covered over in a hurry," Moss explained. "It takes away the ego satisfaction a kid expects when he drives by and doesn't see his mark where he left it."

Experience shows that if graffiti is removed within a day the problem for that one spot usually disappears altogether within three weeks, Moss said.

Moss is a compact, bespectacled man with a friendly, easygoing smile that masks a prickly side he puts on display every so often at Palo Alto City Council meetings.

The council recently presented Moss with a gushing formal commendation for his anti-graffiti work. But despite the recognition heaped on him, some city official

still view him as an irritating gadfly.

He relishes the role.

"Why should they all be sitting around thinking everything they do is wonderful? Poor babies," said Moss, smiling.

His wife, Harriet, thinks her husband's dedication to his self-appointed task is commendable — even though he often will break off from their morning walk to tend to a fresh outrage that has sprung up overnight.

"The only thing I worry is that the police will stop him someday," she said. "You know, the post office doesn't want anyone messing

with mailboxes, even if he is cleaning them off."

On a graffiti-removal tour of his neighborhood the other day, the keen-eyed Moss picked out for attention a small, solitary blotch of

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green paint someone had spattered on a rustic mailbox pole on a neighbor's lawn.

It reminded him of the paranoia that has inflicted some Palo Alto residents whose property may be the only one on a block to get spray painted.

"One speculation I hear a lot is that someone has cased the joint and plans to come back and burglarize it," said Moss.

"The one I like best, though, is that it's supposed to be a guide to Martians when they land to kidnap the family living there."