

Festivals, riots and cultural refugees round out Eugene

■ Ask anyone around here and they'll tell you Eugene is a town that moves to the beat of many different drums

By Jack Clifford
Oregon Daily Emerald
Eugene.

Activist capital? Hippie haven? Police state? Cultural wasteland? Paradise found?

All of the above?
This city has more identities than Sybil, with personalities ranging from "ideal hometown" to "a gussied-up, backwater burg."

When city founder Eugene Franklin Skinner arrived here in June 1846, the area was occupied by the Kalapuyas. The Willamette Valley's soil and the river served as the anchor that kept the Native American inhabitants in the area, as well as beckoned the early settlers.

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Steve McQuiddy
former
freelance writer

Skinner to move to higher ground. Since the city's incorporation in 1862, countless people have cursed Eugene's rains, with little impact — the floods still regularly occur.

We all know it's not the eight months of crappy weather that draw people to this area. The University has its bright spots to be sure, but pales in comparison to an education at say, Stanford. And there's no professional sports team to attract residents, although on any given day residents might be treated to a rousing game of Red Rover between anarchists and the Eugene Police Department.

The appeal of Eugene may be its "lost in time" aura. The general consensus if you ask around is that the town's clock runs about 20 years behind the rest of the country, former Eugene freelance writer Steve McQuiddy said.

"Eugene is the end of the line, and it's populated for the most part by refugees," he said. "Everyone has already run away from where they were and there isn't anywhere else to go."

"At some point, the restless ones burn out or settle down; they do so among like characters and ... well, here they are."

Yes, here they are, all 136,490 of them, which is the 1999 population estimate from the Portland State Center for Population Research and Census. That's an increase of 3,000 from 1998, but city officials may have to form a committee to form a committee to verify those numbers.

"The fact that the people in this place have more potential to do more marvelous things than anywhere else in the nation, and con-



Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

Local residents stroll past the eclectic booths at the city's Saturday Market, one of many trademark events that make Eugene unique.

tinually settle for mediocrity ... It's mind-boggling," McQuiddy said, while stressing that "Eugene is thin-skinned, but also a sweetheart ... I love the town."

Eugene has its faults, of course.

Those interminable periods of bureaucracy when city officials can't decide on the simplest matters. A lack of resources spent on bettering the town's cultural landscape. No decent dance club. The depressing drive from the airport to the city's center. Rain, rain, rain. Activists who think it's perfectly OK to cross someone else's personal boundaries to make a point. Red

light runners. A severe lack of diversity. And more rain.

But as McQuiddy pointed out, there's enough to love about Eugene.

A hike up Spencer Butte, either early morning or early evening. The smell of fresh bread from the Williams Bakery, just off the eastern edge of campus. The Eugene Celebration. Ducks' sporting events. The Pioneer Cemetery. Dancing with the masses at a WOW Hall show. Frog. Watching someone riding his or her bicycle in a downpour, but secretly wishing it were you.

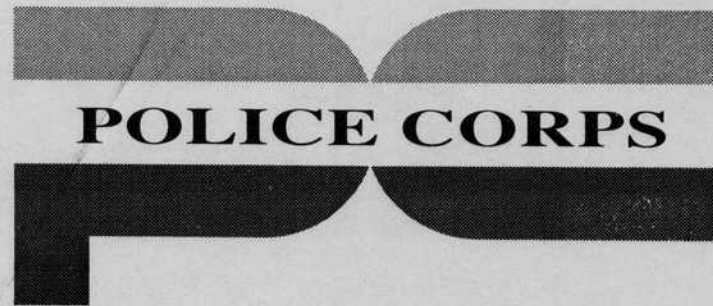
OK, maybe not that last one. Maybe the best thing about Eu-

gene is that residents don't really strive to make it something it isn't. We're a medium-sized city, with just enough culture to keep the weekend drives to Portland or Seattle down to a handful.

So, if someone/something were watching the United States from outer space, and they used Eugene as a barometer to base their perspective on the country as a whole, how skewed would that perspective be?

"It might be that Eugene is simply running a different race ... in a different direction," McQuiddy said. "I guess a direct answer to [that] question would be: about 180 degrees."

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