

CHESS, from page 8

Khingratsaphone has been playing chess since he was 15, learning the game from his uncle. He became fascinated with it – with the competition, he says, knowing your opponent, knowing the game. He says he's learned a lot about life from chess. And Pioneer Courthouse Square is more than a small reason for that.

"I came down here about three years ago," he says. "A whole group of men hanging around outside a chessboard on a rainy day kind of intrigued me, because they were playing a game I love to play."

And what he found kept him coming back: "I love downtown. There's a lot of people, especially a lot of girls around ... not around the chess scene so much, but around the area."

Claiming he'll play chess till the day he dies, Khingratsaphone hopes to earn a rating before long, something a few of the Pioneer players have achieved. He hopes his math studies will aid him in that, as well as his practice in the square. But he owes the square for more than chess knowledge.

"I've picked up a lot of street wise, things that school can't teach me. Just the whole environment, it's cool," he says, adding that he's soaked up all he can from the older players, about chess and about life. "They talk about their mistakes and about their lives. It's like a second family down here."

Bill Peel found that second family as he moved into retirement and into a new neighborhood nearly a year ago, finding companionship in his daily games at the square with Russel and the others.

"All through chess," he says. "And I wouldn't have known them otherwise. We'd have just passed each other in the street. All of a sudden, all barricades are down, it's the game."

But that isn't the first time chess has helped him out.

Dressed in white high tops, jeans and a gray cutoff T-shirt, the 56-year old Peel

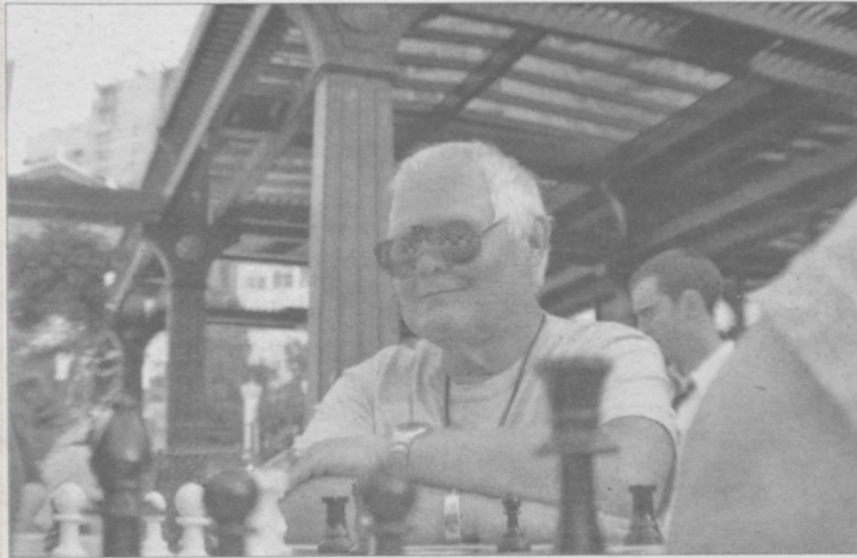


PHOTO BY JEFF BRANDT

The checkered squares reflect in Bill Peel's glasses as he contemplates his next move. The game, he says, has kept his mind sharp and provided companionship through good times and bad.

hunches forward on the bricks and adjusts his chess set, explaining that he's been playing since 2nd grade.

"I was first board at Burgess High School in El Paso, but you might not know what that means," he says, boasting that Burgess was one of the top-ranked chess teams in the country. "Do you play?"

He offers rook odds as I sit down, knowing by my ambiguous answer that I don't play. Setting up the pieces one by one – save one of his rooks – he begins to reveal why he's so dedicated to the game of chess.

"When I was young, I had a lot of frustration. I was destructive, I was violent. It was just natural frustrations of growing up, being a kid, but I didn't have an outlet for them," he says. "So they suggested chess to my parents as an outlet. I began playing chess, and everything changed."

Chess straightened Peel out. He became calmer, progressed in school and enrolled in ROTC at University of Texas-El Paso to

secure a lengthy military career as what he simply calls a "jack of all trades."

Peel moved to Portland to help care for his ill sister's children, who are now adults, he says with a touch of pride and nostalgia. Retired, Peel moved from Gresham to downtown roughly eight months ago, knowing no one in the area. Playing chess gave him the opportunity to keep his mind sharp and gain companionship.

"I owe a lot to chess," he says, examining my first move and countering. I then slide a pawn one space further.

A boy appears on the steps to our right. "I wouldn't have done that," he says. Josh Webb, who goes by Sid, is one of the many frequenters of the square familiar with Peel's skill. Dressed in a black trench coat, heavy boots and an array of necklaces, the 17-year-old drops his bags and two-liter of root beer to watch the game. They begin discussing the difference between a chess tactician and strategist. After several more

moves, he turns to me: "You don't play chess, do you?"

He lights up when he learns of the article, pulling out a vendor badge. Recently, however, Webb hasn't had as much time for selling or for playing chess.

"I'm busy just surviving," he says, spitting after every sentence. "Making sure I'm safe, making sure my girlfriend is safe, even if I'm not."

Webb says he's battled homelessness in downtown Portland for the past four years, excelling at times as a wandering vendor, surviving with the wiles of one much older. Webb is matter-of-fact when discussing how he became homeless: "My mom was a crystal meth addict and my dad is somewhere in North Dakota."

And Pioneer Courthouse Square, for now, is his community.

"It's the only place that will let me play," he says. "There's nowhere else like it in the city."

With his feet in the air and his belly against the bricks, Webb cracks jokes with Peel that only an avid chess player could appreciate. And as he does so, he for once looks more 17-year-old wiz kid than a boy without a home.

"In my mind, I've already won," he says of the game I've all but lost. Bill has beaten Webb with Queen odds, meaning my Rook odds never stood a chance. At a time, Peel leaned in after one of my moves and returned it to its previous state.

"You didn't want to do that. Trust me."

Soon after, he shakes his head and mutters, "This just isn't fair." I look down and notice a white king and pawn, cowering in the corner of the board against an army of black pieces. Peel bursts into contagious laughter, and the flick of a finger topples the king and resigns the game prematurely.

"That's OK. That's OK," he says. "If you want to learn chess, you came to the right place."

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pockets

by Christine Rekk

the deeper those pockets, the richer the image,
a fine sign of gross lines between poetry and permanence.
in pockets of dissidence, pants pockets threadbare,
cash flow and power grow increasingly rare.
now which pockets share and which cringe at the touch
of humanity's faithful feeding wealth with their blood?
cop's got cuffs in his pocket, a tazer, a club;
but the gun's drawn and ready to dispatch one more stud
from the race against race, against isms, programmed failure,
pour the poor into prisons to pad the pockets of the mayor
with pocket crumbs from the wayward and incarcerated slave labor.
pock-marked hopes of the homeless, veteran's cards in worn pockets,
no service provided beyond guaranteed silence –
society's pockets prefer to prioritize
the murder of the depressed, the disdained, and the marginalized,
shot for weepingly carving his face with a pocket knife.
but these are the pockets funding war instead of homes,
stuffing empties with gospel tracts since the masses are prone
to pocket guides! pocket politics! pocket PCs and pocket saviors!
and because God is infinite, all-powerful and just,
your salvation is hinged simply on ability to trust
that filling His pockets with the little you have
will mend your own pockets, only after you're dead.
promoting pockets of petulance not pockets of hope,
love life but hate people in an effort to grope
rewards from lip service since we know God's elect
receive special privilege when they judge circumspect:
in His name!
blasphemy
to suggest it may only be a tactic to deflect
responsibility,
how absurd to suspect that these policies might
balance all pockets in equanimity,
or do they just rupture the pockets of air we rely on,
provide an excuse to spy on, try on
Patriot costumes with the rest of the citizenry,
complete with false pockets to succeed politically.