

## Downtown Denizens - Stockton 1975

*Excerpted from “Booklegger: Anecdotal Recollections of a Skid Row Bookseller” by Bill Maxwell*

With 16 years of schooling under my belt and a BA in politics from UC Santa Cruz in my hand, the world was not, as they say, my oyster. I was tired of academia and wanted some real world experience. I knew that given my family connections in the community even if my target job at the book store did not pan out I always could find some sort of employment in the area. From the time I was 11 or 12, I'd always had a part-time or seasonal job, whether it was a paper route or driving a truck for a packing shed or operating a collating machine in my father's printing plant. I did not like to be idle. Plus, I and many of my contemporaries were of the opinion that there was bound to be massive political and economic upheaval in the near future. After all, we'd seen two Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated, Watergate and Nixon's resignation, friends and relatives drafted and dying in Vietnam, bombings and marching in the streets. Residing in California's Central Valley, where there was abundant water and the lion's share of the nation's fresh fruits and vegetables were grown, it did not seem like such a bad place to be in case the proverbial shit hit the fan.

Thus it was that I took up residence in an upstairs apartment on the southeast corner of Hunter and Rose streets, just a few blocks north of downtown and the book store. I shared the apartment with a fellow Lodi High graduate who also attended UCSC. Spending five days a week at the store, I quickly became immersed in the local culture of this somewhat threadbare area with its apartment houses, concentration of SRO hotels, greasy spoons and bars. I soon became familiar with some of its more quirky residents. Some of the patrons of the aforementioned establishments could be found lurking in doorways or back alleys, paper bags with a mickey of fortified wine jutting from hip pockets.

There was one in particular who stood out, a man, possibly Native American, in his 40s maybe. Years of drinking cheap liquor had taken its toll. I had rousted this fellow and his companions out of the alley behind the bookstore on at least one occasion. He was memorable mainly because one of his eyes was dead and clouded over in a milky grey. He was coming up the street now, weaving slightly,

using the parking meters as guideposts. I was standing in the doorway of the Harvard smoking a Lucky. The man spotted me and stumbled toward the doorway.

"Hey! I got a new eye!" he called. I could not miss the change in the man's face. One was no longer inclined to avert one's gaze from the milky dead eye. "Wanna see?" the man said; and before I could decline, he had deftly inserted a finger behind the glass orb and popped it out into the palm of his hand. He held it out for me to examine.

"Far out," was about all I could muster by way of comment, staring down into the brown-eyed palm.

The man put the glass eye in his mouth, rolled it around momentarily and then adeptly returned it to its proper socket. "Ya gotta keep it clean," he said. "Ya get a piece a dirt back in there and it hurts like a sonofabitch." Without further comment, he headed off up the street toward the doorway of the Earle Hotel, a low-budget residential hotel above the book store.

"Congratulations," I called weakly after him.