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Legends of the Surfer Subculture: Part Two

Tanis Thorne

Coinciding with the release of the movie *Gidget*,¹ a new era in surfing was ushered in with the development of the light and durable, polyurethane-foam and fiberglass-covered surfboard. Thousands of Southern California teenagers rushed to enjoy the new-found opportunity at their doorstep and to partake of the radical social identity that went along with surfing.

The folklore of the youthful surfers of this period reflects their rebelliousness; with time and maturity, it grew to incorporate the pervasive themes of political protest, drug-use, and Thoreauian naturalism. For many, surfing was one of the few remaining outlets from overly structured civilization; it was “the most unexplored, unjaded, unpushbuttoned, pidgeon-holed trip.”² The renowned surfer, Phil Edwards, says surfing was first popularized in the United States by rebels—bands of kids on the run—seeking to escape organization and the standardization of man.³

Confirming that the first surfers were bohemians, the editor of *Surfer* magazine, Steve Pezman, comments that they were deliberately as “outrageous” as they could be. The rebels would strip off their clothes at parties, wear Nazi uniforms in public for shock value, do “BA’s” (“bare-assing”) out car windows or next to passenger trains, and other “RF’s” (“rat-finking”—i.e., capers, tricks, or practical jokes generally asocial in nature).

Two popular stories of “capers” of the day were the “Famous Hood Ornament Trick” and the ubiquitous “Popcorn Box Caper.” In the former anecdote, a naked surfer posed gracefully as the hood ornament of a car, while he was ceremoniously chauffeured around a busy, drive-in restaurant. (This story has a basis in fact, and was recently repeated

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1. *Gidget* was patterned after the surfers at Malibu in the 1950’s, among them Mickey Muñoz.

2. Jim Pyle, 6 March 1975.

3. Phil Edwards and Bob Ottum, *You Should Have Been Here an Hour Ago*, (New York, 1967), 3.

in a nostalgia article in *Surfer*.⁴) The "Popcorn Box Capers," on the other hand, appears to be a "floater," a kernel idea which is readily borrowed and attached to the legendary material surrounding a hero (or scoundrel) of local repute; the story reports the activities of the audacious young man who surreptitiously put his penis through the bottom of a (full) box of popcorn in a movie theatre and then offered some to an unsuspecting neighboring female.

The following remark by Steve Pezman reveals the explicit recognition that surf-lore was the sounding board for status claims:

Many stories emanate around that bizarreness that each area was proud of: The Mac Media Destruction Company⁵ was famous at Huntington and famous at Manhattan Beach or famous at the then happenings. And area would try to pull off toppers—capers that were toppers. And the Newport guys would do the most radical get away at the Trestles and the Huntington guys'd pull another caper and it was all this interchange that was the undercurrent to the whole surfing thing.⁶

Here was a historic situation in which persons of one locality tried to consciously outdo persons of another locality via narration. Prototypic forms were set with each new "outrageous" feat. Although innovation was highly valued, an aspiring surfer lacking innovation merely had to outdo others *in kind* (in deed and/or narration) to be accepted. If, however, the ability or opportunity to outdo others were lacking, one merely had to obey the proper forms of behavior and narration in re-enacting the outrageous event to confirm one's surfer identity.

In one field experience, I asked an individual for a "surf story," and he replied with a long-winded narrative about an "outrageous party," rather than about a surfing experience *per se*. The more I listened, the more puzzled I became, until I realized that the framework and the details were essentially traditional. The anecdote contained: 1) the creation of a surf-club to get membership dues from the "geeks" (novice or inept surfers); 2) a pilgrimage to a surf contest in a "Woody Wagon" (a surf vehicle) with lots of beer and the embezzled funds of the club; 3) the rental of motel rooms at their destination, which were invaded by hoards of enthusiastic and destructive partyers; and 4) a climax in which one comrade vomits on the beauty pageant stage. This memorate has a clear prototype in the uncontrolled parties of the Mac Media Destruction Company. In my informant's narrative, the party he described was made to appear like an extravaganza of the Destruction Company in order to attain similar in-group prestige.

4. Denny Aaberg, "No Pants Mance" in *Surfer*, 15 (April/May, 1974): 29-31.

5. The Mac Media Destruction Company was a group of surfers from La Jolla; they were given journalistic treatment by Tom Wolfe in the *Pump House Gang*.

6. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975.

Cult-hero tales (or legends) and tall-tales are very popular forms among surfers.⁷ Also, stories tend to be generated about specific surfing locations (surfing "spots"), because of some exceptional aspect of that place (i.e., large or nicely shaped waves, a particularly beautiful or dramatic setting) or just because it is *the* local spot. At a gathering of surfers, stories about one spot will sometimes exclusively be told, depending on the associations and experiences of those present.

Reference to setting, that is, a specific surf-spot, is a constant element in surf-lore; for it evokes associations in the minds of the listeners regarding the history of the place (as surfing is such a young sport, the history is usually within living memory and is thus often close to the experience of the surfers), its potential dangers, the prestige of riding its waves, and other factors which form a dramatic background for the narration. Each spot has its own set of oral formulae which have been more or less internalized and which to a large extent are taken for granted by surfers.⁸

The Trestles is a surf-spot with a rich tradition of narrative folklore.⁹ Why was the Trestles such a popular springboard for narration? Denny Gregory in his manuscript of Trestles' tales¹⁰ describes the dramatic setting:

Now here's the game: In San Clemente, California, right next to Richard Nixon's exalted palace of the Western White House, there is a Marine base called Camp Pendleton. The best waves in the world break on the beaches of Camp Pendleton.

The whole area is called Camp Pendleton, but the surfers have named the beaches other things. The beach in front of Nixon's pad is called "Cotton's" named after the previous owner of the Western White House. Further south in front of the jungle terrain the beach is called "Trestles" named after the nearby trestle. Sweeping further south is "Church" named for an old church nearby. And then down to "San Onofre" presumably named after the medieval Saint Onofre. . . .

Anyway. Richard Nixon this very day can gaze out of his livingroom window there at the palace and watch perfect waves break (unridden) on the beach. He lives in front of a fantastic surf spot. Now Richard Nixon doesn't surf. And he won't let surfers get near the beach. A real "dog in the manager" about the whole thing. He has his palace guards marching near the beach. FBI or some such thing.

7. See "Legends of the Surfer Subculture: Part One" for a fuller discussion of these aspects; *Western Folklore*, 35 (1976):209-217.

8. *Ibid.*

9. I collected but a small fraction of the material on the Trestles that is available. 10. Denny Gregory is a man in his late twenties, who was raised in Tustin, California and has surfed in Southern California for ten to fifteen years. He has resided primarily in Hawaii for the last five years, and spends his time surfing, writing, and setting the scene. He is a showman by inclination. His manuscript of Trestles' tales, written between 1973 and 1974, has never been published.

Gregory goes on to tell of the rules and consequences of the surf game, whose object is to get past the guard gate, dodge the Marines and the FBI and reach the forbidden surf. Only military personnel and their dependents (El Toro Marine base is in the vicinity as well) and one of their guests are allowed on to the restricted beach. Others must sneak in along the beach or through the jungle terrain between the road and the beach. The first time a trespassing surfer is caught, his board is impounded and he (and his parents if he is under age) must suffer a lecture; the second time, there is a stiff fine or a six month stay in jail. Gregory writes of the injustice of the situation (the surfers "just wanting their God-given right to the sea") and enumerates the harrassments they suffer:

Now Marines have this thing against surfers. Anyone on a spree or anyone, even if he were a raving anarchist, communist maniac, with a trunk full of bombs can drive like royalty right through the gate. It is an Open Base. Except to surfers.¹¹

The Trestles' stories are known throughout the surfing world: "Even in Australia they know the Trestles and the conflict with the Marines."¹² The history of this conflict at Trestles is recounted by Pezman:

The Trestles is a surfing spot that is one of the best in the world. And it's been surfed for years and years since the 1930s. And the eras of surfing there are defined by the ways of getting in. There's always been a way to get in, against the will of the Marine Corps. And at various times, the Marines have been really uptight, taken radical measures to keep surfers out and at other times, they relax a little.¹³ But generally, it's been a game of cat and mouse, between the MP's and the surfers. Even when Nixon was president—his Western White House is a surf-spot called Cotton's Point—when he was there as President in the Western White House, the combined security forces—the secret service, the Marine Corps, the MP's, the U.S. Federal Marshalls, the Coast Guard—all com-

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11. Trestles was opened to the public subsequent to the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974.

12. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975. The gregarious story teller, Denny Gregory, speaks with pride of the awe he inspired in Floridians and New Mexicans when he told them matter-of-factly: "Yeah, we surfed and the jarheads chased us and they used to shoot at us and stuff." His audience was so impressed that he "just started typing down the stories we used to do." "Jarheads" are Marines. Denny Gregory, 6 March 1975.

13. In "The Great Escape," Gregory cites a relaxed time: "And every now and then, maybe when the general gets laid or maybe during Christmas Season the Marines have orders to leave the surfers alone. The rumor goes around that the Marines aren't busting and Church is open. Church is open and surfers may worship freely on every wave."

bined did not succeed in keeping surfers out of that area. It's like they get in there by osmosis.¹⁴

For many surfers, the Marines' endeavors to keep them out of the area was an incentive to try to surf the Trestles, in part because the Marines kept the crowds away and also because the situation was an invitation to adventure. In his story, "The Great Escape," Gregory notes that many surfers "would rather have the jarheads chasing them and have only the gung-ho, daring surf-commandos be able to get waves."

Several informants concurred that a surfer could easily avoid getting caught by the Marines if he knew the ropes. Even if caught, the surfer pleading ignorance of the off-limit area would likely be released. Thus, the stage was set. The surfers were at a rebellious age in a rebellious time. There were the forbidden, yet ever desirable, waves. The Marines were a fitting as well as convenient target of opposition, because they could symbolize many aspects in dichotomous relationships (e.g., *authority* vs. rebellion, *conformity* vs. individuality, *outsider* vs. local, *low class* vs. high class). Hyperbole and stereotypification were the apt tools to achieve contrast, and the multi-dimensional "meanings" of the conflicts between surfers and Marines ensured the continuing appeal of Trestles' stories.

The rumors of Marines shooting at surfers gives the stories added zest. But in reality, the Marines were more moderate and indulged freely in the game of cat and mouse with surfers. The perfect milieu was thus provided for one-up-manship; for it was a situation with just enough challenge and just enough potential danger to attract those surfers hungry for adventure and status. The formation of surf clubs at this time was not insignificant in this regard, for complicity was thus guaranteed in the exaggeration of heroic deeds.

The recurrent, if not dominant, theme in Trestles' stories is the surfers' triumph over the Marines. The jungle, the area of wild undergrowth between the beach and the freeway, was a fertile area for exploits. (Before the freeway was built, circa 1967, surfers could drive right into the jungle and park).

The Marines discovered that we [the Trestles' Key Club—who had bought a car and "painted it camouflaged" so it would hide well in the thick foliage] were parking in the jungle and would send squads searching through the jungle to find the car. While they were taking the rotor-cap, the valve stem, and pulling the coil out of our car, we were at their car, which was parked on the dirt road outside of the jungle, ripping out their ignition wiring, taking out their valve stem, taking their rotor-cap.

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14. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975.

Frequently, surfers would lure Marines away from their jeep on a chase; a decoy group would lure Marines away from their jeep parked on the beach. Two more surfers would run out of the jungle, take the jeep and drive it into the jungle and hide it from the Marines, who then had to find it or they were in deep trouble. And it looked really bad for them [Laughter].

One time we were caught by the MP's, put under arrest and our boards were put in a truck and we were locked into the back seat of the MP car with the metal cage like a police car and the doorhandles off on the inside. Then, they left us to go catch other surfers and I can't remember how we did it but somehow we opened the door and left and locked the door and closed it; so that when they got back the car'd be all locked up, but we'd be gone.¹⁵

In another of Pezman's capers, a machine gun was surreptitiously stolen from a Marine asleep on watch-duty while his platoon was doing maneuvers in the jungle. The gun was dumped in the reeds and lost forever.

Certain recurrences in the Trestles' stories are seemingly determined by the necessities of the situation; namely, how does one get into the restricted area and what does one do when the enemy is encountered. The method of getting in was included in eighteen of the thirty Trestles' narrations I collected. Therefore, it might be claimed to be the conventional opening of a Trestles' tale. The narrator's companions (very frequently these are fellow club members) and the kind of automobile driven are also often mentioned at the outset of a story. What may appear to be straight anecdotal narration, however, often contains stereotypification in characterization and standardized narrative themes and motifs. Nevertheless, Pezman's observation on the "eras of Trestles" (see above) should be taken seriously, as the "eras" provide a way of dating the stories with some degree of accuracy.

There is ambivalence in the characterization of the surfers in Trestles' tales. On the one hand, the surfer is conceived as a spiritually or morally superior being because of his pure relation to nature; while on the other hand, this same close relation to nature—and the step back from the dominant culture as he reassesses it—has made him something of a savage. Elements of nudity, defecation or urination are recurrent narrative motifs, sometimes occurring in rather bizarre contexts; e.g., a surfer hiding his feces in the glove compartment of a rival or climbing a tree to demonstrate the shit valve for his friends. Nudity or an act of defecation usually precipitates a chase by the Marines. These outrageous acts are therefore traditional formulae linked with a consequent—the chase.

The surfer is frequently a figure of invulnerability; he is rarely

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15. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975.

caught, harmed, or outsmarted, and he is not at all intimidated by the authority the Marines represent. In Denny Gregory's story "My First Encounter," for example, the hero manages to outrun a platoon of "America's finest." (*X961;F681*).

In contrast to the surfer, the Marine is not a person with individuality; he merely possesses rank and serial number. Gregory satirizes the Marines in "Marine for a Day," playing on the stereotype of Marines as lacking independent thought or action. In this tale, Gregory finds a pair of Marine-issue swimming trunks and wears them for a lark. He goes swimming and forgets about the shiny, red trunks until he is accosted by a group of Marines mistaking him for an officer:

A group of uniformed Marines were wandering toward me up the beach; they were walking in step. It's funny but Marines are always walkin' around in step. The group of three Marines walked past me but one of them stopped and said something like:

"Hey Surfer, you in the Corps?"

"Who me?"

"Yes, you."

I looked down at my trunks and the whole trip was clear. (I'll have a few grins with these lads).

"Yes, I'm in the Corps."

They saw my long hair and something in their brains did not compute. They walked over to me and all kinds surrounded me. It was friendly. We were all at San Onofre Beach Club and that's free territory. They continued their inquiry. They spoke in a rare American dialect indigenous to the Marine Corps. The dialect was Alabamese. I assumed the same Southern dialect as they spoke. I never got to be in the service myself but all my friends had and I had heard my friends talk about the service so I knew the lingo. The conversation went like this:

"So you're in the Corps, huh? What company you with?"

"Hunerd 'n first airborne reconessense division."

(This really flipped 'em out.)

"Oh yes . . . where you been stationed?"

"Over in Nam."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, I'm with a special reconessense company. You know, in the jungles. So I can keep my hair pretty long."

"Yes. Look what they did to us." They brushed their bald heads.

"Too bad."

"What rank 'er you soldier?"

"First lieutenant." (Up to now we'd been friends but as soon as I said I was an officer, they all got real nervous and backed away.)

"Yes, sir." (They called me sir.) "Ah yes, sir, well how do you like surfing on this here surfboard."

"Fine. Fine."

"Yes, well, we gotta be goin' so, uh (one of 'em made a half-assed salute). We'll see ya."

They hustled on down the beach. I walked on, a little nervous but laughing my head off. I told the boys up the beach a fine story. They all blew their minds. We jived about the surf and kicked up sand and had fun.

A little later that day while I lay wallowing in the sand another incident with a Marine occurred. This time all the boys were sitting around. A perfect audience for me in my new trunks. Anyway, a shaky Marine in *his* identical red trunks came charging up to me and my friends sitting around the beach. He held himself up into the full attention and snapped a regulation salute to me. My friends went bananas. The Marine was unshaken. He'd heard of the long-haired officer who was back from Viet Nam. He was also well trained. He looked down at me and very respectfully said,

"Lieutenant, sir?"

"Yes, soldier."

"Ah, I was wondering if it would be alright to swim in this area."

(I was a benevolent leader.) "Sure soldier, ah at ease . . . (He went into a sort of parade rest with his hands behind his back.) . . . ah yes soldier, you can swim but be sure you don't get in the way of the surfers."

"Yes, sir." He snapped a salute and marched up the beach. My friends couldn't believe it.

A sole distinction between the Marines themselves, apparently, is that most Marines take order whereas only a few give them. The surfer, by contrast, is an individual:

One is following orders from his sergeant.

One is following orders from his soul.

One is chained and

One is free.¹⁶

The Marines were characterized as "inlanders" by surfers: untanned, inept at swimming, speaking "Alabamese," and (as if this is not enough to condemn them) ignorant as well. One informant went so far as to say they were morons: " 'The left hand knoweth not what the right hand doeth,' is the Marine Corps slogan. . . . They really have a short attention span." Gregory refers to them as "Marinus Nimwitus" and Pezman tells the following tale:

So one time, a friend of mine and I were out—and this was a pretty famous episode—we were in the water and they were shouting at us with a bullhorn, "You're in a restricted surfing area! Come in." And we refused to do it; so the jeep disappears. And then about a half an hour later, a truck arrives with a whole squad of Marines in the back and a

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16. Denny Gregory, "Introduction" in his unpublished manuscript of *Trestles* tales.

lieutenant. And the lieutenant gets 'em all out, and they all strip down, and they've got Marine Corps' swimming trunks and tennis shoes and they start doing jumping jacks and calisthenics on the beach. Then, they send 'em out after us, swimming, to try to trap us and we're on surfboards. So first of all, it's a futile task; a swimmer cannot catch a paddler. So as they're paddling out—these are guys from Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas, and Blacks and Mexicans and guys that aren't ocean oriented. So as they're walking out through the rocks, we're yelling "Moray eels, moray eels, Look out for the eels!" [After finally getting out into the water, the Marines attempt a pincers movement, but the surfers are way ahead of them and always have the upper hand.] Maybe, they're out maybe three-hundred yards from where they started and they're cold and they're miserable and the lieutenant keeps blowing his whistle and pointing and they keep looking in. And our rap on their ear is something like this: "You're about to go to Nam aren't you?" and they're gritting their teeth. "You're going to go into battle, and that lieutenant's going to lead you into battle, isn't he? And this guy is asking you to do the impossible. You could drown. This guy is going to kill you when you get to Viet Nam! How can you follow an order like this? There's no logical way that you can trap us. See, you get one hand away from us, and we drift away. You guys are absolutely the dumbest guys we've ever seen in our lives. How could you just turn into machines?" and just ran it down for a half-an-hour. You know, profanity, you know, going through different moods, having them where you could let them have it.¹⁷

In the competition between surfers and Marines, the surfers usually, but not always, triumph. In "The Day I Finally Got Caught" by Gregory, the protagonist is caught after a spectacular chase, and his board and car are impounded. When he is reunited with his friends, later in the day, shivering and despondent, the surfer shows his citation. His friends "proudly reached into their wallets and showed . . . their papers [citations] that they had to sign" ending the tale on the tone of moral triumph for the surfers.

The "classic" Trestles' situation, it was generally agreed, was the confrontation between surfers and Marines when the surfers were in the water and the Marines were on the shore, yelling for them to come in and be arrested. The moment had particular irony for the surfers, for they felt themselves to be "in their element." The demand, of course, was unreasonable, and the Marines were characteristically ludicrous.

Do you want to hear a classic surf story . . . ? We used to have this club called RASA. RASA was the Restricted Area Surfing Association. . . . Chris, Jim, and Dick and I were like a little herd of surf mongrels. Everyday, whenever we could, we'd go to the beach. We'd never, we'd get in the Base and we'd never go to San Onofre. We'd always go to Church or Trestles, you know. Always! Restricted Area Surfing Association. So, one day, we're up surfin' and the typical jarhead scene happens,

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17. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975.

you know; we're up having a great time, and they come up the beach and tell us to come in, and you're at the point where you say, "Gees" and just sit there. "What do you mean 'Come in'?" and just sit there. Typical thing. And then finally something happens and we come in and they ambush us and all that. Okay, so big deal. There we are and thinking they've got us caught. So, [laughter] they've got their big truck out there, barricadin' us in and we're in Jim's van—we used to have a VW van, you know—so, we load the boards, you know, and they're giving us all this bullshit, you know, and they're getting ready to haul us off to Juvy [Juvenile Hall] [laughter] or whatever the fuck they do to you, you know. So meanwhile, Chris is up on the bumper taking a piss on the guy's bumper. And the jarhead sees Chris doin' it or something like that and then, while he's getting pissed at Chris, Jim goes in the jarheads' truck, takes the keys out of the truck and *throws* them in the sand. So, there's the jarheads' truck and no keys and [laughter], so all of a sudden GRRKKKK [grinding sound]—the boards flyin' in the dirt, we get into Jim's car and we haul ass out, and they radio another one and it's this *race* [faster] to the gate. Okay, the jarheads are trying to pass and Jim's pulling over, you know, and blocking them off and coming up to the gate—and they're radioing up to the gate and they're out standing there. [Rocket propulsion sound]. Through the gate onto the freeway onramp. The jarheads onto the freeway, hot pursuit. Followed clear out to Doheny [much excitement in voice] and followed us clear out. . . . And finally, Jim's driving along and here's the jarheads; they finally catch up and pull up next to the side of the car and they're going "Pull over" [deep voice] and all this shit. And Jim looks at them, reaches over, pushes Hendrix [a Black guitarist] in and turns it really loud. Really loud, looks the other way and keeps driving.¹⁸

Surfers escaped from the Marines by outrunning, outsmarting, and outfighting them, or being released through the benevolence of the authorities. The following Trestles' tale is unusual in the nature of the escape that is effected:

One time, it was like forty or fifty surfers on the beach and maybe thirty in the water. Usually, when they came, they'd sneak up on you in their cars through the jungle or up the beach. And then burst at you in a hurry, and try to trap you before you could grab your board and paddle out into the ocean which was King's X. And so one time, two jeeps, with two marine MP's in each jeep, succeeded in—one coming from the north and one from the south—trapping about thirty or forty surfers on the beach. And they all, and they rounded us up into this big group, and all of a sudden there's thirty of us standing there and we look and there's four MP's and thirty of us. And all of a sudden everyone looks at each other, and we look at these guys. And we all just looked at each other, and all walked off in different directions. And no one ran. And the Marines were standing there screaming, "Negative! Negative! Get back in the group!"¹⁹

18. Jim Pyle, 6 March 1975.

19. Steve Pezman, 25 March 1975.

On the rare occasions in which surfers are captured, it is usually by being waited out by the Marines in the classic confrontation situation or by being ambushed, as in the above narrations. In the continuation of the previous Pezman story (in which the surfers harrass the swimming Marines) the lieutenant finally called the Marines off, and then hid his men in the jungle until the surfers came in: "They waited it out, and they got us!" Eventually, the surfers talked their way out of the predicament and were released. Another raconteur describes an ambush in the following tale:

One of the first times I ever surfed there [Trestles], there were really good waves, and I was on the beach after I'd been out for a while; and there was a big roar and around the point at Lower [southerly] Trestles, looking at Uppers [northerly], was a tank, you know, and the thing was belching fire—BRRRRR rumbling down. And they weren't MP's; they were just Marines out having a lark. "Let's chase the surfers, let's scare the shit out of these guys, have a little fun," you know. But that was the first time I'd ever been there and thought it was pretty impressive. And they, guys, come roaring up the beach in the tank, and everybody out in the water stayed there, and everybody on the beach fled. And they grabbed their boards and a lot of them jumped in a pond which ran back inland a ways and paddled. I just stood there on the beach and was just going "Hi" real cool and like that. And they were going back and forth, and they forgot about me, because I wasn't playing their game. But right in back of me, a bunch of these guys are paddling [informant plays part of guy paddling furiously, looking over his shoulder in incredulity and fear] looking over his back and the tank's roaring after him and belching fire, and the guys are laughing, loving it, in the tank.²⁰

Analysis of further collections of Trestles' tales would reveal, I am convinced, the same basic characterizations and the same thematic pre-occupations. On one of the many levels in which the meaning of the Trestles' stories may be inferred, the tales are a commentary on the revolution in social values. On another level, the meaning may be said to reside in the sociological mechanisms of creating and sustaining group identity in the context of the clash of two interest groups. Whether one sees the tales as entertainment or as instruction, it is clear that the tales have a discernable structure and contain realism as well as fiction, tradition as well as improvisation.

*University of California
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20. Rick Herzog, 3 March 1975.