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Cindy Welles strolls in Big Oak Tree Park in the unincorporated community of Clyde in Contra Costa County.

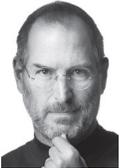
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Next Exit: Bay Area backwater Clyde proud of being 'the mouse that roared'

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Published: Thursday, Nov. 3, 2011 - 12:00 am | Page 1D

The streets of Clyde, all 12 of them, are quiet these days. Drive the mile length and the half-mile width of the fingernail-shaped community, with your progress slowed by only a single flashing red light, and you'll find that life moseys along in blissful tranquility.

Occasionally, you can hear the far-off whoosh of a BART train in neighboring Concord, or catch a whiff of petrochemical plumage from nearby refinery, or espy activity behind the forbidding fences of the mothballed Concord Naval Weapons Station on the town's northern and eastern flanks.

But Clyde's 678 residents, these days, choose to willfully ignore minor intrusions into their community idyll.

They have fought long and hard over the decades to keep Clyde "small and unique" – repelling developers' growth schemes, resisting the war resisters encamped on the outskirts, rallying against Concord's periodic annexation forays, reining in military encroachment and regulating refinery runoff. And now that they've won, or at least reached an amicable truce with outsiders, they have one simple hope.

"We just want to be left alone," said Nita Price, a Clyde resident for 69 years.

But then Price, who at 83 serves as the town's unofficial historian, flashed a 100-watt grin.

"And yet," she added, "we have seven 'Welcome to Clyde' signs in town."

Such a dichotomy, prideful yet protective, defines Clyde. In the cosmopolitan Bay Area, dominated by immaculate, hydra-headed freeway and mass transit systems, pricey housing tracks and a retail cornucopia, Clyde is a funky throwback jutting onto a spit of land leading to the Delta.

Real estate prices here are still steep – this is the Bay Area, after all – and suburban civilization in the form of Starbucks, Burger King and 7-Eleven lies just two miles south in Concord, but Clyde has retained the look and vibe of days gone by. Houses vary in size and color, a two-story pale green colonial next to a purple clapboard salt box next to a brown ranch house. Chickens cluck from backyards; boats are parked in front driveways. Streets range from the narrow former stagecoach-passage strip of Norman Avenue to the well-traveled Port Chicago Highway.

"We're like – well, how about this? – an upscale Mayberry," said Shon Wolf, president of the Clyde Civic Improvement Association. "It's very tight-knit and off-the-beaten-path. There's just one way into Clyde and one way out. We have people who pay attention to what's going on, maybe more than in the other communities."

True, the vigilance of the citizenry is fervent. Never was that more evident than during the Vietnam War protests of the mid-1960s. Hundreds of protesters encamped in Clyde – most across from the entrance to the Naval Weapons Station on the south end, but some in rented houses – so riling up the locals that they took up arms.

In the fictional, TV world of Mayberry, Sheriff Andy never let Deputy Barney Fife have a bullet for his gun.

Not so in Clyde. Price pulled out a yellowed newspaper clipping from 1966 showing a clot of Clyde resident vigilantes walking down the street "armed with pistols, rifles and shot guns" to keep the

protesters away from the heart of town.

Gunplay fortunately never came to pass, but Clyde's battle with the anti-war activists continued into the 1980s, when protest segued from Vietnam to arms shipped to Central America. In 1987, Clyde made national headlines when activist Brian Willson stood on the tracks and had his legs severed by a munitions train during a protest at the height of the Iran-Contra scandal.

By the 1990s, the protesters slowly dispersed until dwindling to a single man, Sacramento native Greg Getty. He lived in a camper across from the base for 12 years until authorities finally evicted him for vagrancy in 2002.

Clyde residents used to roll down their windows and shout, "Don't you know the war's over?" according to a story in the Contra Costa Times.

Longtime Clydeans cut no slack with the protesters. Over the years, they staged counter-protests and sold anti-protester T-shirts.

Price abashedly admits she still wears one that "has a picture of a train on it and it says, 'If you can't stand the pain, don't get in front of the train.'"

"My sons just about died when I wore it."

Price's son Dell remembers the '60s upheaval in Clyde as a surreal spectacle. Jesse Jackson speechified in Clyde. Joan Baez sang there. FBI agents roamed the crowds.

"It was pretty wild," he said. "Police didn't give enough support, so there was a vigilante group.

"I remember going to the (general store, since closed) store and seeing hippies in line next to the vigilantes and news reporters."

Developers draw heat

Less flashy, but no less important to locals, were Clyde's other battles.

Developers had long eyed Clyde as prime waterfront real estate. But the Army closed Port Chicago Highway at the north end, and the privately owned hills abutting Clyde's eastern flank have been deemed too steep to build upon.

So developers focused on Clyde itself both for infill development and for razing and reclamation.

An attempt in the 1970s to construct a huge apartment complex mobilized the town, which enlisted a San Francisco law firm to sue to stop the project.

Clyde won that battle, as well as two attempts by neighboring Concord (population: 122,067) to extend its civic reach. (Concord has built a golf course and business park abutting Clyde's town limits.)

Then in 2005, the Naval Weapons Station was decommissioned, and the U.S. Department of Defense was deciding whether to let Concord and surrounding cities develop the land.

Clyde mobilized once more with protests and letter-writing campaigns to its congressman, Democrat George Miller of Martinez.

In the end, Clyde maintained its unofficial sovereignty.

"Have we won?" asked Cindy Welles, a member of the Clyde Citizen Advisory Committee. "I guess so. We've been able to stay our own little backwater. I guess you can call us the mouse that roared."

Military also targeted

On rare occasions, they've even roared against the military.

In the late '90s, Clyde mobilized once more to try to halt the construction of a 11,000-square-foot Navy administrative building that townsfolk labeled "an eyesore" to be built 65 yards from one of Clyde's residential streets.

Clyde went all out, even saying that the site of the proposed building was on a site eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Town activists argued that debris from the Port Chicago explosion in 1944, during which two Navy ships blew up, had showered debris into that spot of Clyde. That debris, they said, was historically significant.

Clyde lost that battle but won concessions such as the demand that the building have no windows so that military personnel could not peer into private homes.

Earlier this year, Welles was driving home after a dinner in Concord when she saw a truck filled with debris from old munitions rail cars leave the naval base and rumble through town on Port Chicago Highway.

The Navy had assured residents in 2008 that it would not haul dirt and detritus from the weapons station through Clyde.

"I just had to make a phone call," Welles said. "It was no big thing."

Ever vigilant, these Clydeans. Nothing less than their way of life is at stake.

"We're just out here all by ourselves, and we care to keep it that way," said Alice Davis, secretary of the Clyde Civic Improvement Association.

"When people come here to visit, they see this nice community and think, 'Boy, I'd rather live here than (in) the bustle of the city. We're a throwback to gentler times."

Gentler, yes. Unless you get them riled. Don't mess with Clyde. As Wolf half-jokingly said when it was suggested that the town no longer has armed men roaming the streets:

"Walking the streets armed? No. Armed, well ..."

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Next Exit is an occasional series about out-of-the-way Northern California towns that most folks miss while in a hurry to get somewhere else. If you have a town you'd like us to know about, please call (916)321-1145 or email smcmanis@sacbee.com.

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Kensc1

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