

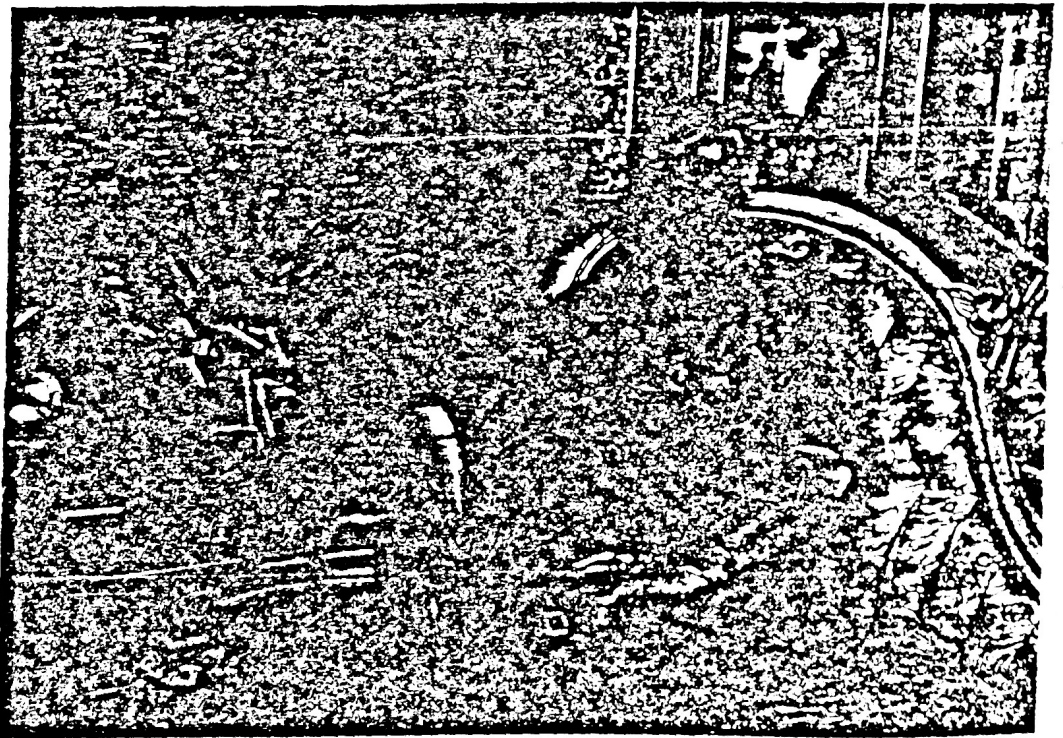
# THE FORTUNES OF THE GYPSIES

**S**omeone once said that the secrecy of the gypsies makes the Mafia look like an open society. This secrecy, this invisible tribal barrier, has for centuries shielded the gypsies from the outside world. For the essence of the gypsies has changed little since their nomadic forebears left India sometime in the fifth century, wending their way through western Europe and eventually scattering to the far reaches of the world.

No one knows when gypsies first arrived in North America but there are thousands now living in California, most of them clustered in the state's larger cities. They live in our neighborhoods and shop in our stores, but we do not know them. Some say they are free-spirited romantics; others say they are unconscionable cheats. Somewhere therein lies the truth, for beliefs about gypsies have always been a blend of myth and reality. But, for a moment, set aside any stereotypes you may have and take a look at this generous, belligerent, proud, cunning people whose near-feudal social structure nurtures close family ties and demands respect for the elderly and obedience

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Proud and tradition-bound, the gypsies of Northern California have managed to preserve their insularity without forfeiting the privileges of twentieth-century life. They live among us, yet we hardly know them.



By Nikki Meredith

[Photography by Ron Shuman]

[COMMUNITIES]

...m the young, and restricts life choices in a way that is astonishing than a democratic society.

Attempting to arrange an interview with Staley Costello, chief of the Richmond/San Pablo gypsies, offers a glimpse of the protective barrier that separates them from non-gypsies, or *gajes* (GAH-nays), the gypsy word for outsiders.

Staley's grandchildren screen most of his phone calls. Upon recognizing the voice of a *gaje* they immediately say, "He's not home." After a multitude of calls, Staley finally comes to the phone, and after even more phone calls he reluctantly agrees to an interview. But then other obstacles materialize. In a six-month period the chief is called away to attend numerous gypsy weddings, funerals and deathbed illnesses somewhere in the western United States, all demanding that he leave town exactly five minutes before the scheduled meeting.

While it is true that gypsies have an inordinate number of milestone events they must attend — an extensive network seems to connect all American gypsies in some way — it is also true that giving interviews to *gaje* reporters is not a gypsy priority. To a gypsy, an American (used interchangeably with "gaje") is an alien and always will be. Gypsies don't believe for a minute the everyone-is-created-equal credo. *Gajes* have strange customs, and accordingly, they are not allowed into the inner sanctums of gypsy homes. (There are exceptions, of course. Inconsistency is another gypsy trait, one that exasperates *gaje* anthropologists intent on identifying cultural patterns.)

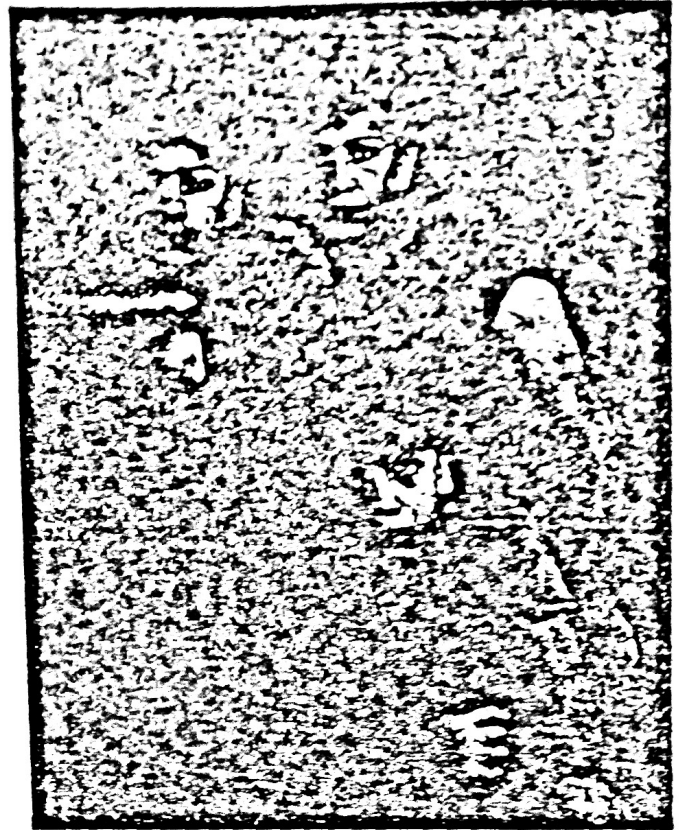
Gypsies admire tenacity, however, and eventually Staley allows himself to be interviewed in his small wood-frame house on a busy street in San Pablo. The house sits on a block of similar houses occupied by some of the Costellos' numerous adult children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Accompanied by his wife, Pearsa, Staley sits in his parlor, amicably answering questions. (*Gajes* are allowed in living rooms but not in kitchens or bedrooms or bathrooms of gypsy homes, where "contamination" is a central concern.) Staley is a big, dignified old man — virtual requirements

for gypsy leadership. His girth makes moving laborious; he prefers to sit, which contributes to his regal mien. He has a gentle manner, a smooth, plump face and a high-pitched Andy Devine voice. In contrast, Pearsa, who wears her gray hair in a tight bun, has sharp features, a deeply lined, leathery face and a loud, guttural voice. From her mouth hangs a cigarette, *de rigueur* for gypsy women. The contrast between them is a reflection of the unique gypsy hierarchy, which awards men leadership positions while also valuing intelligence and encouraging aggressiveness in women.

The two met and married in West Virginia and eventually moved to California's Central Valley, where they were farm laborers. Along with other gypsies, they settled in western Contra Costa County fifteen years ago, acquiring some property by taking advantage of urban renewal programs. Eventually, the entire area was claimed by a loose coalition of three gypsy tribes: the Kalderasha, the Machwaya and the Cuneschi. These groups make up one *kumpania*, or community, the basic political and social unit of the gypsies. Presently the area is dominated by Kalderasha families. Staley is Kalderasha; Pearsa is Machwaya.

Staley has been this region's leader,



or *Baro Rom* (Big Man), for about ten years. He rules by popular consent and, as leader of settled gypsies, is expected to insure that his people stay out of trouble with the law. He must keep nomadic gypsies — who will give his people a bad name — out of the community, and he must maintain cooperative relations with the local police and social agencies. He also arbitrates disputes among gypsies and presides over the council of elders and the gypsy court, or *kris*.

Staley must also see that the people in his *kumpania* are cared for; in fact, his name is even listed in the *Yellow Pages* under "social welfare agencies." He says most of his people are unable to work and are living on welfare. "We are sick, honey, very sick." In fact, gypsies do suffer more than their share of illnesses, a fact they attribute to settling and increased contact with *gajes*. *Gajes* in the medical community, however, attribute some of this illness to poor nutrition and inbreeding.

One of Staley's grandchildren, a lovely fifteen-year-old girl, darts in and out of the living room, doing household

chores and waiting on her grandparents. Historically, gypsy children have rarely attended school, which accounts for the fact that most gypsies are illiterate. Gypsies say they now send their children to school, but as the children, especially the girls, approach adolescence, they are kept home for fear of corruption by *gaje* teenagers.

When asked if watching television makes her want to live more like *gajes*, the girl replies with a barely audible "no," just before grandma barks "She'd better not."

One of Staley and Pearsa's endearing characteristics is their sense of humor, which tends toward the ironic — gypsy-style. In describing their relationship, Staley laughs and says "Mama is 72. I'm only 66. I'm much younger." Pearsa lets out a hoot, followed by a full-bodied laugh that fills the room.

Interspersed with the laughter, however, are loud sobs and gusting tears over the death of their son Joe at age 26 last year, of an unidentified illness. (Gypsies do not permit autopsies.) In a week they will have a one-year-anniv-

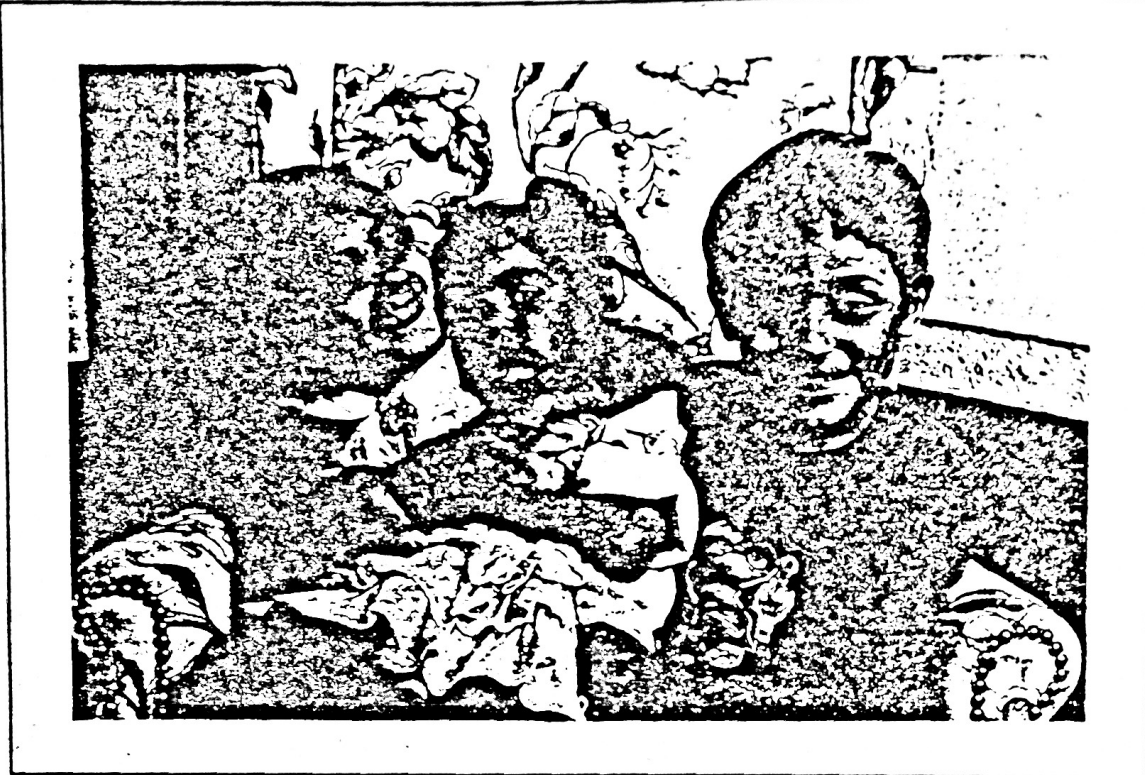
versary funeral feast, called a *pomana* — one of the gypsy affairs outsiders are occasionally invited to attend.

In a public hall rented for the occasion, local gypsies as well as gypsies from San Francisco, Santa Rosa and Stockton come to honor Joe. The parking lot is crowded with four-wheel-drive trucks and long Cadillacs. An old gypsy woman sits in the back of a Cadillac, smoking. She is not feeling well so she stays in the car for the entire event. As wagons once were, cars are important to gypsies. For some, just sitting in a car is a soothing experience. Even settled gypsies spend a lot of time traveling — looking for work or attending horse races and gypsy weddings and funerals. Traveling is also used as a way of “cooling off” and settling community conflicts.

Pomanas are held twice after the death of a gypsy: six weeks after the funeral and again a year after. This is Joe's final earthly party and the gypsies are demonstrating that they love him lest his ghost decide to make life difficult for those he left behind.

From the look of it, his ghost should be more than satisfied. Two long banquet tables, arranged in a cross, are literally covered with food. The centerpiece is a continuous horn of plenty with mounds of bananas, grapes, oranges, peaches, plums, avocados, Twinkies, candy bars and potato chips. Surrounding the centerpiece are hundreds of plates of prepared food — traditional gypsy dishes like stuffed cabbage and *pufe* (a kind of bread). At the head of the table sits Joe's brother Steve, who is impersonating Joe for the feast. He is looking very dapper in a new outfit purchased for the occasion: a derby hat, maroon vest, gray wool suit and starched white shirt. In the “old days,” the outfit would subsequently be thrown into a river or sent to a cleaner and never picked up, which, in some way, appeased the spirit of the dead. But, according to some sources, hard times and practicality now dictate that the new clothes become a part of the family's wardrobe.

Before the feast, one of Joe's uncles circles the tables three times carrying burning incense in a frying pan. There is much loud talking and laughter. Occasionally the uncle yells out in



Romany, the gypsy language: “Be quiet. Have a little respect for the dead.” After the incense, Joe's uncle says a prayer for Joe in Romany, which, loosely and partially translated, says, “The sun and the moon should be witness to the fact that Joe's brother is wearing the clothes in the daytime, Joe wears the clothes at night. If we make a little mistake here tonight, please excuse us.”

Most of the old Machwaya women wear traditional gypsy garb — long dresses, bandanas, gold hoop earrings and lots of gold jewelry. Girls of thirteen and fourteen, faces heavy with make-up, look like disco queens. They do not mix with the boys, who are gathered in small clusters. The girls are dressed to attract the attention of the boys' parents who are looking for brides.

During the course of the evening, the old women sit and gossip, the younger women work and the men stand in groups drinking and joking, often with self-mocking humor, telling stories that play on gypsy stereotypes: hustlers, welfare chiselers, less-than-

skilled body-and-fender repairmen.

Throughout the feast Staley Costello issues orders and urges people to eat. “You sure you got enough food?” he asks repeatedly. Pearsa mostly cries while other old women admonish her to stop. The one-year feast signifies the end of mourning; it is improper to cry afterwards.

Everyone fills cardboard boxes with leftovers, which they will bring home. “Did you get enough?” Staley and Pearsa ask as people leave. In addition to honoring a dead loved one, the feast is an opportunity to exhibit one's prosperity and share the wealth.

Among the guests at the *pomana* are John and Louis Stevens, relatives of Pearsa's from the Machwaya tribe. They stand out somewhat because they are more trendily dressed than the others, in designer jeans. They are the sons of Madame Rachel, a Santa Rosa fortuneteller.

There are two fortunetelling businesses in Sonoma County, and both are run by Madame Rachel's family,

which is much envied because it has a license to practice this traditional gypsy occupation. Fortunetelling is outlawed by most California cities, although some allow gypsies to continue practicing if they had a permit before the city banned it. In the cities that do allow it, licenses are difficult to obtain and subject to myriad regulations.

Madame Rachel does not attend the *pomana*, but later agrees to an interview in her house and “*ofisa*” — fortunetelling parlor — in Santa Rosa. A white Cadillac is parked in front of the well-kept white stucco house. Inside are ceramic figurines, dangling crystal lamp shades, bunches of plastic flowers, religious scenes, floral rugs, brocaded wallpaper. The interior decoration is a reflection of the gypsy tendency to adopt fragments of the gaje culture and integrate them into their own: Here, a crucifix dangles over a Buddha statuette and icons are placed beside bottles of holy water.

Madame Rachel herself is a plump, handsome woman who talks mystically about her spiritual powers while watching her favorite soap opera. *All*

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*My Children.* Sitting on her velour couch wearing a floral house dress, she says she is part of the modern world. "My children went to school, they played with Americans at school — we live like everyone else." But she also says she is looking for a wife for her nineteen-year-old son, a tall, husky fellow whose main occupation seems to be running errands for his mother and sisters. She will soon go to pomanas and weddings in Los Angeles in search of a bride.

Madame Rachel's husband, Pete, does not work now, but she says at one time he sold mobile homes. She and her daughters support the family through fortunetelling. When asked how she acquired her skills, she replies, "It is gifted by God, honey. It is gifted." And it is a gift she carefully guards. She does not want competition from other gypsy fortunetellers and acknowledges that her family determines which gypsies come into the area. "We've been here for a long time with no trouble, no complaints. We don't want to lose our reputation."

"George Johnson" is a handsome man with black, liquid eyes, dark hair and dark skin. He will not allow his real name to be used because he talks about things gypsies do not like talked about to outsiders. "I would rather not be a gypsy, but I have no choice. It's been pounded, stomped and stapled into me."

Sitting in a San Francisco bar, drinking gin and tonics, he talks about his life as a gypsy. He is in his early thirties and lives in the Bay Area. His father was a Latin American gypsy but no one is sure where his mother was from. "Her family was traveling when she was born. No one thought it was important to remember where they slept that night."

Originally from New York, George has lived in many cities, sometimes supporting himself as a roofer or by paving driveways. Now he sells a little of this, trades a little of that and plays the horses to support the family. His goal is survival, which he says is the gypsy way. "Gypsies live only for the present. There is only today. We don't worry about yesterday or tomorrow."

"I feel sorry for gypsies," he continues. "We are discriminated against, we are labeled, remarks are made about us which are derogatory. Gypsies are ignorant about so many things and it makes life difficult. I can read because I have a little bit of education but most gypsies can't."

George claims prejudice is widespread. "One time my daughter was very ill and I couldn't even get a hospital to treat her. Hospitals don't like gypsies. Sometimes they don't pay their bills and they create a lot of disturbances. When a gypsy is sick everyone comes to the hospital to be with them. We talk loud, we are demanding. We are not a mannered people."

George says that when he was young he tried not being a gypsy and it never worked: "I would pretend I was Mexican or Italian, but gypsies always recognized me. As soon as I got into a new city someone would spot me. We all basically know each other from somewhere along the line.

"I also tried living with American women, but I was so lonely I couldn't stand it. They didn't understand me. Only gypsies can understand me. We stay together because we cannot survive without each other."

He is proud of the fact that he can read and he wants his children to go to school, but he questions the value of higher education. "Why should a gypsy go to college? Who's gonna give a gypsy a job?"

George would like to set his wife up in a fortunetelling business and is bitter that the laws in most cities prevent it. But he says his life is controlled more by gypsies than by non-gypsies. "I once lived in Philadelphia and I had to pay a guy to let me live there. There are a lot of places I can't live unless I want to be dominated by the guy who controls that territory. If I wanted to live in Richmond, I'd have to be willing to be bossed by that old man [Staley Costello] over there. As soon as I come into a new town I'm recognized and hassled. This is America and I can't live anywhere I want to. Can you believe it?"

Despite his complaints, George defends gypsies against gaje prejudice. "Americans say gypsies steal, but how many Americans cheat on their taxes? How many Americans are guilty of white-collar crime? Gypsies aren't violent. They don't mug people; they don't rob banks."

At the end of the interview, about seven drinks later, George looks around for the cocktail waitress. Then he lets out a loud gypsy laugh. "What do you think? Why don't we just leave now and save some money?" He laughs heartily as he takes out several large bills and leaves them on the table.

Every 25 years or so, some expert forecasts the end of the gypsy culture, usually citing some technological or social advance that will prevent the gypsies from maintaining their separate identity. In the 1940s an anthropologist predicted that the gypsy culture could not survive gas rationing.

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Janet Tompkins, a social worker who has worked with the western Contra Costa County gypsies for seventeen years, says she herself was convinced fifteen years ago that television would be their ruin. "People always underestimate the adaptability of the gypsies. Gypsies are practical, not sentimental, about their traditions. They hang on to the ones that serve a purpose and abandon the others."

Hence, buying homes may inhibit nomadic impulses, but real estate acquisition increases power and helps establish gypsy territory; when fortunetelling and begging are banned, welfare provides a convenient substitute; the automobile renders horse-trading obsolete, but allows traditional skills to be transferred to buying, selling and fixing cars.

Despite superficial cultural "progress," Tompkins says, change always stops short of assimilation. In seventeen years she has seen only two defections from the gypsy community she works with. "No matter what, the basic integrity of the gypsy culture is not tampered with; it is not sacrificed."

Above all, the gypsies endure. □

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## GYPSIES: FACT & MYTH

- Gypsies are not originally from Europe, but from India, and the language they speak, Romany, is not from Rumania but is a derivation of Sanskrit.
- The gypsy culture is not a true patriarchy. Like other areas of gypsy life, sex role differentiation is prone to inconsistency. Generally, the authority of gypsy men is based on secular political knowledge — such as a thorough familiarity with the California Welfare Code — and masterful dealings with gaje officials. The authority of women is based on their knowledge of the spirits, use of "medicines" and ability to place curses. However, there are some old women who have become political ruling forces in gypsy communities. In general, the women are much more restricted socially, especially in their contacts with gajes, and more work is expected of them. In the days when fortunetelling was a major source of income, women were expected to provide for their families.
- Although gypsies deny it, anthropologists who have researched gypsy culture say that while gypsies have a strong belief in the supernatural, they do not believe in fortunetelling except as a business. The prohibition against fortunetelling in most California cities is a thorn in the side of gypsies because young girls, especially from the Machwaya tribe, are "trained" to be fortunetellers and fortunetelling is seen as a desirable way to make money. In the old days, nomadic gypsies enhanced their fortunetelling income by the *bujo* — a switch-the-bag swindle. Such tricks are not employed by settled gypsies, who are interested in return customers.
- Gypsies are nominally Catholic, but perform their own ceremonies and do not look to the church or the government to sanction their marriages.
- A gypsy marriage is considered a union between two families, so it is arranged by the parents. Once married, usually at fifteen, a girl goes to live with her in-laws. One young gypsy woman with children says that it is important to live with your in-laws to learn their ways, but adds that it is very hard work because you have to be a servant to the family: "It gets much better when you have your own children because then you don't have to do as much for your husband's mother."

— N.M.

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