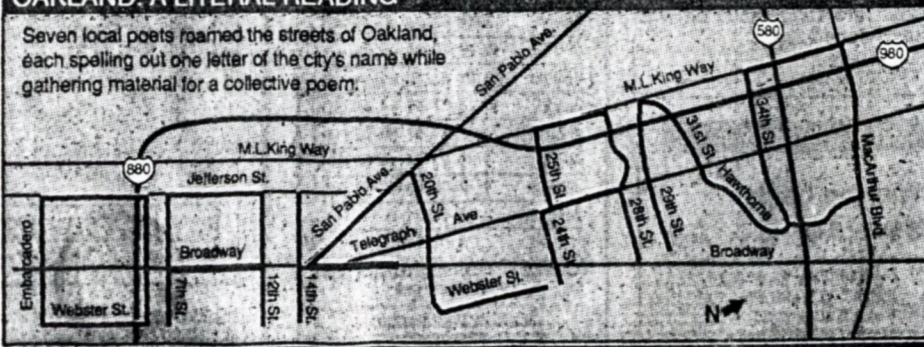


OAKLAND: A LITERAL READING

Seven local poets roamed the streets of Oakland, each spelling out one letter of the city's name while gathering material for a collective poem.



By Steve Kearsley / The Tribune



By Dennis Lee/The Tribune

Berkeley poet Gene Scott Burnett walks 'O' segment of Swamp Fest West in Oakland.

An invasion of avant-garde poets

By Sarah Thailing
The Tribune

"O, memories!"
"O, why the demise!" moaned Gene Scott Burnett of Berkeley. He stuttered like Porky Pig and scatted like Ella Fitzgerald on the chilly brown steps at 14th and Broadway yesterday evening as commuters scurried by on their way to BART and AC Transit.
Burnett was one of seven poets who walked the Oakland streets yesterday afternoon and called it art. They were spelling out Oakland, both by pacing out giant letters as they walked, and by using an assigned letter in their poetry: O, A, K, L, A, N and D. His letter was O.
From Embarcadero to Interstate 580, the poets walked a path tracing one letter each to

kick off the Swamp Fest West, an avant-garde festival of poetry, performance art and improvised music that runs through Sunday.
Instead of seeing the requisite magenta skies that poets find above Paris, or the broad shoulders another writer saw in Chicago, the Eastbay poets spelled Oakland with the oil leaking from automobiles. They saw khaki-colored air freight advertisements. They heard loud noises and saw young men sell drugs.
And they loved it.
As Oakland poet Laurie Schneider put it, "The more prosperous it gets, / the less there is to see."
For Jack Foley, an Oakland "performance

See POETS, Back Page

Poets

Continued from Page A-1

poet" who has a weekly poetry show on KPFA, the textual scavenger hunt was a chance to let his mind play. "It's outside the usual venues," said Foley, who walked the first A. "This is not Cody's (Bookstore) or Intersection (for the Arts). This is Broadway and San Pablo."

Foley, a short man with long black hair, had started at the corner of Franklin and 12th streets, at the edge of Chinatown. He gazed into the setting sun for a while and watched an Asian man driving a Porsche with a Nazi war helmet in the back.

He watched an elderly Native American woman walk into the Souza Brothers deli. He stared, fascinated at a concrete foundation in City Center that he said reminded him of an Italian movie director's work.

And he wrote carefully at every corner.

"We want to expose people to poetry who normally wouldn't see it," said Crag Hill, an Oakland poet who traced the letter D near 580.

"We are bringing poetry to the audience rather than the other way around."

An offshoot of a similarly eclectic program called the Festival of the Swamps in Madison, Wisc., the festival showcases local artists and musicians performing in Oakland, Berkeley and San Francisco as well as Martinez, Santa Cruz and Marin County.

Hill, a Wisconsin native, helped organize the festival so he could bring its energy to the West Coast without going to Madison. He never dreamed it would attract artists from Buffalo, Miami Beach, Cleveland and Phoenix.

"I didn't realize how famous — or infamous — the Swamp Fest is," he said.

For the next four days the artists will take the stage in the urban landscape: the streets, cable-car turnarounds, the Oakland Airport. A pick-up marching band will travel from Lake Merritt to downtown Oakland tomorrow evening.

The festival closes on Sunday when musicians improvise until sunset at the abandoned gun emplacement in the Marin headlands.

And to claim a few minutes of the harried commuter's day, poets will perform during rush hour at BART stations.

"If you don't perform, you might as well be reading in your living room," Hill said. "There's the risk that a collaboration may not work. It's like improv in music."

Foley believes that the Bay Area, where Alan Ginsberg recited "The Howl" at San Francisco's Gallery Six in the '50s, is a fitting place for poetry's oral tradition to flourish.

"That's the West Coast mode of publishing: performing a poem to other people," he said. "We have no history out here, but we have a lot of voices."

But do people in the Bay Area have time to listen? A few people passing by the middle of Oakland's K listened to seven of those voices yesterday evening.

"Is this a private meeting?" asked one woman on her way home from work. When she found out the poetry reading was open to everyone, a smile broke across her face.

For information about Swamp Fest events, call 268-9284.

— Tribune staff writer Roland De Wolk contributed to this story.