

Pat and Mike: Imperial Beach's real McCoys

By Walter L. Fisher
Staff Writer

Feeling powerless? Don't think your efforts make any difference? Don't tell Patricia and Mike McCoy of Imperial Beach because they won't agree with you.

"I think people are far too content to say 'I can't make an impression what I say doesn't matter,' and by golly it does. It does," said Patty McCoy. "It makes a tremendous difference if people would only get up on their hind legs and say what's really on their minds and what they really believe and go for it."

Mike agrees with his wife. "Yes, if you have a democratic system you might as well use it. I think we're losing a lot of the freedoms we've had in the past because people are so complacent," he said. "I think people don't use the system they've got effectively, and that's a shame because they put (other) people in positions of power that will run their lives for them instead of running their own lives. I don't understand that. The people should run the politicians, the politicians shouldn't run the people."

Not only do they believe the individual can make a difference, but the McCoys put their beliefs into practice in working to improve Imperial Beach.

They were both brought to the San Diego area, and eventually to Imperial Beach, by the San Diego Zoo, but by different routes.

Mike was born in Colorado 43 years ago and went to school there.

"I went to the Colorado State University and got my doctor of veterinary medicine there and then got accepted on a zoo internship at the San Diego Zoo," Mike said. "I came out here expecting to work for several years and then go back home or go into wildlife veterinary medical practice. I ended up down here in Imperial Beach because my partner did a lot of reproductive work at the zoo. I met him there and we got along real well and so I just came down here and went to work for him."

Patty was born in London, England, 48 years ago and came to the South Bay by a much more circuitous route.

"By way of South America," Patty said. "I trained as a teacher at South Hampton in England and then I taught in England for five years. I was getting fidgety and I saw this ad in the paper and it said 'teach in Colombia.'"

"My geography never was very good and I thought it said British Colombia."

She went off to the interview and learned the job was in South America, but still she thought it might be an interesting place.

"To my horror I got the job. I'd opened my big mouth and I'd chit-chatted to quite a few people about this job, never really thinking I'd get it, and having got it I thought, 'well, heck I'm going' because I really didn't want to back out of it at that point," she said.

In South America, Patty met an American who was teaching there and later followed him to the United States and got married. They lived in Georgia and Costa Rica before coming to the South Bay in 1971.

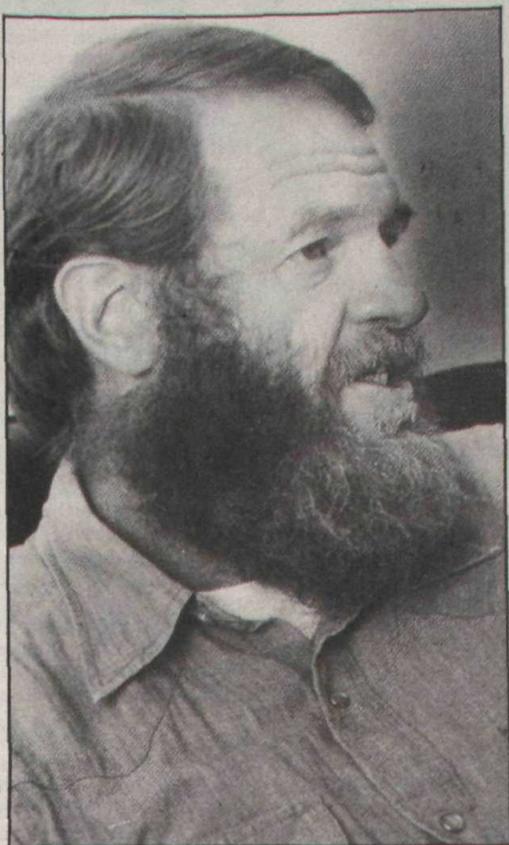
Mike met Patty when he and her first husband worked together at the zoo and had become friends. But the McCoys didn't get together until a few years later after Patty was divorced.

"We don't want this to sound like Peyton Place. There was nothing improper going on, believe me," Patty said laughing. "It was just meeting up again years later when we both were single."

The McCoys share a common interest in animals and in the Tijuana Estuary. In fact, both say they were drawn to Imperial Beach at least partially by the estuary.

"When I first came here, we came mainly because we liked the estuary so much," Patty said. "I was beginning to feel probably over the years there's a certain imbalance. There isn't any planning and all the beautiful wild places are being eaten alive. At some place you have to call halt."

"There's a poem by Jared Manly Hopkins, I can't even remember the title of it, but it says 'Oh, let them stay the places that are wild and wet.' It kept going through my mind and I kept



Michael McCoy



Pat McCoy

thinking there's really nowhere for urban man to go. The places are getting smaller and smaller and we're getting bigger and bigger. The very idea of more houses going in where other inhabitants of the planet happen to be living really got to me. They can't exactly go in an be advocated on their own behalf. You begin to wonder at what point the whole web will fall apart."

Patty related the thinking about endangered species to Paul Erlich's theory of the rivets.

"If you're flying along in an airplane and you see a rivet pop out you think 'oh, well.' You feel a little uncomfortable, but it really doesn't bother you that much. Then another one pops out and then another one pops out and you start getting worried. You say 'at what point will the rivet fall out that will make the whole thing fly apart.'"

"And I think that, going back to the idea of the individual making himself count, began to fall into place. I thought 'well gosh, if I don't stand up and say what I think then who's going to?' That's how I really got started," Patty said.

Mike got involved in the estuary when the International Boundary and Water Commission considered channeling of the Tijuana River Valley. The plan was stopped, he said, because even with a channel the area was susceptible to flooding and development of the area didn't seem like a good idea. The San Diego County Planning Organization voted down the channel plan in 1974, he said. Since then the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has purchased a large portion of the estuary area and it has been nominated for national sanctuary status.

"Then, the next hurdle was to protect the estuarine habitat. In fact, that's one of the reasons I came here. I was particularly interested in the Tijuana Estuary from the first time I saw it. There was no other estuary like it in Southern California," Mike said.

The problem of the estuary came to a head in 1980, he said, when the city of Imperial Beach asked for a vote of the citizens about whether or not to develop a marina in the estuary.

"There were many laws on the books that would prohibit the development of a marina even if the people wanted it. Also, the people of Imperial Beach at the time didn't realize if they did get that type of marina it would shift the economic base and many of the people that lived here then in rentals would be moved out because the real estate would escalate to the point their basic

economy wouldn't support what they were fighting for.

"I think they wanted something they couldn't have legally and they wanted something they probably wouldn't be able to support indefinitely economically. I think they were being sold a bill of goods which was very upsetting to me other than the fact that I really wanted to protect those wetlands," Mike said.

While both Mike and Patty want to protect the estuary, they realize it is just part of the total problem of development and economics that faces Imperial Beach.

"It seems obvious there has to be development," Patty said, "but it must be planned, it must be sane and it must take into consideration other members of the ecosystem. I think we've come to the point where economics and environment are coming together, where we're going to have to make a symbiosis come from it. We can't keep on having acid rain. We can't have this sewage problem going on and on. There has to be a balance struck," she said.

"It's not logical," Mike added.

"It's not a question of struggle against something. I think it's finding the point of cooperation between people, something that's sane and livable. I also think you can't go on saying what you can't

do. You have to come up with a positive marriage between environment and economics and this is why on the local level we're very encouraged by the beachfront plan if we can get it through," she said.

Patty was a member of the task force that helped develop the beachfront plan, which the city of Imperial Beach is now trying to implement.

"We didn't see eye to eye all the time, but the consensus was something needed to be done with that beachfront. And why not tie it in with the sanctuary? That was the idea for me."

"If you look at Imperial Beach and compare it to other communities up and down the coast, there is no other place like it with vast tracts of empty property or derelict property. At the moment, for the tourist it's the sort of place he comes in and he desperately looks for a place to stay and a place to eat and he can't find it and he leaves. He maybe buys a bit of gas on Palm Avenue, but that's it," Patty said.

"You want to be careful of overdevelopment, though," Mike warned.

"Yes, but that's the whole point of a plan whereby you can balance it as best you can with residential and commercial and make it a place that's interesting," Patty said. "It has to be more to the character of this community than La Jolla or Del Mar. If it (Imperial Beach) were going to be a La Jolla or a Del Mar it would have been by now. That's the way it would have developed, but it never has, and in a way its proximity to Mexico has been both a curse and an advantage. We're very, very excited by the possibility of development

at the beach with the Coastal Conservancy helping out with seed money, and using our own tax dollar, quite honestly. It's not a handout. It is bond money the people in this city have paid into equally with other people in the whole state, and it's time that we got a share of the pie," she said.

What level has the estuary plan reached to fit into the total plan for the city?

"Well," Mike said, "we have got finally a management plan that's being certified by the agencies that will be involved directly and indirectly with the sanctuary program. Hopefully the management plan, where it's appropriate, will interdigitate with the beachfront development. That's what we had hoped for the future."

Mike said the plan for the estuary calls for some areas to be totally off limits to human activity, some areas to be set aside for educational activities and some areas to be used for research and interpretive facilities.

"We're trying right now to get moneys to construct an interpretive facility in the Tijuana River Estuary and that will draw some, well, quite a few people into the area to observe and enjoy and so forth," Mike said.

"Most wildlife refuges have a great quality to them, and state parks also when you have an interpretive center," Patty said. "You have the Anza Borrego Desert State Park with that absolutely wonderful interpretive center. We don't see why Imperial Beach shouldn't have one of equal, if not better, quality and we're going to work very hard for that, and we have been doing so because we feel that is a key to bringing in good tourism."

Neither of the McCoys could estimate how much tourism the estuary could generate for Imperial Beach, but Patty thinks the numbers of people visiting the city will increase as population pressures drive people south from the more populated beaches in San Diego.

"Gradually it can't help but increase because we're going to have something of great value people will want to come and see, the one last unpopulated area of the county," Patty said.

The McCoys also hope the development of the estuary and the beachfront will stabilize Imperial Beach by bringing in more permanent residents and fewer transient residents.

Mike's main concern is his veterinary practice, and after squeezing out time for his work with the estuary, there are few chances for recreation. Patty said they like to go camping to get away from the phones for a while and she tries to insert the word play into Mike's vocabulary when she can.

Both Patty and Mike are committed to doing what they can to make Imperial Beach the best possible place to live. They really don't believe they are isolated voices with no power to make changes.

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