LOCAL/STATE

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Life is like a box of Forrest Gumpisms

e's a department-store Santa who won't say "Ho, Ho, Ho." He's a Lone Ranger impersonator who refuses to issue a hearty "Hi-

yo Silver!' He's a Humphrey Bogart sound-alike who rejects the signature phrase "Play it again, Sam.

He's Steve Weber, the Cannery Row tourist attraction you've never heard of.



Marty Burleson

More comparisons? Weber is Nixon without "I am not a crook!" Marie Antoinette without "Let them eat cake!" Evander Holyfield without "Lend me your ears!"

He's Forrest Gump without . . . without . . . well, you tell me.

Three days a week, Weber portrays the nice-but-naive, sunny-but-slow, quiet-but-quotable title character from 1994's "Forrest Gump," a film that earned \$327 million at the box office and ranks No. 4 on the all-time money-

making list. He spends his Sundays "Gumping" in Monterey, outside the 17-month-old Bubba Gump Shrimp Co.

Here's what the suitcase-clutching Weber, a Tom Hanks twin in full Gump regalia, will say to passers-by:

"'My name's Forrest. Forrest Gump."

■ "Stupid is as stupid does."

"That's all I have to say about that."

■ "Your name is Jen-ny? That's the most beautiful name in the wide world.'

What he won't say is the other thing. The candy thing. The thing that - next to "Show me the money!" - is, without doubt, the most done-to-death catch-phrase of 1990s Hollywood.

"Life is . . ."

"Life is like . . ."
"Life is like a . . ."

I can't say it, either.

"It's too old and worn out," Weber says of Hanks' signature line in the much-loved movie. "I'd rather just talk to people."

Just talk. A plain, ordinary conversation with a plain, ordinary guy. Only an "ordinary" conversation with Steve Weber lasts 15 seconds, 10 on a busy day. And the "ordinary" Weber is sporting a buzz haircut, off-white suit, blue-checkered shirt, white-andred Nike shoes, orange-green-andwhite striped socks and a box of Russell Stover chocolates.



WHO'S THAT: Steve Weber as Forrest Gump.

In Weber's case, life is like a rummage sale.

And people are buying. Boy, are they buying.

"It's amazing what people feel about that movie," said Cathy Peterson, marketing and training administrator for the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., as a crowd of 40 to 50 people sought pictures with the bench-bound Weber. "This goes on all day. He draws a crowd. He draws people in off the street."

One day this week - when Weber made a special trip from his Santa Clara home - those people hailed from Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania, South America, France, Asia and beyond. Some wandered over to the restaurant's outdoor menu, eyeballing such fare as Lt. Dan's Drunkin Prawns

ad. A few went inside.

"Nobody's quantified (Weber's effect on business)," the 39-year-old Gump impersonator said. "But everyone believes that it works."

and the Championship Ping Pong Sal-

If not, who cares? Weber generates so much good will that he'll be flown to Maui for the Dec. 1 opening of the See BURLESON/Page 2B

BURLESON: Words unspoken

Cälifornian

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There he'll meet more people like Sissy Mitchell, a tourist from Shreveport, La., who on Monday couldn't get over Weber's physical and verbal likeness to the cultural icon.

MITCHELL: "When are you here?"

WEBER/GUMP: "I come to Monterey on Sundays."

terey on Sundays."

MITCHELL: "Isn't this Monday?"

WEBER/GUMP: (Pause) "Stupid is as stupid does."

MITCHELL: "How long will you be here?"

WEBER/GUMP: "Until the bus comes."

MITCHELL: "I love your ears, Forrest."

WEBER/GUMP: "It makes me nervous when you talk like that, ma'am."

Next to approach the bench was a wide-eyed, cap-wearing 4-year-old.

"I have the tape of you at my Grandma Pat's," said the boy, entranced.

Almost no one takes a seat next to Weber without having his or her picture snapped by a spouse, friend or total stranger. Peterson estimates Weber's been photographed millions of times in the last 17 months.

The photos sometimes wind up in unexpected places.

"One lady put it on her credit card,"
Peterson said.

Peterson — who scrapped plans to have Weber make in-restaurant appearances when picture-seeking diners refused to leave their tables — said she's amazed at the Gump impersonator's ability to remain pleasant and in-

character for hours at a stretch. Few people, she said, could put up with the constant crush of well-wishers.

There are secrets, Weber confessed.
One of them is refusing to say youknow-what. Another is keeping toothy
smiles to a minimum, reasoning that
the movie character often wore a stern
expression. Weber also declines to
give his real name or background to
the curious, asking persistent visitors
"What does it matter?"

Troublemakers can be a problem, though.

"People will say, 'You're not the real Gump',' said Weber, a sales representative in real life. "I say, 'I am the real Gump. The other one's just the actor who played me.' "

The ruse often works.

"Kids will just scratch their heads," he said. "One out of 10 adults will walk away saying, 'I didn't know there was a real character."

Weber is working on one other method of keeping conversations fresh without resorting to clichés. The key can be found on the box of chocolates he tries so hard to avoid mentioning.

That's where Weber keeps a series of conversational crib notes. In Spanish. In French. In Portuguese.

But nothing about chocolate.
"I do that," he confided, "to keep from driving me nuts."

MARTY BURLESON is a reporter at The Californian. His column focuses on local people and appears every other week. If you would like to suggest a someone for a future column, send him a note at The Californian: P.O. Box 81091, Salinas 93901, or call it into the Opinionline at 754-4287.