

Memoirs of Humboldt County

J.S.

BILL HAS LIVED WITH HIS lady on the Ridge for three years. Last summer he was often to be seen in the old school bus, parked a few miles down the road. The people of the Ridge intended the bus to be a lookout post; mostly it was just a party. It was parked at the four corners at the top of the hill, from which point a rocky road winds its way for a mile and a half down to the county road. There, someone in an old pickup usually kept in touch via CB radio. In the early morning, as people who had CBs at home checked in with each other, there was likely to be a lot of chatter. Were there any fires? Who had the school car pool today? What was happening down the road? Busts usually started early. It generally took the county sheriffs a couple of hours to drive the 60 miles from Eureka, then sometimes the whole day to search the land for the gardens, hack down the tall plants, and haul them along creek beds and deer trails to the trucks. It's hard work, this legal larceny.

When the sheriffs stormed the Ridge for the first time, in October 1978, the four-wheel-drive Broncos reached the school bus blocking the road in record time; Bill and his neighbors were impressed. They were also impressed when they heard later how the sheriffs and DEA agents had surrounded the hastily deserted bus, automatic weapons ready. It was sad, though, to hear how the deputies had pushed the bus down the steep road where, luckily, it slid into a ditch. But by then it was too late for the deputies. In the near distance, and

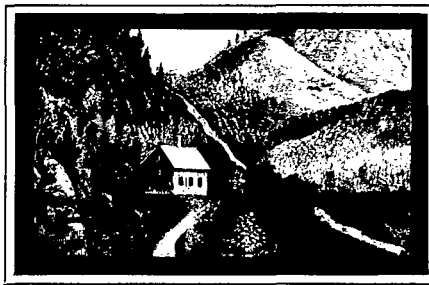
farther along the Ridge, the high-pitched whirr echoed as chain saws bit into the heartwood of tan-oaks and the blood-red trunks of madrone trees.

Instead of continuing on up to the Ridge, the lawmen went straight to the lower part of the watershed. Supposedly, they had warrants for that area anyway—but the fact is that they could have driven along any of the winding roads and filled their vehicles with the plants they would have found there. They knew that. Everyone in Humboldt County knows that.

Unhappily for Bill and many of his neighbors, the tree-felling tactic only left them with a lot of dead trees blocking their one road, and a guilty conscience to boot. Humboldt is one of the most rapidly eroding counties in the United States, and "counterculture" types like Bill have been raising Cain about the logging practices that have caused the erosion. It was downright embarrassing.

There were neighborhood meetings on the road that week. Everyone agreed that cutting down trees was irresponsible—and dumb, because the sheriffs knew how to use chain saws, too.

That week a plane flew so low over Bill's house he could practically tell you the brand of cigarette the pilot was



smoking. The appearance of the plane rekindled the paranoia that had broken out earlier in the summer, when a Huey-type helicopter swirled up and down the watershed for most of an hour. Some neighbors said it was the California Department of Forestry fire chopper, which is often seen during the dry summer season. But it wasn't the right color. Some said it was a Louisiana Pacific chopper. But LP had no business in the area. Some thought it was a drunk or a madman—he was lucky he didn't get shot at, fucking around like that just before harvest. Many people panicked

and cut down their immature plants—at a considerable loss.

Bill observed the plane; then he watered and fed his rabbits. It had been a hot summer. It would be a hot harvest season. That was great for the plants. But it was lousy on the nerves.

Ten days later, before dawn, you could hear the plane circling the Ridge again. Then the whirr of chain saws. Then you could see the string of fifteen Broncos threading along the hillside. The plane circled for ten hours, while the sheriffs went from garden to garden. They cut up water lines and holding tanks, took water pumps and various tools, and snipped off many of the best buds. They also took all of Bill's plants—nine months' worth of hard work—and threw his lady out of the garden when she went to ask them just what the hell they thought they were doing. They arrested his land partner, Ken, an ex-school principal in his late fifties. When they got to his house, Ken attacked them with a copy of the U.S. Constitution and advised them of their rights which, since they had no warrant, he considered to be strictly limited. A neighbor half-jokingly asked the sheriffs, via CB, just how he was going to be able to send his kids to college if they took his crop. "Well," rasped the radio in reply, "There's always next year. . . ."

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, as many angles from which to view this lifestyle—this distinction of ours as sinsemilla growers—as there are people viewing it. But the fact is that living in these woods comprises much more than just growing a highly marketable herb. After one's first year of total dedication to the almighty crop, cultivating it becomes but one aspect of a busy life. A central task, certainly—it is our occupation, our art, really, considering the expertise and painstaking labor involved in producing the flowers with aesthetic characteristics (size, scent, color, taste) as important as their primary use. If all you do is lay around singing "Desperado" to yourself, your homestead will fail. And it is a home that most of us seek; that is the real end to which the growing of an illegal herb is the means. Contrary to the implications of reports in the media, the people own old pickups, not Mercedeses. They don't drink champagne, just homemade beer. There are indulgences, but most of the money goes back into the homestead.

And it isn't always the "simple life," either physically or mentally, that some would associate with living in the coun-

J.S. is a writer and sinsemilla grower living in Humboldt County, California.

try. To be sure, we enjoy the rewards of being self-employed. Our time is our own to schedule, our defects in self-discipline our own to suffer for. Buying land, constructing buildings on it from available materials, developing water and energy sources, raising our own food, maintaining our own roads in concert with our neighbors: It's as if the state did not exist. But add to that list some further complications: the need to be an active member of an informal community which, because of both logistics and the insistence on quality, must educate its own young in a curriculum of its own design; a preference for health care of a kind not always acceptable to the AMA; and the difficulties that arise in a community of willful individualists and eccentrics who find themselves, for better or worse, in sudden interdependence; and you are apt to be about as "laid-back" as a contender in the Olympic decathlon.

Of course, it is beautiful country. The meadows and oak groves are traversed by families of deer and patrolled by ravens and hawks. It is pastoral and serene. There is always time to observe the timeless in nature. To play. To relax in a hammock beneath the oaks in the heat of the day. To contemplate the evening's chores. To listen to the planes circling in the distance.

Humboldt County is logging country. It is the Redwood Empire, approximately 40 miles wide and 100 miles long, and most of it is under the control of the federal government—the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management—or worked by the big companies like Louisiana Pacific and Pacific Lumber (the town of Scotia, in fact, has the dubious distinction of being one of the last real company towns in America). The area has been economically depressed, for it has been a resource colony for the rest of the country, and its resources have diminished dramatically. Much of the population now exists on welfare, or social security, or the undependable largesse of a dwindling tourist trade.

In the late sixties young people from the bay area began buying up the land abandoned after the hills had been denuded of the redwood and fir. They started growing pot, developing exotic strains of cannabis suited to the excellent climatic conditions there. It was a good way to make land payments. Land values went up. They are still going up. In logging boom days, every block in the town had a saloon; now every corner has a real estate agency. The failing Hum-

boldt towns are beginning to boom again. The merchants aren't always courteous to the "hippies," but though it is hard for some of them to accept mores and styles of life that are foreign to them, it is almost impossible to ignore the economic benefits. At harvest time, the manager of the local Bank of America branch is absolutely beaming; you'd almost expect him to be handing out cigars.

IN 1978 STEVEN BALL WAS busted for cultivation. His attorney, Robert Cogan, presented an unusual case. He noted that the type of marijuana that had been legislated against was the hemp plant common to roadsides of the midwestern United States, *Cannabis sativa*. Cogan arranged to have a botanist testify that Ball's plants were grown from seeds endemic to the Middle East, *Cannabis indica*—not illegal under California law. The botanist testified that there are, in fact, three separate species of cannabis.

The charges were dismissed.

After the Ball case, there was a revival of the movement in the state legislature to make all cannabis strains illegal. The legislature sat on the proposal, as it had some years before.

Like the merchants of southern Humboldt, who are satisfied with a few symbolic busts, the legislature doesn't seem overly eager to expand its laws against a plant that the public seems, more and more, to be accepting as a part of American life. In Alaska, for instance, not only has possession been decriminalized, but cultivation for private use is allowed, though the law does restrict cultivation to three plants per person. It's hard to believe, however, that anyone up there is actually counting.

The Humboldt County sheriff's department, aided by the DEA, still makes raids. They took Bill's plants, despite the strain of seeds he used. But now they shy away from making arrests; successful prosecutions are rare, and the process is prohibitively expensive. The idea now seems to be to discourage the more flagrant growers by hitting them where it hurts—in the pocketbook—by simply confiscating the fruits of their labor. But with prices for sinsemilla climbing up to between \$1400 and \$2000 a pound, no one needs to grow so obviously anymore. Bill may grow between four and ten plants next year (figuring three-fourths of a pound per plant). Like farmers anywhere, he can't be sure what his yield will be. One thing he knows for sure: He won't be subsidized. The idea

wouldn't appeal to him anyway.

Humboldt County has found itself in the national limelight. Ironically, those who fled the cities for the freedom of the hills of northern California have discovered that the state's rip-off artists won't let them be. On the Ridge, we expect the planes that fly the grid patterns over our lands, photographing our homesteads with infra-red cameras, by early July. □

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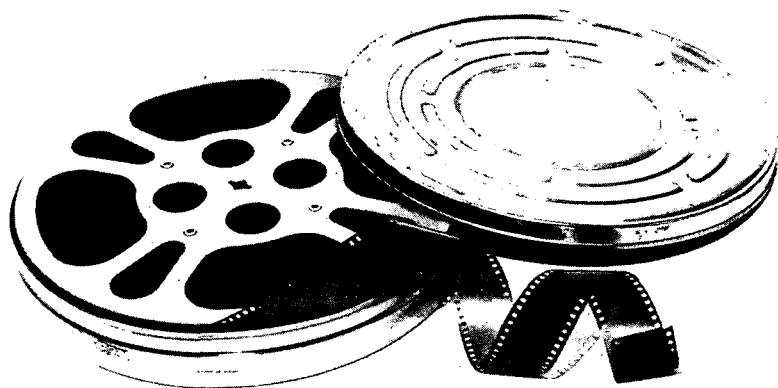
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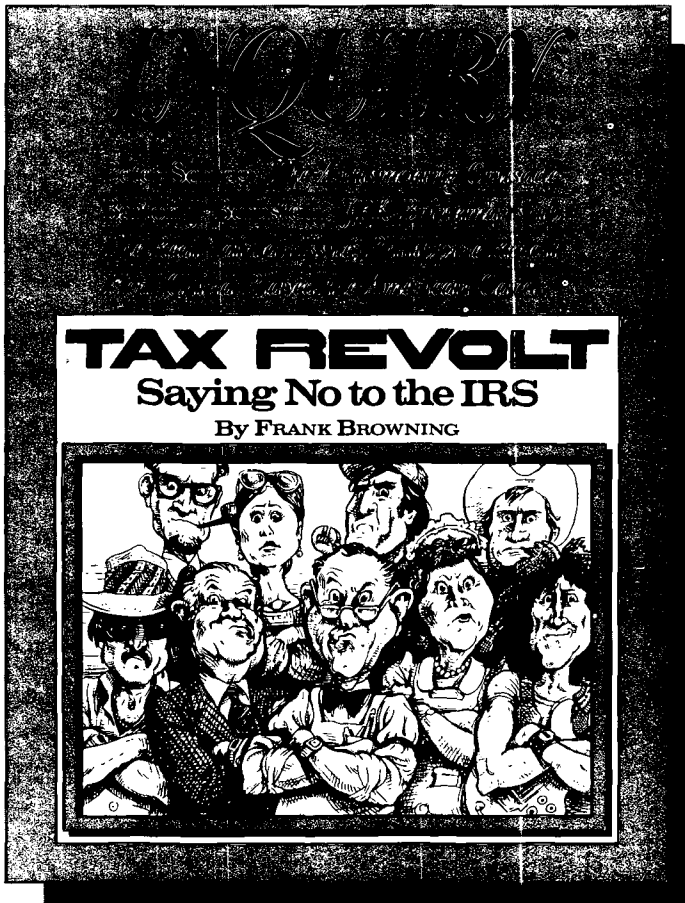
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