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I Think, and Lived
to Tell the Tale



Manson & Me

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by Michael Finley

I remember one day in 1969, in the spring. I and a bunch of college dropouts from the Midwest were living in a commune we had set up in the Vermont district of Los Angeles, a couple dozen or so blocks south of Hollywood.

Our commune was a spin-off of something called the Universal Life Church, a mail-order ministry run out of Modesto, California, which ordained anyone who sent in a postcard, without questions. The church was really little more than a

pretext to get together with friends and smoke pot. We weren't bad people, but we were foolish. One of our agenda items was ecclesiastical outreach, so every other weekend or so we made little trips to other Universal Life branches around southern California. One of our favorite places was a desert drop-in known only as Thompson's Chicken ranch, near Twenty Nine Palms in the Mojave Desert 100 miles away, which in turn was vaguely near to Palm Springs.

The first chance we got, we hitchhiked out there, to see if it made sense to align ourselves with the place.



This is the guy I met
in 1969.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch was a true desert commune, consisting of a gutted main house, a machine shed, a couple of lean-to's and a water tower that had water when it rained, which it never did.

We went out there perhaps three times during our months on L.A. The first time was on church business, ostensibly; the other times were just for fun.

Life on the ranch

The desert was an incredible place for Midwesterners on holiday. The crumbling ruined mountains, that looked older than Sinai, and twice as forbidding, sat right behind the ranch. Everywhere were Joshua trees and the braided branches of their dead. Yucca plants exploded at every arms-length. And under every rock, something living -- a gecko, a Gila monster, hornytoad, or a rattlesnake. It was Don Juan country, a fine, unforgiving place to surrender to the sun.

I have two main memories of Thompson's Chicken Ranch, one involving teenaged runaways, and one involving mass murderer Charles Manson. There is a third memory, involving an earthquake that destroyed all of California, and

us with it, but that will have to wait for another time.

The core population of the ranch was a small handful of men in breechclouts, as lean as jerky and about half as verbal, who lounged in the shadows in the daytime, and ventured out only at night. It says something that in all our visits to the place -- where we were regarded about as seriously as the Partridge Family -- we never learned any of their names. Indeed, I can't recall even having a conversation with anyone. We communicated mainly with grunts and far-out's. People just arrived, found a corner to crash in, and did their thing. It was not just that they were nonverbal, but that they were incurious, as if the sun had baked all the inquisitiveness out of them.

These guys were hard-core in their habits, and I would guess wealthy in their background. They had no visible means of support, they never lifted a finger for any other human being, yet they were up to their ears in high quality LSD, California red wine and ganja, and for their delectation a kind of underground railroad arrived every day with three or four or five high school girls in it.

Every morning that we stayed by the ranch, the local police would show

up and cart off the underaged girls that had been there the night before. It was not a big deal. The police would arrive promptly around 8:30 AM, would go to the back door and call out "Hello?" and would then roust the groggy 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds and lead them away, in various stages of dishevelment to the patrol car. In town, they would have the girls call their parents and arrange for their return. It might even have been the same girls each morning. I wasn't there enough times to say one way or the other.

Had this happened back in Ohio, it would have been a screaming scandal, with banner headlines in the local Republican rags. Here in California, with the Age of Aquarius already growing dog-eared in the desert sun, it was matter-of-fact. Daughters didn't belong with their families in the new age. That they were sent home every morning was a weary formality of a changed world.

Dave the deserter

Now, to the Manson trip. It was a weekend trip we Midwestern hippies undertook, plus Dave, a deserter who was living with us, and Sylvia, his girlfriend. We arrived at the Chicken Ranch on a Wednesday afternoon.

This particular trip, we traveled in a fairly new van that Dave had somehow acquired. Dave is another separate story. He was both a speed freak and a Jesus freak. He told us his mother died when he was eleven, and his daddy was already gone by then, back in the Texas panhandle somewhere, and he was left to raise his little brother by himself. Dave took to reading the Bible to his brother Jeremy every night, and dine on jackrabbits and quail he would shoot, and cornbread he would make from stolen ears.

It was an intense life, and they managed as best they could. But over the passage of months things began to go sour for the two boys, which Dave summed up by telling me that one day he nailed his little brother's hands to the bedroom door. It had something to do with a vision of Jesus, which he now thought the might not have got quite right.

Jeremy survived the ordeal, but he grew up to become an even bigger druggie than Dave, and Dave believed that, in addition to the FBI wanting him for slipping out of the Presidio brig one night and being seriously AWOL for eight months, hiw brothger Jeremy was also hot on his trail, with a head fill of hootch and the determination to repay Dave for the crucifixion.

But anyhoo

I say Dave got the Econoline van *somehow*, but it occurs to me as I write this that maybe Dave stole it. It looked bright and suburban and a little uncool that way, but it had a great tape deck. The album that spring was *Born on the Bayou*, by Credence Clearwater Revival, and we had it on the whole way. It was a record you could get lost in, like a high-powered boat in a backwater swamp, especially if you were high and, well, lost to begin with.

When we arrived at the Ranch we were even less welcome than usual. About thirty bikes were parked out front. So we drove past the house up a long skinny drive leading up toward the pile of rocks passing as a mountain range. We parked about 200 yards from the house, set up a lean-to against the truck, and got out.

Dave had a spy-glass, and he identified the bike group below us as the Sons of Troy, a fairly nondescript bunch of road losers. We went hiking through the rocks for about an hour, careful of rattlesnakes. When we returned, we could see that a second wave of bikers were arriving below us. Their jackets all said Hessians. I had heard of the Hessians, they were a large

and unruly group, bullies, of the sort (they were called the Beetles) who took over that town under Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin in *The Wild One*.

Manson arrives

Just then a poky humpbacked school bus began churning down the drive. I stopped by the house and a man got out, looked around, and almost immediately got back into the bus, and drove up toward our camp. This bus was painted black, and about 25 years old, with psychedelic painted hubcaps and scarves trailing from the back window.

The driver was a goofy-looking man with shortish hair. Also debarking was a short, intense, brown-haired and brown-eyed man who looked nervously at us, and without nodding, walked to the back of the bus and untied the emergency doors, which were connected with a strap of leather. About six girls were inside. I can't remember their faces, except for one straw-haired girl with a horsey sort of look to her.

Was this Charlie Manson? I can only say that, in retrospect, he looked exactly like the fellow who was soon in all the papers. The date was late March or early April, 1969. The Tate-La Bianca murders

happened the following August.¹ He was supposed to be holed up somewhere near Death Valley, about 100 miles away. The guy I met was driving a black schoolbus, just like Manson is said to have driven in accounts by Ed Sanders and Vincent Bugliosi. Finally, the goofy-looking driver before us now was a ringer for pictures I saw later of Tex Watson.

The Watson lookalike came over to us and asked if they could borrow our fire to make a fire of their own, about 50 feet away. While we were enjoying hot afternoon tea, a third group of bikers could be seen approaching on Highway 16. The Sons of Troy had beaten a hasty retreat about two hours earlier, over some turf disagreement with the Hessians. Dave took one look in the spy-glass and announced this was the Hell's Angels.

The battle rages

What followed was a fight. From afar, our theory was that the biker

¹ Odd coincidence. I was doing this in 1969. My wife Rachel, whom I would not meet until 1975, would make a trip to Poland in 1971. There she would meet, quite by accident, a filmmaker, the brother of Viktor Frykowski, one of the three victims of the Sharon Tate murders.

groups were all on different drugs. The Sons of Troy were probably potheads -- we could almost imagine ourselves, under slightly different circumstances, riding with them. The Hessians seemed like downers--n-red wine types, surly and a little fat in the gut. But the Hell's Angels were like Valkyries, streaking down from the LSD clouds to humble the drunken pretenders.

We saw flying kicks, tire irons, fistfights, sticks -- it was like a scene from a Western street fight, with the sun setting over to the west. The Angels were in control. They smashed a few bikes, and somehow got together a small pile of tires from the Hessian bikes and lit them up. The fire, and the clouds of black rubber smoke, rose high up over the desert plain.

The hero

Then, way down by the horizon line, about four miles away, we saw a little oscillating red light. It was a pick up truck with a tank of water mounted in back. It had a little siren, too, that made it sound sort of like an ice cream truck. It headed down the highway, and finally turned down the dirt drive leading to the ranch. We could hear the tires grind to a halt on the gravel, and the door open up, and standing in front of

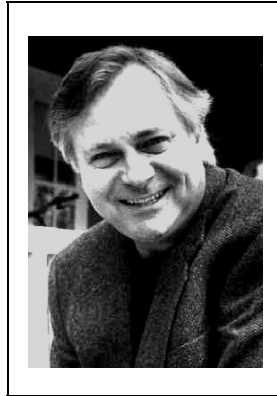
about a dozen bikers was this enormous, blonde-haired man, wearing suspenders, a plaid shirt, and a chin which we could even tell from two hundred yards away was cleft as though by an axe helve. He looked like a young Paul Bunyan.

He smiled at the bikers, turned on his hose, and doused the pile of flaming tires. In about ten minutes the fire was out, and he said goodbye, hopped back in his truck, and drove away.

It was an astounding performance, a triumph of a tiny water hose and a man of peace and great size over the armies of the night.

Manson's group was gone in the morning. They had packed up their black school bus and toddled off to their next destination. Throughout our time together, they neither killed us nor scrawled slogans on our van in our blood. We kept to our patch of the desert, they kept to theirs. My overall estimation of them was that, for that day and that place, they seemed like better than average neighbors.

About the Author



Michael Finley researches and writes about a host of topics relating to culture and change. His website “Future Shoes” is a treasure trove of

articles and essays about what we are becoming. Mike’s book with Harvey Robbins, *The New Why Teams Don't Work*, won the Booz-Allen & Hamilton Global Business Book Award for “Best Management Book, 1995, The Americas.” Mike enjoys the distinction of being named one of a handful of “Masters of the Wired World” in 1998 by Financial Times Press. Other nominees include Arthur C. Clarke, Nicholas Negroponte, Alvin Toffler, Charles Handy, Al Gore, Tony Blair, and Jim Barksdale.



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