



Living on the Faultline

By the time we got to Los Angeles, I had a pretty intricate notion of what I wanted to do with the church. It would function as a screen for an array of illegal or questionable and even entrepreneurial activities.

I even went to the downtown Los Angeles Public Library to research the sanctuary laws going back to the 17th century. You will recall from such stories as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *A Fistful of Dollars* that civil authorities were forbidden from seizing individuals to who had taken refuge in the church. In the Mexican version of these stories the church was then surrounded by soldiers who played the dirge of death or "Deguello" while they starved the besieged individual out.

This isn't the scenario I dwelt on, however. My Los Angeles was the Los Angeles of Jack Webb and Sergeant Friday. My fantasy had the LAPD coming to our pad, responding to a complaint, and banging on the door. Inside, all manner of debauchery would be taking place. When I open the door, I point to the sign: "24 HOUR RELIGIOUS SERVICES." Stunned and sputtering, the cops would then withdraw, and I would slink, chuckling, back into our den of smoky iniquity, I mean sacristy. It would be sweet.

Clearly, I was expecting the police to be like the Wooster police, or the Ohio National Guard unit we had disarmed, easily baffled, only 10,000 times more numerous.

Of course, LA was nothing like that. In the entire period we spent at the house on Vendome Street, no policed ever came to complain, about noise, or smoke, or whatever, despite the fact that we lived obnoxiously, insensitive to the needs of the Mexican-American family living just downstairs from us. It was not that we played music at airstrip deciblage at three in the morning -- it would have been rare for us to stay up that late, and we did not like our music especially loud -- but that there were a dozen of us at our peak, arriving at all hours, and acting like God's gift to the counterculture. I would have hated to live downstairs from us.

One weekend, Robert and I decided to make a pilgrimage to see Rev. Hensley, and we hitched up over the Grapevine and on to the Emerald Valley. We reached Modesto well after dark, and rapped on the reverend's aluminum trailer door. I expected a shining

visage to come to the door, but Rev. Hensley looked irritated, as if people had dropped in on him like this before.

"Rev. Hensley," I said. "We're Mike Finley and Robert Frank, ministers of your church. We operate a storefront church in Hollywood."

"I ain't got no room here to sleep," were the first words he said.

What did we care about that. "Not a problem, sir," I said. "We just wanted to meet you and get your blessing for our set-up."

"Yeah, OK. Uh, there's a county park about a half mile down that way. Police leave people alone if they have proper ID."

It was clear the Reverend was taxed by the legions of pilgrims and luminaries that made their way to his slab, so we thanked him for putting up with us, spent the night on a couple of picnic tables, and in the morning continued on our way.

The Big Bonito

Besides sanctuary, I had a hankering to play the theology card with my draft board back in Elyria, Ohio. I filed an application to be reclassified as 4-D, deferred for reasons of divinity, along with a cover letter written on stationery I created using a black-and-white linocut of two praying hands with radiating grace lines emanating from them.

Surely, I thought, no reasonable board member could fail to see the sincerity in the application. Or if they did miss the sincerity, they would be unable to

articulate why it was insincere. In either case I was home free, along with all the legitimate ministers of the United States, who were exempted by Congress for reasons of national security that I have never understood.

I remembered reading (again, from Paul Krassner's *Realist*) that a ploy of ultra-tricky draft evaders was to take advantage of some Selective Service regulation requiring the local draft board to hold onto all correspondence with individuals -- they were not allowed to pick and choose which items they might put in the permanent file, and which they might toss out. The rule was promulgated to protect draft-eligible young men from the filing caprices of their local draft boards. But it constituted a loophole for persons like myself who thought they were put on earth not to kill for their country but to amuse other draft dodgers.

So I walked the 20 blocks from Vendome Street to El Centro in downtown Los Angeles. It's a fabulous indoor bazaar of several hundred shops, from every nationality -- fish, vegetables, meats, spices -- muy autentico, like you never see in the Midwest.

I went up to the fish vendor and purchased the biggest, reddest bonito fish he had on ice -- an 8 pounder costing me almost six dollars. I carried it dripping in paper the 20 blocks to the church, attached a letter asking my local board to file this with my other materials, rewrapped it, plastered the butcher paper with stamps and dropped it in the corner mailbox.

I can't say how it played with my draft board, in Elyria, Ohio. They never sent me any statements to sign

about my divinity status. My guess is that they had a bulletin board somewhere, with an article about Rev. Hensley's church thumb-tacked up where everyone could see it, and a note -- BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THIS!

That would have been the sensible thing, but there was nothing sensible about the draft. Their job was to winnow out the good kids who deserved to live from the black and brown and poor white trash kids, who deserved to come back from their tour in hefty bags, wheelchairs, and straightjackets.

Of course, none of any of this mattered. Two months after I sent in my deferment statement, and one month after I sent in my fish, I was drafted. The people on the board must have looked at the stuff I sent and decided I, perhaps especially of the many thousands of local boys they sent off to suffer, could benefit from the experience. They surely did not keep the bonito in the file cabinet for perpetuity, as had been my expressed wish.

But I didn't learn my lesson because I had already hit the road again, leaving no forwarding address. By the time I got my draft notice, I missed my physical and my induction, and was, for all intents and purposes, AWOL.

Thompson's Chicken Ranch

We had two other brushes with the Universal Life Church. We learned from people on the street that a sister congregation of some note existed out in the Mojave Desert 100 miles away, near Twenty Nine Palms. The first chance we got, we hitchhiked out

there, to see if it made sense to align ourselves with the place.

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 ecclesiastical outreach; the other times were just for fun. 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 armsbreadth. 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 three main memories of Thompson's Chicken Ranch: one involving teenaged runaways, one involving mass murderer Charles Manson, and the third involving an earthquake that destroyed all of California, and us with it.

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 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.

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.

Charles Manson and the Sons of Troy

I remember one day's events very clearly and in chronological order. It was a weekend trip the six Midwesterners, plus Dave the deserter, and Sylvia, his girlfriend -- made to the Chicken Ranch.

This particular trip we traveled in a fairly new van that Dave had somehow come across. I say somehow, but it occurs to me now that 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 Creedence Clearwater Revival, and we had it on all the time. It was a record to get lost in, like a high-powered boat in a backwater swamp, especially if you were high and, well, lost anyway.

When we arrived 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."

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 Charles Manson? I can only say that, in retrospect, he looked like the fellow who was soon in all the papers. The date was late March or early April, 1969. The Tate-Labianca murders happened the following August. He was supposed to be holed up somewhere near Death Valley, about 100 miles away. He drove a black schoolbus, according to Ed Sanders and Vincent Bugliosi. The goofy-looking driver before us now was a ringer for pictures I saw later of Tex Watson.

Their group 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.

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

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 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. My recollection of them was that, for that day and that place, they seemed like OK neighbors.

Camping on the Faultline

As spring drew closer to 1969, rumors began circulating -- in the commune, at the book shop, on the street. A prophet named Edgar Cayce predicted that a earthquake would occur on Good Friday of that year, and it would wreak cataclysmic destruction on California. This rumor was repeated everywhere -- no one I knew knew which of Cayce's books it actually appeared in -- yet the corroboration from conversation to conversation was remarkable.

Rennie was the only person in our group who was scared at first. But since the other three of us were all in love with Rennie to one degree or another, and since we were all smoking pot and were extremely susceptible to frightening ideas, we began to invest in the principle of destruction as well. The capper came one night in March, when a traveling psychotic named Jedediah stopped at our fires, and told us, with dramatic, unblinking, unhumorous intensity, that he had seen a vision of our tattered paradise disappearing under the blue-capped waves of the Pacific.

We were stoned to the gills when he made this prediction, and we were never quite sensible on the subject again. I gave my notice to Pickwick. Rennie and Michael packed up our things -- stereo, records, clothes, guitar. Robert finished up at the ocean-in-a-bottle factory, then the two of us went to U-Haul and rented a van for the upcoming weekend. Thursday morning we loaded everything up and drove east to the Joshua Tree National Monument.

We camped along a stony outcropping a stone's throw from the Chicken Ranch -- we didn't want to be there in case bikers returned, or another group like Manson's. We put up a lean-to shelter of some tent stakes and bed sheets, and crouched next to rocks through the afternoon. At night we started a fire, sang songs, and speculated on the time that the earthquake would occur, whether we would be able to hear it from 150 miles away, etc.

Morning came, and the sun began its slow ascent. By noon we were baking in the sun. By two in the afternoon we were dizzy from the heat. By three we were starting to wonder about our ability to survive through the quake. But after three, we decided it had probably happened, and that it was too far away for us to have felt. We walked down the outcropping, down to the highway, then walked another two miles to a filling station, and plunked quarters into the Coke machine.

A genuine desert old timer was watching us from the counter. He had a radio on, and it was playing something pretty square. I asked him if there was any news from Los Angeles.

"Los Anagaleze? I don't think so. What are you expectin'?"

"We heard there might be some sort of earthquake."

"Gee, not that I heared. Here, let's get a city station on for you." He spun the tuner and played a few seconds of several metro stations. Business as usual on the airwaves.

"Where'd you hear about this earthquake?"

"We heard that there was going to be a Good Friday earthquake, that the San Andreas Fault would come apart and California would slide into the ocean."

The old man laughed. "San Andreas, you say? Hee hee hee!" He pointed up toward the outcropping we had walked down along. "You see that line up there, going on up into the Monument? That's your San Andreas

faultline right there. If there was an earthquake, a big one I mean, well, everything along that line'd probably just disappear. We'd be the first to know about it."

We all looked at each other. We had parked about fifty feet from the fault line we were fleeing from.

We drove back into Los Angeles with heavy hearts. Sure, there was probably a silver lining to the failure of the earthquake to destroy California and kill millions, but we couldn't see what it was, not yet. We had all lost our jobs, given notice on the flat where we worshiped, and had no money. Worst of all, now we would have to pay for the van rental.