

Feature: Case cracked

Feature Apr 20, 2016

The Waldos, originators of '420,' find missing link to story



The Waldos, originators of the term '420,' searched week after week for a secret cannabis patch planted by a Coast Guardsman in Point Reyes in 1971.

By Molly Oleson

No sooner has Waldo Dave settled into a corner table at Mill Valley's Depot Bookstore & Cafe, his back to the windows that separate the indoor tables from the outdoor patio, when a loud *thud!* behind his left shoulder startles him. He whips around to see Waldo Steve's face smooshed up against the glass. The two men—both in their early 60s, friends of more than 45 years—laugh as Waldo Steve peels his face away and heads inside, leaving behind a drizzly April morning and a contorted imprint.

He grabs a chair, sits down and pats an envelope that contains 167 pages of officially embossed United States Coast Guard records. "This was the ultimate goal," he says of the highly anticipated mail that arrived three weeks ago but took years of searching to obtain.

"This is what slams the door shut on everyone who says that our story is a bunch of bull," Waldo Dave says.

As the story goes, in the fall of 1971, "five wise-cracking friends"—Steve, Dave, Mark, Larry and Jeff, who called themselves the Waldos after a wall they hung out on in between classes at Marin County's San Rafael High School—were given a hand-drawn map to a secret patch of cannabis in Point Reyes. The crop had been planted—and the map leading to it drawn—by a Coast Guard reservist named Gary Newman. Newman, brother-in-law of Bill McNulty, a friend of the Waldos who gave them the map, was said to have been paranoid about getting busted for planting the cannabis on federal property.

The Waldos were determined to find the patch. Week after week, they planned to meet at 4:20pm at a campus statue of Louis Pasteur. They'd get high, jump in Waldo Steve's 1966 Chevy Impala, listen to its "killer" eight-

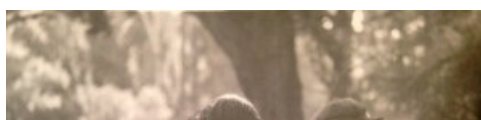




Photo courtesy of the Waldos.

track stereo and head to the Point Reyes coast in search of the treasure. “It was always like Cub Scout field trips,” Waldo Steve says of the group’s Waldo Safaris. “Except we were stoned.”

The Waldos never found the patch. But “420 Louis”—and later, simply “420,”—became their secret code for pot. Today, the Waldos’ three-digit code has become mainstream universal slang for all things cannabis. Every year, April 20 (4/20) is the date of 420 festivals, 420 races, 420 Olympics and 420 college campus “smokeouts.” There are 420 publications, 420 beers, “420-friendly” real estate ads and a California Senate Bill No. 420. The list goes on.

The Waldos, who describe their high school selves as intelligent, fit guys who were “seekers” rather than “stupid, slacker stoners,” live throughout Marin and Sonoma and work in fields ranging from financial services to independent filmmaking to the wine industry. Waldo Steve and Waldo Dave, the “talking heads” of the group, agreed to meet me prior to the annual worldwide pot holiday to share their story. It’s a busy time of year for them.

“By the way, *The Huffington Post* just called,” Waldo Steve tells Waldo Dave as he flips through a heavy-duty blue binder that contains hundreds of references to 420 culture in newspaper and magazine articles from the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *National Geographic*, *Time*, *Esquire* and dozens more, records of dissertations on the sociological aspects of 420 and documented proof of conversations, handwritten eyewitness accounts, references to the marijuana map and copies of letters from the early ’70s—all supporting the Waldos’ claims that they were the very first people to use the term “420.”

“Actually, we’re the centerfold in this one,” Waldo Dave jokes, pointing to a cover of *Playboy*.

The two men (who could be stand-up comedians) enthusiastically exchange inside jokes, noises, secret words, one-liners and impersonations. Their banter is a glimpse into the wild, adventurous world of the Waldos—intertwined with the beauty and the freewheeling counterculture of Marin in the ’70s. A golden era, they call it.

The Waldos don’t know what became of the map that revealed the Point Reyes cannabis patch. But “everything else” is preserved in a high-security bank safety deposit vault in San Francisco’s Financial District. One letter, written by Waldo Dave and sent to Waldo Steve after he had left Marin for college, reads, *My brother is Phil Lesh’s [of the Grateful Dead] manager, and last weekend I had a job as a doorman backstage at a concert. I smoked out with David Crosby and Lesh ... p.s. A little 420 enclosed for your weekend.*

Another, from a friend who had also left Marin and was living in Israel, informs the Waldos that there’s “no 420 here.”

“It was an original little joke that turned into a worldwide phenomenon,” Waldo Dave says.

Cannabis culture

It’s 4:20pm in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, and puffs of smoke drift from groups of young people gathered on “Hippie Hill,” known among potheads as *the* place to light up. A drum circle provides a fast-paced, background beat, and an older guy dances, hands clapping above his head.

Next to a grove of eucalyptus trees, three friends pass a joint around. When asked what 420 means to them, the one with long, dark dreadlocks proves that he’s adopted the Waldos’ secret code as his own. “Usually means it’s time to smoke,” he says with a crooked smile.

Do they know where the term comes from?

“If I can remember correctly, it was a group of high school kids who would meet at 4:20 to smoke,” says another. “My mom told me that.”

Dave recalls: “In about 1995 or so we started seeing ‘420’ carved into benches and spray-painted on signs, and we said, ‘Hey, what’s

happening here? This is starting to evolve. We've gotta start looking into this thing, you know?"

Waldo Steve remembers Waldo Larry telling him that he was seeing more and more 420 paraphernalia— "more hats, more T-shirts, more everything."

I better get the story straight, he said to himself.

A phone call to *High Times* magazine—"the definitive resource for all things marijuana"—resulted in the publication's editor immediately flying to California to meet the Waldos and verify their claims.

Following the original 1998 article in *High Times*, the origin story of 420 spread to other publications, one by one. "I think after the internet became big around 2000, then it started snowballing," Waldo Dave says.

Ever since, the Waldos have fiercely defended their version of events, agreeing to meet journalists at their vault, get on camera and trek out to Point Reyes.

When asked how many hours they've devoted to documenting their story, Waldo Steve answers quickly and assuredly: "Thousands."

"People keep trying to twist the story," Waldo Steve says, noting the naysayers "come out of the woodwork" each year to attack and discredit the Waldos' story, or claim to have coined the term "420" themselves.

"There's so many of 'em you can't keep track of 'em," Waldo Dave says. "It's pretty hilarious. We've created a whole generation of 420 claimers now."

"It's such a fabled thing," Waldo Steve adds. "People want to be part of a fable."

"We've had people saying they thought our story was a fairytale," Waldo Dave says, noting their recent search for the Point Reyes Coast Guardsman who made the map. "So we said, 'Hey—we'll go *find* this guy. We may not be able to find him, but we're gonna try.'"

The missing link

The search for Gary Newman began six years ago. It was never easy. There were false starts, dead-ends, unanswered phone calls, unanswered letters and "no show" meetings in San Jose, where the Waldos had leads that the Coast Guardsman could be living.

"I was getting worried," Waldo Steve says. "I was thinking, 'God, this guy could die, and I'll never get his side of the story.'"

More searching led to *piles* and *piles* of databases, and more dead-ends. Finally, the Waldos received a reply from Gary's friend Carol, and found out that Gary most likely did not have a permanent residence.

"Somebody had to get into the streets," Waldo Steve says of the search. For a reasonable price, he hired Bay Area private investigator Julie Jackson.

"He said he needed to find a guy that was basically homeless," Jackson says of Waldo Steve in a recorded interview. "It was like a needle in a haystack."

Although she had little information to go on, Jackson was fascinated by the history of the Waldos that was presented to her. She informed the San Jose Police Department about what she was up to, in case she needed backup, created a perimeter map of where Gary might be located and started reaching out to people who might know him.

"Usually I don't take cases like that," Jackson says. "But this one was too good to pass up."

The phone call

Months after getting a hold of Gary's friend Carol but not hearing anything, Waldo Steve was traveling in a Texas "ghost town" near Big Bend National Park. "Big thunderstorms," he says. "Cracks of lightning."

He and his brother Norm were the only people in a little emptied-out Mexican restaurant and saloon. "And between cracks of thunder, I

He and his brother Norm were the only people in a little empty-out Mexican restaurant and saloon. And between cracks of thunder, I get a phone call.”

Who could be calling me in the middle of nowhere, he thought to himself.

“This is Carol, I’m Gary’s caretaker,” the woman on the line said.

“And I could hear Gary goin’ [*imitating his raspy voice*], ‘I can remember everything about the Coast Guard!’” Waldo Steve says. “It was like, ‘Whoahh!’”

“Major breakthrough,” Waldo Dave says. “He’s *aliiive!*”

What seemed to be a hot trail led to months of more unreturned phone calls, unanswered letters and no-show meetings. And then, suddenly, everything changed. There was a date, a meeting spot and a time. Gary showed up.

“Gary, we’ve been looking for you for *so long!*” Waldo Dave yelled when he first saw him.

As it turned out, the Coast Guardsman who had played such a large role in the Waldos’ story, and in what developed in following years, was homeless and living on the streets of San Jose. The Waldos paid for their



The five Waldos were recently reunited with former Coast Guardsman Gary Newman (center, white beard), who verified the story of the cannabis patch map. Photo courtesy of the Waldos.

new friend to stay in a San Jose hotel during the Super Bowl, so that he could watch the game. There, they interviewed him to make sure that all records and accounts matched up.

“Gary had *no idea* what he started,” Waldo Steve says, referring to 420. “I thought it’d be better for him to show us everything,” He rounded up the Waldos, Gary, Carol, Jackson, Patrick McNulty (brother of the late Bill McNulty), and headed out to the Point Reyes Lighthouse, where Gary had been stationed. In a short video made by Waldo Dave, Gary talks passionately about his time there.

The official Coast Guard records that the Waldos sent away for—and received three weeks before our interview—describe a decorated, life-saving Coast Guardsman. Finally meeting him after 45 years, the Waldos say, was like a reunion with a relative they never knew. And through the kindness of someone who Waldo Dave describes as “having a heart of gold,” Gary is no longer homeless.

“And now we’re like some big, happy family,” Waldo Steve says.

The fun never stops

Waldo Steve says that with Gary Newman’s official Coast Guard records in hand, and an eyewitness account of his time at Point Reyes, the 420 naysayers of the internet will hopefully be silenced.

“I don’t think it’ll be finished,” Waldo Dave says. “There’ll still be people saying, ‘Oh, that’s not true.’ But you know, they’re entitled to their own opinions; we have the *facts*.”

Are the Waldos done searching for more proof of their claims?

At some point, Waldo Steve says, he may take some of the Waldos' evidence to a museum or an auction house that offers forensics, to get an approximate date of creation.

"That'd probably be the last thing we can come up with, right?" Waldo Dave says.

"I don't know," Waldo Steve says with a laugh.

"I guess we could find that missing roach from 1971," Waldo Dave jokes. "Underneath the seat [of the Impala]." He holds up an imaginary roach. "This is proof!"

The Waldos say that in 45 years they haven't made a penny off of their story. But that was never their intention anyway—they were just a bunch of hippies running around, oblivious to the idea that their secret code would one day have such far-reaching ripples.

They're regular, working guys, Waldo Steve says, noting that they have wives, kids, jobs, commitments and bills to pay.

"We're not doing this to be celebrities," Waldo Dave says. "We're just doing this to set the record straight." The evidence, they say, will probably be in a museum someday.

"We don't look too deep," Waldo Steve says of what the group started in 1971. "We just think it's funny. And we think it's funny when people do look deep."

"It's like when they tried to find out what the Beatles were saying by turning records backwards, and things like that," Waldo Dave says, laughing.

After the excitement surrounding April 20, they'll sit back, watch how their secret code—and all things cannabis—evolves. And they'll keep on laughing.

"Sometimes," Waldo Steve says, "I'll get a message from Dave, and it'll just be a bunch of wild screaming and antics. We remind each other that we're all kinda nutty-crazy, that we're all there for each other in this crazy, mixed-up world."



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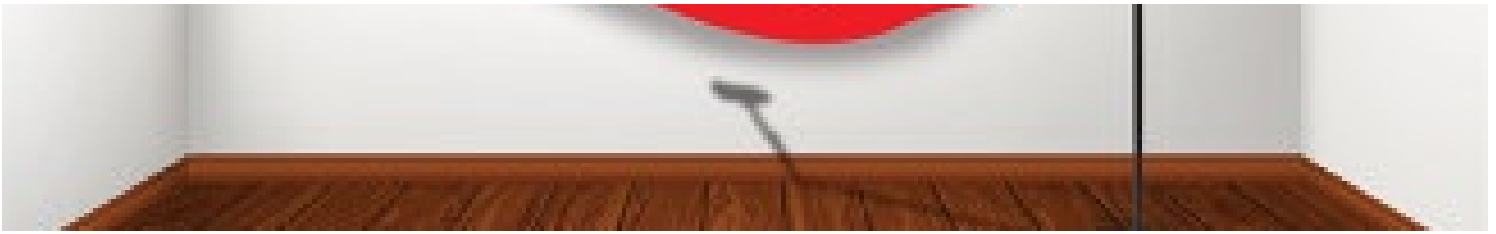
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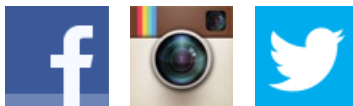
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