

## Local originators of term 420 solve 45-year-old mystery

By **Alyssa Pereira** Updated 8:23 am, Wednesday, April 20, 2016



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The 420 flag, pictured here, was made by a friend of the Waldos named Patty Young in the 1970s. The phrase "EYOT" at the top was mostly meaningless, but it became used as a substitute for 'It's all too weird ... [more](#)

In the 1970s, it was a treacherous task for high schoolers to obtain marijuana.

"Back then we spent every day of our lives worrying about getting busted. Going to buy was a really secret thing," Steve Capper says. That was paranoia, but it also made for an energy-charged brotherhood of outlaws, avoiding the law."

Capper, a man who now works in the financial services industry in San Francisco, was once one-fifth of a group calling themselves the Waldos, a coterie of companions at San Rafael High School generally considered to be behind the term "420."

While many believe that the famous phrase 420 was associated with some sort of

police code for marijuana, that's not the case. Actually, it began as a secret language mumbled in school hallways to communicate a post-class smoke session, and since then, it has taken on the form of a bona fide national phenomenon. However, as the guys remember it, almost 50 years ago when the term was born, it was just a friendly pastime with friends; a reference to post-class trips during which they'd seek a treasure trove of marijuana mysteriously up for the taking somewhere in Point Reyes.

This is where most people stop believing the story. As it goes, forty-five years ago, the Waldos were given a treasure map. Fantastic and preposterous as it may seem, the Waldos have always contended that the brothers that passed it over to them promised with it a stoner's paradise where the "X" marked the spot: a free crop of marijuana, ready for the taking.

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For the next few weeks, the Waldos would catch each other's eyes in the hallways, uttering simply "420 Louis." It was a secret code, an invitation to meet at 4:20 p.m. after their sports practices, at the statue of Louis Pasteur in front of the school. Then, the "safari" would begin and they'd take off towards the Point Reyes Coast Guard Station in a '66 Chevy Impala in search of the stash.

The grower of the weed, it turned out, was a coast guardsman named Gary Newman, stationed on the peninsula. He was the brother-in-law to the Waldos' buds who first delivered them the sacred map. Newman and some other friends had planted the weed for personal use, but they soon began to grow suspicious that their overseeing officers might bust them. So, to get rid of the evidence, Newman made a map for those interested to come harvest.

The Waldos never found the marijuana, and eventually they reluctantly pushed the mystery aside, but the phrase 420 stuck, just like the name Waldos — a reference to the wall where they met between classes.

"We'd hang out there, make fun of people going by, doing imitations and joking around, and that was kind of our hang out," fellow Waldo and current independent filmmaker Dave Reddix tells SFGATE. "So we just started calling each other Waldos."

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The phrase 420, meanwhile, was just another "little joke," as Reddix says.

But if it was a joke, it was one that everyone else soon learned, including some members of the Grateful Dead, as well as band mates in Phil Lesh's side projects, Too Loose Ta Truck and Sea Stones.

While Reddix isn't sure that Lesh or other musicians like David Crosby first heard 420 from his own mouth or from his brother's (who managed a couple of Lesh's other bands), it does seem probable. After all, the Waldos tended to hang out backstage at many of the Dead's shows. The father of Waldo Mark, who today often works as a photographer and renovator in the real estate sector, helped the Dead find the band space for rehearsals and shows, making sure to add the Waldos to pertinent guest lists.

"For a young man around 18 or 19 around these guys, it was pretty overwhelmingly fun," Reddix remembers. "We'd shoot some hoops and get high and listen to the Dead playing and practicing inside this warehouse."

And though the Waldos never knew for sure where the Dead picked up the phrase, the bigger mystery was always the answer to the map.

Until 2016.

After a six year hunt beginning in 2010, "hundreds" of unanswered cold calls, and the hiring of a private investigator, they **finally found Newman**. Though homeless in the San Jose area, he agreed to meet them, 45 years after he penned the legendary treasure map.

When they finally met, it was Super Bowl weekend, but the Waldos were able to put him up in lodging for a couple days while they interviewed him about the map.

But of the revelations and stories exchanged (which you can read about **more in-depth here**), one of the most memorable moments came when Capper went to pay the bill. "I go to the motel owner, and ask how much is [the room]," he recalls. "He says including tax, it's **exactly \$420 dollars.**"

And now, almost 50 years after the Waldos were first handed the map, 420 has a life of its own, far away from San Rafael. It permeates many areas of pop culture, including music, **TV shows, government bills, Craigslist ads**, and even beer labels.

Lagunitas Brewing in Petaluma, for example, has for years crafted a "Waldos" triple IPA in its namesake's honor. Brewers have even asked some Waldos to select hops for the beer based on which they believe smells the most like marijuana. The Untappd app has even developed a **special game** attached to the Lagunitas beer's check-in.

"[The Waldos'] legacy lives on and we just get to participate in it on a slightly different level than before," Lagunitas spokesperson Karen Hamilton tells SFGATE. "Who would have guessed that a few short years after making Waldos' Special Ale for the first time, there would be states that have legalized marijuana and an entirely new shift in attitudes and thinking about it all across the country?"

But though the brewery uses "420" for a light-hearted specialty beer, there are some people that take the term very seriously. Mentioning that they've heard of at least one Ph.D. candidate who has based studies on the etymology and spread of the word, they note that some people have built careers using the word.

For most people though, the word's usage is just recreational. "It's humorous, it's amusing," Capper says. "For a large part of people, it's just fun."

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