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COLUMN ONE; The Inside Dope on '420' Buzz; * When, where and why did innocuous numbers become a sly reference to 'pot smoker'? Its history is hazy but the smoke may finally be clearing on the real story.
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Today is Saturday, April 20. Dude! Do you have any idea what that means?

Brad Olsen does. For three years the 36-year-old entrepreneur has been trying to get today's date into alignment with his annual How Weird Street Faire, a celebration of, among other things, peace, music, tech, the counterculture and space aliens. This year—just as the energy drink Red Bull pulled out as festival sponsor, leaving him short of promotional funding—Olsen finally scored the calendrical convergence that means so much to so many in his target demographic.

"I mean, that date, that number, four-twenty, just resonates with—" he suddenly paused, considering whether to just blurt it out: dope smokers. Finally he laughed, "That date's just embedded now in stoner lingo. Which was why I wanted it."

In a phenomenon that has turned a snippet of street slang into an almost mainstream sales gimmick, the number 420—and its temporal counterparts, 4:20 and 4/20—have quietly risen from the lexicon of marijuana users to become countercultural marketing tools. Never mind that pot remains a controlled substance, that court battles rage over the legality of medical marijuana, that the Bush administration has linked drug use to the support of international terrorist networks.

"Four-twenty"—once an obscure Bay Area term for pot—is showing up nationally in the advertisements and business names of concert promoters, travel agencies, even high-tech companies.

Atlanta's Sweetwater Brewing Co., launched six years ago by a group of entrepreneurs in their 20s, sells its 420 Pale Ale in supermarkets and opens its doors to the public at 4:20 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. New York's 420 Tours sells low-cost travel packages to the Netherlands and Jamaica. Highway 420 Radio broadcasts "music for the chemically enhanced" online.

The founders of Sacramento-based 420net.com, meanwhile, chose their name not because their start-up, which specializes in Web servers, has a party angle, but because their target customers are online game players—a group that tends to be male, single, young and hip to adolescent underground lingo. Kris Greenough, a 23-year-old co-founder, conceded that if the reference was intentionally misleading, it was also "catchy, shall we say."

The hook extends, as well, to the event business. Scores of countercultural-themed gatherings are scheduled nationally for today, from a Washington, D.C., rally against the war on terrorism to the national convention of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws in San Francisco's Union Square. The Bay Area alone has slated at least half a dozen events, including the Cannabis Action Network's 6th Annual 420 Hemp Fest, an ad hoc smoke-in on Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County and a "420" night at a Mission District bar, featuring glass pipe vendors and a nurse who home-delivers organic pot brownies.

San Francisco Police Inspector Sherman Ackerson says the department won't be cracking down, due to the city's "laissez-faire" stance on pot possession. Drug abuse prevention groups, not surprisingly, are less nonchalant about it. Last year, the forReal.org Web site of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Substance Abuse Prevention put out a public service document titled, "It's 4:20—Do You Know Where Your Teen Is?"

"The 420 icon is very well recognized in the subculture of marijuana users, and now it is being used very skillfully to brand," said Alvera Stern, who heads the center's federal division of prevention, application and education. The mainstreaming of terms like "420," she said, gives the false impression that pot smoking is socially acceptable and widespread.

"It gives credence to a marijuana user's perception that everyone is doing it, in spite of data from four major national surveys showing the majority of people have never used marijuana in their lives," Stern said.

But, at least in some cases, the "420" hook is less about getting high than about getting attention.

"I don't want my thing to be a big smoke-out," said Olsen, who has hired private security guards to make sure his expected crowd of 3,000 revelers doesn't do anything too blatantly illegal. "But it's a memorable date: 'The How Weird Street Faire. 420.' Boom. That makes an impression. And I need an impression, because this thing costs \$3,000 to \$5,000 on the front end and I don't have much of a marketing budget this year."

How a random three-digit number became a pot euphemism is, in itself, a story. Either that, or something from the annals of Cheech & Chong.

Links between youth culture and the number surfaced after the April 20, 1999, Columbine massacre, when some postulated that the shooters chose the date of their rampage to coincide either with Hitler's birthday or some date of unspecified importance to teenage youth culture. Well before that, however, pager-toting suburban adolescents throughout the country used the three digits as a code for smoking marijuana. And in 1991, High Times magazine, a staunch promoter of the 420 phenomenon, published an item on a flier that a staffer found circulating at a Grateful Dead concert in Oakland: "WAKE 'N' BAKE. Smoke Pot At 4:20," the flier reportedly said.

The term, however, appears to have been coined long before then, according to those who have tracked it. Stern, for example, says she heard it as long

ago as the late 1980s, when she was working with young people in a Pennsylvania drug treatment facility. Ron Angier, field supervisor for the Marin District of California State Parks, has recollections that are older still, from his first days as a park ranger 22 years ago on Mt. Tamalpais.

"Crowds of teenagers just started showing up on the mountain at 4:20 p.m. on April 20," Angier said. "Maybe a thousand kids went up one year to Bolinas Ridge, this open vista that overlooks the Pacific Ocean and Stinson Beach."

At first, he said, the authorities viewed it as a harmless spring- fever ditch day or, later, a perhaps-overly-enthusiastic Earth Day observation. But soon the annual al fresco smoke-in clogged the two-lane mountain roads with parked cars. "Occasionally we'd have injuries, either from accidents or overdoses," said Angier. "We started having to close down the mountain because it was becoming unsafe."

Finally, in the mid-1990s, the pilgrimage dissipated, to the point that Angier, who now supervises the Mt. Tamalpais ranger station, plans no increase in park enforcement this year. The reason?

"Well, I think this generation has more to do than to just run up to Mt. Tam and get loaded," Angier said. "Also 420 is a nationwide thing now. The events are all over, not just here."

That still doesn't explain what the number 420 has to do with marijuana. One theory holds that there are exactly 420 chemical components in marijuana. (Untrue, say the experts). Another is that when the Grateful Dead toured, they always stayed in Room 420. (Also untrue, says Grateful Dead Productions spokesman Dennis McNally.)

"My kids' little skateboard friends in Oregon used to tell me that 420 was police code for a pot bust," laughed Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Adams, a former wife of the Dead's late guitarist Jerry Garcia, repeating yet another popular, but inaccurate, theory.

"But I never heard the term before the 1990s," she said, speaking by cell phone from a park bench in Colorado, where she had gone to catch the tour of String Cheese Incident, a Dead-inspired jam band.

"We always just said, you know, 'joints' or 'doobies,' or 'Js' or whatever. 'Four-twenty' was a '90s thing that traveled the way hula hoops and Frisbees traveled, along the youth net. Via the hackey-sack crowd."

In fact, the only documented story behind the 420 phenomenon is the most comically mundane one, starring a group of now-middle-aged former slackers at San Rafael High School in 1971. One—now a commercial lender in San Francisco—told the story on condition that he be referred to only by his first name, Steve.

"I have a lot of clients in L.A., I'm 47 years old, I don't smoke anymore and I run an \$80-million-a-year business," the wiry father of one said, sitting in a small, cubicle-filled office on the 12th floor of a Financial District high-rise.

His desk was filled with snapshots of his 6-year-old daughter, his suit was pinstriped and his filing cabinet sported a plaque from the Better Business Bureau. The only evidence of his assertion that "I'm still an old hippie" was the pair of sneakers he wore around the office instead of the dress shoes he kept under his desk, for meetings.

Few of his old friends, he said, still smoke pot with much frequency. (One, now a Marin County father of two who is a sales representative for a Burbank-based notions company, said in a later phone interview that the last time he got the urge, he had to hide in the garage so his wife and kids wouldn't see him.)

The men said they didn't mind telling their story for posterity, but at this point in their lives, they have too much at stake to speak for attribution. "As my wife says, 'Where's the upside?'" laughed Steve.

In any case, Steve said, in 1971, a friend approached them one day at school with a map of Marin County. "He said his brother-in-law was in the Coast Guard and had planted a patch of weed out on the Point Reyes Peninsula, but believed his C.O. was onto him, and he didn't want to get busted. So he had offered it to our friend, who was offering it to us."

The group agreed to meet that afternoon after school at 4:20 p.m. by a campus statue of Louis Pasteur, he said, and head out to search for the marijuana patch. "But one thing led to another," he laughed, "and suffice it to say we never found it. Every day we'd meet at 4:20 by this statue, and every day we'd just end up getting high and driving around for hours." Over time, the mere phrase "four-twenty"—exchanged in a hallway, or discreetly mentioned in the presence of teachers and parents—became their personal code for "time to get high," he said.

Steve and his friends went off to college—mostly at San Diego State and Cal State San Luis Obispo—but their secret code lived on in Marin County, preserved by younger brothers and friends. "We have postmarked letters we wrote to each other from the early '70s with all kinds of references to '420,'" Steve said. Gradually, he said, the term was picked up by local teenagers, and then by Deadheads, who are legion in Marin County.

"By the mid-1990s," he said, "we started seeing it all over. We couldn't believe it—it was on hats, T-shirts, record labels, cleaning solutions, all over the Internet."

Intrigued, he said, he logged onto a High Times magazine Web site, found the reference to the Grateful Dead flier, and contacted Steven Hager, the magazine's editor-in-chief. Though he did at one point do some research to find out whether the term was trademarked (it is, by various entities for various products), "We weren't looking for money," he said. "We never got a penny, and that wasn't my goal—I already have a successful business. But I e-mailed him anyway and said, 'This is the story. It's not police code, it has nothing to do with Hitler's birthday or chemical compounds, and I have the postmarked letters to prove it. It was just a joke. Just a joke! And now stoners have turned it into some kind of holiday.'"

High Times eventually did an article in late 1998 on the friends, who stay in touch and still refer to themselves by their old high school gang name, "the Waldos." But by then, the term had taken on a life—and a lore—of its own.

Last year, when the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws took up the 420 banner—announcing that April 20 was "Stoner's New Year," that its national conference would, from then on, be held on 4/20 and that 4:20 p.m. was to pot smokers "what Miller Time has become to beer drinkers—some legalization advocates predicted the exposure would instantly kill the 420 phenomenon with uncoolness. Instead, according to those who have capitalized on it, it has merely followed the natural evolution of all that is trendy in a capitalist market.

"Eighty million Americans have smoked marijuana at some point in their lives, according to government figures. That's one out of three people," noted NORML executive director Keith Stroup, pointing to the same studies the government's Stern used to note that two out of three people haven't used it.

"This idea of 420 being a 'secret code' is kind of funny, when you think that a third of the population is in on the secret. We're going to be selling tickets to our 420 party at \$50 a pop—that's how mainstream we think it is."

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: Entrepreneur Brad Olsen, organizer of the How Weird Street Faire in San Francisco, is ecstatic at being able to hold it today: 4/20; PHOTOGRAPHER: RANDI LYNN BEACH / For The Times

Credit: TIMES STAFF WRITER

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