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Like, Wow, Man, They Invented Some Stoner Chic

Mystery term started in San Rafael

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Today is April 20, and the significance of the date could be religious or infamous, depending on whom you ask.

But for many who describe themselves as members of the counter-culture, April 20 — or 4/20 — is a day to celebrate the pleasures of altered consciousness, loosen the bonds of convention and, in short, slack off and smoke a lot of pot.

This afternoon, as the clock strikes 4:20 p.m., thousands of people across the United States will be gathered on college campuses, in city parks, private homes and on mountain tops to observe what some refer to as “the stoner’s New Year,” or “Miller Time for hippies.”

In San Francisco, the Fourth Annual 420 Hemp Fest will kick off at 4 p.m. at Maritime Hall, and in Marin County, revelers plan to gather atop Mount Tamalpais for a ritual smoke-out. In Ann Arbor, students at the University of Michigan will have their annual Hash Bash, and in Washington, D.C., legalization activists will kick off a fund-raiser for their yearly Fourth of July smoke-in in front of the White House.

If you’ve never heard the term 420 (that’s “four-twenty,” not “four hundred and twenty”) used in quite this way, you’re not hip — but you’re not alone. The term has eluded the understanding of those in the straight-and-narrow world for nearly 30 years.

And if you do know what 420 refers to, odds are that you have no idea where the term came from. Ever since 420 became an insider’s catchphrase in the 1970s, theories as to its origin have multiplied like Starbucks outlets, raising it to the level of urban myth.

“It has become a giant urban

myth and it’s a lot of fun,” said attorney Keith Stroup, executive director of the National Organization to Reform Marijuana Laws, or NORML. “Folks who smoke have a lot of fun with this code word, and the rest of the country doesn’t know what the hell we’re talking about.”

Devotees will insist that 420 is the penal code section for marijuana use, or the police radio code for marijuana smoking in progress, or the number of chemical compounds in marijuana, or that April 20 is the date that Jim Morrison died. Unless it was Jimi Hendrix, or was that Janis Joplin?

All these theories, and dozens more, are wrong, wrong, wrong.

For the record, 420 of the California penal code refers to obstructing entry on public land. The number is not a police radio code, and the number of chemical compounds in marijuana is 315, according to the folks at High Times magazine, who should know. Morrison died on July 3, Hendrix on September 18, and Joplin on October 4.

According to Steven Hager, editor of High Times, the term 420 originated at San Rafael High School, in 1971, among a group of about a dozen pot-smoking wisecracks who called themselves the Waldos. The term 420 was shorthand for the time of day the group would meet, at the campus statue of Louis Pasteur, to smoke pot.

“Waldo Steve,” a member of the group who now owns a business in San Francisco, says the Waldos would salute each other in the school hallway and say “420 Louis!”

“It was just a joke, but it came to mean all kinds of things, like ‘Do you have any?’ or ‘Do I look stoned?’” he said. “Parents and teachers wouldn’t know what we were talking about.”