

The Review, 250 Student Center University of Delaware Newark, DE 19716

4:20

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April is a holy month.

Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus by eating the chocolate treats left by a furry bunny during Easter, and people of the Jewish faith commemorate the freedom their ancestors found when fleeing Egypt by eating hard slates of unleavened bread.

But the highness of these holy days pales when compared to the traditions of a holiday that began today.

Pot smokers everywhere are replacing bunnies with bongos and Seders with spliffs to pay homage to 4:20 -- a growing phenomenon that Steven Hager, editor in chief of High Times magazine, says has become readily associated with the drug marijuana.

A great deal of folklore and urban legend surround the 29-year-old stoner tradition. One student who says he celebrates the day by "smoking [pot] a lot" recalled a fellow smoker telling him the origin of the number's significance came from the California police code for marijuana possession.

Representatives from the Los Angeles Police Department say the person who contrived the story is probably smoking something.

Another nameless patron of the holiday says the date was chosen to honor Interstate Highway 420 in California that leads to a commune whose members heavily indulge in the use of marijuana.

A spokesperson for the California Highway Patrol says no such road exists.

With the aid of the staff of High Times magazine, a publication dedicated to the stoner culture, The Review succeeded in getting an interview with one of the true originators of the 4:20 term, Steve "Waldo," 46.

Steve asked that his last name be given as Waldo to avoid potentially harmful publicity while giving credit for 4:20 to all the people who developed the term.

He says the Waldo group, which remains close to this day, consists of six to 10 friends who attended San Rafael High School in California during the early '70s.

He says the Waldos were a bunch of fun-loving guys who had a knack for making friends with anyone they met, a love for smoking weed and -- most important to the tale of 4:20 -- a treasure map to a hidden marijuana patch.

Steve's story begins with an older brother of the Waldo clan who was secretly growing marijuana in a secluded field but had to abandon his agricultural endeavor to ensure his career with the California Point Reyes Peninsula Coast Guard was not jeopardized.

For a month, members of the Waldos would pile into Steve's 1966 Chevy Impala searching for the hemp patch. Before each day's endeavor, members of the group would offer reminders of the afternoon's activity by saying "4:20 Louis" as they passed each other in the halls.

Steve's translation: Meet me by the high school's Louis Pasteur statue in the parking lot at 4:20 p.m.

"Not everyone would go every time," he says, "but each time we went looking for the patch something crazy would happen."

In standard Waldo fashion, Steve says, marijuana patch searchers would begin their quest by getting high. In most instances the festivities continued for the duration of the trip.

On one excursion, Waldo says, he and his fellow explorers had shut the car windows while smoking and driving, so that the smoke made visibility minimal.

"The car slowed to about two miles an hour," he says, "and when we opened the windows to clear the air we noticed there were about 200 cows following us single file down the road."

Steve says the cows followed because the farmer who tended the cow pasture would lead the live stock to their feeding bin in a similar fashion.

Unfortunately, such memories were all that the trips to the "patch" would yield. The pasture was never found, and probably wilted in the California sun.

The 4:20 slang did not.

Steve -- who is currently married, has a 5-year-old son and runs a commercial finance business in San Francisco -- says it became the all-purpose term for the pot smoking within the Waldo crew.

"We would say it everywhere 'cause no one had a clue what we were talking about," he says. "It could mean 'Are you high?,' 'You look high,' 'Do I look high?' or 'We should get high.' "

Siblings and friends soon took the phrase for their own and 4:20 spread. Members of the Waldos graduated high school and attended colleges throughout the area, helping 4:20 spread further.

"The interesting thing about 4:20 was that I could go back to San Rafael years after I had graduated and ask someone if they knew what 4:20 was," he says. "They would always say, 'Yes.' "

In spite of the term's widespread use in recent years, Steve says, he and the other Waldos have not made any money off of 4:20.

"None of us had really realized how much it had spread until the late '90s," he says. "Now it's appearing in movies, music industry labels and clothing. But we don't really care. All of [the Waldos] are successful, so we just think it's funny.

"We smile when we say it, we smile when we hear it, we think it's hilarious."

Hager says the hemp slang did not find mainstream national recognition until High Times published a story about 4:20 roughly 10 years ago. A second High Times article revealing the truth about the Waldos' story was published in 1998.

Currently, Hager estimates, of the 11 million people who use pot, approximately 1 million celebrate 4:20 day. All members of the Waldos are included in those statistics, but Steve says each person's smoking habit varies and does not conflict with his family or his own well being.

Since the publication of the Waldo articles, no one has come forth with any alternative explanations for the 4:20 holiday.

If opponents did arise, Hager says, they would have to contend with documented proof presented by the Waldos in the form of post-marked correspondence making reference to 4:20 as early as 1974.

Although none have contradicted the 4:20 tale, some have made the "pot-smoker's New Year" their own by celebrating in personal ways.

Senior "Joe Smith," who spoke on condition of anonymity, says he rang in last year's 4:20 holiday by taking some "hits from the bong at 4:20 a.m."

After catching some rest, Smith says, he spent the day walking around Newark trying to "puff" with as many different people as he could.

In the process, Smith says, he smoked a quarter ounce of marijuana.

Because 4:20 falls on a Friday this year, Smith says he will be attending some 4:20-themed parties.

Similar festivals will be held all over the country today in honor of 4:20. Some include Freedom Fest in Sweetwater, Tenn., The 420 Festival in Towson, Md., and the 420 Festival in Denver, Col.

Hager says there is room for fun within the confines of 4:20, but he also believes part of the day should be reserved for meditation.

"The most appropriate way to observe 4:20 is to go the highest peak in your town at 4:20 and have silent meditation, as you pray for drug-war peace and the legalization of marijuana," he says.

The largest of such celebrations is found on the peak of Mt. Tamalpais in San Rafael, Hager says. As many as several hundred people will visit the mountain, which he describes as a smaller version of Mt. Fuji.

A marijuana dealer in the Newark area, "Sam," says he does not take the holiday that seriously.

"It's all about fun," he says. "It's not a holiday like Christmas or Easter -- it's for the shits and giggles of it.

"What is there to get excited about?"

Sam says he does not expect any change in his business either.

"Some of my biggest customers will buy three-eighths, [roughly \$180] per week," he says. "When you're buying regularly you're already smoking every day so it doesn't have much of an impact on how much you're going to buy."

Waldo says for him, the holiday has become an opportunity to call friends he hasn't spoken to in a while and wish them a happy 4:20. But mostly, he says, he thinks the whole situation is just funny.

"People tend to take it a bit further than I would," he says. "But the thing has kind of developed a life of its own."

The childhood slang of a bunch of teen-age stoners has successfully found its way into pop culture. Slowly but surely, the truth about 4:20 is revealing itself.

There is no 420 highway to herbal bliss or excited cop calling in a 420 bust.

There are only the Waldos.

Put that in your pipe and smoke it.