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# The 420 Founding Fathers

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The Waldos invented 420, and they want you to know it.

By Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez |

It's warm in San Francisco when I hop into a Sidecar near City Hall and ask for a ride north to Marin. "Why you headed to San Rafael today?" the driver asks.

“Do you know the number 420?” I reply.

My driver is sober as a judge and doesn't partake in cannabis. He still guesses, correctly, that my mission must have something to do with “that marijuana,” as he puts it.

This chance conversation is proof positive that the number 420 is synonymous with weed worldwide. Less clear is why. And, how?

Urban myth obscures the codeword's origin. There are many genesis stories, from Bob Marley's birthday (wrong, it's in February) to obscure police codes (wrong again; in San Francisco at least, a “420” is “juvenile disturbance”). But there is only one true tale.

In late March, a group of Marin County middle-aged men who have long been said to be the magic number's originators staked their strongest claim yet. It was they who invented possibly the world's most pervasive slang word for smoking weed as teenagers — and they've just launched a new website to prove it.

This is why I'm crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, I tell my driver. San Rafael is where I'll meet the founders of 420: The Waldos.

## 44 YEARS OF 420 LOUIE

I'm not sure who to look for as I hurry through San Rafael High School's yard towards our arranged meeting place: a 9-foot statue of chemist Louis Pasteur. This is the spot where five teenage friends met 44 years ago to get high, accidentally coining an eternal counterculture term in the process.

As I approach the spot, I see five middle-aged men, dressed in denim and tucked-in shirts, the costumes of their age. It's them, hanging out by the wall that gave them their names: Waldo Steve, Waldo Jeff, Waldo Larry, Waldo Mark, and Waldo Dave.

Their last names are guarded secrets, a move made to avoid the notoriety that would otherwise dog them in their current grown-up, straight-laced Dad lives. But at least with me, they act like teenagers and nonstop jokers.

“I'm sorry. Sorry Siri!” Waldo Dave says to my iPhone, after forgetting to identify himself verbally for my voice recorder's notes. How else am I supposed to know who says what, I chide, trying to keep up.

Then Waldo Steve, the ringleader, adds, “Siri, find me heroin!” Siri kept quiet on that one. The Waldos fill in the silence with their story: 420 all started in 1971, at this very spot.

It began with a treasure map given to Waldo Steve by a friend, who obtained it from his brother-in-law, a Coast Guard officer. The figurative X marked the spot for a small patch of cannabis supposedly planted — and then abandoned — in rural West Marin by coasties wary of their superiors.

Spellbound by the promise of free weed, the Waldos would meet weekly at 4:20 p.m. by the Louis Pasteur statue outside school. Here, they'd take, before hazily setting off in Steve's '66 Chevy toward the Point Reyes Coast Guard Station, in search of the hallowed field of green.

There was a need for secrecy. Waldo Jeff's father was an SFPD narcotics officer. So they invented a code to discuss their degenerate deeds in front of their families: 420 Louie.

“Once a week everyone would go around the high school saying ‘420 Louie! 420 Louie!’ to go out and find [the patch],” Waldo Larry says. “We never did.”

They eventually dropped the “Louie” from the codeword and gave up the search. What remained was “420,” to mean getting high.

But how did 420 spread to a worldwide counterculture code word?

## BIRTH OF A NOMENCLATURE

The Waldos happened to know a couple of rock groups, one of which just happened to be a local band with a fervent worldwide following.

Waldo Mark's father handled real estate for The Grateful Dead. And Waldo Dave's brother, Patrick, was good friends with Dead's bassist Phil Lesh. The band used the term on stage. Deadheads picked it up, and eventually 420 made the pages of High Times.

Lesh confirmed to The Huffington Post in 2009 that Dave's brother, Patrick, was indeed a friend. Lesh said he "wouldn't be surprised," if The Waldos invented 420, but couldn't himself remember.

The legacy lives on with today's San Rafael High students (some of whom could be the Waldos' grandchildren). Before I encounter the Waldos, I meet Kai, a sophomore. Earlier this year, Louis Pasteur's statue was colored red, gold, and green, Kai tells me — a Rastafarian shout-out to the famous alums' 420 accomplishment.

Nationally and locally, this 420 origin story has unfolded in countless newspapers and on television. But never entirely on the Waldos' terms.

"We're hashing the same old story over and over," Waldo Steve tells me. "It's time to come up with something new, to start telling people the backstory."

This is why they've launched their website, 420Waldos.com. As Waldo Dave says: "It's about truth."

Truth — and a lot of tomfoolery.

## GAMES WALDOS PLAY

"Steven had a 'safari pitch' if you will," says Waldo Jeff, using the group's preferred term, safari, to describe their adventures.

Steve was the main instigator of their mischief — and smoking herb was central to their "Steve safaris."

"We would have something unique to do and there was always a plan and a purpose, and it always involved smoking out," Waldo Jeff says.

Waldo Steve puts it more frankly: "I was always on the forefront of stupidity."

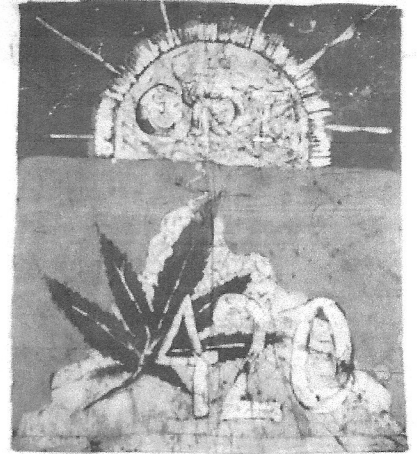
Some pranks were simple, like bouncing in the painter's safety nets under the Golden Gate Bridge. Or their habit of picking up hitchhikers, driving through an automatic-carwash, and lowering the windows just in time to take in the deafening wind of the air-drying section.

During these outings, The Waldos stayed high. They smoked through a variety of means, even once using a manzanita tree branch, which they described as the "good, hard wood."

When I ask which misadventure is their favorite, most of the group chimes in at once: "Patty Hearst!"

It goes like this: The Waldos planned a stoners' trip to Disneyland.

Four of The Waldos and their long, brown-haired friend Laura sped south down Highway 101 in their Safari-mobile, a '66 Impala. They were intent on hitting Burbank in time for a live taping of The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson.



*The Waldo's 420 Flag was created at San Rafael High School in 1971, and is part of their extensive collection of proof that they invented the term 420.*

But before you could say “Here’s Johnny!” three cop cars blared sirens behind The Waldos. Ahead, another three cop cars cut them off.

This was no routine stop.

As the Waldos pulled over, the police “all pulled their guns!” Steve tells me. The police thought the girl in the car was Patty Hearst, and that The Waldos were the Symbionese Liberation Army, her kidnapers.

Guns be damned, the crew remained calm. After all, “We were ripped,” Waldo Dave explains. The officers took a look at the group’s IDs, and their passenger, and gave them a by-your-leave. So went life with the wacky Waldos.

Aside from trumpeting their oddball stories, The Waldos’ new website gives evidence they birthed the 420 codeword, to fend off any pretenders to the 420 throne.

“We’ve created a whole culture of 420 claimers!” Waldo Dave says. “But there’s proof.”

Proof comes in the form of letters postmarked in the ‘70s, one in which Dave writes to Steve with a postscript: “a little 420 enclosed for your weekend, Dave.” There’s also the Waldos’ bona fide freak flag: a cloth flag a friend knit, emblazoned with “420.” The Waldos invite doubters to test the flag’s material, to verify it was knit and dyed in the ‘70s.

There’s also print proof. The San Rafael High School newspaper interviewed a Waldo in the 1970s. The Waldo had a Marshawn Lynch-like one-word reply. He simply told his interviewer: “420.”

## WALDOS ALL GROWN UP

Some of the legend is lost to time.

Waldo Steve has long tried to track down the original Coast Guardsman who passed along the treasure map. Only just last month he tracked down the officer’s name, but not its proper spelling.

The map itself is gone too.

The Waldos now smoke much less frequently, they said, as they are older, working stiffs.

Steve owns a specialty lending institution, which Dave works for between his stints as a filmmaker. Mark is a real estate photographer, Larry is a project manager in a print shop. Jeff is a marketer at a Sonoma County winery.

“We’re all living a diminished version of the American Dream,” Steve says, as they all laugh.

Despite this, the Waldos say they are content. Between wisecracks, the merry pranksters wax philosophical on how their stoned teenaged selves accidentally created a marijuana phenomenon.

“Can you imagine making a joke up that went around the world, and everyone in the world told that joke once, at least, and got a laugh out of it, and enjoyed it?” Waldo Jeff asks me.

He can.

He smiles at the thought.

“It’s a beautiful thing.”