Meet the Hippies Who Invented the Term 420

Steve Capper and Dave Reddix share the fascinating oral history of the origin story of 420.

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Back in 1971, a group of hippie high schoolers in Marin County, California came up with the term "4:20" for weed. The story of how this codeword came to be and how April 20th became a worldwide celebration for all things marijuana, is the stuff of legend.

The high school click called themselves The Waldos and most of them are still alive to tell the tale—if you light up a joint and listen.

The founding fathers of 420 — Steve Capper and Dave Reddix—gave an interview on the Enhance Your Life Podcast to discuss the origin story of 420, how it spread beyond their friend group, all the false claims and conspiracy theories about 420, and how these guys are monetizing their invention.

You can listen to the entire episode below. In the meantime, here are some highlights:

Tell us about the Waldos. How did you start this group and why did you end up calling it the Waldos?

Steve: There's a wall in San Rafael High School right on campus, in the center of campus, and we used to hang out on the wall.

Dave: Between classes, people would go by, and we'd do impressions of all these people and joke around. Not in a derogatory way, but just a funny way doing impressions to make each other laugh. That's what we did between classes. We sat on the wall, and that's how we became the Waldos.

The wall is on the side of the main building of the entrance to the high school that has Greek columns. It was above the art room classes. That's where we would meet.

Steve: But the centerpiece of our story is the statue of Louis Pasteur.

What is the significance of Louis Pasteur's statue to the story of the Waldos?

Dave: Let's go back a little bit before we get there. First of all, the Waldos were seekers and guys that got tired of hanging out at the football games on Friday nights. We'd be the guys underneath the bleachers, smoking a doobie, going, "What are we doing here?" Steve went to this place called the Holographic Society.

Steve: Let me back up a second. *Rolling Stone* was a real counter-culture publication. Nobody knew of it. Nobody took it at one time. My brother had it in the house, and I read an article about the first guys who were developing the first holograms. We're talking 1971. I mean, you grew up with it, but for us in '71, three-dimensional images made out of laser light – that was like science fiction, *Star Trek* to us. It said these scientists were so into what they were doing, they were there working on it 24/7. I go, "God, maybe I'll just go down and pound on the door and visit them." It said they had a whole holographic city made out of holograms.

So I thought I'd go see it. I got tired of the football game, I ran down there, pounded on the door. They welcomed me. Had a great time, and I went back to the Waldos and said, "Hey, you guys got to see this." So of course, we all pile in the car, get stoned, and…

Dave: And we went there and they greeted us with open arms. They were so happy to have us there. They said, "Come back anytime." So after that, we're all, "Hey, we're on to something here. Let's start challenging each other each week to find something new and weird to do." So that's how we started what we call safaris.

Steve: One day, we were hanging out on the wall at San Rafael High School. One day a buddy of mine, Bill McNulty, came up to me and he said, "Hey, my brother and a bunch of guys are in the U.S. Coast Guard." These Coast Guardsmen were stationed out at the Point Reyes Lighthouse, and they were growing some weed. For some reason, they thought their commanding officer was going to bust them, and they didn't want to get busted. So these guys said, "We don't want to get busted. You kids can pick it. Here, Bill. Here's a map of where it is, and you and your friends can go pick it." So, he brought me the map and Dave got all excited.

Dave: It's a no-brainer. You're 16 years old, somebody comes up with a treasure map for weed? We're going! [laughs]

Steve: Yeah. Like I said, we were into sports, and a couple of guys had sports practice. We got out of school around 3:00, 3:15. It was a flexible schedule. Sports practice lasts about an hour. Waldo Jeff was the team manager, Larry was doing junior varsity. So it took about an hour for them to finish their football practice, and then we decided to meet at the statue of Louis Pasteur at 4:20.

Dave: We met there at the statue, we got high, and then we hopped in Steve's '66 Chevy Impala with a killer Craig 8-Track stereo. The car was just clouded with smoke, and we drove out to Point Reyes on our mission to find this patch. We searched for weeks, but we never found the patch. But in the ensuing days, we'd see each other in the hallways and we'd go, "4:20 Louis?" to signify, yes, we'll meet today again to go search.

After so many weeks and we went out there, we didn't find it, so we dropped the "Louis" portion and just called it "420," and we realized we could use that as a secret joke code to talk about weed in front of our parents, cops, teachers, friends, and nobody knew what we were talking about.

Steve: And another thing: we had to have a secret code around Waldo Jeff's dad, because Waldo Jeff's father was one of the highest-level narcotics agents in the state of California. [laughs]. He was a narc. We definitely needed a secret code around him.

How does 420 spread beyond your friend group to the world?

Dave: First of all, when we got out of school we were using that term, and then we passed it on to our younger brothers and their friends, and they started using it. Then it was 1975 when the Grateful Dead took a hiatus from touring for about nine months. My brother Patrick was good friends with Phil Lesh, the bassist in the Grateful Dead for 50 years. At the time in '75, Phil said, "Hey, I'm starting a couple of bands while the Dead are taking time off. Would you like to be the manager?" Pat said, "Sure."

So Pat hired me to be a roadie, and we did these gigs in 1975 where we traveled around California. I was smoking weed with guys like Phil Lesh and David Crosby and Terry Haggerty, and Pat and I were using that term "420" amongst them. They thought it was kind of funny. It eventually spread throughout the Dead groupies and roadies and things like that and spread further on out

Steve: Waldo Mark's father was a real estate broker. He handled real estate needs for the Dead, primarily. They needed office space because they had a big organization, ever-expanding. They needed rehearsal space. They needed places to store their equipment. Everybody in the Dead organization, a number of the band members too, were making money. They bought homes in the Marin County Hills.

He would find them their homes, and then, of course, when they would go out on tour, like, "Hey Mark, you guys want to babysit their homes, take care of their pets?" So we were around them quite a bit because of that. He'd find them a new rehearsal space and we'd just go down there. Or we'd go with his dad backstage, guest list, to shows. So we were backstage using the term "420" around the Dead community. That's another way it spread also.

Dave: We used to go hang out in the Grateful Dead's rehearsal space in San Rafael, California, on a street called Front Street. It was a warehouse. We'd sit out there and get high, and they had a basketball hoop. We'd shoot hoops and get high and listen to the Dead practice inside. That street, Front Street, is actually the picture on there — Shakedown Street is the name of the album, but that drawing on Shakedown Street is Front Street, where we used to hang out in front of the warehouse.

Steve: Also, I don't know what year it was, somewhere in the '80s I think, somebody came out with a beer, 420 Deadhead Draft. It had the insignias of the Grateful Dead, the skeletons, and stuff. So maybe that spread it too. There's a lot of ways it spread through the Dead community.

Dave: It was slang, but there was a concert I went to in 1987. It was in Calaveras County, the Mountain Aire concert. It was the Grateful Dead and Santana and some other bands. After the show, a friend of mine invited me and another buddy, a substitute Waldo, John Roach. He and I went up to this place called Avery Ranch, which was a plateau on top of this mountaintop. On top there was a huge field with all these tiny little cabins.

We were just hanging out there and partying, and all of a sudden, this great, big helicopter flies down. It's one of those banana helicopters. It lands, and all the Grateful Dead come trooping out. This is after the concert. A little bit later on, John and I are walking around and we see this little cabin, and Jerry's sitting up on the porch there by himself. So we go over and say, "Hey, how's it going? Would you like to partake in a little smoke?" He said, "Yeah, come on up." So we went up there on the porch and we hung out with Jerry for like an hour and a half. We had some yucks and smoked with him, and he told us some great stories and anecdotes. That's another reference.

Steve: And then, of course, there were other ways it spread. We all went off to college. I went to Southern California, and everybody from all over the country and the world picked up on it. We had a 420 flag that was made in 1971. It was in my dorm room with a big marijuana leaf. So everybody at college took it home. Then Larry went down to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and it spread there. So going off to college is another way it spread.

Dave: In 1991, Steve Bloom was the editor of *High Times Magazine*, and he was at a Grateful Dead concert in Oakland. I think it was in April. He saw a flyer – I don't know where he saw it, hung up or somebody gave it to him – and the flyer said, "Come join us on Bolinas Ridge on Mount Tam to celebrate 420 this April 20th."

Steve: But people had been going up there for years on 4/20.

Dave: This got his attention, and they wrote an article about it. For about seven years after that, we kept on seeing "420" spray-painted on signs and scratched into benches. One time, Steve and I were out in the middle of the desert out in Arizona – and it was totally in the middle of nowhere – and we see this one tree, and we go up to this tree, and "420" is carved into the bark. We go, "How the hell did this happen?"

About 1998, Waldo Larry called up Steve and said, "Hey, I'm seeing this 420 everywhere."

Steve: It started to be on hats and t-shirts. It started to get commercialized.

Dave: Larry said, "We're seeing it everywhere. Steve, we've got to contact somebody and set the record straight."

Steve: So I wrote a letter to High Times. There are all the theories about how it started. There are too many people that think it was a police code for being busted for marijuana, which is total bull – which I could go into further. People thought it was the number of chemical constituents in THC that get you high, all these other things.

Dave: They thought it was Bob Dylan's song. That's the funny thing. We created a whole cult of 420 claimers. But the one thing they all have in common: none of them have a shred of proof. The Waldos are the only ones in the world that have documented proof, and we keep it in a vault in a bank in San Francisco. And guess where it's located? It's at 420 Montgomery Street. Wells Fargo Bank.

What is the document? Can you reveal it?

Dave: Sure. There are letters from several of Steve's friends, and one of them is me. In the letter, I said, "Hey, I got this pig as a roadie. I'm getting high with Phil Lesh and David Crosby. Here's a little 420 for your weekend." So I rolled him up a little joint and I flattened it down and put it in the envelope. He still has that letter.

Steve: And it's postmarked. I had a friend that went off to Israel on a kibbutz and he was all upset, writing me in the letter, "No 420 here. It's a problem." So I have postmarked letters. I have many other letters. These are the early '70s postmarked. Then we have a high school newspaper. There's a question man in the newspaper, and the question man said, "If you could say anything to the graduating class, what would you like to say?" Our friend said, "420." So we have a 1974 San Rafael High School original newspaper that has that.

A lot of people are making money off 420, but it's your guys' thing. Was there a part of you that was like, "Wait a minute, this is my intellectual property"?

Steve: You can't really trademark just the number and start grabbing things. If you're going to do it, you have to do it for a specific product category.

Dave: We've trademarked 420 Waldos. We have had a couple of products in the last few years. The first one we have is with Lagunitas beer. They have a Waldos Special Ale they've been making for 10 years. It's in the stores now. Go to your stores and get a 4-pack. It's a very strong beer. It tastes great. Also, we had a vape pen a few years ago with Chemistry over in Oakland. We donated all the profits from that venture to the Drug Policy Alliance for people that are persecuted with getting busted for marijuana busts in other states where it's still not legal.

Steve: Lagunitas was bought out by Heineken, so they're putting out the beer. They wanted us to help create the beer. We went up to their factory and went through tons and tons of bins of hops. They wanted us to choose the hops that smelled most like marijuana.

Dave: Yeah, they wanted to get the most dank-smelling hops that smelled like marijuana and would taste like it. So they took that beer and they made it, and they've been making it for 10 years. This is a 10-year celebration of that relationship.

You guys certainly have enjoyed it in your life, and it's made for many a fun adventure in your life and probably will continue to be. Do you still all remain friends?

Dave: Oh yeah, we're still friends and we still see each other. We still go on safaris every once in a while. Some funny things have happened in our adult lives, too.

Steve: Pretty much at least one of us, we're probably on the phone every single day. Last night, Jeff and Larry, and Mark were up at the Lagunitas Heineken brewery getting some free cases of 420 Waldos Special Ale. So we're in constant, continuous contact.

Dave: If you got to 420waldos.com, you can actually see a little mini-documentary of us finding the guy who gave us the map 47 years later. We took him out to the Point Reyes Lighthouse and we did some interviews, and I put together a little documentary video because I'm a filmmaker. I worked for CNN for 20 years, and now I'm an independent filmmaker.