

Old Angels Never Die

They Turn Digger

Nat Freeland

1967

LA Free Press — First of all, please forget everything you've heard about the Diggers, because it's mostly a bunch of crap.

To begin with, the Diggers are what happened when the Hell's Angels met LSD and got turned off violence to psychedelic love.

The central cadre running the hippie hostels day by day is made up of guys with names like Motorcycle Richie, Tobacco, Little Wolf, Apache and Tiny.

Most of them are ex-out-law motorcyclists who realized there was more to life than punchfests and beer puking after they got turned on. They have an amazing kind of inborn cleverness and resourcefulness that has kept the Diggers going through one crisis after another. If it's not an eviction, it's a bust or a food shortage.

All of these guys are classic school dropouts, unteachable by U.S. education's standardized standards. But seeing them in action and actually watching them grow before my eyes, the huge human waste of cram rote learning became more terrifyingly evident than ever before.

"Who's got a short?" Motorcycle Richie was yelling the first night I came to watch the late shift at their temporary church haven.

Richie is a tough Irish 20-year-old from the docks of Brooklyn who currently sports shoulder-length black hair under an IRA cap and a leather bike jacket that must weigh 25 pounds.

The latest dispossession notice was already plastered over the window of the big frame house. "The inspector saw we already got guys in to fix the stairs and the plumbing," said Little Wolf. "But they said we can't make improvements on a condemned building. Isn't that a crock?"

The sign on the door had two announcements, "Leave your dope outside," and "Nobody under 18 allowed after 11 p.m."

The Diggers aren't kidding about this; it's the only way they can get any breathing space at all from the Men in Blue. They will excommunicate anybody found holding on the premises after a first-time warning.

Not that the Digger ethic objects to anybody getting high at a borrowed pad and returning home for the trip. In the high-ceilinged living room, every couch space and most of the floor was taken up by a stunning variety of people.

There were cliques of high-boot hippies discussing their latest hit, the twangy accents of young southern whites mingled with Negro whisky drawls. A couple of guitars were going and the blues counterpointed the intense conversations about the Digger cause.

The smaller rooms were furnished with mattresses and rucksacks. There was a full complement of crashing, or sleep, going on in most of these spartan but clean chambers.

"For a while we were getting a lot of Narks coming in and banging around, said Richie. "But we kept hitting them for collections and cleanup detail so that cut it down."

The heart of a Digger house is the kitchen. It's off limits as a hangout. Working on the crew is status. The night's cook was in leather and swastikas and on an acid trip. A very savory stew was boiling in a big pot.

Anybody who came in and knocked at the half-door was quickly handed a bowl. The dishes and spoons were cleaned as soon as they were returned. The whole kitchen was at least as clean as the Army feeding holes I used to pull KP in.

The Diggers have been driving journalism crazy ever since they came on the scene. They aren't a closed system, there's nothing down on paper and the leader in charge is whoever walks in and gets the job done that week.

The potential for danger and violence is always there when you have a high-pressure bunch of physically bold people functioning as a group in close quarters. But so far the Diggers have a remarkably good track record.

By now, most people know that the name of the Diggers comes from a 16th Century English group of Christian anarchists who resolved to till the soil and give away all their surplus food. This dangerous doctrine was quickly suppressed by the authorities.

They have been accused of "fascism" and of throwing their weight around Haight-Ashbury by both the square and hip district merchants. However, there's nothing more to back these charges than a certain penchant for shoplifting in the early days. Now they're more likely to pick up food from the U.S. surplus stock-piles.

The Diggers were constantly accomplishing things that surprised me. Food appeared and was prepared, house-work done regularly, doctors and lawyers summoned.

The first time I met Apache was in the kitchen of the Digger home. He was a big kid with a high-pitched voice and confused eyes, he seemed slightly backwards, like Lenny in "Of Mice and Men." He came up shyly and said he wished he could write a poem about how much the Diggers meant to him.

The permanent Digger braintrust revolves around Peter Berg and Arthur Lisch, two longtime hip activists. Berg is a former writer for the S.F. Mime Troupe and runs the environmental free store "Trip Without A Ticket" which is the latest Digger HQ. Lisch does most of the wheedling with Frisco bureaucracy and used to run a civil rights puppet theater in the Hunts Point Negro ghetto.

Both men live at home with their families but are central to the functioning of the Diggers.

Food is given out by the Diggers every day at four o'clock in the panhandle, a strip of park that parallels Haight Street. It's plain but filling fare and it has kept a lot of the more visionary drifting hippies out of deep trouble.

One night Motorcycle Richie and a few of the boys combined business with pleasure by taking a night out at the Avalon Ballroom to mend a few older Digger generation fences with Family Dog impresario Chet Helms.

After getting up a communal admission kitty for the crowd, Richie was telling the Family Dog tribal chieftain, "Man, we won't burn your fifty-dollar bills any more. There's too many kids in the houses that need to be fed."

Richie used to say, "I sure wish I could get my chopper down from Sacramento." One day he made it somehow, and filled the street with his joyous figure eights.

Later that evening, a line of Diggers were sitting along the freakout counter at Tracy's Donut shop. "My head hurts all the time, it feels like," said Tobacco. "It's all the hassles at the house every day."

"Me too," said Richie. "When acid people and meth people are living in the same place there's always something to straighten out."

Growth speed-ups tend to be painful, and it's not easy to expand your thinking powers when society calls you a castoff with a second rate mind.

The last time I saw Apache it was in a truckstop diner north of Salinas as I was driving back to Los Angeles. He jumped out of a big, expensive car being driven by a worried-looking older couple. He was wearing a rakish Indian warrior costume with a feathered headband.

Apache rushed into the diner, moving with the bold decisiveness of a born leader. He hustled the counterman into the back room and didn't notice me till he was on his way back to the car.

"I'm helping those people find their daughter, who ran away, he explained. "They can do things for the Diggers." The Diggers have done something for Apache too.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #34, July 15-31, 1967

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