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## Introduction to the Northern Californian Situation : From Counterculture to Legalization – Cannabis in the "Emerald Triangle"

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North of the San Francisco Bay Area, once you pass the vineyards of Sonoma County, human habitation becomes increasingly sparse. The highway narrows, revealing Redwood forests (home to giant sequoias), marking the entrance to Mendocino. This county, along with its neighboring counterparts Humboldt (to the northwest) and Trinity (to the northeast), collectively form the world-renowned "Emerald Triangle." Coined to describe one of the primary regions for outdoor cannabis cultivation in the United States since the late 1960s, it is reputed for the exceptional quality of seeds and buds, as well as the quantity of production<sup>1</sup>. This region, where the average population density does not surpass 15 inhabitants per square kilometer, has long attracted marijuana consumers, producers (some actively involved in the prestigious Emerald Cup, a widely acclaimed competition spanning the Atlantic), seasonal workers (known as trimmers or "trimmigrants"), and notably, enforcement authorities and the media.

The stigma enveloping the Emerald Triangle aligns with its reputation, often touted as one of the most crime-ridden areas in the United States. Supposedly, the intersection of illicit cash, cartels, and local cannabis growers, including hippies and "rednecks", coincides with numerous reports of shootings, murders, and disappearances every year. Despite occasional statistics pointing to the contrary<sup>2</sup> or the need for cautious interpretation<sup>3</sup>, this perception is deeply rooted, especially after the success of the Netflix series *Murder Mountain* [2018]. This TV show characterized Humboldt County as "a place where marijuana can kill<sup>4</sup>," advising people to "reconsider any visit to the Emerald Triangle<sup>5</sup>." The narrative revolves around the homicide of a cannabis grower in 2013 near Alderpoint in the southern part of the county. It purports to trace the history of illegal cannabis cultivation in the region, estimating direct sales at over \$300 million for Humboldt alone in 2016 [Van Busic et al., 2017] – equivalent to the combined value of forestry and all other agricultural

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsweed.fr/cannabis/triangle-emeraude/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.insideprison.com/city\\_crime\\_statistics.asp?cityCaseR=Trinity&stateNorm=CA&zipC=96093&stateID=](https://www.insideprison.com/city_crime_statistics.asp?cityCaseR=Trinity&stateNorm=CA&zipC=96093&stateID=)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/07/14/humboldt-county-has-states-2nd-highest-homicide-rate-why/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thedailybeast.com/netflixs-murder-mountain-where-marijuana-can-kill>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bustle.com/p/the-humboldt-county-murders-explored-in-murder-mountain-might-make-you-reconsider-any-trips-to-the-emerald-triangle-15570775>

production<sup>6</sup>. The storytelling takes on a distinct dichotomy: the second episode of the series draws a line between the ethos of the early cannabis growers – hippies who embraced the “back-to-the-land” (BTL) movement [Hervieu and Hervieu-Léger, 1979; Jacobs, 1997] – and what marijuana has evolved into: an industry led by individuals devoid of morals or principles.

Can one genuinely assert the existence of a “lost paradise,” borrowing the title of this episode? How do we account for the ongoing coexistence of authorized farms and a persistent black market [Corva and Meisel, 2021], despite state referendums on medical legalization in 1996 and subsequent recreational legalization passed in 2016, which went into effect in 2018 ?

This introduction to the Northern California situation is crafted with the intention of avoiding sensationalism or, conversely, romanticizing the (small-scale) cannabis production, sales, and consumption within the Emerald Triangle<sup>7</sup>. Our perspective on the marijuana story in the region is shaped from the vantage point of family farmers, drawing from a series of interviews and observations conducted collaboratively by Brian Hill and myself as part of a more extensive research project dedicated to the legacy of the BTL movement in the United States<sup>8</sup>. Additional materials provided by a coalition devoted to preserving the history of counterculture on the West Coast, of which we are a part<sup>9</sup>, will also contribute background information.

As we delve into this topic, we discovered that despite its roots in the upheaval of the Sixties, there is no inherent link between the BTL movement and marijuana, at least concerning commercial production (cash crop). However, in the distinct region known as the Emerald Triangle, many back-to-the-landers embraced it as their primary source of income. This stands in contrast to other regions, such as the Central Valley within California, where topography and climate facilitated the simultaneous cultivation of more traditional crops (vegetables, fruit trees) or livestock. We anticipate that the localized insights of Dominic Corva – focused on Humboldt – and the firsthand experiences of Brian Hill – pertaining to Trinity – in the subsequent papers will enhance our ongoing discussion.

This concise socio-history will explore five pivotal moments: a. the inception of the cannabis market in Northern California; b. its evolution within the BTL movement; c. the overt conflict initiated by state and federal authorities pre-dating medical legalization; d. the “Green Rush” between the referendums of 1996 and 2016; e. current uncertainties, after a “crash” in the Marijuana industry, serving as a conclusion.

<sup>6</sup> These data represent a conservative estimate, according artist, researcher, and Southern Humboldt expert Scott Holmquist, whose anecdotal evidence suggests \$500 million or more.

<sup>7</sup> See also Brian Hill’s article in this issue for a critical examination of the effects of cannabis on local communities.

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/ProjectB TTL>

<sup>9</sup> <https://chcoalition.org/about/>

## The Emergence of a Cannabis Market in Northern California

Exploring the origins of the cannabis market in Northern California requires revisiting the mid-1960s. In the context of the San Francisco Bay Area in 1967, Marijuana became intricately linked to the counterculture movement [Roszak, 1969] and the Summer of Love. The Haight-Ashbury district, a focal point of the counterculture, played a significant role in the cultural shift that embraced alternative lifestyles, experimentation with psychedelics, and the rejection of mainstream values. Similarly, in Berkeley, located on the opposite side of the Bay, by 1969 radical student movements had fully integrated countercultural drug use as part of their liberatory agenda<sup>10</sup>.

During this era, marijuana use became prevalent among youth, particularly within hippie communities and campus radicals. An article from *Time* designated it as the “most widely used hallucinogen” in these demographics. An estimated twenty to thirty million young Americans were reported to have experimented with it, with a prevailing belief that “this progression cannot be stopped.” Remarkably, it is suggested that around “50% of West Coast students are either current or potential Marijuana smokers.” Occasional smokers are portrayed as excelling both academically and in regular activities, while those who consume it frequently are described as “having seemingly made it the focal point of their lives, engaging in more talk than action” [1968: p.231-232].

The 1967 Summer of Love saw a convergence of young people seeking social change, personal liberation, and a break from societal norms. Cannabis was often used alongside other substances like LSD, contributing to the psychedelic experience and the exploration of altered states of consciousness. The Haight-Ashbury district became a symbol of this cultural revolution, attracting thousands of young people from around the country. The prevalence of marijuana in this community was not only recreational but also carried symbolic importance. It was seen as a way to connect with nature, reject established norms, and foster a sense of communal sharing and living.

In her ethnographic study spanning 1966 to 1968, Sherri Cavan delved into the unique dynamics of obtaining cannabis in Haight-Ashbury, dedicating an entire chapter to the subject [1972: 113-139]. The community’s emphasis on communal beliefs and psychedelic use justified a unique transactional approach, often centered on sharing and giving rather than conventional buying and selling. Specifically, she begins her chapter by reevaluating H.S. Becker’s analyses focused on supply and secrecy [1963]. In the Haight context, the persistent supply issue arises due to the Bay Area’s unsuitable climate for systematic plant cultivation, often resulting in imports from Mexico, including sought-after varieties like Acapulco Gold. Additional concerns revolve around marijuana quality and dealer knowledge. Among hippies and other young

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hipplanet.com/hip/activism/the-berkeley-liberation-program-1969/>

counterculturists, acquiring the product is not necessarily reliant on purchasing as the primary method. She introduces the concept of “laying grass” for small quantities<sup>11</sup>, “giving grass” for significant amounts, and finally, “requesting grass,” with each method meticulously distinguished. Ultimately, according to Cavan, the prevailing dynamic within this community is one of sharing, setting it apart from the rest of the American society.

The counterculture’s association with marijuana and other substances, however, drew the attention of authorities, prompting increased enforcement efforts to control drug use as the movement gained visibility. This heightened scrutiny and legal action were part of the broader societal response to perceived challenges posed by the counterculture and student movements. As early as 1966, California became the first state in the Union to ban the once-legal use of LSD. The following year, Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California, pledging to “clean up the mess in Berkeley” [Ridley, 2019: 508]. Anticipating President Nixon’s official launch of the “War on Drugs” by four years, Reagan initiated his own campaign against recreational drug use, making it a focal point of his tenure as governor and later as president in the 1980s. In 1968, California exhibited an extraordinary +324% surge in drug arrests, in contrast to the 60% increase observed in the rest of the US [Maguire, 2015: 23].

In the interviews we conducted, various issues surrounding the Summer of Love era are frequently mentioned, with cannabis busts serving as a pretext to repress hippies and campus radicals being one of them. For a portion of our respondents, this moment, often perceived as a time of extraordinary positivity, is actually accompanied by various challenges such as overcrowding, managing the reception of runaways, LSD-induced mental crises, personal hygiene problems, poverty, as well as the emergence of amphetamines and heroin coexisting and gradually replacing psychedelics and marijuana for many users. The rise of a parallel legal retail market, characterized by the establishment of psychedelic shops offering smoking and other accessories, coupled with the increasing “commercialization” of the “hip lifestyle” involving entrepreneurs and individuals accused of capitalizing on this way of life, further fuels the criticisms directed at this era. These developments played a pivotal role in the demise of the “gift economy” that groups like the San Francisco Diggers [Gaillard, 1999] aimed to foster.

Eventually, the escalating repression, coupled with the disillusionment of urban activism and increasing levels of violent crime in the US cities, prompted a significant exodus of hippies, radical campus activists, and other counterculturists from urban areas, leading to the development of the BTL movement.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Hill reports that the most commonly used term among hippies and radicals to describe this action was “score a lid”.

## Development within the BTL Movement

The initial idea leading the BTL movement was to achieve community and family self-sufficiency across various domains, including food, energy, childbirth, and education, intricately interwoven with a profound reconnection to nature and what were perceived to be traditional “tribal” lifestyles far from the cities [Jacob, 1997; Stuppia, 2022]. Among the BTL pioneers, dubbed “urban refugees” [Grant, 1974], motivations for leaving cities and choosing the countryside or the backwoods varied widely. So did the forms: some opted for communal living<sup>12</sup>, while others arrived in traditional nuclear-family structures. However, echoing the sentiments of Timothy Leary, they collectively decided to “drop out:” rather than pursuing revolution or seeking a personal change within the challenging urban landscape, they forged their own (micro-)societies away from civilization. “Transform by example” by being back to nature became a popular slogan [Lombard, 1972], synthesizing the two different approaches, the traditional hippie philosophy of “change yourself before changing society,” and the campus radical notion of “change society before changing yourself.” The prevailing leitmotiv shifted to “change yourself to change society,” “be the change,” “be free,” and “flip off the system,” as revealed in various interviews we conducted.

As they progressed, connections were established with other “dropouts,” including Vietnam veterans, and, at times, American Indians. Relationships with locals and long-term white rural resident families appeared to be more complex, often unfriendly, or marked by discrimination and “anti-hippie bigotry.” For instance, in the second episode of *Murder Mountain*, original grower and long-term Southern-Humboldt activist Douglas Fir mentioned that everyone arriving in this remote county in the late 1960s attempted to escape something: some sought refuge from the Vietnam draft, others aimed to distance themselves from the traumas experienced in Vietnam as veterans, while others simply wanted to live hidden from Western civilization. A majority of locals were hostile to all these newcomers, and various episodes report incidents and legal cases. In Denny, an unincorporated community in Trinity County, Brian Hill describes a different situation, but the unique configuration of this place can help to explain the early relationships established between locals and back-to-the-landers, as we shall see later<sup>13</sup>.

As observed previously, growing marijuana was not the primary objective for the majority of these early “dropouts” returning to the land; instead, it was viewed as a subsistence crop – a part of the “shared” or “gift economy” mentioned earlier, aligning with the spirit of the hippie movement. However, a series of factors progressively changed the game.

<sup>12</sup> Many communes flourished all along the coast, especially in Mendocino County [Boal *et al.* 2012].

<sup>13</sup> See also his paper in this *Politique des Drogues* issue.

One might note, first, the disillusionment with communal living and various economic challenges faced by these pioneers, in addition to the previously mentioned bigotry and the repercussions for producing, smuggling, or selling relatively small amounts of marijuana – especially when compared to later years. Cannabis enforcement actions, along with those involving substances like LSD or psychedelic mushrooms, often served as pretexts for apprehending or expelling individuals perceived by locals and authorities as part of a “foreign,” “beatnik,” or “East-Coast citizen invasion.” For example, during a police raid at Black Bear Ranch, a commune near the Emerald Triangle in Siskiyou County, law enforcement mistakenly confiscated several seedlings, misidentifying them as cannabis when they were, in fact, tomato plants [Terence, 2018]. Another notable case unfolded in 1972, when federal narcotics officers and local law enforcement anticipated discovering a million-dollar drug laboratory in Southern Humboldt. Instead, they found Dick Dickenson and his girlfriend, two hippies lacking even indoor running water. When Dickenson fled, he was shot in the back by a federal agent, dying from his wound. Police only found a personal-use supply of illicit drugs on the property. These police actions exemplify the repression aimed at curtailing small-scale marijuana farming and personal use as a means to control population influx in the region.

A second challenge was posed by the unique climate of the region, technical learning, and the pursuit of more productive and adapted seeds. This narrative is intricately linked with the “hippie trail” to India, gradually giving rise to a burgeoning business. During this period, the majority of cannabis consumed in Northern California was still imported, primarily from neighboring Mexico – a favored activity of freelance smugglers and established Mexican crime organizations well into the 1980s. Regarding cultivation, urban areas provided limited space and fostered indoor production, whereas Mexican seeds, frequently planted in rural areas, often yielding suboptimal results. The celebrated road taken by hippies from Istanbul to Kathmandu [MacLean, 2007] significantly influenced the arrival of cannabis seeds that were more productive, better adapted to the region’s climate, and more potent than those from Mexico. In our interviews we heard many distinctive tales of acquiring seeds and cultivating varieties like Skunk, very different from those found in Central and Latin America. For example, Brian Hill obtained seeds from smugglers who brought them from Afghanistan in the early 1970s, and subsequently planted them in Northern Humboldt and Trinity. Meanwhile, in *Murder Mountain*, Douglas Fir describes importing seeds from Pakistan to Southern Humboldt in 1979. Notably, the series omits other earlier “smuggling adventures” of this grower, more in line with his principles as a political activist [Holmquist, 2022]. Ongoing genetic research, spearheaded by Cal Poly Humboldt, seeks to further unravel these unique strains and their origins. In terms of techniques, it spurred various progressive learnings and experiments, including the development of “sinsemilla” (seedless cannabis). In Northern California, this technique became so widespread that by the late 1970s, the

police established a “Sinsemilla Task Force” to curb large-scale cultivation in the Emerald Triangle, as we shall see in the next paragraph.

Finally, the region's geography is characterized by vast forests, containing remote clearings and meadows, and primitive roads. Secluded properties (sometimes collectively owned or acquired, as exemplified by the Greenfield Ranch near Ukiah, Mendocino) also facilitated a hidden lifestyle and was central to transforming a “subsistence crop” into a “cash crop” [Raphael, 1985], increasing the volume of Marijuana production and nurturing the evolution of an “outlaw” [Polson, 2018 & 2019], or better “insurgent” [Holmquist, 2010; 2022; 2024] culture, and economy. This transformation allowed for the simultaneous development of local communities and alternative organizations. Due to the illegality of crop cultivation and widespread distrust toward the State, these communities relied less on public funding. Consequently, they established their own infrastructure, including schools, medical facilities, and other essential services<sup>14</sup>. For instance, in 1974, in Southern Humboldt, midwives and other alternative health advocates initiated the work that led to the establishment of “Redwoods Rural Health Center.” Initially located in a storefront in Redway, the center later moved to its own building in 1989 [Butler, 2015: 3]. In the same area, “Beginnings School” opened in Briceland in 1975. Its Octagon building, along with the Mateel Community Center, became one of the main gathering places for back-to-the-landers’ events [Holmquist, 2010]. In Denny, Brian Hill also reports the reopening of various structures that were abandoned since the XIX Century gold rush, including a school for homesteaders’ children. As reiterated in various interviews, the essence can be summarized as follows: “we didn't come here to cultivate Marijuana, but to create our own food garden. Yet, Marijuana became our main crop,” enabling us to initially meet our own needs, then survive, and eventually live while contributing to or sharing with the local community.

However, by the late 1970s, the increasing profits from cannabis farming sparked a debate within the communities of the new settlers themselves. A faction of back-to-the-landers, notably, “left the region in the first years of the emerging cannabis economy because it violated their countercultural principles. Early arguments against this anti-commerce orthodoxy came prominently from new settler women seeking economic independence from welfare and from men. Weed money also quickly became a hippie-approved way to support activism. As weed commerce became a settled matter, debate arose and has continued over how much was acceptable” [Holmquist, 2024: in press]. This debate ultimately gave birth to two distinct narratives regarding the evolution of cannabis in the Emerald Triangle, intricately entwined with the history of repression in the region.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Holmquist notes however that this situation evolved since the early 1970s, when the state funds were still available and the cannabis wasn't the main source of income of the region yet. In Southern Humboldt, for example, schools benefited from a special deal brokered by Peter Rice that allowed the local school district to count students in hippie schools in exchange for shared funding.



## The Open War on Cannabis

The “War on Drugs” initiated by state authorities in the late 1960s and federally in the early 1970s, intensified significantly towards the end of the decade and into the early 1980s. This escalation encompassed a broader geographical scope, spanning across the Pacific Northwest to the Emerald Triangle and down to the US Southern border [Trebach, 2005; Corva, 2014]. It led to the confiscation of increasingly larger quantities of cannabis. It also interconnected with debates about political activism, particularly for the environment, health, recognizing the medicinal value of Marijuana, and economy, giving rise to a first “green rush” [Martien, 1978 & 2016].

In response to the failure to control cannabis smuggling to the US from Mexico since the late 1960s, the US government initiated a program to pay Mexico to spray herbicides on cannabis farms beginning in 1976. This move raised concerns among American consumers who were reluctant to smoke “poisoned pot” [Polson, 2018: 145]. The same year, a Sinsemilla Strike Force, later renamed “Task Force”, funded by federal money, was established in Humboldt and Mendocino counties. This initiative involved air surveillances, raids, and busts by state authorities, aiming to eliminate a product that then increased in value. The dynamic was straightforward: as efforts intensified to suppress international trafficking, there was a simultaneous rise in urban demand for domestic products, raising prices. Consequently, more individuals moved to Emerald Triangle to grow and/or smuggle cannabis.

According to various interviews, cannabis prices from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s were often described as “equivalent to that of gold”, despite variations in data and memories. For example, in 1979, a report from the Mendocino County Agricultural Chamber assessed the annual value of production in the county at \$90 million, equivalent to over \$380 million today. In his graphic novel *Homegrown – A year in the life of a Humboldt Guerrilla Grower* [2018], Andrew Santos recounts that for the 1990 harvest, wholesale prices ranged between \$3200 and \$5000 per pound. It’s not surprising, therefore, that other “refugees from money looking for something of worth” [Martien, 1978: 174] joined the back-to-the-landers growers’ scene. This diverse group comprised old local redneck neighbors, as well as newcomers such as Vietnam veterans, survivalists and first “greed-driven” individuals, dubbed “greedos” (greedy growers). Interviews also reveals that, at the time, American Indians were part of this community. Ironically, as prices rose and repression against producers increased, state legislation became more permissive, particularly for consumers. Despite the setbacks of early 1970s initiatives to legalize Marijuana and a federal law categorizing Marijuana as a Schedule 1 Controlled Substance, in 1976, California passed a law specifying that the possession of less than 1 oz. of cannabis would be an “infraction” with a maximum penalty of \$100 plus a \$25 assessment.

One of the distinctive yet representative examples of the transition in the late 1970s occurred in the small community of Denny, nestled in the Trinity Alps, along the New River, a tributary of the Klamath River. This once-abandoned mining town, dormant since the gold rush of the 1930s, experienced a significant influx of hippies and others from the early 1970s onwards. It became a hub for diverse groups, including left wing back-to-the-landers, old-time miners, Native Americans, and right-wing rednecks and Survivalists. The utilization of the 1872 Mining Act, allowing mineral search on public land, often served as a pretext for activities like homesteading and cannabis cultivation. The US Forest Service (USFS) contested these mining claims, leading to a “war” involving raids, cabin destruction, and spraying herbicide. In turn, members of different groups allied to fight the USFS. By 1982, Denny gained the reputation of being “the most outlaw town in California” and was considered an “experiment” in itself. Indeed, facing an increasingly uncontrolled situation, the government opted to test militarized enforcement measures. At the end of 1983, they officially launched the Campaign Against Marijuana Production (CAMP), a pivotal policy of the 1980s-1990s and part of a larger federal eradication program that impacted numerous rural areas across the US, especially in Oregon, Kentucky, and Arkansas [Trebach, 2005; Balko, 2013]. A first “media raid” preceding the initiation of the program in California occurred in southern-east Humboldt and involved the California Attorney General and TV crews. However, according to Dominic Corva and Brian Hill, a bust conducted in Denny in 1982 appears to have particularly inspired CAMP one year before its official commencement.

The initiation of CAMP in 1983 marked the escalation of the War on Drugs, employing helicopters, soldiers, and flamethrowers in raids against cannabis cultivators in the Emerald Triangle. Subsequent resistance by BTL political activists in southern Humboldt led to the establishment of structures such as radio stations in Garberville for information sharing and groups like the Civil Liberties Monitoring Project (CLMP) and Citizens Observation Groups (COG), engaging in non-violent “cop-watching”. In Denny, CAMP encountered such hostility that an official deemed it a necessity to “virtually occupy the area with a small army”, implementing roadblocks and dispatching military convoys, which included threats of residents with guns [Balko, 2013:149].

CAMP faced challenges due to the vast territory and “guerrilla growing” techniques that undermined its effectiveness, such as planting visible parcels of male plants, sacrificing sun exposure, and hiding females in the forest, along with opposition and shock in local communities forging alliances mentioned earlier. For example, “in 1985, this campaign uprooted 15,739 plants, which authorities estimated was only 20% of the state’s total crop” [Johnson, 2019: online]. For Vietnam Veterans, the sight of helicopters and the use of military personnel to search properties triggered painful memories of their wartime experiences, exacerbating cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Interviews suggest that these events also contributed to psychological trauma in children, especially when the parents were arrested, and crops seized.

Conversely, the raids and the “feeling to live in a state of war” fostered new coalitions among hippie and non-hippie neighbors.

CAMP also marked a temporary, if not definitive, pause in the ongoing debate within back-to-the-landers communities over the role of cannabis, whether it supported the BTL Movement and revitalized the economy or prompted a shift toward a more exploitative and consumerist capitalist lifestyle. The literature continues to explore this debate, offering varying perspectives, such as the one presented in *Murder Mountain*, portraying a paradise lost. It is however crucial to note that this situation is intertwined with various factors, which would take too long to explore fully in this introductory paper. In addition to the emergence of “second-generation growers,” including the children of “OGs” (original growers) hippie families with more materialistic values than their parents, factors such as the ready availability of cocaine played roles. Jerry Martien points out, “since the eighties, [...] when a blizzard of carbon notes<sup>15</sup> and cocaine blew through the backcountry, the best way to destroy the weed economy would be to flood it with pulp dollars. Cops no longer needed to shoot hippies – give’em enough hundred-dollar bills, hell, they’ll shoot each other” [2016: 7]. Scott Holmquist's 2022 paper, “Insurgent Growers,” presents an alternative narrative, suggesting that all the significant BTL institutions in southern Humboldt County were initiated without substantial amounts of cannabis money. Growing served as a catalyst for political activism, and by the 1980s, growing solely for private gain faced stigma. The arrival of CAMP and cocaine marked the end of the “golden era of Marijuana” for farming, yet it simultaneously strengthened the counterculture community and ushered in new opportunities. Despite increased repression, hippie-grower organizations, culture, and businesses thrived.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tensions also surfaced in some Emerald Triangle communities over environmental issues. These includes first assessments of the environmental costs of growing Marijuana, resistance to herbicide spray by state authorities, but first and foremost, opposition to the logging of old growth, known in the area – and in all the Pacific Northwest – under the name of “Timber Wars”. The conflicts pitted the old “timber economy” championed by longstanding logging families – still the primary income source for the redneck community at that time – against environmental activist newcomers who arrived to cultivate cannabis, engage in trimming, or pursue alternative endeavors. This dynamic recalling tensions over the transition from food gardens to cannabis cash crops, driven by an influx of money, is more complex than it may initially seem.

In a broader context, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed not only battles to destigmatize perceptions of growers and legalize recreational Marijuana, but also efforts to underscore the medicinal benefits of the plant. This advocacy addressed health issues such as combating dependencies (heroin, tobacco,

<sup>15</sup> A synonym for the “US Dollar”.

alcohol, and the emerging cocaine market), cancers, glaucoma, and AIDS, with a particular focus on LGBTQIA+ communities.

In San Francisco, Dennis Peron, a dedicated gay rights and cannabis activist, as well as a Vietnam War Air Force veteran, emerged as a key figure in this struggle. Influenced by his personal experiences with marijuana, Peron fervently advocated for its legalization as a therapeutic option for diverse health issues. In the 1970s he was arrested repeatedly for selling cannabis, including at his cafe. In the early 1990s, Peron co-founded the San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club, marking the establishment of the first medical dispensary. Despite encountering legal challenges, including a 1996 arrest on marijuana-related charges, Peron utilized his trial as a platform to champion cannabis legalization. His subsequent acquittal garnered national attention, significantly shaping public opinion on medical marijuana.

In the same year, California became the first state to pass a referendum legalizing medical cannabis, known as “Proposition 215.” This landmark decision ushered in a new green rush in the Emerald Triangle, marking a new phase in the region's history.

### **From Medical to Recreational Marijuana: the “Green Rush”**

1996 “Proposition 215” marked a significant shift from the prohibition market towards viewing Marijuana as a “medical substance” with an “economic dimension,” “marking [a] new normal” for patients, legal distribution, and, to some extent, producers, and law enforcement [Polson, 2018: 156-157]. This proposition, approved by 55,6% of Californians, legalized medical use of cannabis with a doctor’s prescription to treat conditions based on that doctor’s judgment of need, for conditions such as AIDS, cancer, or chronic pain. It also permitted personal cultivation for medical use, and membership in a Marijuana collective or cooperative, emphasizing, however, the non-commercial nature of such enterprises. “Prop 215” led to a conflict with federal authorities, as cannabis was still, and remains as of this writing, classified as a Schedule 1 substance, the most severe category, making it illegal in the US for any use, including medical. The new California law was also criticized for its ambiguities, but eventually it paved the way for a broader acceptance of cannabis in most US states, initially for medical use. It laid the groundwork for recreational legalization, which in California passed by a 2016 citizen’s referendum, going into effect in 2018.

Initially California state authorities intended to ignore the referendum’s intent and continue enforcing cannabis prohibition, assuming all cultivation was illegal until it was proven to be for medical use, post hoc. As before, a significant CAMP “bust campaign” was initiated in 1997. Federal authorities followed suit, operating within their jurisdictions. In one notable case, B.E. Smith, a Vietnam Veteran, right-wing advocate, and long-term medical activist, planted 87 plants (a symbolic reference to the US Constitution) near his cannabis farm in Denny.

He offered patients affected by PTSD and other diseases a price of \$500 per untrimmed 17-ounces<sup>16</sup>. The US Marshal and the USFS seized the production, leading to B.E. Smith's federal conviction and a 27-month prison sentence in 1999. His trial exemplifies one of many legal battles fought by growers, which were also recognized as patients, in the late 1990s. Locally, endeavors were undertaken to broaden the scope of Proposition 215. For example, in Mendocino in 2000, voters decided that the possession of fewer than 25 plants should be considered the lowest priority for local authorities.

Eventually, in 2003, California Senate passed a bill, known as “SB420”. This measure aimed at addressing ambiguities within “Prop 215”, including issues such as the allowable number of plants per patient, the authorization for collective cultivation, and the introduction of updated guidelines for law enforcement. Dispensaries flourished. Anthropologist Michael Polson notes that they identified as cannabis collectives, but they functioned more like retail outlets: “while the collectives comprised medical producers and patients, dispensaries required what small businesses routinely need. [...] [While] the proceeds of Marijuana sales used to go primarily to producers and brokers, now they were distributed to an array of economic actors clustered around distribution. This was intensified by the fact that many dispensaries grew Marijuana onsite” [*ibid.*, 160-161]. His research reveals indeed that the cost of medical cannabis for California consumers has remained relatively stable compared to pre-legalization levels. However, a significant shift occurred in producers’ pricing, plummeting to \$800 per pound, with the surplus absorbed by distributors.

Despite this factor, local and interstate black markets remained dynamic. Proposition 215 and SB420 created a “gray zone” for small producers and saw a reduction in state law enforcement operations. In southern Humboldt, a notable case dates from 2008, on a ranch land nicknamed “Buddaville” after one of the founding members of the growing group, a second-generation grower known as Buddah. Federal repression persisted but evolved, focusing primarily on public roads passing through national forest areas used for cannabis transportation. This strategy granted USFS law enforcement the basis to bring federal charges for marijuana offenses [Butler, 2015: 12]. Nevertheless, it did not reach levels witnessed during the pre-215 era.

As Dominic Corva elaborates in his paper in this issue of *Politique des Drogues*, “helicopters spread out throughout the state and funding for eradication decreased. The cannabis economy morphed into a major informal economic development machine,” involving almost all stakeholders in the Emerald Triangle, including “non-countercultural players.” Opportunities in the cannabis and related businesses attracted people to the region, causing real estate prices to surge. The increasing scale of cannabis production, in turn, led to the employment of more “trimmigrants” from all over the world. Supply

<sup>16</sup> Approximately 500 grams.

stores, restaurants, and other enterprises sprouted in tandem with the proliferation of growing medical licenses at the entrances of gated properties. In Humboldt, Mendocino, and Trinity, this time became known as “The Green Rush,” although Marijuana farming had already experienced at least one earlier rush, as mentioned previously.

This period of prosperity is not without its share of criticism. A political debate grew, particularly among those who had played a role in founding the forest defense movement in the 1990s. This discourse pitted the OGs, the older generation of hippie growers, against the new generation, often comprised of their own children. The focus of this debate was the environmental consequences of cannabis cultivation, particularly indoor and in greenhouses. Notably, in 2008, an anonymous campaign by a group of growers, involving posters and full-page local newspaper ads, advocated for “growing it with the sun” in Southern Humboldt and Northern Mendocino. The group specifically opposed the use of diesel-powered generators for indoor Marijuana cultivation. In other cases, growers attempted to organize political lobbying campaigns. In 2012, Emerald Growers Association was established. This “non-profit, member-based association of medical cannabis cultivators, business owners, and patients”, no longer active today, aimed to “promote California’s locally farmed, sustainably grown medical cannabis, and advocate for a medical cannabis industry that benefits the community, the environment, and the California economy<sup>17</sup>.”

From a criminological perspective, this era witnessed a rise in the presence of illicit, large-scale cultivations, notably those led by foreign growers. These groups, originating from Eastern Europe (Bulgarians, Russians), Southern Asia (Hmong), and Mexico, have been portrayed in *Murder Mountain*. However, there is a lack of concrete evidence supporting the existence of organized “cartels” in the sense of violent, large-scale criminal enterprises. To the best of our knowledge, references to “cartels” may be more aptly understood as colloquial expressions circulating within local populations to denote “greedos” with foreign origins, often collaborating with compatriots. These individuals typically transitioned into cultivation after successful trimming seasons, rather than indicating the presence of international mafia structures. Nonetheless, the situation remains unclear. What is certain is that challenges with workers, neighbors, crimes, and violence have remained relatively stable compared to the previous era, as indicated by various interviews. Characterizing the green rush time solely as a development of an increasingly violent criminal weed culture would be inaccurate.

Dominic Corva concludes that “the younger generation became significant landlords and organizers in the cannabis economy, while the older generation – and some younger people who espoused countercultural values – protested against the “Green Rush,” viewing it as an encroachment of capitalist,

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.medicaljane.com/directory/company/emerald-growers-association/>

materialist, and industrialist values.” As the era neared its end, however, grower communities expressed shared concerns on the eve of the recreational legalization referendum, known as “Prop 64.”

This referendum followed an unsuccessful attempt in 2010 but was influenced by increasingly favorable legislation, such as the approval of a 2014 initiative reducing the punishment for possession of controlled substances from a felony to a misdemeanor in California. Pioneering efforts in states like Colorado, Washington, and Oregon, which had legalized recreational cannabis between 2012 and 2015, also played a role. While the momentum for broader legalization of recreational Marijuana had been growing in California, it encountered resistance in producer communities. People were apprehensive about the introduction of a more intricate framework for a legal economy, which could mirror or exacerbate the problematic medical regulations already in place. The main concern centered around the fear that legalization would result in a more complex and unfavorable system for producers, especially smaller ones. Instead of eliminating the black market, it was anticipated to increase costs and regulations, particularly in terms of taxes and compliances, forcing growers to choose between legality and ability to pay bills. Prices were expected to decrease, and big companies to take position in this new market. Despite Proposition 64 receiving approval from 57% of California voters, it encountered substantial opposition within communities of the Emerald Triangle. In Humboldt, only 58% of voters expressed support, 54.3% in Mendocino, and a mere 50.1% in Trinity – significantly lower than the approval levels in urban areas, such as the 74% in San Francisco. The outcome of the 2016 referendum marks the transition to the contemporary era, which will be explored as a conclusion.

### **A Contemporary Crash? Ongoing Uncertainty, and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Our exploration of the Emerald Triangle highlights the complex evolution of the cannabis market and rural migrations spurred by the BTL movement in Northern California. Starting out as a pursuit of self-sufficiency, in this region, the movement adopted small-scale Marijuana farming, giving rise to debates and tensions over commercialization and countercultural principles. The escalation of the War on Drugs in the late 1960s and early 1970s resulted in conflicts and alliances among BTL communities, culminating in a green rush post the 1996 legalization of medical cannabis. However, this form of legalization brought unforeseen challenges, including significantly lower cannabis prices. The 2016 Prop 64 accentuated problems, especially after its coming into effect in 2018.

More than five years have elapsed, bringing significant transformations to the Emerald Triangle’s landscape, particularly in the legal and economic spheres. The exorbitant expenses associated with the legal market have resulted in numerous growers, who applied for legal compliance soon after the law passed,

to abandon their operations since 2019. According to our interviews and observations, they faced the dilemma of choosing between staying legal, continuing to pay bills and workers, returning to illegal operations, or changing their line of work. Additionally, they confronted competition from large-scale legal farms, often engaged in indoor or greenhouse cannabis production and sometimes related to multinational companies. With the entry of these major players, prices in the market quickly dropped. Recreational legalization has also compelled producers to invest in brands, merchandising, and follow new trends, including specialized cannabis-containing products like “wax”, “live resin” and other extracts, vape pens, and edibles. Santa Rosa has emerged as a new cannabis hub, positioned outside the Emerald Triangle but leveraging its reputation as the original home to the annual Emerald Cup cannabis competition. On the contrary, the black market has persisted. At the state level, while CAMP is officially operational, officers have adopted new methods, employing satellite reconnaissance on known illegal parcels and imposing fines through regulations related to “fish and game” or other environmental laws, rather than military tactics. Essentially, fines have replaced the previous police presence, and busts. For the so-called “cartels” and illegal growers, the market has predominantly shifted out of state, particularly to states that have yet to legalize cannabis. However, these growers were not exempt from the “crash:” the significant drop in prices per pound, notably in comparison to the previous eras, has led to the almost complete disappearance of illegal trimmigrants, except for individuals from minorities such as Mexicans and Hmong, and a decrease of growing operations. More broadly, the post-Prop 64 crisis has impacted the entire cannabis ecosystem of the Emerald Triangle, influencing not only specialized stores handling tools, agricultural seeds, and compliance services but also affecting bars, grocery stores, and various other businesses. Additionally, real estate has experienced a substantial decline.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have offered a temporary breath. COVID contributed to the preservation of the local cannabis economy by boosting both black market and licensed consumption throughout the United States. This temporarily surge accommodated increased production at higher prices. It can be approximated that this effect granted producers an additional span of at least one or two years. Nevertheless, following the lifting of restrictions, both legal and illicit markets have displayed considerable volatility, and the situation remains uncertain today.

In response to these challenges, local small legal growers in the Emerald Triangle are actively engaged in revitalizing their reputation. Confronting competition from indoor cannabis and large companies funded by industries such as tobacco, they are implementing strategies such as creating distinct labels (“organic,” “sun grown”), appellations, forming associations, guilds, and cooperatives of small producers, and instigating local markets or fairs dedicated to cannabis. This proactive response is evidenced by events like Eureka's Cannifest or Laytonville's producer market (since 2021). Brian Hill anticipates a trajectory for the local or homestead cannabis sector that parallels the



evolutionary patterns observed in both the organic food movement and the micro-brew beer industry in the 1970s and in the 1990s. He predicts the emergence of a dichotomy: on one end, “there will be large-scale products reminiscent of “big box” items”; and on the other, “locally grown, organic cannabis”. Woody Harrelson's recent establishment, “The Woods, situated in West Hollywood, exemplifies this transition, prominently featuring sun grown, homegrown cannabis” from Northern California. According to him, this shift reflects a hopeful expectation that “localization will prevail.”

However, this scenario appears in a constant state of evolution, and the prevailing sentiment in the region currently indicates the possibilities of a new crash, save, or the evolutionary transformations of the primary crop that has historically defined the reputation – both positively and negatively – of this distinctive region<sup>18</sup>.



Source : Wikipedia/CC

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