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POWER PLAYGROUND

The Bohemian Grove is a place of studied mystery, but make no mistake: It is where the most powerful (male, white) gather for two weeks a year to, well, play.

BY JOHN VAN DER ZEE

On Friday afternoons, every July, the corporate jets come streaking into the Sonoma County Airport in Santa Rosa, California. Alighting from the ramps, business-suited men clutching attache cases are met by limousines and taxis edged out on the apron. Less than two hours later, the same men, clad in an assortment of comfortable sports clothes, stroll along a path winding through a forest of redwood trees lit by Japanese lanterns.

Around them, nestled in wooded canyons, are compounds of accommodations: tents, tree houses, forts, stockades, cabins, reminiscent of a boys' summer camp. At one fenced-in compound, a group listens to a newspaper editor on a small stage telling jokes and stories. Across the road, in a clearing among Irish an tpepes, an insurance broker playing the banjo accompanies the rather shaky singing of a television network sales executive. At a third camp, a corporate attorney pulls away on a tuba as part of a wash board band.

Amid this cavalcade of amateur entertainment, the men move from camp to camp in what seems like a gigantic open house. In twos and threes, drinks in hand, they stop to talk, and renew the old school tie—grammar school, prep school, college, the service.

No begins another annual two-week encampment at the Bohemian Grove, the largest private gathering of men of wealth and power in America. Founded almost a

century ago by the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, the Grove, located some 70 miles north of San Francisco on the Russian River, has become famous—or infamous, depending on one's point of view—as a bastion of the business and political establishment. Outsiders, liberals (read Democrats), women's groups and the like—castigate it as the place where the true owners of the Republic gather in secret to divvy up the pie. Club members, and conservatives generally, reject this as a canard, insisting that most Bohemians are men of moderate means and that the

USING THE GROVE FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES IS TABOO, BUT...

Grove is a gathering of men out to have an innocent good time.

In fact, using the encampment for business or political purposes is forbidden by the Bohemian Club's motto: "Weaving spiders, come not here." On the other hand, it is difficult to buy the proposition that the likes of Henry Kissinger, Henry Ford 2d, George Bush, Nelson, Laurance and David Rockefeller and every Republican President since Calvin Coolidge have come to this out of the way, place purely to escape the workaday world, enjoy amateur theatricals and commune with the redwoods.

A good number of the 2,300 members

and guests who come to the Grove over the two-week encampment, mostly on the weekends, are California professional and business men. But what gives the Grove its resonance is the presence of many of the men considered to be the owners of America: bankers, corporate leaders, politicians, university and foundation heads, press lords.

The Grove is the gathering place for executives of every stripe. There are hereditary proprietors, such as Chairman Stephen D. Bechtel Jr. of Bechtel Group and Chairman Jack R. Howard of Scripps-Howard Broadcasting; big-name company chieftains, such as A.W. "Tom" Clausen, chief executive of BankAmerica and former president of the World Bank; and David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, and former U.S. deputy secretary of defense; and even media stars turned entrepreneurs, such as Merv Griffin, Art Linkletter and Walter Cronkite.

"People on their way to the top are brought into the Bohemian Club," says a second-generation Bohemian who is prominent in California civic affairs. "That's how the presidents of certain companies always seem to turn up as members. It's a way of saying, 'Here's an up-and-coming man, someone you should get to know.'"

It's the kind of access that men are will- ing to pay a stiff price for. Membership in the Bohemian Club costs up to \$8,500 in initiation fees and dues of \$110 a month. There is a 13-year waiting list for Californians and up to 18 years for outsiders. An exception is made for the professionals who are the leading participants in the Grove's theatrical and musical performances. These men, who include members

John van der Zee, the author of The Great Men's Party on Earth, once worked as a waiter at the Bohemian Grove.

is squarely behind George Bush, a longtime member and Grove regular.

The Grove's increased influence during the Reagan era has attracted growing attention from outside. Demonstrators representing antinuclear, environmental, women's and antiwar groups are now a familiar sight at the entrance, forcing members and guests to run a gauntlet of picket signs. The general reaction inside the Grove is to make jokes about the protesters, enhancing the "us versus them" atmosphere. "I talked to them," a veteran Bohemian says of the pickets. "and I told them they were going about it the wrong way. What they should do is demonstrate at night and catch the members who are sneaking out to visit the hookers across the river."

Given the Grove's undertones of hierarchy and power, the contradictions become thematic. Here is a group of men out to have fun, be gregarious, make new friends. But all are mirror images of one another: white, educated, usually affluent men who are defined by what they do, whose jobs or professions are usually part of this introduction. The Grove's usefulness as a place where men of influence can meet on common ground is always present, and eventually the encampment begins to seem an idea fundamentally in conflict with itself. "It's not in itself a control mechanism," says one veteran Bohemian, "but men are introduced around with the thought that contacts might be useful. Significant conversations do take place."

One longtime member recalls that years ago at the Grove, when he was "very young and idealistic," he was shocked to hear the head of a large corporation call the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury "a son of a bitch" and bowl him out for not following instructions.

Where the conflict of values runs deepest is in the Grove's attitude toward women. More than anything else, the encampment represents an escape from the world of women, with its obligations and restraints. Nevertheless, women are always there in the conversations men have about their wives and mistresses, in the jokes and stories, in the skirts, songs and drag roles, and in the availability of prostitutes in motels and hotels across the river.

But not even Bohemia is immune to change. Most of the protesters at the Grove's entrance are women. And in a direct challenge, in 1981 the Bohemian Club was taken to court for refusing to employ women. After an investigation by the California Fair Employment and Housing Practices Commission, the club was found guilty of discrimination in hiring. It fought the decision all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and lost last September. By November, the dining room of the "San

Francisco club was hiring waitresses, and female employees are scheduled to appear at the Grove this summer for the first time.

Also last November, San Francisco enacted an ordinance prohibiting private clubs from discriminating on grounds of race or sex in choosing members. The race issue presents no real problem for the Bohemian Club, since it has a tiny number of black and Asian members.

There also are various steps the club can take to keep the encampment an all-male preserve, such as incorporating the Grove separately from the club in San Francisco. But the women's issue will undoubtedly continue to be a problem. At Stanford, for example, a group of female faculty members has protested the use of university funds to help pay the Bohemian Club membership fees of male faculty members and administrators.

It's Saturday, the last day at the Bohemian Grove, and the adrenaline level is rising. On tap is the climax of the encampment, the one-time-only performance of the Grove Play. At dinner, entire camps arrive in groups. From table to table, the traditional lyric, "Bohemia, Bohemia, this home is here," rolls among the diners.

Later, at the Grove theater, members and guests sit on low benches facing an open stage that is backed by a wooded hillside stretching up into a horizon of night sky and redwood branches. The night's performance involves a cast of more than 100, including a young lawyer who played leads at the Yale Drama School and a chief executive who stands shivering

plauded. There is no flippancy here. When the president of a bank, playing a free spirit, rejects an offer of gold from Mammon, not a single irreverent voice shouts, "Come on, Fred, we know you never passed up a dollar in your life!"

We know in advance that the hero of the epic will be a nobleman, king or commander worshiped by his men, and that he will see His Duty and Do It. By the final episode, the stage has been traversed by so many armies that it could be a Balkan province.

We are now at the headquarters of Charles Stuart, prince of Scotland, who has just been defeated and killed by the English in a skirmish that enveloped the entire hillside in punitive standing over Charles, an English officer proclaims his death an accident and announces an amnesty to the rebels.

Charles, who speaks a bagpipe band, down in from Vancouver, comes skirling down the hillside, 30 pieces strong, keening and flourishing. The pipers draw crowds of English and Scottish soldiers all across the hill, bringing most of the men in the audience to their feet. "Way to go, baby!" The crowd of players winds at last onto the stage.

Four Scottish chieftains cover the prince's body. As the pipers begin a dirge, they lift the body to their shoulders and bear it up the hillside, followed by the pipers and soldiers. While the procession winds its way, an organ and an 80-piece orchestra join in to swell the sound. Finally, a lone piper standing in a spotlight high on the hill ends the performance with a rendition of "Amazing Grace."

Squinting and stretching, members and guests move up the aisles and cluster in



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with a spear in one hand and a cup of cologne in the other.

The players—monks, knights, Indians, women, soldiers, woodland sprites—appear by spotlight at different heights and depths above the stage, marching up and down the winding path in an illusion of endlessness. The audience responds to them like a high school cheering section. Entrances, music, lights, props are all ap-

propos. Some of the most inaccessible men in America are smiling and nodding, talking about the play and the music to men who were strangers minutes before. With a series of pops, a bottle roars to life at the Campfire Circle. The crowd gathers around, clutching drinks, staring into the flames, men made taw by huge bright shadows, aging bodies feeding young and loose on Scotch whisky and music.