

Country's power brokers 'camp' despite protests

Hernandez, Javier C. **McClatchy - Tribune News Service** [Washington] 29 July 2006: 1.

Abstract

Outside of this kingdom of redwoods, they lead lives as some of the most powerful politicians, CEOs and lawyers in the country. But beginning in the ides of July, these men set aside their devoirs and enter the gates of Bohemian Grove, a secretive Northern California summer camp where mint juleps and games of Texas Hold 'Em are just as common as late-night chitchat with former U.S. presidents and spats over stem cell policy.

Secluded in the old-growth redwoods about 75 miles north of San Francisco, "the Grove," as it is called by generations of Bohemians, is the obsessively sub-rosa summer home of the Bohemian Club, an elite San Francisco-based men's group that boasts George H.W. Bush, Charles Schwab and Walter Cronkite among its ranks.

The Bohemian Club includes some of the most powerful men of the world. Each July, about 2,000 members attend the club's encampment at Bohemian Grove.

Full Text

MONTE RIO, Calif. -- In the sylvan shadows here, power brokers come out to play.

Outside of this kingdom of redwoods, they lead lives as some of the most powerful politicians, CEOs and lawyers in the country. But beginning in the ides of July, these men set aside their devoirs and enter the gates of Bohemian Grove, a secretive Northern California summer camp where mint juleps and games of Texas Hold 'Em are just as common as late-night chitchat with former U.S. presidents and spats over stem cell policy.

"It's a very convivial atmosphere for fellowship," says one member, who asked not to be identified because Bohemians are discouraged from speaking with the news media. "It's a place where you drop your title and talk

to people in a different way."

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Sunday marks the end of the club's annual encampment at its 2,700- acre estate along the Russian River. It is here, in the forests of this minute Sonoma County resort town, where more than 2,000 members of the corporate and political creme de la creme come to unwind on their summer playground.

The Grove today is an oasis of old-world values, a resting place where members -- primarily white, elderly and Republican -- come to enjoy big band music and inhabit camps with names like "Hill Billies" and "Cave Man."

While rock music has finally made it into the Grove, members say racial and ethnic minorities remain scarce. And some outside of the Grove warn that the ban on females may eventually lessen the group's dominion.

But even as the world around them changes, Bohemians this year enjoy much the same camp that their grandfathers did, complete with amateur plays and arcane Druidic rites like the "Cremation of Care," a ceremony in which torch-wielding men cloaked in crimson robes burn an effigy representing the cares they are supposed to leave behind.

Such cultish traditions have become fodder for scores of activists and conspiracy theorists.

But Bohemians cling to this way of life. Without vast reserves of testosterone and a veil of secrecy, they say, the euphoric sanctuary that is Bohemian Grove could not exist.

"Weaving spiders, come not here," decrees the motto of the Bohemians, a Shakespearean line meant to encourage members to check their deal-making impulses at the gate.

For the most part, Bohemians say the ban on business inside the Grove is upheld.

"We might talk about policy, but you don't make policy decisions," says Charles Townes, a 91-year-old Nobel Prize-winning physicist and member of the Bohemian Club for more than 30 years.

Perhaps the most important discussions come at the Grove's "Lakeside Talks" series. It was in that forum that Richard Nixon introduced his detente policy to deal with the Soviet Union and where big-name politicians often float policy ideas, according to San Francisco native John van der Zee, author of the 1974 Grove book "The Greatest Men's Party on Earth."

"It's a great political materials testing-ground," van der Zee says. "That's where you can get immediate feedback from a cross- section of American business, civic and corporate leaders on ideas."

This year, Bohemians are hearing presentations with titles such as "These Europeans: Do They Understand Us? Or Anything?"

The private nature of the talks is a perennial gripe of activists.

Mary Moore, a 71-year-old retired business owner with the stamina of a 1960s peacenik, has dedicated the past 25 years to the Bohemian Grove Action Network.

Moore says protesters have come out in greater numbers in the years since George W. Bush took office.

"This is a network of the really elite banking, financial and governmental leaders, and they're listening to these

talks on these subjects without any public scrutiny," Moore says. "This is not the way we learned politics should be in civics course."

As the Bohemian Club celebrates its 134th anniversary, some wonder whether it risks fading into irrelevance.

Theda Skocpol, a Harvard political scientist, says the exclusion of women, who today occupy an increasing number of top leadership positions, might ultimately hurt the group's clout.

"It's often a matter of survival to change," Skocpol says. "These days, it's probably a problem for the club to exclude women -- they're simply not going to have some of the people who are major players."

But Townes, the Bohemian physicist, says most members have decided that barring women is "the right thing to do."

"We camp out for two weeks together in the woods. To have women there would be a little complicated," he says.

(EDITORS: STORY CAN END HERE)

The group is also trying to boost the number of minorities and Democrats who make the yearly trip down Bohemian Highway, but the club's membership process has slowed its ability to diversify. Incoming members must endure a 17-year waiting list before they can groove at the Grove.

As a result, members say, minorities are washed out in a sea of white men, and they estimate that Democrats make up only about 25 percent of Grove participants.

However, one Bohemian says, "There's no hint of discrimination."

When van der Zee wrote his book on the Grove decades ago, he thought the Bohemians were in their final throes. Today, he is amazed the club continues to thrive, and he attributes it to the renewed respect for hierarchy and isolation in the current political and social climate.

"I think there will always be that element in this society," he says.

And by all indications, members hope that dictum rings true well into the 21st century.

As private jets and Town Cars begin their yearly voyages back to lands of privilege, silence once again reverberates in this verdant village. The sounds of Beethoven symphonies and backwoods theater echo into oblivion, but as one member puts it, "the bonds of we Bohemians are everlasting."

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MALE RULING ELITISTS ONLY

The Bohemian Club includes some of the most powerful men of the world. Each July, about 2,000 members attend the club's encampment at Bohemian Grove.

James A. Baker III, former secretary of state

William F. Buckley, Jr., conservative author and commentator

Jimmy Buffett, singer

George H.W. Bush, former U.S. president

Walter Cronkite, retired CBS anchor

Clint Eastwood, actor

Merv Griffin, former talk show host

Walter B. Hewlett, son of Hewlett-Packard founder

Henry A. Kissinger, former U.S. secretary of state

Edwin Meese III, former U.S. attorney general

Robert G. Mondavi, wine producer

Colin Powell, former U.S. secretary of state

David Rockefeller, philanthropist

Donald H. Rumsfeld, U.S. secretary of defense

George P. Shultz, former U.S. secretary of state

Source: 2004 list of Bohemian Grove camp participants obtained by the San Jose Mercury News

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