

manson & me



mike finley



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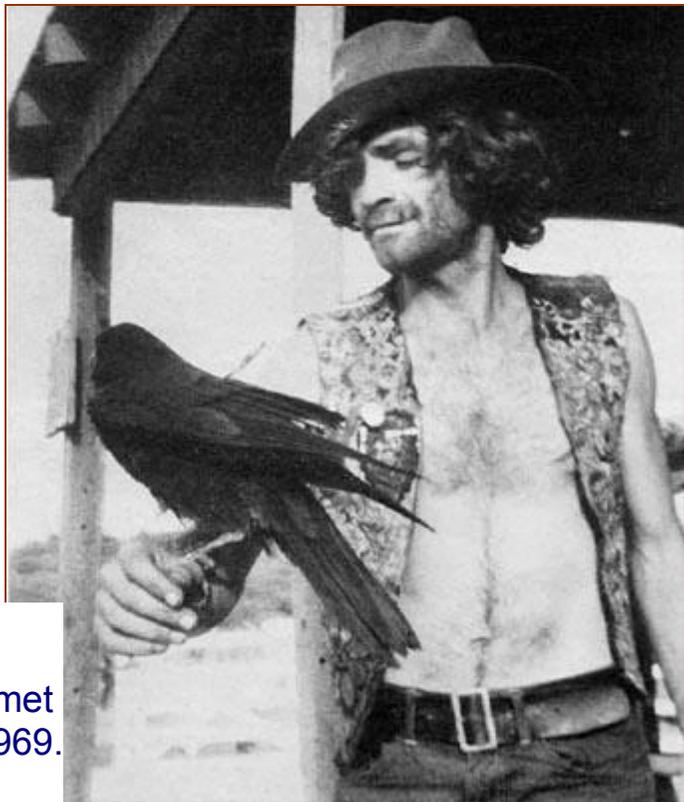
by Michael Finley

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I have two main memories of Thompson's Chicken Ranch, one involving teenaged runaways, and one involving mass murderer Charles Manson. There is a third memory, involving an earthquake that destroyed all of California, and us with it, but that will have to wait for another time.

The core population of the ranch was a small handful of men in breechclouts, as lean as jerky and about half as verbal, who lounged in the shadows in the daytime, and ventured out only at night. It says something that in all our visits to the place -- where we were regarded about as seriously as the Partridge Family -- we never learned any of their names. Indeed, I can't recall even having a conversation with anyone. We communicated mainly with grunts and far-out's. People just arrived, found a corner to crash in, and did their thing. It was not just that they were nonverbal, but that they were incurious, as if the sun had baked all the inquisitiveness out of them.

These guys were hard-core in their habits, and I would guess wealthy in their background. They had no visible means of support, they never lifted a finger for any other human being, yet they were up to their ears in high quality LSD, California red wine and ganja, and for their delectation a kind of underground railroad arrived every day with three or four or five high school girls in it.

Every morning that we stayed by the ranch, the local police would show up and cart off the underaged girls that had been there the night before. It was not a big deal. The police would arrive promptly around 8:30 AM, would go to the back door and

call out "Hello?" and would then roust the groggy 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds and lead them away, in various stages of dishevelment to the patrol car. In town, they would have the girls call their parents and arrange for their return. It might even have been the same girls each morning. I wasn't there enough times to say one way or the other.

Had this happened back in Ohio, it would have been a screaming scandal, with banner headlines in the local Republican rags. Here in California, with the Age of Aquarius already growing dog-eared in the desert sun, it was matter-of-fact. Daughters didn't belong with their families in the new age. That they were sent home every morning was a weary formality of a changed world.

### **Dave the deserter**

Now, to the Manson trip. It was a weekend trip we Midwestern hippies undertook, plus Dave, a deserter who was living with us, and Sylvia, his girlfriend. We arrived at the Chicken Ranch on a Wednesday afternoon.

This particular trip, we traveled in a fairly new van that Dave had somehow acquired. Dave is another separate story. He was both a speed freak and a Jesus freak. He told us his mother died when he was eleven,

and his daddy was already gone by then, back in the Texas panhandle somewhere, and he was left to raise his little brother by himself. Dave took to reading the Bible to his brother Jeremy every night, and dine on jackrabbits and quail he would shoot, and cornbread he would make from stolen ears.

It was an intense life, and they managed as best they could. But over the passage of months things began to go sour for the two boys, which Dave summed up by telling me that one day he nailed his little brother's hands to the bedroom door. It had something to do with a vision of Jesus, which he now thought the might not have got quite right.

Jeremy survived the ordeal, but he grew up to become an even bigger druggie than Dave, and Dave believed that, in addition to the FBI wanting him for slipping out of the Presidio brig one night and being seriously AWOL for eight months, his brother Jeremy was also hot on his trail, with a head full of hootch and the determination to repay Dave for the crucifixion.

### **But anyhow**

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great tape deck. The album that spring was *Born on the Bayou*, by Credence Clearwater Revival, and we had it on the whole way. It was a record you could get lost in, like a high-powered boat in a backwater swamp, especially if you were high and, well, lost to begin with.

When we arrived at the Ranch we were even less welcome than usual. About thirty bikes were parked out front. So we drove past the house up a long skinny drive leading up toward the pile of rocks passing as a mountain range. We parked about 200 yards from the house, set up a lean-to against the truck, and got out.

Dave had a spy-glass, and he identified the bike group below us as the Sons of Troy, a fairly nondescript bunch of road losers. We went hiking through the rocks for about an hour, careful of rattlesnakes. When we returned, we could see that a second wave of bikers were arriving below us. Their jackets all said Hessians. I had heard of the Hessians, they were a large and unruly group, bullies, of the sort (they were called the Beetles) who took over that town under Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin in *The Wild One*.

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The driver was a goofy-looking man with shortish hair. Also debarking was a short, intense, brown-haired and brown-eyed man who looked nervously at us, and without nodding, walked to the back of the bus and untied the emergency doors, which were connected with a strap of leather. About six girls were inside. I can't remember their faces, except for one straw-haired girl with a horsey sort of look to her.

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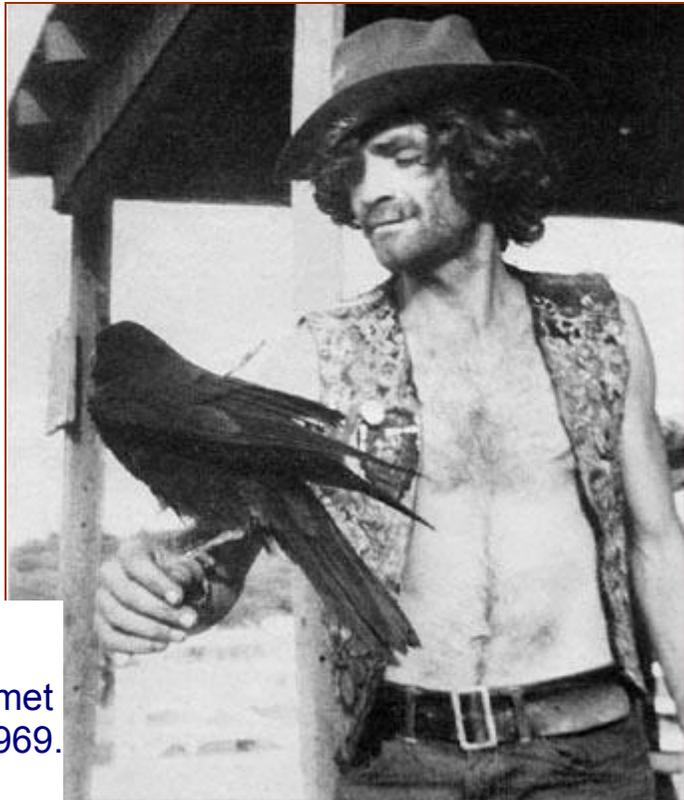
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