

Commentary... L.A. death trip

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

During summer college breaks back in the mid-1980s, I did some work for my grandparents — the typical light home maintenance stuff on their place in La Cañada, California. My grandfather was on his last legs, his breath stolen by emphysema, which he earned with a heavy smoking habit in his younger days and by working with asbestos and God knows what-all building liberty ships in Long Beach harbor during World War II.

At lunch we'd sit at the kitchen table and I'd ask him questions about his ranching days and the move to L.A. during the Depression. These were just conversations, not interviews — and I neither recorded nor wrote anything down. Though I was a history major and a lifelong history nerd, I didn't really think then of my grandpa's life as part of history. I know. Youth is wasted on the young.

Sometimes the conversation wound down odd paths. I don't know how we got on the subject of the Manson murders of August 8-10, 1969, but I recall the conversation vividly. Because the killings freaked my grandpa out — and he did not scare easy.

Quentin Tarantino's current movie, "Once Upon A Time In Hollywood," uses the murders as a fulcrum on which to move a twisted love letter to vintage L.A. That it

works so effectively is evidence that there is something endlessly fascinating about the killings set against the cultural context of the times.

It was context that made the killings so chilling to the likes of my grandfather. Part of it was that he either knew or knew someone who knew Leno LaBianca through the grocery business (I can't remember which it was, but I think probably the latter). The slayings of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca were the second set of gruesome "Helter Skelter" murders, and are usually treated almost as a footnote to the slaughter of actress Sharon Tate and four others in Benedict Canyon the night before. A shocking murder that hits within a couple of degrees of separation is bound to shake anyone.

But what my grandpa told me was that the killings made him and my grandma and their friends feel vulnerable in a way they had never felt before. Things still felt "innocent" and "secure" for them back in 1969, despite all the social turmoil of the era. Really, for a whole lot of middle class people just working to make a living and provide a decent life for their family, "the Sixties" weren't really a thing. My brother was in high school, too young for Vietnam; my older sister was married to an Air Force man, but he was stationed in England. There was just no real personal point of connection to all the *sturm und*

drang. My grandparents lived in a nice suburb that had not yet become an enclave of the rich. It was an actual neighborhood. They left windows open on hot August nights (a child of the Depression, my grandpa refused to pay for air conditioning. The week after he died, my grandma installed a unit).

It would be several months before the Manson Family was fingered for the crimes of August 8-10. The sensational killings and all their bizarre and gruesome iconography made my folks and countless thousands just like them feel personally vulnerable. "They" — whoever they were — might just come into your home and carve you up. We like to think of the media "back then" as sober and responsible, but it was rife with speculation and stoked fear and hysteria. People — and not just freaked-out movie stars — started sleeping with guns on the nightstand.

All of a sudden, the turmoil of the '60s, which my people viewed through the TV screen but seldom encountered in

the real world, felt very present and profoundly menacing. Is that kid with long hair hitch-hiking at the freeway on-ramp a killer? Who is that driving that beat-up car down the street? What horror is going to happen next?

1969 was Maximum California Weirdness playing out in blood. Charles Manson was an avatar of a variety of pretty commonplace cultural influences and obsessions — drugs, sex, pseudo-religious self-actualization cons, "revolution," all rolled up, lit on fire and inhaled in combination with the ultimate L.A. drug — the deepest belief that somehow, someday, if you can just get in front of the right person at the right time, you can be a STAR.

The gruesome events of August 8-10, 1969, are often tolled out as "the end of the Sixties." You can take your pick of end points. Altamont in December 1969? The landslide reelection of Richard Nixon in 1972? Watergate in 1974? The final evacuation and fall of Saigon in 1975? Such punctuation is inevitably somewhat arbitrary and

inadequate.

This much seems clear, at least from the standpoint of my people: What happened on August 8-10, 1969, shook the sense of security that middle-class Angelenos (and maybe Americans writ large) had retained through the weird and wild times of the 1960s. Whether "the Sixties" ended then or not, a certain sense of the world did. Open windows and unlocked doors seemed mighty risky. Long hair and rock music wasn't just distasteful — it was downright sinister. It may be putting too much weight on a single episode, but the way the killings went down — and the way they continue to be obsessively recounted — pushed a wedge into cultural faultlines that had already cracked open around Vietnam, the sexual revolution, and a broad culture clash. It raised the stakes. *They* weren't just rebelling — *they* were murdering *us*.

Those faultlines still remain 50 years down the line, and no number of security cameras can quite relieve the fear.



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