

Guru 'sold enlightenment' in Central Oregon

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

"I sell contentment," said the guru then known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. "I sell enlightenment."

It was a big claim. For many followers, it rang true. During the 1970s the India-based cult grew in popularity among well-off, educated Westerners, and tensions increased around their ashram in Pune (Poona). The Rajneeshees decided to build their own utopia in the United States.

They found a location right here in Central Oregon: Big Muddy Ranch, near the town of Antelope.

Rajneeshpuram, the large intentional community they built from the ground up in the early 1980s, is featured in the High Desert Museum's new exhibit, "Imagine a World" (see related article, page 6). Photos, informational material, and a Rolls Royce are part of the installation.

What's up with the car? Well, the Bhagwan became famous for combining spirituality with materiality and carnality. Unlike most other gurus, he didn't preach asceticism or reject wealth and consumerism. On the contrary, he embraced them, along with unconventional approaches to sex and violence.

Rajneesh became known for his "drive-by darshan" at Rajneeshpuram. He had taken a vow of silence, so this was

a primary way of interacting with his followers: driving down a dusty road, occasionally nodding to them or pressing his hands together.

The undeniably weird image of a long-bearded, robed Indian mystic driving through the Wild West landscape of Wasco County in one of his 93 Rolls Royces, the road flanked by red-, pink-, and orange-wearing devotees singing and dancing, captured the imagination of many. He became known in the American media as the Rolls Royce Guru or Guru of the Rich; in India, he had once earned the moniker The Sex Guru.

In 1982 he told an immigration officer, "All the religions have commanded and praised poverty, and I condemn all those religions. Because of their praise of poverty, poverty has persisted in the world. I don't condemn wealth. Wealth is a perfect means which can enhance people in every way... So I am a materialist spiritualist."

Money matters, in other words. By the time Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh left India in 1981, according to *The Oregonian*, "his empire was embroiled in disputes over millions of dollars in unpaid taxes." In the United States, the legal problems of Rajneesh, his right-hand Ma Anand Sheela, and other Rajneesh leaders eventually encompassed far worse.

In a very brief period of

time, the Rajneeshees built an entire mini-metropolis, with sewage systems, housing, a bus system, and other municipal functions. Devoted followers learned to plan, build, and farm together, embracing hands-on hard work as part of their spiritual ethic. Building their own city and infrastructure from scratch became part of their spiritual practice.

Tensions developed between the thousands of residents at Rancho Rajneesh, later incorporated as an actual city called Rajneeshpuram, and residents of nearby ranches and houses in the town of Antelope. (The conflicts are well described by residents interviewed in "Wild Wild Country," streaming on Netflix.)

The museum shows memorabilia of Antelope-area residents and Oregonians in general revolting against the sudden appearance of a new mini-city in their midst. These items are displayed in the trunk of the Rolls Royce, naturally.

Some opposition shown at the time can be interpreted as xenophobic or racist. Nevertheless, in terms of public relations, the Rajneeshees largely dug their own grave.

At one point, they recruited thousands of unhoused people from around Oregon, promising them a place to live, good meals, and beer. The point wasn't necessarily religious conversion, but to boost Rajneeshpuram's voter base



PHOTO BY TL BROWN

Memorabilia of Oregonians opposing the Rajneeshees building a city in Central Oregon is on display in the trunk of a Rolls Royce at High Desert Museum.

to gain a stronger political foothold in the county.

When those folks arrived at the polls, local pollsters didn't let them vote. Back at camp, they became "rowdy," according to a report in *Good*. "To keep the peace, the Rajneeshees separated these disenfranchised people from the rest of the group, drugged their beers with sedatives, and made them listen to chanting."

Sheela and others were later accused of poisoning Oregon locals with salmonella bacteria to prevent them from making it to the voting booth; trying to take over the city of Antelope; and even a plot to assassinate a federal official. So much for utopia.

Convicted of immigration crimes, the Bhagwan paid fines; globetrotted a while,

only to be run out of most countries; and returned to India. He changed his name to Osho and is often quoted in Internet memes and New Age environments. He died in 1990.

Ma Anand Sheela pleaded guilty to attempted murder and assault for her role in the bioterrorist poisoning attack. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison, paroled after about three years. Convicted of criminal acts related to an assassination plot against federal prosecutor Charles Turner, she was tried in her new adopted country of Switzerland and sentenced to time served.

As for Rancho Rajneesh: it is now called Washington Family Ranch, owned and operated by Young Life, a Christian organization.



PIZZA

FUN & GAMES




PEPPERONI

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FLOUR



MENU



CHEF



SAUCE



TOMATO



PEPPER



DELIVERY



UTENSIL



Pizza Word Find

SUDOKU EASY PEASY!

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Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down, and each small nine-box square contains all of the numbers from 1 to 9.

MATH SQUARE

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Use the numbers 1 through 16 to complete the equations. Each number is used once. Each row is a math equation. Each column is a math equation. Remember that multiplication and division are performed before addition and subtraction.