

Mushroom pushing proves lucrative living

By SHAUN McCREA
Of the Emerald

The next time you see little grey mushrooms sprouting in your lawn you may also catch sight of Mitchell Henderson — picking them. Henderson (not his real name), a soft-spoken, free and easy example of the Oregon counterculture, is one of the many mushroom hunters in the Pacific Northwest interested in gathering hallucinogenic mushrooms. But his interest is more than a hobby, it's a profession: Henderson supports himself by selling psilocybin mushrooms. During the six to eight weeks of warm weather and heavy rain in the fall and spring, Henderson travels as far as the coast, searching for *Psilocybe similanceata* — one of the 17-odd varieties of hallucinogenic mushrooms growing in the Willamette Valley.

Psilocybe similanceata (also called the "liberty cap"), is probably the most common variety of psilocybin mushroom in the valley. One usually finds it sprouting in meadows, along roadsides and around dung after a heavy rain. A brownish mushroom with a hollow white stem and pin-stripes radiating down its cap, *similanceata* tends to grow in specific cycles year after year, and only appears in the fall and early spring. Other varieties appear at varying times of the year.

Henderson has been hunting mushrooms for about four years. "I began because I wanted to make a living in a 'creative' way," he states. "Mushrooms are spe-

yourself you don't expect. They can give you a sense of direction or even show you a planned destination."

Henderson enjoys the folklore surrounding "magic mushrooms" (or "zoomers" as he calls them), but most of all he enjoys his success as an entrepreneur. He appears constantly relaxed, self-confident and satisfied with his chosen profession. Perhaps he has reason to be.

Although only about two out of every 12 fields he checks ever yield mushrooms, Henderson usually manages to harvest between seven and 30 pounds of mushrooms each expedition. At \$5 an ounce that totals \$80 a pound, or a whopping \$2,400 on a 30 pound haul. Lucrative? Yes. Dangerous? Maybe. Under Section 274 of the Oregon Criminal Code, psilocybin and psilocin (the active ingredients in the mushrooms) are illegal to transport, cultivate, possess or process, and can be considered a Class A misdemeanor (maximum sentence of one year) or a Class B felony (maximum sentence of 10 years), depending on the discretion of the court.

However, few arrests are made and even fewer cases prosecuted, because of the cumbersome process involved in testing the mushrooms for psilocybin and because of the time and effort necessary to maintain the freshness of the mushrooms for evidence (they deteriorate rapidly unless frozen or dried).

Sergeant Hunter of the Eugene Police Lab sighed when asked about mushrooms. "You mention mushrooms around here and

as any other prospective picker, buyer or eater must consider. First, there is a good chance of picking the wrong mushrooms. On this, Henderson himself voices concern.

"I always worry I'll pick the wrong ones," he explains. "I'm

admits that some people inevitably have problems.

"I've never had a person sick," he emphasizes, "I've had a couple people who didn't get off after eating about 20 'zoomers' and that was surprising, but I've never had anyone freak out. I did have

mushrooms in this one field last year, but as I was leaving this farmer came bounding up and told me I couldn't leave, that he'd called the police. I waited about 20 minutes, got tired of it and left. The dude jumped in his four-wheel drive pick-up and nudged my car off into the ditch. The police came and arrested me for trespassing, but the guy never did more than press charges so it never went to court." Henderson smiles. "About 50 per cent of the farmers are like that."

Conversely, Henderson cites an example of another farmer who gave him complete permission to pick mushrooms, just as long as he didn't destroy the fences or let the farmer's cows loose.

Besides the fact that psilocybin mushrooms are illegal, difficult to identify and somewhat unpredictable, there are other aspects to be considered. Since mushrooms often grow in fields or meadows near dung, they tend to be unclean — a factor that can lead to the contraction of tetanus. The probability of picking up heart worms is a lesser, but still possible, danger.

The number of people searching for or eating mushrooms has increased tremendously only this year. The Drug Information Center (DIC) estimates that in November alone, over 200 people came in or called for information regarding mushrooms. As the popularity of consuming psilocybin mushrooms increases, so does the danger of mishap. Admittedly, there are some people who know the varieties of mushrooms, know how to test them and even how to make money off them. Mitchell Henderson is one of these people — but he is a definite exception to the rule. Most people simply do not have the background, knowledge or training and they are advised to either forget mushroom hunting or to at least send a sample of any mushrooms they have picked to the DIC for analysis.



Photo by Perry Gask II

'Mushrooms are special because they're organic. They're a present from the earth.'

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The high is dependent on the quantity ingested, although about 20 medium mushrooms is the usual dose. Henderson refuses any comparison of LSD and mushrooms, claiming: "...one is like being in the city — the other like being in the country. Mushrooms are so much safer. The high ranges from pleasantly euphoric to a different consciousness altogether. 'Zoomers' take you beyond the realm of normality — they bring out things within

everybody groans," he said. "I don't think we've had one sample sent in for analysis this whole year."

Whatever police policy, Henderson certainly doesn't worry about being busted. "It's something I put out of my head," he says simply. "It would take too much incriminating evidence for them to ever build a case against me."

But even if the Eugene police are not strict in enforcing the laws on psilocybin, there are other dangers that Henderson as well

not afraid I will, but I always worry. That's why I always test my mushrooms. Even a small bit of an *Amanita verna* (a death angel) can make a person horribly ill or even kill them. That's also why I stick to lowland picking — once you get up into the hills the varieties run about 90 per cent poisonous."

There is also a chance the mushrooms (even if psilocybin) will make a person ill. Because people's metabolisms differ, their bodies react differently — sometimes with disastrous results. Reports of people in both Oregon and Washington hospitalized from the effects of mushrooms have become common this fall, and indicate that metabolism has at least some effect on a person's physical ability to assimilate mushrooms. Henderson maintains the problem is psychological, not physical, although he

one guy who had a hard time but that was only because he didn't have faith in himself."

A third problem relates to where a picker chooses to hunt. Often it is on someone's private property without their permission and as such constitutes trespassing. Henderson relates a run-in of this nature. "I found hordes of

Two Oregon stores join coffee boycott

SEATTLE (AP) — At least two supermarket chains in Washington, Oregon and Northern California have joined Eastern stores in urging customers to curtail coffee purchases in an attempt to hold down skyrocketing retail coffee prices.

Retail coffee prices around the nation are averaging about \$3 a pound. A boycott that began in New York City has spread in the East to Massachusetts, upstate New York and Ohio.

Tradewell Stores, Inc., which operates 111 stores under the Tradewell and Prairie Market names, has joined the boycott in the West.

The boycott effort "has had some effect, not a great deal, but we feel it will pick up momentum as the week goes on," said Tradewell president Al Thompson at the firm's headquarters here.

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He said tea sales are up. "It is a logical product to replace coffee and we are going to start promoting it for that reason," Thompson said.

Signs introducing the store's position were sent out by the firm last week and were in place in all stores by Monday.

The signs state:

"In our opinion, today's coffee costs are unrealistic, unjustified and the only way to bring them down is for the consumers to reduce their purchases. However, we must continue advertising coffee in newspapers because it qualifies us with coffee companies for allowance which help maintain the lowest cost possible.

"We do not wish to stimulate or encourage the sale of coffee at today's high prices."

Thompson said customer

comments have been favorable "and they appreciate someone taking a stand."

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