

Marijuana's magazine

This is the first of a three-part series examining current marijuana laws and proposals for changes.

Tom Alexander was bitter when he found himself in a jail cell one day in 1979, after the law discovered his marijuana patch.

But while the Corvallis man did get mad, he also got even.

"I saw first hand how the judicial system works," says Alexander. "I sat in jail while an attempted rapist got out on \$100 bond. Four months after I got out, a head narcotics officer was indicted on four counts of selling cocaine."

The charges against Alexander were dropped because of an improper search warrant — but that wasn't enough for Alexander.

"I was enraged to the point where I had to do something. I had no knowledge of journalism, but I put together this rag," he says, indicating the latest copy of *Sinsemilla Tips*.

While unpretentious in design, the Corvallis Gazette-Times hails *Sinsemilla Tips* as "the trade journal of the marijuana industry" for the expertise it offers on growing finer, more potent marijuana. After two years the quarterly magazine now distributes a few thousand issues throughout the United States and parts of Europe.

The magazine also serves as a forum for another of Alexander's projects — reforming marijuana laws. When the Oregon Legislature convenes next January, Alexander and fellow members of Citizens for Legal Action hope to find a sponsor to introduce the Oregon Marijuana Control Act of 1983.

The bill would create the Oregon Marijuana Control Commission, an organization similar to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission.

The proposal "will put the state of Oregon in the marijuana business. They will buy it from the farmers and sell at a profit," says Alexander. The money would be used for higher education, drug education of the young and for law enforcement.

The bill, tentatively scheduled to be uncovered in a press conference between Christmas and the New Year, would be a voter-referral bill, meaning it would require voter approval rather than the governor's signature. "Atiyeh will throw it in the wastebasket," Alexander acknowledges.

The main issue, says Alexander, is megabucks.

"The University of Oregon graduate business school says marijuana is at least a \$500 million business in Oregon — probably closer to a billion dollars. The social and economic benefits supersede any health and moral aspects," says Alexander. "Economics is the key issue and the most important issue."

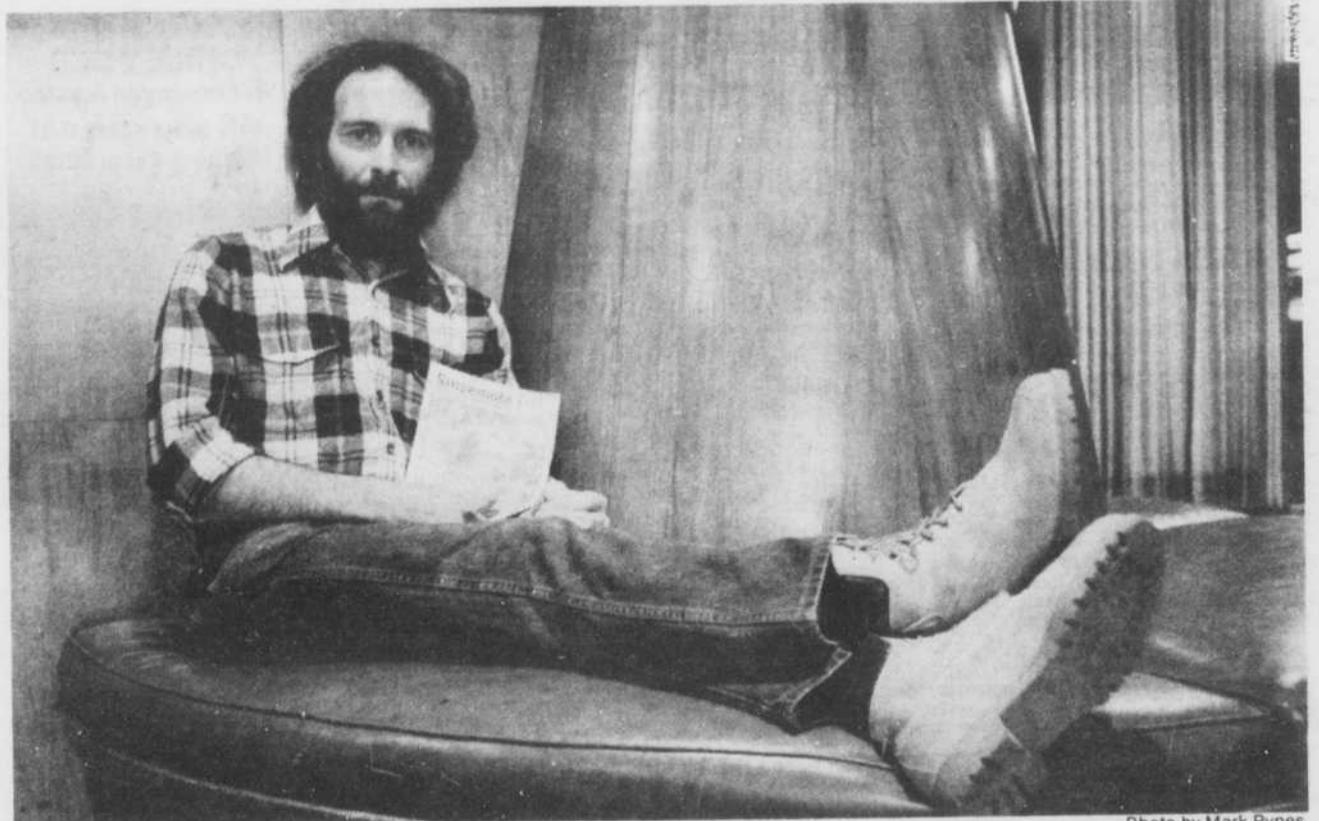


Photo by Mark Pynes

Tom Alexander took his revenge by publishing *Sinsemilla Tips*, a magazine about pot.

Faced with record deficits, the Oregon Legislature will have to look to new sources of income or face drastic budget cuts, Alexander says. The timber industry is "non-existent," and the micro-chip industry is a pie-in-the-sky. "Atiyeh is fooling himself."

In Oregon, possession of less than an ounce of pot is a misdemeanor with a maximum fine of \$100, which is a slap on the wrist compared to most other states. But possession of more than an ounce is a felony punishable by up to 10 years in jail and a \$100,000 fine.

Under the proposed new law, marijuana would be sold out of regulated stores, much like liquor. Unlike alcohol, there would be no advertising allowed for the promotion of pot. There is a twist thrown in to appease worried parents — conviction of selling marijuana to minors would carry a life sentence.

"That'll get watered down in committee," says Alexander. "The only reason we put that in there is to show them that we mean business. I have two children myself, and I'm very concerned about their access to marijuana. We want to take it out of the schoolyard and put it in state-controlled stores."

Even though he says he has talked with "thousands and thousands" of pot farmers in his travels to obtain information for his magazine, Alexander doesn't spend all his time skulking in the netherworld of underground drug dealing. Instead, Alexander has welcomed, even sought, media attention.

High visibility is not a desirable trait when you're dealing in an illegal drug, Alexander admits. "The

number one commandment when you're a grower is that you don't tell anyone what you're doing.

"But I am not breaking the law. I'm printing a magazine — that is a principal, constitutional right," says Alexander. "I don't grow marijuana, so they (the police) have no reason to harass me. I think they realize that I was a peaceful hippy growing marijuana and that they came up and stirred up a hornet's nest. Now I am one of the chief advocates of marijuana reform in Oregon and even the country."

Lobbying for marijuana reform in the Oregon Legislature and free advertising for his magazine, Alexander has stirred up a raft of publicity, including interviews with *USA Today*, a recently formed national newspaper, and many Oregon newspapers, radio and television stations.

Alexander, who also owns a gardening store in Corvallis that sells metal halide and sodium lights and hydroponic systems, concedes that some of his customers probably don't have aspirations of growing bigger-and-brighter tomatoes.

"What they do with it is their business," says Alexander. "They don't tell me, and I don't ask them."

His gardening business doesn't discourage marijuana growing and his magazine encourages it. But in the relatively small community of Corvallis, his enterprises remain unhampered by the law.

"I think the police kind of respect me," says Alexander, "because I'm fighting for something I believe in."

Stories by Sean Meyers

Is 'pot politics' hurt by strategy split?

The most formidable opposition of the Oregon marijuana reform movement may not be angry mothers, public opinion or Pres. Ronald Reagan's multi-million dollar "war on drugs."

Its biggest stumbling block might be the movement itself — one arm of the octopus not knowing, or supporting, what another is doing.

John Saja, state coordinator for the Oregon Marijuana Initiative headquartered in Portland, admits that "there has been a certain amount of the political stuff," between rival pro-marijuana groups but denies that it is due to anything but a difference of opinion on how best to go about "reforming" marijuana laws.

"There's OMI and we're doing what we're doing, and there's Tom Alexander and some people he's working with down in Eugene and they're doing what they're doing," says Saja. "I wish them all the luck in the world. I'll be happy if they succeed. I just don't think that they will."

Alexander, who with the aid of Citizens for Legal Action hopes to push a pro-marijuana bill through the 1983 legislature, represents the other side of the coin. A recent issue of his magazine, *Sinsemilla Tips*, mentions a state-wide meeting of the Oregon Coalition Against Marijuana Prohibition, which was attended by thirty people representing 14 organizations.

"As it happened," the magazine editorialized, "the meeting degenerated into a loud argument between what have clearly become two factions in Oregon's legalization movement."

The OMI, about a year old and with a mailing list of 3,000 people, including 100 "hardcore" members, gained statewide attention this fall when a petition asking for the abolishment of penalties for personal use and cultivation of marijuana fell just short of the required 50,000 valid signatures needed to put it on



Graphic by Shawn Bird

the ballot.

Alexander's faction will undoubtedly also get attention late this year when they announce their proposed legislation, which would legalize marijuana farming if distributed through state-controlled stores. It would also create an Oregon Marijuana Control Commission and possibly establish a life sentence for anyone convicted of selling to children.

Alexander's group, says Saja, is asking for more than Oregonians are willing to give.

"(We're for) having the personal use of marijuana legalized," says Saja. "So that you can smoke marijuana privately and grow it for personal use. Sale would still be illegal, just like it is now."

Specifically, OMI wants at least a reduction in the classification of marijuana cultivation as a Class A felony. "According to the law, growing one plant is a more serious crime than manslaughter in this state... you can get up to 20 years in prison and a \$100,000 fine. Right now, we just want to right the serious inequity in our law that makes growing a worse crime than manslaughter."

The average marijuana smoker, according to OMI statistics, spends \$1000 to \$1,500 on marijuana per year, so allowing people to grow marijuana for personal use would aid the Oregon economy. "If they were allowed to grow their own, that's \$1,000 or \$1500 that would be spent on something else," says Saja.

Saja says that in petition drives and interviews he has "personally talked with from 20-30,000 people about marijuana, so I feel I have a generally good feeling for what people in Oregon are willing to accept."

He cites a Gallup poll in the October 25 issue of *Newsweek* that reports 85 percent of those polled believed "that the growing of marijuana for sale to others should be treated as a criminal offense" while only 53 percent agreed that "the growing of small amounts of marijuana for personal use should be treated as a criminal offense."

"Oregon is the only state in the union where there is currently a strong movement towards relaxation of marijuana laws," says Saja.

He feels there is a mandate for reduced marijuana penalties whether or not the various groups in the state work together towards that goal.

"I don't necessarily think it's wasted energy if we're not working toward the same goal. There's room for all types of opinions," says Saja. "But I agree that it might be better if we worked together."