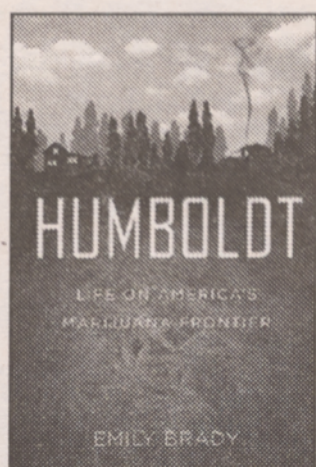


The straight dope on California's marijuana mecca

BY MAGGIE TARANAWA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Now more than ever before, marijuana is becoming mainstream in America. Though it is still a Schedule I substance, considered as dangerous as cocaine and methamphetamine, recent state legalizations in Washington and Colorado mark the sea change that could eventually



Humboldt: Life on America's Marijuana Frontier
By Emily Brady

lead to nationwide acceptance. Emily Brady's narrative nonfiction piece, "Humboldt," shows us a community, both infamous and secretive, that might be considered the heartland of America's weed supply.

First, a bit of history: in the 1970s the first wave of counter-culture types swarmed to portions of Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity counties in

Northern California, an area called the Emerald Triangle. They grew their own vegetables — and a little pot. Cultivating cannabis certainly wasn't their goal, but Southern Humboldt, or SoHum as it's called, acquired its reputation gradually. First, a new method for producing sinsemilla, a type of cannabis with a higher THC content, reached SoHum and increased demand. Then, fear of tainted pot from Mexico increased demand for weed grown domestically. Gradually, Northern California became synonymous with high-quality marijuana. Word spread, and before long outsiders were arriving to cash in on the "green rush."

Within the first few chapters, Brady introduces us to four SoHum characters that represent different aspects of their community. There's Mare Abidon, the "old hippie" who moved to the area in the '60s; Crockett Randall, the 35-year-old drifter who's just in it for the money; Emma Worldpeace, the child of hippie growers who knows there's no real future for her in Humboldt; and Bob Hamilton, the straight-laced officer watching the whole operation with a weary acceptance.

Brady's book begins in 2010, when the subject of legalization is first breached in SoHum communities. It ends with the legalization of pot in Washington and Colorado. The four narratives don't intertwine but instead run parallel to one another, each illustrating a distinct aspect of SoHum culture.

The first chapter, devoted to Mare, begins with a community meeting in Redway, Calif.,

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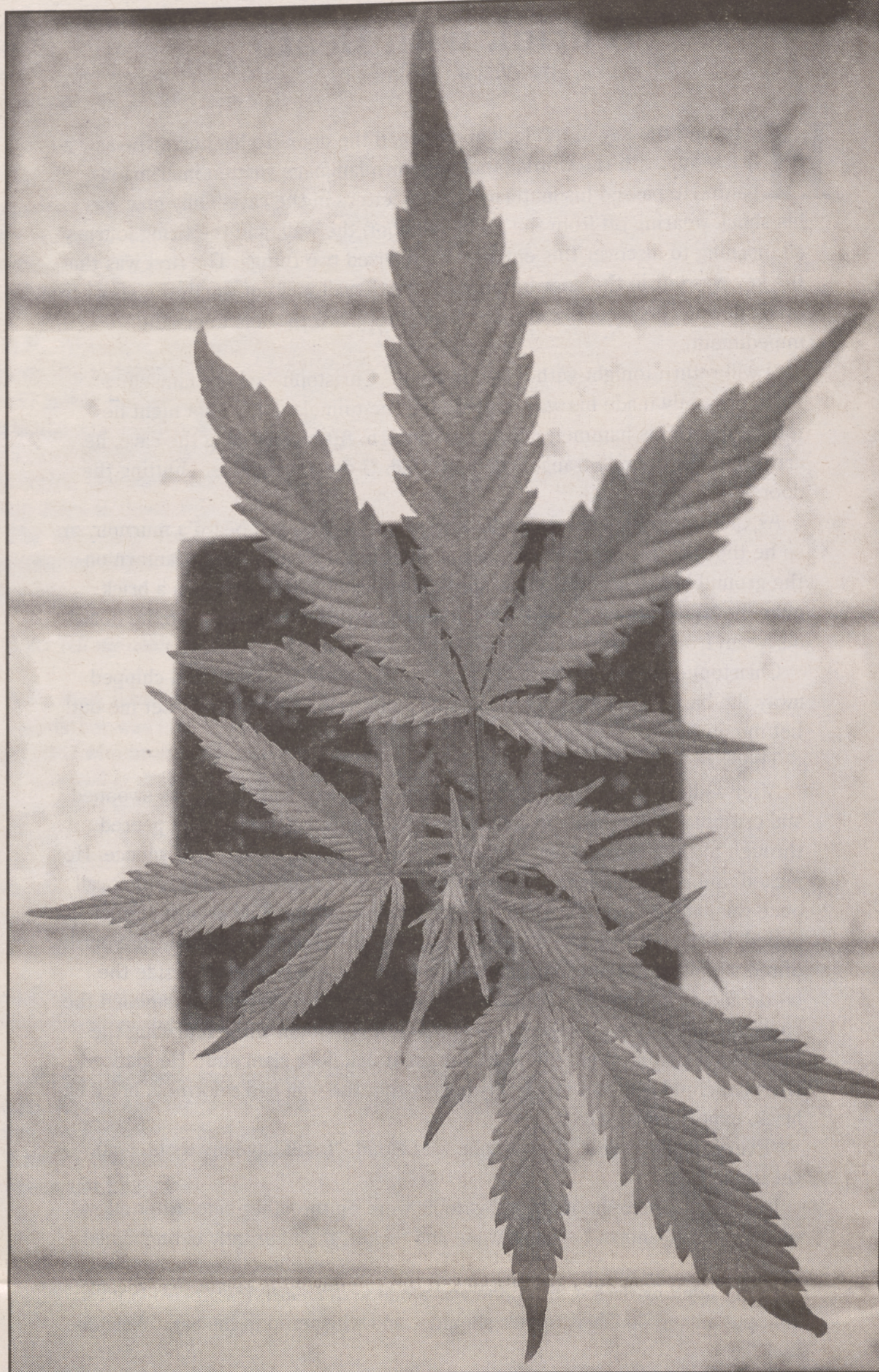
in March 2010. The gathering is spurred by California's looming marijuana legalization bill, Proposition 19, which if passed could completely change the lives of SoHum growers. The opinions of those assembled are varied. Some attendees wish to make SoHum the Napa Valley of pot — complete with "Bud and Breakfasts" and tasting rooms. Others don't welcome legalization so warmly. As one attendee explains:

"The legalization of marijuana will be the single most devastating economic bust in the long boom-and-bust history of Northern California, impacting local businesses, nonprofit organizations, the workforce and county tax revenue."

Many residents feel the same. The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit think tank, released a study estimating that the legalization of marijuana in California would cause prices to drop up to 80 percent.

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Crockett Randall, another one of the narrative's main characters, opposes legalization for that exact reason. Although not from the Emerald Triangle, he has a long history with marijuana. His mother sold it when he was young to make ends meet. He started selling out of a trailer at age 17, and in his 20s he journeyed to



SoHum to strike it rich.

Officer Bob Hamilton, as the straight-laced law enforcement official, makes the hippies nervous. Bob grew up in SoHum and then moved back as an adult, still cherishing an idyllic view of the place. Rather than hate all growers, Bob takes a more practical approach: He hopes that marijuana will either be completely legalized or completely prohibited. The gray area produced by the state's 1996 law legalizing medical marijuana irks him. He sees firsthand how the war on drugs has failed, and the illegality of SoHum's economy just fosters crime and violence.

Emma Worldpeace, the fourth character in Brady's narrative, can attest to the problems created by her community's illegal growing. Although she attends Berkeley and aims to make a life for herself outside of Humboldt, her brother's imprisonment for murder pulls her back into SoHum. Emma's brother Mike ran a successful growing operation. When he allegedly shoots and kills several illegal immigrants working for him, he goes to prison.

Emma appears on SoHum's community radio station to discuss the findings of a research project she completed at Berkeley.

Her topic: why so many young people die in Southern Humboldt. Shockingly, the youth death rate in SoHum was nearly twice the county average. She concluded that it was not the drugs that killed the youth, but rather the business-related violence and secrecy demanded by their families and communities. Emma hopes that legalization will lift that burden of secret-keeping and make her community safe again.

I don't think I need to tell you that legalization doesn't happen. In the end, the strange bedfellows of big-time pot growers and conservative Californians outvoted the large minority that favored legal cannabis. Typically, off-season elections don't see as many young, liberal voters, and Prop 19 was somewhat underfunded. Still, Mare and Emma remain optimistic that the long march toward legalization in their state has begun.

Brady's "opus dopus" is succinctly written and provides a vivid snapshot of a unique American community. She certainly does her subjects justice: Their lives and values are presented compassionately and without judgment.

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