

# RAJNEESH: Documentary stirs memories of commune

Continued from 1A

Black-and-white photos taken by Phinney show scenes from the compound, Antelope and The Dalles. The Bhagwan taking his daily drive around the ranch in one of 74 Rolls-Royces. Red-frocked followers lining the road, kneeling and singing as he passed by.

In one photo, a woman mops the compound's huge industrial kitchen. In another, protesters from the embattled town of Antelope carry signs with slogans such as "Free Antelope" and "Let Antelope Roam Free."

Aerial shots reveal dozens of large buildings and hundreds of tents brought in to house followers during the annual festival. Phinney pulled out several items he and other reporters discovered in the Antelope dump after the town's takeover. He held up a cork board with the image of the Bhagwan with a target imprinted over his face.

Phinney remembers the media at first thought the group would bring good things to the region.

"Initially all the media thought these guys were great — they were going to create an oasis at the (former) Big Muddy Ranch," Phinney said. "I'll be honest, I bought into it."

But not for long. As the ranch grew into a self-sustaining town and steadily made moves to take over Antelope and Wasco County, he got concerned. Phinney reported some things that drew Rajneeshee ire. Eventually, he said, his name appeared on the cult's enemies list. Rajneesh propaganda showed up on his car and front porch.

Sheela and other Rajneeshee officials proceeded with intelligence and knowledge of local law, he said, but finally they went too far.

"It was all going according to plan, then they just got too arrogant and started pushing too hard and too fast," Phinney said. "If they'd followed all the laws, they'd have gotten a lot farther."

## Gary Kopperud

After the fall of Rajneeshpuram, Gary Kopperud returned to the ranch to rescue his favorite follower — a large, orange cat named Popcorn that he soon renamed Swami. Swami later accompanied Kopperud when he spoke to groups about Rajneeshpuram.

Kopperud, who worked for Juniper Broadcasting in The



The Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh takes his daily afternoon drive through Rancho Rajneesh in one of his 74 Rolls Royces.

Dalles and also shot video for Associated Press during the time of Rajneeshpuram, got a firsthand look at the commune as a member of the press. Kopperud, who now lives in Pendleton, said he watched the commune rise from the desert with fascination. At its height, he said, it included a 4,200-foot airstrip, public transportation system, creamery, restaurants, a police force dubbed the "peace force," a mall, fire station and other amenities.

"They were really on the move," Kopperud said. "They had talented people from every walk of life."

Kopperud met the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and his personal assistant, Ma Anand Sheela.

"He was very soft spoken," Kopperud said of the Bhagwan. "There was intensity and peace in his eyes at the same time. He was the spirit. He was everything to those people."

Sheela (Sheela Silverman) was a powerful presence.

"When Sheela talked, no one else spoke," he said. "She was not a person that allowed you into her space if she didn't want you there."

Kopperud had a close call in 1984 when Rajneesh followers poisoned salad bars in seven restaurants in The Dalles with salmonella as a strategy to sicken voters so Rajneesh commissioner candidates could win an election. In all, 751 people got sick.

"I was having pizza at Big Dave's that day with a friend," Kopperud said. "He had a salad and I didn't. He got sick."

That plot failed, along with another to bring busloads of homeless people to the area and register them as voters.

In late 1985, top Rajneesh officials fled the ranch. For Kopperud, Swami remained as a reminder of the unbelievable saga.

The cat lived to age 23. *The Dalles Chronicle*, Kopperud said, ran a three-paragraph obituary on his passing.

## Kathy McBride

Many people in Wasco County don't need Netflix to know what happened when the Rajneesh and his followers came to town — it's still fresh in their minds.

"This brought up some raw emotions," Kathy McBride said of the documentary's impact on the town's residents.

McBride, who lives in The Dalles, was the Wasco County Court administrative assistant at the time and was one of the people sued by the Rajneeshees for civil rights violations as they went head-to-head with the county. Her father was the county sheriff, and she said he felt the strain of trying to prevent tensions from erupting into bloodshed.

She has only watched a little bit of the docu-series so far, but she said in discussions with others who experienced the events firsthand and watched the whole thing, there is a sense that depth of the harassment experienced by Wasco County residents isn't portrayed.

After the county started trying to enforce land use regulations at the commune, for example, McBride opened an anonymous package at the courthouse to find human feces. Other times people phoned in bomb threats and the courthouse had to be evacuated.

"Two of them would sit outside my house in The Dalles and watch my house while I was on maternity leave," she said.

After the county refused to register the 6,000 homeless people the Rajneeshees had bused in from around the country to vote, she said the commune pushed many of them out onto the streets of The Dalles with no resources, creating



Followers of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh exult as the guru passes by in one of his 74 Rolls Royces.

a major strain on the community.

McBride doesn't believe the Rajneeshees were all bad — commune members did some "amazing things" out at the ranch with agriculture and art. But she said it was difficult to watch interviews with Ma Anand Sheela, who served prison time after admitting to orchestrating a variety of crimes, including poisoning county commissioner Bill Hulse nearly to death when he visited the ranch and spraying salmonella on salad bars.

"I listen to Sheela and it's like she had no remorse, poisoning all those people," McBride said. "She almost killed our county judge."

She said in retrospect, listening to all of the attempted murders and planned murders that went on, it's amazing no one died. She said at the time it was easy for people outside the area to say residents of The Dalles and Antelope were being paranoid, but later the FBI found evidence of many of the things they had suspected. The Rajneeshees were behind the salmonella outbreak. They were plotting to poison the water supply. The marriage licenses they were getting at the courthouse were part of a massive immigration fraud scheme. They were recording everyone when they visited the courthouse.

"It was scary times, and I'm just glad that people didn't die," she said.

## Kricket Nicholson

Kricket Nicholson remembers the day Rajneeshees drove busloads of homeless people to town and left them walking the streets of The Dalles.

These individuals had been picked up off the streets of other towns and taken to Rajneeshpuram, lured with promises of food, clothing and shelter in exchange for agreeing to vote

for Rajneesh commissioner candidates in the election. When the plot didn't work, the homeless people were jettisoned.

"They just started dumping them," Nicholson said. "They dropped a busload of them a block from the Salvation Army and another at a rest area on the freeway."

Nicholson, now executive director of United Way in Pendleton, was a Salvation Army case-worker at the time. The homeless descended on the Salvation Army in droves that night. Nicholson and others spent the next few days working to feed the people and get them back to their places of origin.

"The Dalles obviously couldn't handle an influx of hundreds of homeless people," she said. "The community really came together and donated money for bus tickets."

Nicholson said the whole Rajneesh adventure left a sour taste in town for quite some time.

"The Rajneeshees wore the colors of a sunset," Nicholson said. "Nobody in The Dalles wore those colors for years."

## Erik Hilden

Erik Hilden came into the Rajneesh orb in a most unexpected way. Hilden, a South Carolina teacher, grew up in Pendleton and went to summer camp near Rajneeshpuram.

On the last day of camp in 1981 or 1982, he waited for his mom to arrive to pick him up. She was hours late.

"Eventually, a car pulled up the camp's dusty driveway loaded with a bunch of Rajneeshees dressed in the colors of the setting sun," Hilden recalled. "Those guys and my mom."

Hilden's mother was bruised and bleeding. She had rolled the family's Ford Escort wagon during a flash flood on a windy road near Fossil. She had climbed out and tried to wave down help.

"She said a bunch of ranchers blew by her," he said. "But this carload of Rajneeshees, on their way to Rajneeshpuram for some giant Rajneesh festival, stopped to help. They brought her to me."

Hilden also recalled times when he and friends left camp and walked to nearby Antelope.

"One year, around 1982, the Antelope General Store had become Zorba the Buddha, a vegan restaurant and hippy zone loaded with followers and other strangeness," Hilden said. "That was weird. One summer, locals and ranchers, and the next summer, sunrise hippies wearing molded smiles and distant eyes."



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