

Heathen Sierrans

All about us we witness the inexorable secularization of contemporary society. We read about the so-called "Christian Right" wailing and gnashing their teeth as the "politically correct" movement tries to sterilize public forums against the germs of religious ideas. Meanwhile, traditional religions have become vague in their doctrines and indifferent in their observation of rules. Catholics eat meat on Friday; Jews have bacon on Saturday; Protestants drink liquor on Sunday. Sunday "blue" laws are gone, replaced by 24-hour-a-day stores and The Shopping Channel.

The Delta Sierra Club is part of contemporary culture and is certainly not immune from the social forces ebbing and flowing. Twenty-five years ago the New Orleans Sierra Club, forerunner to the Delta Chapter, began in a church. The prime mover, Bill Futrell, was a member of that congregation, the First Presbyterian Church, and he had studied for the Presbyterian ministry. Bill, a superb organizer with great vision and energy, was as stern, unsmiling, and humorless as one would expect a good Calvinist to be.

Although we didn't conduct group prayer at Sierra Club meetings, there was definitely nothing alcoholic to drink, and — I know you will find this hard to believe — we discussed and debated whether it was proper to have alcoholic beverages on Sierra outings. (Outings in 1994 seem to be alcohol-free only if the trip is in one of those "dry" counties in Mississippi where the local constabulary is lying in wait for people with Louisiana license plates and ice chests.) When Bill left to teach law in Alabama and eventually to be elected president of the national Sierra Club, the booze question became moot.

The next step on the Delta Sierra's movement down the axis of secularization was to meet for several years in the fall of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. Wine started to appear at meetings. Episcopalians are generally friendly to a sip of sherry or schnapps, because, as the old story goes, whenever four Episcopalians get together, there is sure to be a fifth. The Delta Chapter formed into new groups then, and the Acadian Group appealed to the scientifically inclined by meeting not in a church but in a temple of science, a museum of natural history and planetarium. Rejecting the New Testament's admonition that one cannot worship both God and Mammon (the money deity), the Chappapeela Group met in a bank. Their apostasy was punished, however, because the Chappapeela Group

no longer exists.

During the St. Andrew's years, the New Orleans Group met a couple of times in the old school cafeteria of Mater Dolorosa Catholic Church, a block away. This was very appropriate because "Mater Dolorosa" means "sorrowful mother" in Latin, and Mother Nature, honored by all Sierrans, has much to be sorrowful for. And one year we held the annual banquet in the Jewish Community Center with kosher chicken gumbo, no less.

From the Calvinist-Presbyterian to the Episcopalian-Catholic-Jewish stops, the New Orleans Group found a home for several years in the First Unitarian/Universalist Church. There we actually met in the church proper, in the sanctuary, so to speak. This, too, was very appropriate because the Unitarians seem to assign at least as much importance to social and community activities as to theological concerns. One felt that our Sunday night meetings were extensions of the services earlier in the day.

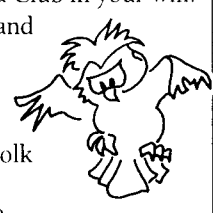
But we have abandoned The Church. The New Orleans Group now meets in the zoo. Meetings are still on Sunday night, so there is some vestigial remnant of observances of the Sabbath, but the Kingdom of God has been replaced by the Animal Kingdom. As the Sierrans slide deeper into the gloom of unbelief and utterly secularized society, a spark of hope has emerged in rumor that Jimmie Swaggert's church is for sale and the Baton Rouge Group is looking at it. Can this be true?

Amen, brethren and sisters. Δ

— Earl Higgins

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Dept. H-117
P.O. Box 7959
San Francisco, CA
94120-7959

W 3500
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