

In search of the Dunites in their Oceano paradise

Several years ago a student handed me a copy of a well-worn and coverless journal he had picked up from a relative.

The second paragraph on the first page read:

"The Atlantic Coast has but one metropolis, uncontested, and up to the present, the recognized cultural center of the entire nation. Lately, there have been stirrings and whisperings out on this Pacific Coast, of rebellion and a declaration of cultural independence."

When I first read this passage, I assumed that it had been excerpted from a speech by David Starr Jordan, the ebullient first president of Stanford University in 1891 as he urged on the first class (which included Herbert Hoover) to join him in making Stanford the "Harvard of the West."

During the late 1960s I heard stage director William Ball utter similar prose as he began San Francisco's respected repertory company, the American Conservatory Theatre. The words suggest the lofty aspirations of a renaissance flowering in a cultural center of the Pacific.

They were in fact written by Chester Gavin Arthur, grandson of Chester A. Arthur, the twenty-first President of the United States. Gavin Arthur, as he preferred to be

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called, was also a "bohemian," a prototype of the "beatniks" and "hippies," some of whom would later regard him as an inspiration. Arthur penned his "declaration of cultural independence" for a new journal begun in the summer of 1933 — an appropriate time for new beginnings. He wasn't writing from the slopes of San Francisco's literary bohemia on Telegraph Hill, or from North Beach, the Haight-Ashbury or even Berkeley in the East Bay.

Instead, he was writing from a place called "Moy Mell," an oasis in the center of San Luis Obispo County's Oceano Dunes. And the passage was from the editorial prepared by Gavin Arthur for the first issue of *The Dune Forum*, a monthly journal which reflected the literary aspirations and tastes of "the Dunites," a small group of unique characters who gathered about Arthur in the windswept sandhills of South San Luis Obispo County's beachfront.

The venture only endured for seven issues, but it left a legacy which aroused the curiosity of men like W.C. Fields and John Steinbeck,

who reputedly visited "Moy Mell."

For a brief, and somewhat less than "shiny" period, the Oceano Dunes were truly America's "bohemia by the sea."

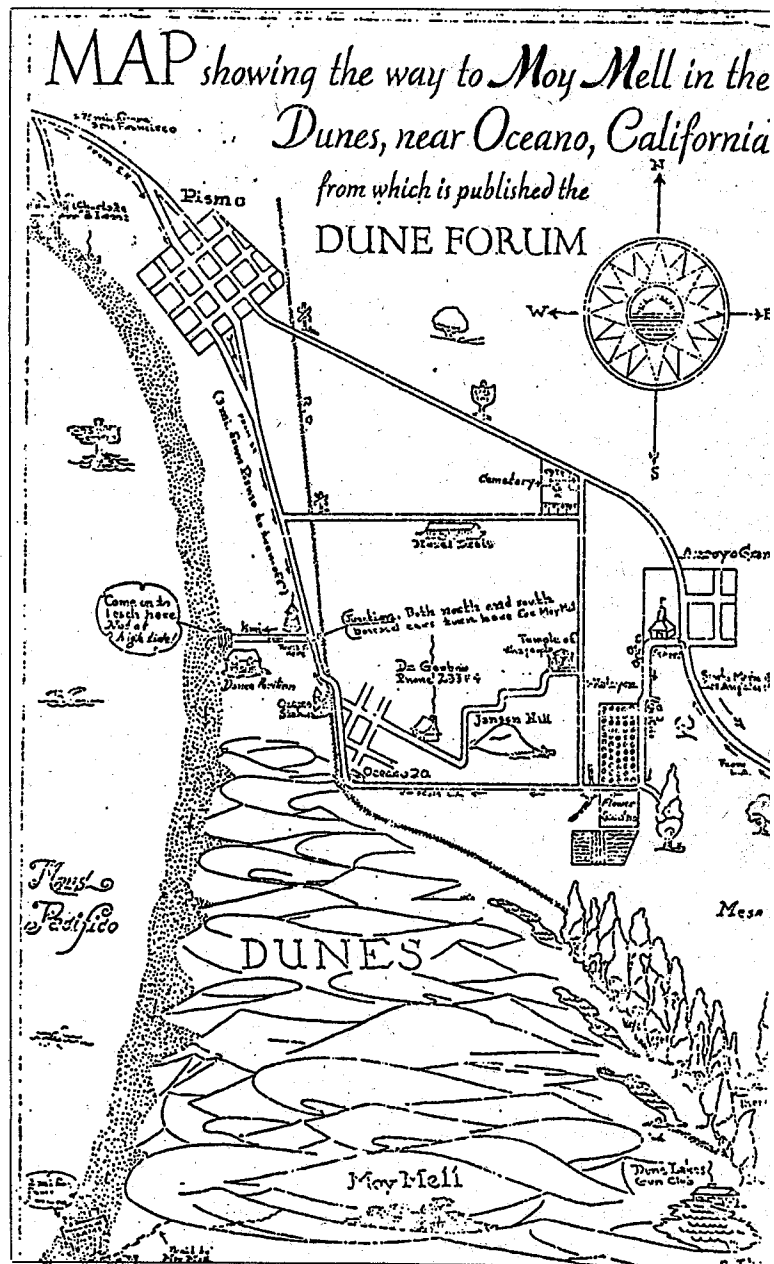
"Moy Mell" is a Gaelic expression meaning "Pasture of Honey." Gavin Arthur, whom I came to know in the San Francisco of the early 1960s, loved the sweet things of life. He often admitted that his main interests in life were sexuality and astrology in that order.

He came to the Dunes in 1931, looking in part for cheap living under the stars with as few cares as possible. The then-bountiful clams would provide much of the food. Gavin said that it took seventy-five clams to make a good broth — and he loved to cook the chowder.

He gathered round himself a group of individualists who refused to be trapped by rent or mortgage payments, jobs or matrimony. They clammed, they fished, they poached an occasional rabbit or deer and not a few domesticated livestock. They raided the bountiful vegetable farms of the Cienega District of the Arroyo Grande. They drank, made a little love and wrote a great deal of poetry and essays on subjects ranging from astrology to fascism and world disarmament.

Gavin Arthur attracted people like Hugo Seelig, nicknamed "the Poet" to the Dunes. "The Poet" left scraps of poetry about, never in-

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This map of Dunite settlements appeared in 'Dune Forum.'

Memories linger of mysterious Dunites

The Oceano Dunes of southwestern San Luis Obispo County have a special, stark beauty all their own. The restless, shifting

sands bury a great deal of the past.

Subdivision stakes and the ruins of ramshackle dwellings that were once called "home" by long-forgotten "families" can occasionally be seen following a storm or when a major change in the wind lifts the curtain of sand. Winter gales wipe away the remains of flimsy piers. Little sign remains of the silent film era desert epics that were shot among the rolling dunes.

Rudolph Valentino lies buried at the corner of Gower Street and Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood. Few people recall his filming in the dunes. Fewer still know of a unique group of bohemians — predecessors to the beatniks and hippies of a later era — who came to the dunes in the 1930s.

Last week, San Luis Obispo fireman Norman Hammond began sharing his avocation with us. Norm is a "duneophile." From the moment he first saw the Oceano Dunes, Norm sensed a strong and scholarly attraction. He heard about the Dunites who had once lived in the dunes.

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times past**



I would later discover that there were quite a few other people who found the dunes and actually made them their home.

In the southern part of San Luis Obispo County, there are many stories about the "Dunites."

In my dune wanderings I found little to verify their existence and discounted them as a figment of someone's imagination.

One day when I was nearing a very dense thicket of willows and wax myrtle trees, I saw a column of smoke rising straight up from the center of it. My first impression was that the grove had somehow caught on fire, right in the very center. After watching it for awhile it seemed to neither grow in magnitude nor diminish. My curiosity was running high and I decided to get a closer look.

The thicket was impenetrable. There appeared to be no way into the interior. Finally, after completely circling the trees, I found



PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHLEEN JONES

Bert "Bouke" Schievink, the last dune resident, demonstrates to friends his system of irrigation using wooden troughs so he wouldn't have to haul water to his garden.

end of the clearing. It was obvious that whoever lived here had been here a very long time.

out here in these dunes. A short period of time passed and I realized he simply wanted to be left alone. It was with a great

In the article was a picture of the man I saw at the cabin in the dunes who had just died. The article described him as Bert

in the 50s.

He and his wife, Arleta, stumbled onto the home of Bert "Bouke" Schievink, the last dune resident, who died in 1974. The Dunites became "living" people for Norm, and he has spent the last decade tracking down their history.

This week, Norm tells us "Bert's Story:"

At the end of the path was a clearing with two cabins that were completely hidden from the world. The smoke was rising from a fire in the clearing that was heating a wash tub with water. Fresh laundry was hanging on a clothesline across one

interior.

ized from the doorway of the largest cabin. He stopped and looked me in the eye. I looked back and we sized each other up for a moment. Then he turned and went back in the cabin.

I waited for a moment, wanting to talk to him, find out who he was, and what he was doing

deal of disappointment that I followed the little trail back out into the wide expanse of dunes.

A short time later an article by Doris Olsen appeared in the Sept. 28, 1974 edition of the Santa Maria Times. It was entitled, "Goodbye to 'Hermit of the Dunes.'"

scievink, last of the Dunites, who made his home in the Oceano dunes for more than 30 years.

I felt as though I had just seen a leprechaun or ghost. The Dunites were not someone's imagination conjuring up stories of a mystical group of people who lived in the dunes ... the Dunites were real. And I had actually seen one!

I spent many sleepless nights after that. Who were the Dunites, really? How many of them were there? Were they different from other people? What did they do while they were out there in the dunes and what brought them here? Every set of foot prints in the dunes made me wonder ... was Bert really the last Dunite?

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