

The Emperor Wears No Clothes

Chapter 13

Prejudice:

Marijuana & the Jim Crow Laws

Smoking in America

The first known* smoking of female cannabis tops in the Western hemisphere was probably in the 1870s in the West Indies (Jamaica, Bahamas, Barbados, etc.); and arrived with the immigration of thousands of Indian Hindus (from British-controlled India) imported for cheap labor. By 1886, Mexicans and black sailors, who traded in those islands, picked up and spread its use throughout all the West Indies and Mexico.

* There are other theories about the first known "smoking" of hemp flower tops, e.g., by American and Brazilian slaves, Shawnee Indians, etc., some fascinating - but none verifiable.

Cannabis smoking was generally used in the West Indies to ease the back-breaking work in the cane fields, beat the heat, and to relax in the evenings without the threat of an alcohol hangover in the morning.

Given its late 19th Century area of usage - the Caribbean West Indies and Mexico - it is not surprising the first marijuana use recorded in the U.S. was by Mexicans in Brownsville, Texas in 1903. And the first marijuana prohibition law in America - pertaining only to Mexicans - was passed in Brownsville in that same year.

"Ganja" use was next reported in 1909 in the port of New Orleans, in the black dominated "Storeyville" section frequented by sailors.

New Orleans' Storeyville was filled with cabarets, brothels, music, and all the other usual accoutrements of "red light" districts the world over. Sailors from the islands took their shore leave and their marijuana there.

Blackface

The Public Safety Commissioner of New Orleans wrote that, "marijuana was the most frightening and vicious drug ever to hit New Orleans," and in 1910 warned that regular users might number as high as 200 in Storeyville alone.

To the DA and Public Safety Commissioners and New Orleans newspapers, from 1910 through the 1930s, marijuana's insidious evil influence apparently manifested itself in making the "darkies" think they were as good as "white men."

In fact, marijuana was being blamed for the first refusals of black entertainers to wear blackface* and for hysterical laughter by "negroes" under marijuana's influence when told to cross a street or go to the back of the trolley, etc.

* That's right, your eyes have not deceived you. Because of a curious quirk in the "Jim Crow" (segregation) laws, black Americans were banned from any stage in the Deep South (and most other places in the North and West also). "Negroes" had to wear (through the 1920s) blackface - (like Al Jolson wore when he sang "Swanee") - a dye which white entertainers wore to resemble or mimic black people. Actually, by "Jim Crow" law, blacks were not allowed on the stage at all, but because of their talent were allowed to sneak/enter through back doors, put on blackface, and pretend to be a white person playing the part of a black person!

And All That Jazz

In New Orleans, whites were also concerned that black musicians, rumored to smoke marijuana, were spreading (selling) a very powerful (popular) new "voodoo" music that forced even decent white women to tap their feet and was ultimately aimed at throwing off the yoke of the whites. Today we call that new music . . . jazz!

Blacks obviously played upon the white New Orleans racists' fears of "voodoo" to try to keep whites out of their lives. Jazz's birthplace is generally recognized to be Storeyville, New Orleans, home of original innovators: Buddy Bohler, Buck Johnson and others (1909-1917). Storeyville was also the birthplace of Louis Armstrong* (1900).

* In 1930 - one year after Louis Armstrong recorded "Muggles" (read: "marijuana") - he was arrested for a marijuana cigarette in Los Angeles and put in jail for 10 days until he agreed to leave California and not return for two years.

American newspapers, politicians, and police had virtually no idea, for all these years (until the 1920s, and then only rarely), that the marijuana the "darkies" and "Chicanos" were smoking in cigarettes or pipes was just a weaker version of the many familiar concentrated cannabis medicines they'd been taking since childhood, or that the same drug was smoked legally at the local "white man's" plush hashish parlors.

White racists wrote articles and passed city and state "marijuana" laws without this knowledge for almost two decades, chiefly because of "Negro/Mexican" vicious "insolence"* under the effect of marijuana.

* Vicious Insolence: Between 1884 and 1900, 3,500 documented deaths of black Americans were caused by lynchings; between 1900 and 1917, over 1,100 were recorded. The real figures were undoubtedly higher. It is estimated that one-third of these lynchings were for "insolence," which might be anything from looking (or being accused of looking) at a white woman twice, to stepping on a white man's shadow, even to looking a white man directly in the eye for more than three seconds; for not going directly to the back of the trolley, and other "offenses."

It was obvious to whites, marijuana caused "Negro" and Mexican "viciousness" or they wouldn't dare be "insolent"; etc...

Hundreds of thousands of "Negroes" and Chicanos were sentenced from 10 days to 10 years mostly on local and state "chain gangs" for such silly crimes as we have just listed.

This was the nature of "Jim Crow" laws until the 1950s and '60s; the laws Martin Luther King, the NAACP, and general public outcry have finally begun remedying in America.

We can only image the immediate effect the black entertainers' refusal to wear blackface had on the white establishment, but seven years later, 1917, Storeyville was completely shut down. Apartheid had its moment of triumph.

No longer did the upright, uptight white citizen have to worry about white women going to Storeyville to listen to "voodoo" jazz or perhaps be raped by its marijuana-crazed "black adherents" who showed vicious disrespect (insolence) for whites and their "Jim Crow Laws" by stepping on their (white men's) shadows and the like when they were high on marijuana.

Black musicians then took their music and marijuana up the Mississippi to Memphis, Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, etc., where the (white) city fathers, for the same racist reasons, soon passed local marijuana laws to stop "evil" music and keep white women from falling prey to blacks through jazz and marijuana.

Mexican-Americans

In 1915, California and Utah passed state laws outlawing marijuana for the same "Jim Crow" reasons - but directed through the Hearst papers at Chicanos.

Colorado followed in 1917. It's legislators cited excesses of Pancho Villa's rebel army, whose drug of choice was supposed to have been marijuana. (If true, this means that marijuana helped to overthrow one of the most repressive, evil regimes Mexico ever suffered.

The Colorado Legislature felt the only way to prevent an actual racial blood back and the overthrow of their (white's) ignorant and bigoted laws, attitudes and institutions was to stop marijuana.

Mexicans under marijuana's influence were demanding humane treatment, looking at white women, and asking that their children be educated while the parents harvested sugar beets; and making other "insolent" demands. With the excuse of marijuana (Killer Weed), the whites could now use force and rationalize their violent acts of repression.

This "reefer racism" continues into the present day. In 1937, Harry Anslinger told Congress that there were between 50,000 to 100,000* marijuana smokers in the U.S., mostly "Negroes and Mexicans, and entertainers," and their music, jazz and swing, was

an outgrowth of this marijuana use. He insisted this "satanic" music and the use of marijuana caused white women to "seek sexual relations with Negroes!"

* Anslinger would have flipped to know that one day there would be 26 million daily marijuana users and another 30-40 million occasional users in America, and that rock 'n roll and jazz are now enjoyed by tens of millions who have never smoked marijuana.

South Africa Today

In 1911, South Africa* began the outlawing of marijuana for the same reasons as New Orleans: to stop insolent blacks! White South Africa, along with Egypt, led the international fight (League of Nations) to have cannabis outlawed worldwide.

* South Africa still allowed its black mine workers to smoke dagga in the mines, though. Why? Because they were more productive!

In fact, in that same year, South Africa influenced southern U.S. legislators to outlaw cannabis (which many black South Africans revered as "dagga", their sacred herb). Many South Africans' American business headquarters were in New Orleans at the time.

This is the whole racial and religious (Medieval Catholic Church) basis out of which our laws against hemp arose. Are you proud?

Fourteen million years so far have been spent in jails, prisons, parole and probation by Americans for this absurd racist and probably economic reasoning. (See Chapter 4, "Last Days of Legal Cannabis.")

Isn't it interesting that in 1985 the U.S. incarcerated a larger percentage of people than any country in the world except South Africa? In 1989, the U.S. surpassed South Africa, and the 1997 incarceration rate is almost four times that of South Africa, is the highest in the world, and is growing.

President Bush, in his great drug policy speech of September 5, 1989, promised to double the federal prison population again, after it had already doubled under Reagan. He succeeded. In 1993, President Bill Clinton planned to redouble the number of prisoners again by 1996. He did.

Remember the outcry in 1979 when former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young told the world that the U.S. had more political prisoners than any other nation? (Amnesty International, UCLA.)

Lasting Remnants

Even though blackface disappeared as law in the late 1920s, as late as the 1960s, black entertainers (such as Harry Belafonte and Sammy Davis, Jr.) still had to go in the back door of theatrical establishments, bars, etc.; by law!

They couldn't rent a hotel room in Las Vegas or Miami Beach - even while being the headline act.

Ben Vereen's 1981 Presidential Inauguration performance for Ronald Reagan presented this country's turn-of-the-century Blackface/Jim Crow laws in a great story, about black comic genius Bert Williams (circa 1890 to 1920).

Vereen had been invited to perform for the Reagan Inauguration and had accepted only on the condition that he could tell the entire "Blackface" story - but the whole first half of Vereen's show, depicting Bern Williams and blackface, was censored by Reagan's people on ABC TV, contrary to the special agreement Vereen had with them.