

THE DAY NUDISM DIED IN LOS ANGELES

By Gary Mussell

"Life in the gay Bohemianism of a nudist colony was an exciting whirl of pleasure to pretty Dawn Blood Noel, 19-year-old wife of a dance band leader ..." With that lead, an article in the Los Angeles Times of July 19, 1939, heralded the death of nudism in Los Angeles County. Two days earlier, the pretty Mrs. Noel had shot herself to death with a rifle; nudism in Los Angeles went to the bier with her. Her suicide was tragic and unfortunate, but the murder of nudism was wanton and ridiculous; the deliberate result of sensational journalism that placed a permanent blot on American nudist history.

It is hard to say where the tragedy of Dawn Hope Noel, and its connection with nudism, had its beginning. Those who knew her seemed to agree that she had been obsessed with the death of her mother, Adele Blood, who was famous as "The Most Beautiful Blonde on the American Stage." Her mother committed suicide in 1936, and her death weapon had also been a gun. When Dawn married orchestra leader Jimmy Noel, eighteen months later, the young bride confided to her husband that she felt her mother's death "so badly that I have never been able to cry since it happened." The girl was also reportedly terrified by the thought that she herself might someday attempt suicide.

After little more than a year of marriage, the couple sought membership in a nudist group known as Fraternity Elysia, which was located near the city of Sunland, in the northeast corner of the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County. They had been nudists for nearly three months at the time Mrs. Noel met her death.

The specific events preceding her suicide are documented. The couple had spent Saturday and Sunday at the nudist "colony." Following dinner on Sunday evening, Mrs. Noel left the club grounds with another couple, while her husband remained at camp. The trio drove to the Noel's home in North Hollywood for the purported purpose of feeding and exercising the family's dogs. There, they were joined by another man, and returned to Fraternity Elysia around 10 p.m. Jimmy Noel was quoted as saying to the police, "We returned to North Hollywood the next morning and I called (their friend) on the telephone to bawl him out for arranging a meeting between Dawn and (the other man). As I talked, I could hear Dawn crying. Then, I heard a noise like a cap pistol. I rushed into her bedroom and found her dead."

It is almost certain that the tragic death of Dawn Hope Noel resulted from events that bore no relation to nudism. But for the newspapers, it was a field day. For the first few days, the press played up the suicide and the Noel's connection with nudism. Soon, however, the Noels were pushed to the back pages, while the press turned its attention to the "expose" of the "nudist menace" in Los Angeles County.



Gay Party at Nudist Camp Ends in Girl's Tragic Death

Band Leader Declares Wife Shot Herself
Following Quarrel Over Her Absence

Life in the gay Bohemianism of a nudist colony was an exciting whirl of pleasure to pretty Dawn Blood Noel, 19-year-old wife of a dance band leader—until he refused to accept her explanation of a four-hour absence from the camp.

As her mate, 36-year-old Herbert James Noel, yesterday flung away from her angrily and went to the telephone to berate one of her male companions on her desertion of the week-end party, she killed herself.

That was Noel's assertion at his home at 13050 Riverside Drive, North Hollywood, according to Capt. Dalton R. Patton and Detective Lieutenant Zachary P. Magness of the police homicide bureau.

TELLS OF PARTY

Noel asserted that he notified the Van Nuys (Valley) division of the police department immediately after the shooting.

"We had gone last Saturday afternoon to the nudist camp on Rancho Glassey, in Tunas Canyon, above Roscoe," Patton quoted Noel as saying. "The party continued that night, all day Sunday and Monday and we came home about 8 o'clock this morning."

DRINKING AT CAMP

"We had been doing some drinking at the camp, and made several trips back to the house during the party.

"Last night (Monday) at about 6 p.m. Dawn said she was going home to feed the dogs and exercise them, and that she would be right back.

"She didn't come back for four hours.

"I found that two men and a girl I know only as Jeanette joined Dawn at my home."

Noel related that after he returned home with his wife he questioned her closely regarding her actions during her absence from the camp. Then, he said, while his wife was pouring herself a drink of Scotch, he telephoned one of the men and upbraided him for his visit to Noel's home in the latter's absence.

"While I was telephoning I heard a sound like the snap of a cap pistol in the bedroom. I dropped the phone as I heard a thump, and ran in.

PHONES POLICE

"Dawn was lying on the floor beside the bed, bleeding from the temple. The rifle was lying beside her. Then I telephoned the police for an ambulance."

Noel told police his wife was the daughter of Adele Blood, former noted Broadway actress who committed suicide two years ago in New York. The daughter was left an estate which provided \$350 monthly income, the officers were told.

If it is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the tragedy of Dawn Hope Noel, the beginning of the chain of events which led to the death blow for Los Angeles nudism is clarion clear. The initial newspaper reports covered the facts of the suicide, mentioned nudism,

and even — in contrast to the smear tactics to come — showed some sympathy for nudist ideals. One writer commended Fraternity Elysia for its policies in screening prospective members, and its rules of conduct. Another went so far as to conclude that Mrs. Noel followed the pattern set by her mother three years before, not because of nudism. Two days later, however, the official tone changed. Nudism, heretofore little mentioned in the public press and not understood by the general population, was suddenly a perfect target for a press campaign. By July 26, the campaign was running full tilt. Using sly innuendo, half-truths, slanting, loaded words, glittering generalities, and motherhood — and banking on the prurient interest of the reading public — the press began a vicious attack on the nudists.

Sheriff Plans Nudist Survey

Vice Squad to Find Whether Camps Annoy Families on Outings

Sheriff Eugene W. Biscailuz yesterday detailed Capt. Walter Hunter of the Sheriff's vice squad to conduct a survey of the extent and management of nudists' camps in the county.

CAMPS ARE LEGAL

The Sheriff pointed out that, while there is no law prohibiting the establishment of the camps, there also is no law against finding out what they're all about.

The Sheriff wants to know:

How many unclad sun worshipers are frolicking among the hills and over the dales of Los Angeles County? How many such nudists' camps there are and how they are operated? Are they in secluded spots or in public places likely to offend persons who prefer to wear clothes on week-end outings?

SUICIDE RECALLED

Public attention recently was focused on nudist activities in this vicinity by the death of Dawn Hope Noel, 19-year-old wife of an orchestra leader who committed suicide, according to the verdict of a Coroner's jury, following a quarrel with her husband after their week-end visit to a nudist camp.

Nudists Lose Fight to Break Ban on Camps

WASHINGTON, June 21 (AP) —The Supreme Court today refused to consider an attack on a Los Angeles ordinance barring nudist camps.

The law bans operation of any place "where three or more persons not all of the same sex are permitted to commingle in the nude."

The ordinance was attacked by Lura D. Glassey, who was sentenced to 180 days in the City Jail. She said the premises where she was arrested were run by the fraternity Elysia, an organization which believes in nudism.

Nudist Camp Curb Signed by Mayor

The ordinance restricting and regulating nudists camps and colonies was signed yesterday by Mayor Bowron and will become effective after the 30 days' publication period. The ordinance will require operators of the camps to take out Police Commission permits, pay a fee and segregate the sexes.



Mrs. Lura Glassey, Manager of Fraternity Elysia, who was arrested and convicted under Los Angeles' anti-nudist ordinance. Los Angeles Times Photo

Asserting that nudists espoused a return to "savagery" and that the appeal of nudism was solely and entirely "exhibitionism," the newspapers labeled nudists as "barbarians who exposed themselves, their sweethearts, their mothers, daughters, and wives to other naked men." Other articles quoted: "Men and women and tiny children cavort before one another in the nude," and "members actually photograph one another in the nude." On July 27, the press announced that, as a direct result of its expose of the nudist "menace," the Los Angeles City Council has taken action toward "outlawing" nudist resorts within the city limits. City Councilman Roy Hampton had introduced a resolution which alluded to the suicide of Dawn Hope Noel; recognized the existence of nudist camps; charged that "at these camps, men and women, as well as children of various ages, all move about and engage in games in the nude with little or no supervision; concluded that "the conduct of these camps is contrary to public welfare and the morals of the community;" and requested the "city attorney to prepare necessary city legislation to rid the community of nudist camps . . . to eradicate the evil." Five photographs taken inside nudist parks in the county accompanied the article.

The next day, the general public was provided with another "peep show" as four additional nudist camp photographs supported an article revealing the plans of Los Angeles County Supervisor Gordon L. McDonough to submit a county anti-nudist resolution to the Board of Supervisors.

The last meaningful mention of Dawn Hope Noel appeared in an article printed July 31; one sentence in a three-column spread denouncing the "evil" of nudism. From that date on, the tragedy of an emotionally upset young woman whose suicide had provided the springboard for the newspaper's campaign was substantially forgotten as the writers turned their undivided attention to the more newsworthy matter of destroying nudism.

Then an article appeared that claimed nudists made a regular practice of posing for indecent photographs. A careful reading revealed that it was the attitude of the press that any nude photo was to be considered indecent unless it was taken expressly for newspaper

publication — an afterthought carefully inserted to preclude criticism of the paper itself for publishing pictures of nudists. "Regardless of what supposed reason these naked people had for posing," one writer stated, "their action is immoral."

Soon, the desired public reaction got underway, as citizens began writing letters to the paper. Printed not in the "letters to the editor" column, but in prominent page-two displays, all the letters supported the newspaper campaign. The same issue of the paper mentioned that there had been letters from a number of nudists defending the practice of nudism; significantly, none of these letters were published.

The press next put pressure on the politicians in city and county government by implying that any official who did not get on the anti-nudist bandwagon was suspect of being in the grasp of "wealthy and politically influential" nudist camp owners. The approach had its effect. One by one, office-holders stepped bravely forward to take firm positions against nudism.

On August 2, Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron announced he would request adoption of an anti-nudist ordinance.

Los Angeles Councilman Norris J. Nelson made an anti-nudist presentation before the police commission. Los Angeles County Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz promised "...to arrest the adults on charges of contributing to the delinquency of juveniles" if he found evidence that children and adults were nude in one another's company.

The Board of Supervisors by unanimous vote passed a resolution asking the county attorney to determine what legislation should be enacted to ban nudism.

Mayor Bowron wrote a letter to the City Council in which he said, "I recommend that there be consideration given to the adoption of a city ordinance sufficiently broad to cover the indiscriminate mixing of the sexes while nude, or indecent exposure whether on public or private property, and provide a proper penalty for the conducting of a nudist camp or inviting or enticing any person to visit same or witness the display of nudity of opposite sexes." Later, Bowron stated that the photographs he had seen were "too shocking and immoral to be put on public view or made a part of public records."

By August 11, Police Commissioner Raymond Haight was insisting, "...we should have an ordinance that will control [the nudist camps] !" On August 12, members of the California State Legislature took up the cry. Speaker of the Assembly, Paul Peek, announced, "If conditions in nudist camps are as reported in the press (*italics mine*), a proposed law to outlaw all nudists camps in the State of California should be introduced in the special session of the California Legislature."

By September 5, 1939, it was all over. The press campaign had succeeded. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors adopted an ordinance prohibiting the practice of nudism in county territory. The Los Angeles City Council approved similar legislation a month later. Happily, calmer reason prevailed in the state capitol; attempts to adopt anti-nudist legislation at the state level were unsuccessful.

The existing Los Angeles County anti-nudist ordinance provides that a person who **willfully exposes his or her person in the presence of two or more persons of the opposite sex**, whose persons are similarly exposed, is guilty of practicing nudism.

Conviction of violating the ordinance carries a fine of not more than \$500, not more than six months in prison, or both.

It would be unfair to say that nudism was outlawed in Los Angeles solely because of the newspaper smear campaign, since a multiplicity of elements enabled the press to conduct such a campaign. First and foremost, there was the tragic death of Mrs. Noel, which involved the very kind of spicy highlights a gossip-hungry public would devour. There was the prevailing public ignorance of the principles and ideals of nudism. There was the climate of Victorian morality which persisted in America until the advent of World War II. There were the local government politicians, fearful of their constituents and the press, and unwilling to take any stand contrary to community standards. Finally, and not least important, there was the eagerness of publisher-businessmen to make a buck during the depression by using the then frequently-employed technique of a crusade, without actual regard as to its merits.

Could the same thing happen today? Probably not.

There is little solace, however, in that knowledge; it did happen in 1939, and nothing has occurred since then to change things. For nearly three decades, it has been illegal, for all practical purposes, to practice nudism in the City or County of Los Angeles; an area where there are probably more nudists than in any other county in the United States.

Of course, people do practice nudism in Los Angeles. There are no nudist camps, but there are nudists, and they do enjoy nudity among their families and friends. The anti-nudist ordinance simply is not enforced where people gather nude in private residences. That is fortunate, too, for the police budget certainly could not withstand the expense of arresting all of us who practice nudism in Los Angeles. The fact is that nearly everyone in the county at one time or another, whether knowingly or not, is a nudist and in violation of the local ordinance.

A careful reading of the law reveals that a nudist is any person who is nude in the presence of two or more nude persons of the opposite sex. Within the meaning of the law, a man and his wife with their child, or children, swimming nude together in the backyard pool are "guilty" of practicing nudism. A nude mother bathing two six-week-old twin boys in the privacy of her own bathroom is "guilty" of practicing nudism.

The anti-nudity ordinance doesn't merely outlaw resorts in the county, but makes illegal the casual nudity that occurs among family members in the vast majority of households. Unfortunately, bad laws are not easily changed. As Thoreau once commented, "Unjust

laws exist. Shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them all at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them . I say, break the law."

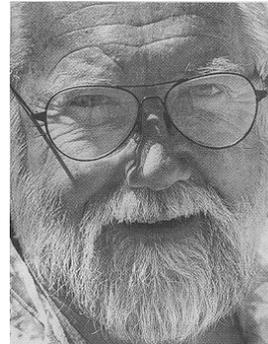
In the same vein, nudist writer John Adams once wrote: "Legislators are loath to change even evil laws, and the majority is slow to be persuaded with respect to the rights of the minority. The American Negro waited for nearly three centuries for society and the legislators to alter evil laws that forced inequality of the races. Their patience at an end, the Negro swiftly brought down the unjust laws — by violating them. Students at the University of California forced that institution to revise its unjust laws — by violating them. Gandhi freed India by the same technique." Undoubtedly, the Los Angeles anti-nudity ordinance will remain in force until the day a nudist Thoreau, Gandhi, or Martin Luther King stands ready to violate the law, force the police to arrest him, permit a judge to find him guilty, and then begin the long and expensive battle through higher courts where the unconstitutionality of the ordinance will be demonstrated. Only through the technique of civil disobedience can such a law as this be eliminated. Someone, someday, must be the nudist champion who will force Los Angeles to abandon the anti-nudist law that was born in hysteria twenty-eight years ago.

POSTSCRIPT

NUDIST PUBLISHERS IN DRAGNET

City, County United In Smut Crackdown

LOS ANGELES - Police and sheriffs on the basis of...
sheriff's vice squad officers...
to believe in a new U.S. Supreme Court...
Court majority ruling Thursday...
weight since the publication of...
magazine in Los Angeles...
of South of...
City, said the...
will have to...



VAL F • DAILY NEWS/Wednesday, April 2, 1968 NEWS — 9

Board votes 4-0 to oust nudists

Elysium Fields battle in 16th year

By DOLORES WOOD
Daily News Staff Writer

A Topanga Canyon nudist camp again was denied permission to continue operations as the Board of Supervisors voted 4-0 Tuesday to uphold its earlier decision that the camp does not comply with land-use regulations.

The board had been directed by the Superior Court to reconsider the case based on arguments by the operators of Elysium Fields that there was no geological threat to the surrounding community's safety.

An attorney representing the camp said the board's decision would be challenged.

The denial was approved by the four supervisors present without discussion. Supervisor Edmund D. Edelman was absent.

"We were completely shocked by the ruling," said Stephen F. Kohle, the attorney for Elysium Fields. "We were given no notice whatever of the hearing, and we are going to challenge the arbitrary nature of this decision. We believe we have been denied our right of due process."

The camp has 30 days until it is subject to criminal prosecution for operating without a permit, unless it can gain a reprieve from the district attorney's office or the courts.

In 1948, a private nudist travel club called the Air-a-Tans was quietly founded in Torrance, California. The club was founded by Alicia Lloyd, who had been a member of one of the first nudist groups in New York thirty years before. The group held occasional backyard nude swim parties and also took occasional group trips to the half-dozen landed nudist clubs that thrived along the eastern boundary of Los Angeles County in Riverside, Colton, and Corona. Because they carefully pre-screened their membership and did not publicize their parties, they remained off the public radar and the police never bothered them.

Other small clubs also came into existence during the next twenty years. One was the Sundial Club founded by longtime nudist activist Ed Lange. Ed also published several nudist magazines sold around the country. His office also got raided by the LAPD several times as some of the locals complained that his publishing business was "obviously" obscene. In 1961 he was even indicted by the LA Grand Jury for obscenity. The charges were dismissed but these periodic raids became a legal nuisance.

In May 1968, Ed Lange opened his Elysium Fields in Topanga Canyon in the western hills of Los Angeles County. A few weeks later, local sheriff deputies were noticed hiding in the bushes on the edge of the property. They were taking photographs of the naked people and documenting all that went on. On June 23, 1968, three helicopters suddenly appeared overhead flying very low. Police cars filled with officers suddenly drove in from all sides and arrested or cited 24 people for violation of the County's anti-nudity ordinance, the law passed in 1939 after the Elysia Fraternity "scandal."

Lange, who had been a close friend of Elysia's founder Lura Grassley, was happy to challenge the law, indeed he had been anticipating this moment for many years. He hired well-known criminal attorney Stanley Fleishman to represent him. Fleishman's vigorous defense claimed the law "invaded the constitutional rights of privacy" since Lange was claiming Elysium Fiends was really his backyard and the people cited were his guests. The judge agreed, and ruled the law unconstitutional. On December 4, 1968 and Appellate Court agreed, and the headlines "Nudists Win!" brought a lot of publicity and acclaim to both Lange and to Elysium from within the nudist community.

And that is how this law was rescinded. Unfortunately, because it took 30 years to win in court, a county of ten million people with a temperate sunny climate never developed any nudist parks or resorts as happened in Florida and elsewhere. Even Elysium's existence was under constant threat of closure by the County in the longest zoning court fight in Los Angeles history. A million dollars in legal fees, 24 years, and a US Supreme Court decision later, Lange finally won his final victory, only to succumb to cancer three years later. Elysium closed in September, 2000 after his daughters sold off the publishing business, and his properties.

Based on an article by Jon Hunter for Ed Lange's Ankh Magazine, January, 1968. Story re-written and updated by Gary Mussell in 2013.