

Maine's
Billionaire
Boys Club.

The Yacht That Sailed Underground.

BY GRANTLAND S. RICE.

IT IS SOMETIME late in June, 1981. George Moran stands on the shifting deck of the Fishing Vessel *John Neptune* somewhere off the dark coast of Barbuda. Far to the south and west across the tropics lie the steamy jungles of Columbia's backwater coast. To the north across 2,000 miles of empty horizon is George's home in Belfast, Maine. His course is steady towards a spot in mid-ocean, north of Antigua. Behind him the boat's wake spreads like a brushstroke on canvas.

Only a handful of people know his whereabouts. Fewer still are aware of his coastal activities. Or his cargo. A cat's paw stirs his hair. This is the adventure he longed for when he came to the Caribbean seven years ago as a single-handed sailor from California. This was the exhilaration he felt on his first trip with his wife Lynda when the boat's mast snapped under the strain of a headwind off Nicaragua. The storms. The risks. The freedom.

At some point three sailing vessels from English Harbor approach and tie alongside. With eyes scanning the horizon, dozens of tightly wrapped bales are quickly transferred from the *Neptune's* hold to the decks of the *Magic*, *Blue Jennifer*, and *Relentless*. Spring lines are hauled in, and the sloops set sail for secluded anchorages along the coast of Maine. When the F/V *John Neptune* chugs into Portsmouth,

New Hampshire in early July, it is just another dragger returning from the sea. When George Moran steps ashore, he is just another rugged member of the U.S. Merchant Marine heading home to see his friends and family.

It is Friday, March 23, 1984. In the Federal Courthouse in Portland, Maine, Judge Gene Carter addresses a group which includes a computer specialist, an expert in real estate investment, an interior designer, an insurance executive, and yes, a commercial fisherman named George Moran. Nearly all have bachelors degrees, and many of them have completed graduate work. Several have given time and effort to charities. There are two married couples present. One member has recently received a two-page, single-spaced typed recommendation from a Georgia State law professor who's been admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Not one has a criminal record.

All fourteen have been found guilty of trafficking marijuana with intent to distribute during June and July of 1981 and 1982. In his sentencing remarks, Judge Carter describes the group as "the best and brightest this society has to offer." He goes on to say "None of them have been given occasion to act as they have ... out of want, out of economic desperation. They have had the best that our society can give them." He sentences nine of the defendants to serve prison time anywhere from three to ten years. Three get probation. And the charges against the two wives are dismissed. Warrants are issued for six more people named in the indictment — including 'kingpin' Harvey Prager — who are still fugitives. The courtroom empties, and the exploits of one of Maine's largest smuggling rings sinks into memory.

"People, in short, who could only commit a crime after dessert."

Or so it seemed. This fall, like a lifejacket from an old wreck, Harvey Prager surfaced in London, England. Investigating the \$23 million Knightsbridge Deposit Center rob-

bery last July, officials came across false documents belonging to a Harvey Israel in one of the burglarized safe deposit boxes. This same Harvey Israel, described by the London Daily Express as an art dealer who lived with his French girlfriend in a "multi-million-pound Chelsea flat," strolled confidently into a Scotland Yard office two months ago to retrieve his papers where he was unmasked as Harvey Prager and arrested. According to John Coles of the Daily Express, the dapper Prager, a Bowdoin College grad, having successfully shed his New England-ness and melted into London's black umbrella clique, boldly "went to them expecting to pick his papers up with no questions asked."

THIS NEW AGE *savoir-vivre* characterizes the activities of a smuggling ring who used a phony consulting firm, six yachts, a fishing boat, and two gutted motor homes to transport 50,000 pounds of Columbia's finest to homes in Maine, New Hampshire, and New York. It was the stuff which made Robert Ludlum famous. The operation included secret, mid-ocean rendezvous, aliases like Shane and Cochise, coded radio messages, and tense flights to St. Thomas. There were even harborside meetings and a fruitcake stuffed with money.

Yet the twenty ring-members were not dark figures from the underworld. They were society's movers and shakers. The friends and neighbors we'd met at cocktail parties or leaning on a rake in the yard. Leading businessmen and friends of state representatives. Mothers and Fathers. The kind of people whose energy excited us. People who told great stories and who'd probably read Dostoyevsky while in college. People whose lives

seemed so organized and successful that we'd ask jokingly if they'd robbed a bank. People, in short, who could only commit a crime after dessert.

So what's missing? What drove successful men and women of the 1980s to secret lives in the world of drug smuggling? There was the money, of course. Timothy Green, an expert on contemporary smuggling, claims the runners' turnover "is certainly on a level with the high finance of modern industry." The street value of the June, 1980 haul alone must have been close to \$13 million — more than most Maine businesses make in a year. No doubt Prager and company saw the operation as a kind of high-risk investment with small outlay and unbelievable returns.

But surely the jump in personality needed to smuggle contraband goes deeper than pure economics. These people were not merely sponsoring the operation from desks and telephones. They were standing on the pitching decks of fishing boats. They were using their own homes to stash the drugs. One of their wives manned a radio. There seems to be a kind of mocha java seductive thrill to all this. In a society where the majority of movement takes place on paper, they were surfing on the edge. Riding point. They were individuals who had courage and energy to challenge Columbian coasts, storms, and the U.S. Coast Guard. As an old rum runner explained, "Daredevilry, nerve, seamanship -- it was all a game with good pay for the successful."

Perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised that twenty of our brightest and most passionate were capable of smuggling. We all entertain thoughts at some point during our lives of going out on the edge, of making that 'blue water' run. Even if we're not an 18th-century smuggler slipping up the New England coast with wines and silk, most of us enjoy a stint now and then in the passing lane on I-295. Without a frontier, we need something to rub up against, to try us, to challenge and help prove to ourselves that we are not just observers. We need to demonstrate in some tactile way that we are at least roommates to our own fate. With the corporatism of America making it more difficult for the individual to make a difference, going against the grain offers a kind of romantic identity. Even if it's just the symbolic mutilation of an odd-even parking ticket.

When I was a teenager growing

MYSTERY



up in Detroit, several friends and I ran a small smuggling operation on Lake St. Clair. My parents had a small powerboat, and across five miles of open water and up a small channel called the Belle River was a Canadian beer store. The owners of this establishment were rather indiscriminate in their selling practices, and my friends and I would speed back across the lake with one or two cases of John Labatts hidden in the cabin. The operation was nearly uncovered when, on a hot summer day, a Coast Guard skiff sounded its siren, drew alongside, and asked to see the boat's life preservers and fire extinguisher.

Fortunately for our social lives, the officers just squeezed the kapok, checked the registration, and sped off. But the moment they were out of sight we were doing backflips off the swim platform. We had, in our own small way, bested United States' finest. We were exhilarated. We walked through the halls of my high school invested with the power of having done a thing in secret. While whatshisname over by his locker was collecting Beatles albums and squeezing pimples, we were sneaking contraband past the United States Coast Guard.

PERHAPS I sympathize with Prager and company because I know I myself am capable of the ambition and the passion, if not the crime, of smuggling. The exotic ports and midnight rendezvous. The wind in the halyards. The subtle urgency of it all. In *The House of the Dead*, Dostoyevsky's smuggler "works from inclination, from passion. He is on one side an artist. He risks everything, runs terrible dangers; he is cunning, invents dodges, and gets out of scrapes, and sometimes acts with a sort of inspiration. It is a passion as strong as gambling."

Drew Hale must have felt this passion when he crewed on one of the boats in the 1981 rendezvous off the coast of Barbuda. "I guess my fault was in thinking of this as a sailing adventure or a job rather than as part of a smuggling conspiracy," he says in a 1984 letter. "Marijuana and the people who used or sold marijuana were not part of the group of people I have chosen to associate with." Hale, unhappy with the tedious traveling that was part of his career with an Atlanta, Georgia corporation, was drawn into the

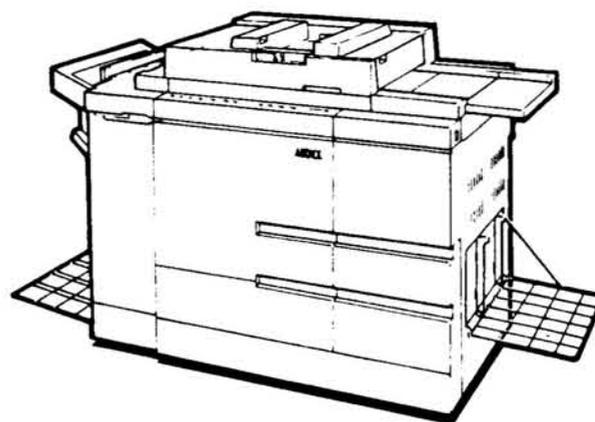


group by a friend from college. "I felt like the risk was my own risk to take and that as long as nobody was dependent on me I wasn't hurting anyone if I got caught," he explains.

Drew's father, Robert Hale, maintains it was his son's "love of water sports that led to his desire for a real 'blue water' run. Drew got the chance and *did it!* I can just picture the thrill in his face as he ran before a southerly hurricane wind on that trip."

Similarly, John C. Holman, a crewmember on the *Magic* when it rendezvoused with the *Neptune* in June, 1981, seemed to be possessed by the adventure of a "blue water run." Holman was a brilliant computer programmer from Albany, Georgia when an old friend approached him about joining the smuggling ring. A member of an honorary marketing fraternity in college and described by one of his graduate school professors as an "impressive research assistant" in the "top one percent" of his class, Holman is currently serving 10 years for his role in the operation which, in addition to crewing on the *Magic*, had him attending secret meetings in Maine. The former volunteer in a Georgia "Feed the

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"Hungry" program is spending his prison time working towards a second graduate degree in business information systems.

In a letter to Judge Gene Carter dated July 23, 1984, Holman offers this explanation: "I was born in 1952 — a member of the post-WWII 'baby boom.' Each succeeding generation, it seems, feels a need to express its uniqueness and its independence from the preceding generation. My contemporaries expressed this self-determination in a number of ways: different styles of dressing, new music, changing political views, and significantly, widespread use of drugs."

Yet while Holman's desire to express individualism seems accurate, it's unlikely it was through the use of drugs. Holman was making "a run," daring the seas and the U.S. government to recognize his challenge. "Is this hard to believe from the young man who spoke of a spirit of adventure as a motive?" writes Holman's mother.

Finally, Orr's Island native James E. Henry, one of the five remaining fugitives, was 30 years old when he and George Moran piloted the *John Neptune* north from Columbia in 1981. A man known for strong convictions, Henry was elected a trustee

HARVEY MEL PRAGER — Track 1; Squash 2; Big Brother Program 2,4; BUCRO 1; Dean's List 1,2,4; James Bowdoin Scholar 2,4; Undergraduate Research Fellow 4; George F. Baker Scholarship 1,2,3,4.



HARVEY MEL PRAGER
 Peekskill, N. Y.
 Zeta Psi
 History

of Portland's "Regional Opportunity Program" for the poor at the age of 17 and, according to friends, was "always talking about conservation." These friends included the

late State Rep. Laurence Connolly and director of the Portland West Neighborhood Planning Council James Oliver.

In July, 1983, three months after selling his majority interest in the *John Neptune* to Moran and two months prior to his indictment, Henry received national recognition for his exploits as an Anti-Whaling activist off the coast of Siberia. The bearded son of a lobsterman, Henry, attempting to trace damning evidence of whaling atrocities across the Bering Sea to Nome, Alaska, was flipped out of his *Zodiac* by a Soviet helicopter and held captive with six other Greenpeace members for five days. In a Press Herald article entitled "Maine Man Acting on Convictions When Seized," an exultant Oliver remarked, "It's right out of James Bond and he's from Peak's Island, Maine."

As it turns out, Henry was indeed acting on at least one conviction. He was arrested in February, 1968 for possession and sale of marijuana. Although the incident was rather trivial in light of Henry's 1980 and 1981 activities, the explanation the teenager gave Justice Thomas E. Delahanty strikes a familiar chord. According to Press Herald reporter Emery Stevens, Henry, who had sheared his beard and cut his long hair "to conform to the rules of society," said he didn't feel "above the law" during the events leading up to his arrest but "outside the law."

American psychologist Semour Halleck once claimed a transgression of the law makes "a direct impact on the environment" and gives the wrongdoer a sense of being the master of his fate. "During the planning and execution of a criminal act, the offender is a free man," Halleck wrote. "He is immune from the oppressive dictates of others since he has temporarily broken out of their control." I'm usually not one for the closure of behavioral science. The inchoate elements of human motivation are best left to fiction. But Halleck's assessment rings true. It was precisely the freedom of escaping the anonymity and stifling convention of high school life that thrilled us as beer smugglers. At home we brushed our teeth and were in by nine. Offshore the world was ours.

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