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People in Crime

L.A.'s Lust Cult



HIGH PRIEST: HE LED RITUAL ORGIES

Rich, rock-ribbed Pasadena, famed for its roses, the California Institute of Technology, and as a retirement haven for Eastern millionaires, looks like the last place a black magic cult dedicated to sex would thrive. Nevertheless, the Church of Thelema (the name means "will"), a cult practicing sexual perversion, has been making converts of all ages, sexes, there since 1940. Among the believers: many prominent residents of the Pasadena-Los Angeles area; at least one member of Hollywood's movie colony.

The existence of the cult, reported to police in an anonymous letter mailed from San Antonio, Texas, in September '42 by "A Real Soldier" and in an October '44 letter, was only proven this June with the "accidental" death of high priest John W. Parsons.

Parsons, bushy-haired, 37-year-old scientist who was one of the inventors of JATO (jet-assisted take-off), was killed when an explosion rocked his lab in the carriage house of the old F. G. Cruickshank estate along Pasadena's "Millionaire's Row," where he lived with his artist-wife and mother. Within hours of her son's death, the elder Mrs. Parsons had committed suicide

by swallowing 50 sleeping pills. The estate, investigators soon learned, had been the "Temple" where Thelemites ran their strange sex orgies.

Thelemites follow code set down by founder Aleister Crowley, Englishman who died 25 years ago after a stormy life. Expelled from France and Italy, exiled from England, Crowley published his teachings under the title: *Equinox*. Its gist: Do anything you please.

Parsons had served as high priest since the death, in '44, of local prophet Wilfred Smith, a disciple of Aleister Crowley, called "the sinister man" by French authorities. Crowley's chief commandment: "Take your fill of love . . . with whom ye will."

Says an ex-member: "The inner circle followed this rule, especially at the fertility rites at the spring and fall equinoxes." Torch-carrying hooded cultists, chanting prayers to "Thou burning rapture of girls, that disport in the sunset of passion," concentrated on "begetting a royal race before dawn." Other rituals: a Black Mass, patterned on a religious ceremony, in which High Priestess disrobed to tune of uninhibited chanting; "purifying" fire torture. Members are accepted in the cult—which also existed in Chicago and New York—on a probationary status, must pass through 10 degrees before qualifying for participation in sex rites.

With the bizarre death of Parsons and the suicide of his mother, Thelemites have gone further underground. But, still active, they conducted a secret funeral for their dead high priest.