the perry Lane papers

A prologue by vic lovell

This is the beginning of a continuing feature.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Tom Wolfe's new book, explores a time of my life which is at once dead and eternal, over and here and now. It is the story of my old friend Ken Kesey, of Perry Lane, Menlo Park's one time hippy ghetto where I lived for six years, and of the Acid Test, the Pranksters, the Trips Festival, and the Hell's Angels.

Perry Lane was a one block long area in unincorporated Menlo Park, situated next to the Stanford golf course, just off Willow Road as you come from the Stanford Shopping Center, a block before you run into the place where Willow Road becomes Sand Hill Road and Santa Cruz Avenue turns into Alpine Road.

The Lane had a bohemian tradition which went back to Stanford's beginnings. Thorstein Veblen lived there at the turn of the century, and balled faculty wives until they threw him out of Stanford. In the late fifties and early sixties it was the only liberated ground in the Midpeninsula. We were proto-hippies when everybody else was a beatnik, and radicals and hippies hardly dared to appear in public, for fear of the hostility they would encounter.

We pioneered what have since become the hall-marks of hippy culture: LSD and other psychedelics too numerous to mention, body painting, light shows and mixed media presentations, total aestheticism, be-ins, exotic costumes, strobe lights, sexual mayhem, freakouts and the deification of psychoticism, eastern mysticism, and the rebirth of hair. We lived and loved and worked and suffered together with that agonizing closeness that comes from knowing that you have nothing but each other. In very serious jest we used to get stoned and recite, dead pan: "I pledge allegiance to Perry Lane, and to the vision for which it stands. One consciousness, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." After which we would march around the dinning room table, carrying American flags and toy guns on our shoulders, giggling with profound hysteria.

We loved pop art, with its bitter irony.

It all ended quite abruptly and very slowly, as all beautiful things must end in a nation which continues to try to be half slave and half free. My present commitment to the Free University is in part an attempt not to make the same mistakes over again. Our current demand for "turf" or liberated space is a good example. In late spring, 1963, a developer bought up a one half block area which was the heart land of Perry Lane, and gave us notice to get out. We demanded to be relocated, and there was a short hassle. He was surprised to find that we were famous. One summer morning, like any other morning on the Lane, we went outside to watch the sun come up, having dropped a good dose of acid about midnight and stayed awake all night laughing and loving. Only this morning there was a bulldozer in the back yard, squatting like an angry June Bug.

I sat in the street and watched, through glazed eyes, as my house was torn apart. Only the devil, I thought, could have the power to destroy something which had existed for so long. A profound insight came to me: Somebody else controls my environment. It was my first real bummer: after being in that place where nobody owns anything, not even themselves, where there are not even separate things to own, to be coming down for the last time on Perry Lane, to this.

Next time, I vowed, it would be different.

The greater part of Tom Wolfe's book is devoted to following Ken Kesey's career after the fall of Perry Lane. In my view, it shows what a fine line divides revolution from decadence. The Lane was a delicate balance of forces, and it never recovered. It ended with our solidarity gone, and it was only then that I realized what a strange and unusual thing it had been. We drifted apart like the characters in a pornographic movie run backwards.

It ended with creativity turned to distraction, ecstasy turned to psychosis, and commitment turned to nihilism.

It ended with Kesey busted, Kesey fleeing to Mexico, Kesey convicted and languishing in jail while Bill Graham got rich exploiting the thing that Kesey had created. It ended before that at the Watts Acid Test, to which the title of Wolfe's book refers. They blew the caculation by a factor of ten when they put the LSD in the punch, and had a mass freakout. One girl sat on the middle of the dance floor beneath the flickering strobe light shitting and pissing in her pants and screaming, "Who cares? Who cares?" and they put a microphone in front of her and turned up the reverb. Bob Cullenbine was there and he cried for a week almost without stopping, afterwards, becausd the only people in the world he had ever been able to identify with had turned into inhuman monsters before his eyes.

It ended before that at Berkeley when Kesey and the Pranksters showed up high on acid before the first VDC march and told everybody to go home and get stoned because what they were doing wouldn't do any good. I said that I would never speak to him again and I almost didn't.

It ended before that and it has never ended and I cannot write of it now without weeping.