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Interview with Peter Berg

Peter Berg

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LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #242
BERG, Peter

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Environmental activist, ecologist, former civil rights activist, former Digger, social revolutionary thinker, and founder of the Planet Drum Foundation

Interviewed: December 18, 1993

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 1 hour, 24 minutes, 4 seconds

Abstract: In his December 1993 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Peter Berg detailed his part in the '60s radical movement and his more recent activities with the Planet Drum Foundation. Berg described his involvement in the Digger movement and environmental movement with bioregionalism at its core. He covered such topics as McCarthyism, the psychedelic movement and the drugs involved, guerilla theatre, San Francisco movements, the Black Liberation Movement, and the Diggers. Berg also discussed the Free Speech movement, bioregionalism, sexism, and homophobia. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Shasta Bioregion, Planet Drum Foundation, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, bioregionalism, ecology, environmental movement, Digger, conservation, industrial growth economy, capitalism, Black Liberation Movement, McCarthyism, Thalhimer sit-in, Mairowitz's *The Radical Soap Opera*, guerilla theatre, LSD, peyote, San Francisco, Co-Existence Bagel Shop, Free Speech Movement, sexism, homophobia, Haight Ashbury

Interview Session (December 18, 1993): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:36 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:43 *Question:* Does the U.S. Postal Service honor the "Shasta Bioregion"? *Answer:* PB said that not only did people at the Planet Drum Foundation use the term, but people in the San Francisco area used the term. PB believed that the USPS would use the term "Shasta Region" to represent Northern California.

00:02:26 *Question:* You use many new terms. You do that because you are trying to change minds, trying to change the way people think about the environment. *Answer:* PB said that what they were doing was not new.

- 00:04:06 *Question:* When did this begin? Bioregionalism? *Answer:* Mid-sixties. *Silent Spring* in 1962, but the book didn't influence Berg. PB was influenced by his own personal experiences. PB, while being a part of The Diggers, was told he was living a different type of cultural ecology.
- 00:06:08 *Question:* Paul Krassner credits you with the term "ecology". Is that true? *Answer:* No, PB said that a woman in the 19teens came up with the term. PB didn't even come up with the term bioregion, but he did alter the definition to include human beings.
- 00:07:27 *Question:* This is not a back to nature movement. You accept the fact that cities are here. Do you want to get rid of cities or limit their growth? *Answer:* No, PB did not want to get rid of cities or limit their growth, but recognized that cities were a non-nature part of life. He said that there are ecological aspects to cities. PB used the example of fuel use; people in the city use less gasoline than people in the country do because they travel far less distances.
- 00:08:47 *Question:* What are the biggest challenges of the movement? *Answer:* PB felt confident that bioregional presets would guide most people that live in rural areas. PB thought that suburbanites had good reason to move to bioregionalism as well. Urbanites would be the most difficult to convince to be involved in bioregionalism because they do not care about the sources of food and water.
- 00:13:31 *Question:* It sounds like corporate bureaucracy is perpetuating the problem because it wants to keeps the system going. *Answer:* Yes, PB said that the only thing that would distress them would be rights of habitation.
- 00:13:56 *Question:* This is a conservative movement. You are trying to return the decision making to the people. *Answer:* Radicalism and conservative are relative terms. Bioregionalism is literally about conservation. PB did want to get the citizens of the U.S. involved in planning for the environment.
- 00:15:36 *Question:* If you are going to have a healthy environment, then you have to involve people. Local decision making is important. *Answer:* PB agreed and recommended that neighborhoods use city money to make improvements ecologically.
- 00:16:36 *Question:* I want to get a sense of how big the bioregional movement is. San Francisco is the base, but where are the other centers of operation? *Answer:* The Pacific Northwest, Seattle, Portland, New York state, Chicago, Australia...
- 00:18:16 *Question:* You recently had an international conference in S.F., the Shasta Bioregional Gathering. What was the purpose? *Answer:* There are people in the

- Shasta Bioregion who have reason to relate to each other, but no opportunity. The gathering was that opportunity.
- 00:19:31 *Question:* What is the purpose of the Planet Drum Foundation, where does it fit in with the movement? *Answer:* PB told people that it was a mother network for the movement. People from all over connected to the Planet Drum Foundation to further their operations and groups. Planet Drum Foundation was a center for publishing, workshops, presentations, teaching, lectures, etc.
- 00:21:03 *Question:* You said “establish a position on bioregionalism”. How did this come about? *Answer:* PB was around to make sure people understood the idea and definition of bioregions.
- 00:22:14 *Question:* It was organized in 1974? *Answer:* Planet Drum was. It took until 1978 to get a good definition of bioregion.
- 00:24:06 *Question:* Does it matter who’s in office? This includes presidents and governors. *Answer:* PB didn’t think that it really mattered. PB asked how much the government can do with environmental data and information.
- 00:29:34 *Question:* I asked you about whether or not it mattered who the President is. Do you think things will change with the change in government? *Answer:* Probably not. PB was not a fan of the Clinton administration.
- 00:31:00 *Question:* Is bioregionalism contradictory with capitalism? Can the two exist together? *Answer:* PB thought that industrialism was the problem, not capitalism. The problem was industrial growth economy.
- 00:32:41 *Question:* Let’s talk about you. Where were you born? *Answer:* In New York.
- 00:32:47 *Question:* Where were you educated? *Answer:* University of Florida-Gainesville.
- 00:32:54 *Question:* What year was this? *Answer:* 1954
- 00:32:58 *Question:* What year were you born? *Answer:* 1937
- 00:33:04 *Question:* What did you major in? *Answer:* Psychology, but dropped out of school.
- 00:33:15 *Question:* This was in the mid-50s, right? During the height of the McCarthy period? *Answer:* Right. During the height of the McCarthy period, PB and company put up signs that said “integrate in ‘58”. The editor of the school paper deliberately tried to get the teachers to make homosexual advances towards him and have drinks with him. The U of Florida-Gainesville lost many professors because of that stunt.

- 00:34:12 *Question:* It (McCarthyism) had a great effect on the University of Florida, like it did at many schools. *Answer:* For some students, it had an “activating effect.”
- 00:34:24 *Question:* Were you isolated in terms of your beliefs and attitudes towards integration and Black liberation? *Answer:* PB said it was apartheid where he went to school. PB then spoke about Elvis Presley being a symbol of integration; a White man, singing Black music. He was liberating for teenagers, representing southern blackness and sexuality.
- 00:38:05 *Question:* You dropped out of university. What did you do? *Answer:* PB hitchhiked around the country, traveling to L.A, San Francisco, and Chicago. In San Fran., the underground culture ruled and the police were trying to put it down. There were musicians and poets everywhere; there was even a “Co-existence Bagel Shop”. PB said San Francisco was like going to heaven.
- 00:39:08 *Question:* What did you do to support yourself in San Francisco? *Answer:* At 17, PB was just living with friends. There weren’t any wars, but there was a draft, but it was difficult to oppose the draft. After getting out of the army, PB went to NY and became part of the Black Liberation Movement.
- 00:40:03 *Question:* What did you do with the Black people? *Answer?* PB was in the second sit-in while he was in the army. The sit-in was at Thalheimer’s department store in Richmond, VA. It’s a famous event because dogs were used to rip the dresses off of girls.
- 00:40:33 *Question:* What was the reaction of your superiors in the army after you returned? *Answer:* PB falsified his background when he entered the army. He ended up being stationed in Richmond because he was supposed to be doing a morale study. His superiors had invented the morale test to get out of their military duty.
- 00:43:37 *Question:* This is after you got out of the army? *Answer:* Yes. PB was anxious to leave the army and join the movement.
- 00:43:43 *Question:* You were involved with the civil rights movement, essentially. *Answer:* Yes, PB was involved in many of the Black civil rights and cultural movements.
- 00:43:57 *Question:* How did you get back to San Francisco? How did you get involved with the Digger movement? *Answer:* PB had a job in NY and had a hallucination that told convinced him to leave the area and eventually move to San Francisco. PB then described his long journey to San Francisco and his stay in Haight Ashbury, where he took LSD.

- 00:46:20 *Question:* Can you recall the experience? *Answer:* He was with a woman and they fell in love. PB said he remembered it vividly. PB had taken other psychedelic drugs before, the first being peyote.
- 00:46:53 *Question:* RC read David Zane Mairowitz's book *The Radical Soap Opera* to prepare for the interview. Mairowitz said LSD had a big influence on the Digger movement. Is that true? *Answer:* [pause] PB said that Mairowitz knew that the Diggers were theatre group.
- 00:47:20 *Question:* Were you an actor? *Answer:* PB said that he was mostly a director and playwright; said he coined the term "guerilla theatre". PB described what the Diggers did. They put on plays that were based in reality and seemed too realistic for much of the audience.
- 00:49:40 *Question:* Jerry Rubin was at Berkeley at that time and involved in the Free Speech Movement. Did you influence him? *Answer:* PB didn't know him, but knew that he greatly influenced Abbie Hoffman.
- 00:49:56 *Question:* He used your ideas later on. *Answer:* PB said that Hoffman used his ideas from the beginning because he understood. Hoffman was at an SDS convention that the Diggers took over. However, PB was not a fan of Abbie Hoffman, but thought that AH understood because he had been part of SNCC.
- 00:51:20 *Question:* Do you use "guerilla theatre" in the bioregional movement? *Answer:* Judy Goldhaft uses performances related to the bioregional movement.
- 00:51:42 *Question:* And that stems from the 60s experience to help you organize today? *Answer:* Yes. PB used his skills as a performer to improve his speaking at events.
- 00:52:00 *Question:* How did the Diggers evolve? *Answer:* The causative event was when Emmett Grogan and Billy Murcutt saw the Fillmore riots in San Francisco (African American riots). They asked themselves what the White equivalent of the riots would be. The two were in a "guerilla theatre" play of PB's in which they were peasants, digging up the commons to plant vegetables and were called "Diggers". Grogan and Murcutt liked the name "Digger" and said it meant "I dig it". PB said that he didn't create the Diggers, he just put everything together.
- 00:57:48 *Question:* You weren't interested in overthrowing the system; you were more interesting making radical enclaves within it. Is that true? *Answer:* Yes. PB wasn't against the war; he was just for the rights of the various groups. He didn't think that society was going to change, but aspects of society would change.
- 00:59:54 *Question:* So protest wasn't important? *Answer:* PB was more interested in pro-

- active activities. The Diggers did protest, but it was not the major action that they took. PB said that the conflict between movement groups was exaggerated.
- 01:00:32 *Question:* The members of Progressive Labor? *Answer:* They were Calvinists. PB and RC called them “fundamentalist dumb reds”.
- 01:01:23 *Question:* You got a lot of criticism from political activists because they thought you were a threat to the movement. *Answer:* PB told RC to consider the source. Not all of the activists understood each other. PB thought it was like Protestantism.
- 01:02:49 *Question:* Or Southern fundamentalism. *Answer:* PB thought Southern fundamentalism was worse.
- 01:03:02 *Question:* There were a lot of hucksters that came into the movement and the Diggers were disruptive then, right? *Answer:* To the Diggers, hip merchants and political protesters were the same.
- 01:04:45 *Question:* You are saying that the Black Panthers took techniques from the Diggers? *Answer:* Yes. PB told the story of meeting with Bobby Seale.
- 01:06:26 *Question:* You had a good relationship with the Black Panthers despite the cultural difference. *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:06:53 *Question:* By 1968, the Diggers were gone, right? *Answer:* No. The Diggers ended after the summer solstice of 1969. Their last event was occupying the steps of city hall from the spring equinox to the summer solstice.
- 01:07:15 *Question:* Why did the Diggers end? *Answer:* PB said that the end was an audience-oriented event. Two things happened: the bloom came off the rose; it was too difficult for them to sustain themselves without any income, and the psychedelic movement fell apart.
- 01:08:15 *Question:* That was the whole movement that burned out, not just the Diggers. *Answer:* Yes. The police completely oppressed the neighborhood.
- 01:08:38 *Question:* Haight Ashbury? *Answer:* Yes. PB continued talking about the oppression of Haight Ashbury and the destruction of the Diggers and the psychedelic movement.
- 01:10:33 *Question:* This is the former Diggers? *Answer:* No, PB was referring to Judy and himself. PB continued the story of the end of the Diggers, the beginning of the Planet Drum Foundation, and bioregionalism.

- 01:13:15 *Question:* Is that because people are more environmentally conscious? *Answer:* PB said RC shouldn't ask him why people do things when they do them. PB said that they were way ahead of their time.
- 01:13:56 *Question:* Do you ever get nostalgic for the period? *Answer:* PB said that he remained very close to everyone involved. PB missed the camaraderie the most. They were outlaws and that made them so close. PB said he had a lot of nostalgia, not for the period, but for the camaraderie.
- 01:16:09 *Question:* Do you know Jim Fouratt? He said that the Diggers had a profound influence on his life. *Answer:* PB said he'd heard of the name and asked why they had an influence on his life.
- 01:16:30 *Question:* What about the legacy of the Diggers? How do you place the contribution of the Diggers in the 60s? *Answer:* PB said that everything that he was doing at the time of the interview came from the Diggers.
- 01:18:30 *Question:* What about the sexism of the 60s movements? *Answer:* PB suspected that yes, there was sexism during the movement and that RC should ask the women. PB discussed sexism and homophobia within the 60s movements.
- 01:24:04 *End of interview*