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On the trail of Charlie Manson

The strange story of Charlie Manson and his brood of nubile flower children charged with murder begins on p. 20 of this week's issue. Written in New York by Paul O'Neil, it is based on legwork by our entire California staff plus a few others. In search of facts and pictures, they traveled from the surfers' canyons of Los Angeles to the heart of Death Valley and San Francisco's decaying Haight-Ashbury, and on the way they had some adventures of their own.

Los Angeles Bureau Chief John Froom reports:

"After all the pounding on doors, false steps and blind leads, there always seems to be that one shiny moment you remember. Reporter John Fried and Photographer Vernon Merritt, for example, got the job of covering the Manson family's existence at the Barker ranch. It's a terrible place to get to and their journey involved four-wheel-drive vehicles and a helicopter, but they made it to the ranch, got their words and their pictures, and made it back again. The day ended in a restaurant in Death Valley with two Japanese journalists approaching and asking, please, for directions to the Barker ranch. Fried and Merritt couldn't say a thing.



JOHN FROOM

"Reporter Judy Fayard tried to track down people who might have known Manson or his followers. Late one night—'Make that one very dark night,' she says—in Las Flores Canyon, she scabbled up a hillside to reach a deserted-looking house where some promising sources were supposed to live. 'Their apartment was in the very back. I went in and quite literally groped my way across the living room and for the first time in my career the thought crossed my mind that yes, sex *does* make a difference in this business. But when I found them, they turned out to be nice and they gave me some good material.'

"Luck—good and bad—figures mightily in a story of this kind. Merritt and I had been to Death Valley on a different story about 10 days before the Manson thing broke, and when it did I called a friend I had made there and asked if he'd heard of this desert commune. 'Sure,' he said. 'Why didn't you ask?' Now that is bad luck.

"But there was one moment when luck did seem to be with us. Trailing through Devil's Canyon, which was to have been Manson's escape route to the desert, we came upon a new, green Cadillac convertible, complete with a bullet hole in its trunk, wedged into an arroyo. We were sure we had a giant clue. Short of a parachute there is simply no way it could have got in there. Unfortunately I couldn't find any connection between the car and the Manson tribe. But I checked the registration, and Mr. J. E. Lopez, if you're interested, I know where your Caddy is."

Ralph Graves

RALPH GRAVES
Managing Editor

LIFE

The Love and Terror Cult

The man who was their leader
The charge of multiple murder
The dark edge of hippie life

Charles Manson,
cult leader

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