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Mountain Drive, April 23, 2009 by [Moira](#)

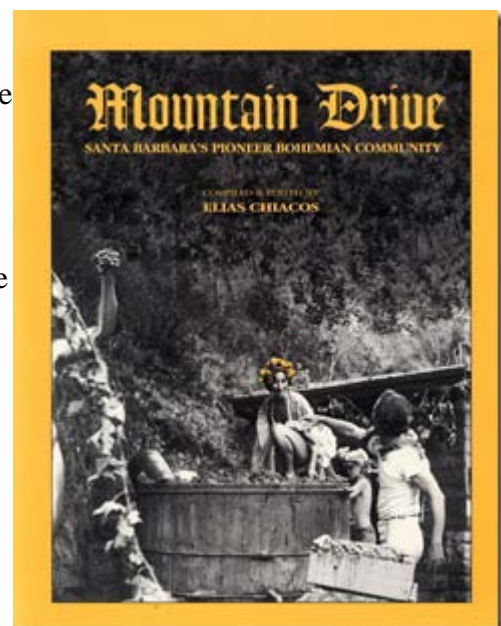
Part of Bohemian Week.



(This spectacular aerial photograph of the area destroyed by the Tea Fire is reproduced with the kind permission of [S B John Wiley on Flickr](#), who retains the copyright.)

On November the 13th 2008, a fire broke out at the abandoned Bothin Tea House in the hills of Montecito, Southern California. Fanned by the area's famed 'sundowner' winds, gusting at times to 90 miles an hour, it destroyed hundreds of acres of land and 200 properties before it was finally brought under control.

As the fires burned, the media headlines were mainly of the stars' houses threatened by the conflagration ... but the real story lay not in the multi-million dollar mansions of Rob Lowe and Oprah Winfrey (which were in fact left unmolested by what became known as the 'Tea Fire') but in the charred remains of the community that had once been at the heart of Southern California's bohemian scene – Mountain Drive.



In the 1940s, Bobby Hyde and his wife Florence (known to friends and family as Floppy) bought 50 acres of fire-damaged mountainside on either side of East Mountain Drive at Montecito above Santa Barbara. Both came from privileged backgrounds, but Bobby was a man with an extraordinary dream ... to create a Utopia where like-minded individuals could come together to live simply, in harmony with the natural world, using only the materials they had around them – earth, wood, stone and water.

He sold the land an acre at a time for \$2,000 a plot. A down payment of \$50 followed by monthly instalments of \$50 plus 2% interest would get you a level plot, an access road, a water supply and advice and help from Bobby – but he would only sell to you if he *liked* you and felt you would fit in ...

If we didn't like our neighbours, we would have nobody but ourselves to blame, because we chose them. (*Six More at Sixty by Bobby Hyde. Doubleday and Company, 1960.*)

There was no building code in Montecito until 1954, so the houses that the Mountain Drivers built for themselves – mostly from adobe – were unique, eclectic and highly idiosyncratic. Some of them were compared disparagingly (generally by those bemused by the 'goings-on' on the mountain) to chicken shacks. They were built and occupied by writers, artists, musicians and free spirits from all walks of life.

With no electricity, people made their own entertainment, in the time honoured fashion ... dramatic productions, musical evenings and what can be loosely categorized as "any excuse for a party" – Twelfth Night, Bastille Day, Burns' Night ... They also initiated that very American phenomenon – virtually unknown elsewhere – the Renaissance Fair.

It was, however, for two things that Mountain Drive became notorious ... the introduction of hot tubbing and the Naked Wine Stomp. The former was simply a economical way of creating and using hot water ... which was generated by coiling black piping on the roofs of the adobe buildings. In southern California's almost constant sunshine, the supply was endless and free ... and to a group of people with comparatively few hang-ups about nudity, nothing was more obvious than to turn it into a communal event.

The Wine Stomp was a far more curious phenomenon. It started in 1952 and was a natural direction for the community to take ... the area had sun and grapes in abundance, after all ... but it grew to legendary proportions and in 1965 featured in the Rock Hudson film *Seconds*. Its notoriety came about because the wine stompers ... led by that year's Queen ... were naked.

Elias Chiacos' 1994 book, *Mountain Drive: Santa Barbara's Pioneer Bohemian Community* tells the story – in words and copious black-and-white photographs – of Mountain Drive's heyday in the post-war years – the 40s, 50s and 60s.

It all makes riveting reading, particularly for a dyed-in-the-wool Anglo-Saxon with a full complement of the regulation attitudes, but it left me feeling very ambivalent. On the one hand, I admired Bobby and Floppy Hyde immensely and mentally applauded what they were trying to create, but other parts of the book – especially some of the photographs of the Mountain

Drivers - made me vaguely irritated, as one would be with a bunch of children who won't behave themselves and think they're doing something terribly clever. I realized eventually that I was just itching to slap them.

A major part of the problem is that the book actually concentrates too much on the more sensational side – on the productions of Lysistrata for instance (did we really need *two* photographs of men sporting “Here’s one I made earlier” fake penises and smug expressions?). And quite honestly, when you’ve seen one photograph of a bunch of naked people in a tub of grapes, you’ve seen them all. I accept that the author may have been constrained by the material available to him but even so . . . there was plainly much more to Mountain Drive, particularly in the early years, and unfortunately it’s rather lost in the book.

However, in amongst all the photographs of grape stompers and hot tubbers and self-consciously arty people, there’s a slightly out-of-focus one of Bobby Hyde in his garden, wearing nothing nothing but a sunhat and a smile. There’s a simple dignity about him that seems to sum up the best of Mountain Drive and what it stood for.

Mountain Drive, as it was, is no more ... but something of its original spirit survives. Some of those who lost their homes in the Tea Fire are the family and descendants of those original residents, who have never lived anywhere else. A few are even living in caves on the mountain, so determined are they not to leave their homes. They lost everything they had in the flames ... but already, as the new spring growth starts to show through the blackened earth, they are starting to rebuild. This time, however, they have to contend with planning regulations ... and that’s something that might have daunted even the formidable Bobby Hyde.

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Shoreline Press. 1994. ISBN: 1-885375-00-X. 133pp.

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This afternoon, Moira will be talking to [Renate Benedict](#). She was one of the very first residents on Mountain Drive (in fact that’s her on the front cover of Elias Chiacos’ book ... as the Queen of the Wine Stomp 1955) ... and a lady who was liberated when the word was still being applied to countries.