

high noon

The mayor
of Grand Forks
aimed to make
his town hemp
central. Then came
the showdown

One evening two Junes ago I sat on the porch of the double-wide trailer that's home to Brian Taylor, mayor of Grand Forks, British Columbia, population 4,300. We shared a drink, admired his hillside view east across the Sunshine Valley, and together tried to make some sense of his complicated life. For starters, he'd just been dumped by his girlfriend, and was now officially a miserable fifty-year-old bachelor. He was sharing the trailer with his twenty-year-old daughter, Theresa, who wandered out to the porch as we sipped our rye, and listened to her father moan about his lost lady love, by all accounts a beautiful woman young enough to be his daughter. Theresa said, "The way she left made me glad she's gone."

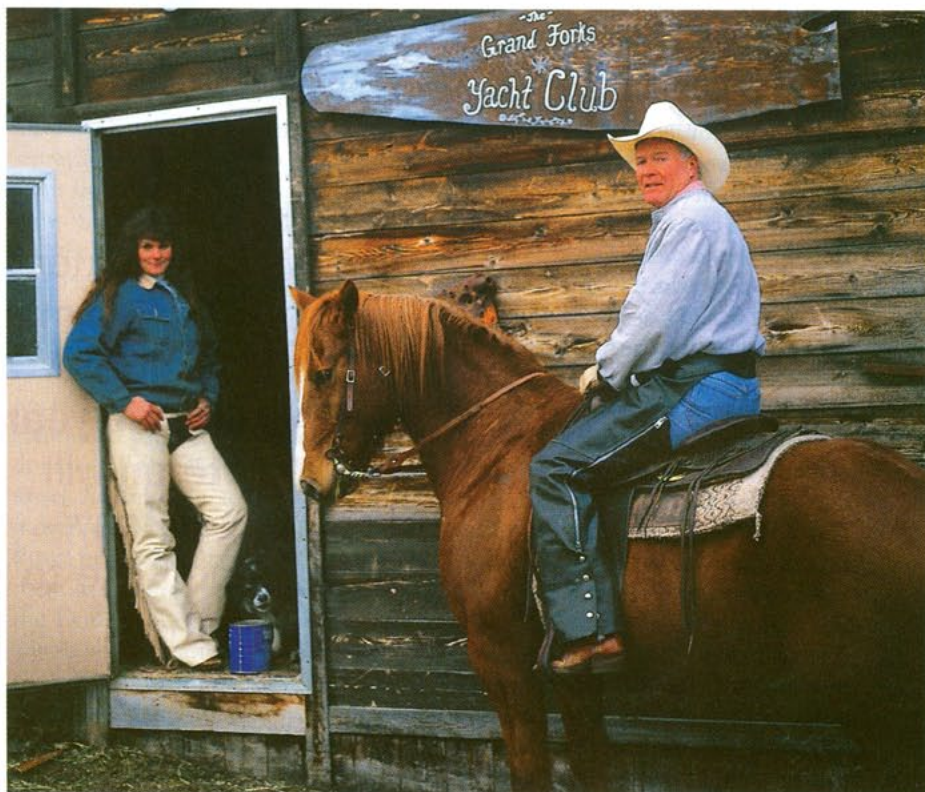
"It was heartbreaking," said the mayor.

"I don't think so," Theresa said.

"It wasn't *your* heart. Give me a break."

"How come you never date hippie women?" she asked. It was a good question. There are plenty of them in this part of the world—the valleys of the Kootenay, Selkirk, and Purcell Mountains, collectively known as the Kootenays. Many arrived as part of a wave of American draft dodgers during the Vietnam War, and were welcomed by local Doukhobors, who are descendants of pacifists who fled Russia to avoid conscription into the Tsar's army a century ago.

"Hippie women don't shave," Taylor answered, and, turning to me, said, "I like



Theresa Taylor (left), at the Grand Forks Yacht Club with her father, Brian Taylor, and Rocking Comet

a woman who wears makeup and high heels. I had a girlfriend once who wore high heels when she gardened. High heels and those little white socks with lace on 'em. It was the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

Taylor's small nose, big cheekbones, and square jaw give him a Jack Palance look, and he can still put on cowboy boots and a pair of tight white jeans and not embarrass himself. Behind his trailer there's a barn he calls the Grand Forks Yacht Club, despite the fact that it sits on a hillside miles from water; it's Taylor's homemade party space, complete with stage, dance floor, and room for a hundred. He keeps a horse, a caramel-coloured Morgan named Rocking Comet. Some evenings, when the mood strikes, Taylor will wander out to the Yacht Club, strap on a guitar, switch on the P.A., and do severe injustice to the songs of John Prine, until Comet comes in from outside to stand by the railing around the dance

floor and blink at him. That's one way the mayor likes to unwind. Another is to pour himself a drink and roll up a big reefer. Taylor is an ardent pot smoker, and by his own account there are times he still likes to party like a teenager. It takes a certain kind of woman to tolerate that in a middle-aged man, which brings us back to the miserable-bachelor issue. I asked if his most recent girlfriend left because of his pot smoking.

"She *said* she left mostly because of pot," he said. But he remained skeptical. "If I thought that were true I'd quit," he insisted. "There's no doubt in my mind that she left for very complex reasons she didn't understand."

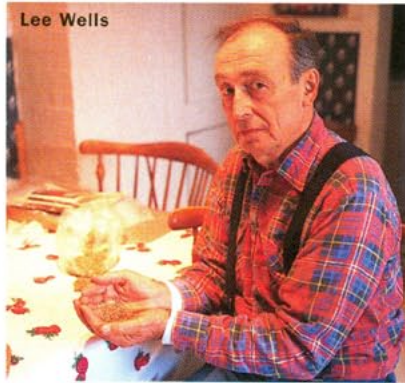
When Taylor, a social worker by profession, moved to town five years ago to become the director of a local centre for the mentally handicapped, he brought with him boxes of files that amounted to the ►

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head office and 400-name membership list of CALM, the Canadian Association for the Legalization of Marijuana. Taylor had founded CALM in 1990 in Kelowna, B.C., after his kids caught him growing pot on the roof of their house. "I sat them down and I said, 'I smoke pot,' and they said, 'Dad, we've known for, like, three years,'" he remembers. "I had to say more to them than 'I don't agree with the law so I flout it.' I had to say, 'As a responsible parent I will do something to change the system.'" Taylor has spent much of the last decade trying to change the system, and in return has seen his own life change, not always for the better. In the last two years alone, he has rendered himself unemployed, drawn the unwanted attention of both U.S. and Canada Customs, and been expelled from the hemp co-op that he helped found. And all because of pot.

A few months after his arrival in Grand Forks, Taylor drove a couple of hours east to Salmo, B.C., to attend something called a Hemp Fest. While most farmers in Canada's fledgling hemp industry are quick to claim there's a big difference between hemp and marijuana, the two are, in fact, the same plant: cannabis. Hemp, though, is cannabis that's so short on marijuana's psychoactive ingredient, delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (better known as THC), that you could smoke an entire bale and not get high. At the Salmo Hemp Fest, Taylor met Jack Herer, the American author of *Hemp & the Marijuana Conspiracy: The Emperor Wears No Clothes*, a book that establishes hemp as a historically important crop. It quotes *Popular Mechanics*, circa 1938, predicting hemp would become America's first billion-dollar crop, citing its potential use in more than 30,000 products "from dynamite to Cellophane." Herer's book quickly became the foundation text for the pro-hemp movement that has transformed the politics of cannabis in North America in the past decade. Herer gave pot activists a whole new language to bring to the debate on marijuana laws; now they could defend cannabis on agricultural, economic, and environmental grounds. When Taylor met Herer at the Hemp Fest, he realized the political implications of Herer's argument: the road to legalizing pot would pass through fields of hemp. He dropped CALM and became a hemp activist.

Taylor put announcements in the



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Grand Forks paper inviting anyone interested in starting a hemp farmer's co-operative to attend open meetings at the Yacht Club. Among the forty or so people who showed up was Lee Wells, who, at sixty-three, had retired to the valley from a working life that included a quarter century as an RCMP officer. "I thought I should go just to see what kind of weird people show up, after looking at it for twenty-five years from the other side of the fence," Wells remembers. "It turned out to be established people from the community." The Granby Hemp Co-op was formed, and Wells was elected president.

The co-op spent the next two years trying to get planting licences from Health Canada, an extremely rigorous process because the law did not yet make a distinction between hemp and marijuana, and hemp licences were being granted only for the purpose of experimental field trials. Wells still speaks bitterly of being told one Friday in the summer of 1995, as the planting season slipped by, that a decision would be made the following Tuesday. The co-op had met every condition Health Canada had set. Wells

phoned back Tuesday only to be told that the civil servant who'd promised an answer had gone on vacation for a month. The receptionist said she'd be happy to mail out an application.

Frustrated by the bureaucratic delays, Brian Taylor committed an act that combined civil disobedience, political theatre, and a green thumb. He planted two pounds of *Cannabis sativa* seeds on his seven-acre plot up the hill behind the Yacht Club. Just so no-one would miss the point, he planted his crop so as to spell out the word HEMP in letters fifty feet long. Anyone driving west from town could see it. As the plants grew, Taylor regularly phoned the local RCMP detachment to enquire when they'd be dropping by to charge him with marijuana cultivation, as the law required. When the police proved indifferent, he persuaded Tom Hinter, the publisher of a local one-sheet newspaper called *The Informer*, to come out and take pictures of the plants, which never grew much beyond two feet because the valley's abundant deer kept nibbling at them. Hinter superimposed a photo of Taylor in front of the plants to make them look twelve feet tall. *The Informer* came out at nine on a Wednesday morning. By 9:30 a.m., the cops were at Taylor's door.

They laid charges of cultivation and possession of marijuana. Two days before his trial date in June, 1997, however, the charges were stayed on the condition that Taylor remain active in his pursuit of a licence from Health Canada to grow hemp legally. Taylor was delighted, crowing to everyone he met in town, "I'm under court order to try and grow hemp!" The Crown's decision not to pursue him was based on changes in federal law. In May, 1997, Parliament had passed the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, which for the first time made cultivating commercial hemp legal, drawing an arbitrary line between hemp and pot: any cannabis plant with flowers containing less than 0.3 per cent THC could now be grown with the proper permits, whereas growing cannabis with more THC would result in criminal charges for marijuana cultivation.

The decision to stay charges may also have been influenced by a new local political reality: in November, 1996, Taylor ran for mayor on a pro-hemp platform against the incumbent mayor, who'd been in office for nineteen years. Taylor's election rhetoric conjured up a vision of

Grand Forks as Canada's Hemp City, a centre for research into and development of new strains of his favourite plant. He was as surprised as anyone when he won, taking seventy-five per cent of the vote.

Grand Forks's large Doukhobor population accounted for much of Taylor's election support. The welcome sign on Highway 3 says the town is "Famous for Borscht and Sunshine," but borscht doesn't begin to cover the Doukhobors' legacy here. For nearly seventy years, until the 1970s, the Doukhobors made up the majority in the valley. At 1,500 members, the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ is the largest Doukhobor community in the world. The name means "Spirit Wrestler"; they are descendants of a Russian pacifist collectivist religious community, the largest self-contained group ever to emigrate en masse to Canada. Their meeting place—Doukhobors don't use the word church—sits surrounded by lush lawns and playing fields just west of town. Beyond it, on Spencer's Hill, just down the lane from Brian Taylor's place, is a house belonging to J.J. Verigin, Sr., honorary chairman of the USCC. (Surveying the view from his porch, Taylor joked, "I call this Messiah Hill. Me and J.J. up here overseeing our domain.")

The Doukhobors still call Verigin's place the *Sirotskii Dom*, which means "orphanage" in Russian, for traditionally the leader's home has also served as a refuge for community members. It's a large, modern house, totally rebuilt after 1970, when it was set ablaze by members of the Sons of Freedom, a small Doukhobor splinter group made up of radical arsonists and bombers. Verigin, now seventy-six, will pass his final years here in relative comfort. At the moment he's feeling a little less comfortable than usual because the last of the active Freedomite arsonists, two aging ladies named Tina and Pauline still zealously dedicated to torching anything that smacks of Doukhobor worldly wealth, are out on parole from their most recent attempt to burn him out. They had been caught walking up Veri-

gin's lane with matches in their pockets and glass bottles full of gasoline in their hands. When these two retire it'll be the end of an era in the valley.

Fire figures prominently in the community's history. In 1894, in Russia, Tsar Alexander III attempted to impose conscription on the pacifist Doukhobors. Their leader, known as Peter the Lordly (J.J. Verigin's great-grandfather), counselled the Doukhobors to burn their weapons and take up vegetarianism, so as to live purely according to God's commandment not to kill. This brought predictable repression: jailings, torture, and banishment from their lands high in the Caucasus mountains to swampland, where a quarter of the population died within a year. Peter the Lordly was living in exile in Siberia, among radicals, anarchists, and the Utopian followers of Leo Tolstoy.

Tolstoy, who felt the Doukhobors approached his own vision of Russia as a communal paradise of pacifist peasants, donated all the income from his final novel, *Resurrection*, to help finance the movement of 7,500 Doukhobors from Russia to Canada, where free land awaited them in Saskatchewan. Tolstoyans sent the Doukhobors on their way with a handbook for learning English that included such useful phrases as, "All governments are based on violence," "Oppose private property," and "Do not take the oath." Within a few years the Doukhobors were at odds with the Canadian government: the land they'd cleared and worked



J.J. Verigin, Sr., with his wife, Laura Verigin

would not be decided to them unless they took an oath of allegiance to the King, something their faith forbade. About 2,000 of them stayed on the prairies and made the compromise; the rest followed Peter the Lordly to land he'd purchased for them in the Kootenays. One site was just west of Grand Forks. To the Doukhobors, only thirteen years removed from mountain life in the Caucasus, it looked like home.

When the Depression hit, Doukhobor farmland, owned communally, was not protected by the government from foreclosure the way individually decided farms were. In 1939, they lost land and buildings worth more than \$3-million. There were suddenly a lot of Doukhobors on the streets of Grand Forks with nothing to do and no source of income. Some found work and private lodging and started down the road to assimilation. As for the others, a rancher named Gilpin donated some land for them up in the valley ten miles east across the river from the highway. The community came to be called Gilpin, and for decades was little more than a ragged chain of squatters' shacks.

The buildings looked temporary because they were. The Sons of Freedom who lived there periodically burned down their own houses as a renunciation of material wealth. (Usually they removed the doors, windows, and furniture first.) If you drive out to Gilpin today, you'll notice the welcome sign makes no mention of sunshine or borscht. Instead it's handwritten and reads "GOD'S LAND CAN'T BE BOUGHT OR SOLD, LEASED OR TAXED. PEACE WILL REIGN ONLY WHEN THE LAND IS FREE."

At the height of Freedomite activity, in 1962, 259 burnings and bombings throughout the Kootenays were attributed to the sect, and that year 1,200 Freedomites migrated in a convoy to Vancouver. They eventually made their way to Agassiz, B.C., where they built a shantytown outside a special fireproof prison holding 104 Doukhobor arsonists. Freedomite fervour has since subsided; it's now down to Tina and Pauline.

Along with the more sensational acts of a minority, the distinct characteristics ▶

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of non-violent Doukhobors – always the vast majority – are also disappearing. But their legacy may live on in the form of community support for free thinkers and radical ideas – like Brian Taylor's push to make Grand Forks Canada's Hemp City. Not that hemp was hard to sell to the Doukhobors. J.J. Verigin can recall hemp oil being used for cooking in his youth. "We're very much interested in hemp, and know its good qualities," he said.

In the same election that made Taylor mayor, Mike Kanigan, a customs officer from Grand Forks, lost his city-council seat. But he kept his job at the border, and on that lovely June evening two summers back, as Taylor and I sat smoking and sipping on his porch, the mayor worried that Kanigan might have found a way to get his own back.

Unlike most British Columbia valleys, the Sunshine runs east-west, and so spreads under a full day's sunlight like a broad smile, the bottom lip just brushing the American border. That afternoon, Taylor had zipped across to tiny Danville, Washington, for his weekly run to buy cheap Yankee milk and cheese. On his way back into Canada, Kanigan pulled him over and searched vehicle and passenger right down to the pockets of the oilskin coat the mayor wears when he rides Comet. Finding bits of straw and hay in one, the heavyset border guard squeezed thumb and forefinger together and announced he was sending what lay between for testing. "I asked to see it, and he said he couldn't [show me] because if he opened his fingers it might blow away," the mayor said. "There's no way it was anything but straw."

When I caught up with Kanigan later, he insisted that he had no personal animosity towards Taylor. He was skeptical of those who were promoting hemp's potential as a crop, and of that arbitrary line separating hemp and marijuana. "Visually you can't tell one from the other," he pointed out. "If a person comes through the border with hemp seeds when I'm working and they don't have the proper permits, they'll be paying a fine. I'll be seizing vehicles." Kanigan's biggest beef with Taylor, however, came out as we said our goodbyes on the doorstep and he told me of a rumour that had been circulating: "He has these big parties up at his house. They're smoking marijuana up

there, with young kids around. One of the teenage boys slept with a lady."

The morning after the mayor spoke to me of border guards and broken hearts, he received a phone call from an excited Lee Wells. Licences to plant hemp had been granted to five co-op members in a twenty-eight-page fax from Health Canada.

I went out to Wells's farm, where his retirement from police work and public administration has turned into the full-time job of tending a thriving organic market garden and raising ducks, geese, and chickens for sale. Call him a farmer, but don't call him a hemp activist. He'll wince and say, "Jeez, I don't like to think that. I think of myself as trying to establish opportunities for young people right here. They can get into papermaking and clothmaking, all kinds of secondary industries with hemp. Young people here have to go to Calgary or Vancouver now – I wouldn't like to sentence my children to live in a large metropolitan area for the rest of their lives just because it's the only place they can get a job."

Lee Wells has never smoked marijuana in his life and has no interest in starting now. When I asked him what he thought of Taylor using hemp as a weapon in his fight to legalize marijuana, Wells told me, "If he wants to smoke marijuana, fine. There's no connection between hemp and marijuana, no connection between him toking at night and what I'm doing."

From the earliest meetings of the co-op it had been understood that the group would distance itself from marijuana, a stance that fitted with their demographic. They were nearly all local farmers, not the Kootenay counterculture types the locals still call hippies. But as media outside the valley began to take note of the co-op's activities, Taylor's pot habit became public knowledge. In February, 1997, Vancouver's *Georgia Straight* described him as "a veteran (and outspoken) pot smoker." Taylor had not expected the mention of his drug use, but decided there was no going back in the closet now that he'd been officially "outed" as a pothead. The day after the co-op's hemp licences came through, the mayor was busy outing himself again, answering radio host Rafe Mair's direct question on a popular Vancouver talk show heard throughout the province: "Do you smoke pot?"

"Yes, I do."

"Finally," said Mair. "An honest politician."

Few people in Grand Forks caught ▶

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dispatch

the show live, but soon everyone in town had heard about it through the gossip mill. The following day I sat in the storefront office of Tom Hinter, owner and sole employee of *The Informer*. In the lunch rooms and coffee shops around town his paper is widely read, because Hinter is notoriously acid-tongued. Of the mayor, Hinter said, "I have mixed feelings. There seems to be so much crisis about Brian, pretty much self-inflicted. Right now he's higher than a kite on his own fame and glory."

Just then Linda Laktin dropped by to pick up the latest copy of *The Informer*. Laktin is a local realtor, a Doukhobor, and one of the five farmers who had been granted licences. Hinter tempered her happiness at getting the licence by breaking the news of Brian's latest promotion of pot, this time on province-wide radio. It had clearly offended him. Laktin was upset, too. Taylor's shares in the co-op had been put in trust when he was elected, she said. "He can't speak for the co-op and shouldn't be saying stuff like that," she complained. "That's not going to help. Lee is the one to do the talking."

On the Friday night of the week the licences came through, Brian Taylor threw a party at the Yacht Club behind his trailer. Some Mexican musicians passing through town serendipitously turned up to make a racket from the stage and draw Rocking Comet down the hill for a listen. Many of the co-op members were still upset over Taylor's radio interview, but that didn't stop them from attending. Lee Wells, the twenty-five-year RCMP veteran, circulated among the guests, who were sampling his homemade champagne. There was dope smoking going on, but the partakers were in a minority. Linda Laktin arrived at the party in a state of elevated emotions. She'd shed tears on her way over, as she drove past the graveyard where her grandparents were buried – in her childhood they grew hemp in the middle of their cornfield, to hide it from the authorities. She recalls her mother "giving shit to my grandmother" for it. Now Grandma's ways might be vindicated. J.J. Verigin's second son, Barry, who dropped by briefly, said he felt it was important that Linda, a Doukhobor, would be a part of the first legal hemp planting. "This plant is part of our tradition. They used to burn the leaves in the *bania* – their bathhouses – and obviously they



"If a person comes through the border with hemp seeds and doesn't have the proper permits, they'll be paying a fine," says Kanigan

didn't think they were getting high. It was relaxing in the bath." Before he headed up the lane to his father's house, the *Sirotskii Dom*, he insisted, "You shouldn't try to legislate human appetite."

This past June I went back to Grand Forks, and finally saw a hemp crop in the ground, on twenty-seven acres beside the river way up the North Fork Road. But there was no party at the Yacht Club to celebrate. Over the winter, Lee Wells, Linda Laktin, and the rest of the co-op members had publicly distanced themselves from Brian Taylor. "We applied for grant funding to do research and development and were flatly told by the province and the feds that if Brian's involved, they aren't. They don't want any situation that would be even indirectly embarrassing," Wells said. Linda Laktin told me, "If Brian wants to carry on with the marijuana issue he knows he has to do it on his own."

Taylor was feeling isolated in his trailer up on the hill. He'd resigned from his job as director of the local centre for the mentally disabled, and had since discovered that his pro-pot stand made him

unemployable in his professional field, social work. He'd started his own business, the Grand Forks Hemp Company, specializing in making hemp bridles, ropes, and saddle blankets. "Anything to do with the hemp organization I'm not welcome in, so setting up my own business seemed the only choice," he said.

He'd spent a lot of energy over the winter organizing a provincial hemp-growers association, only to be presented at the inaugural meeting with a government-backed motion insisting all members refrain from public support for marijuana. At the same meeting, Lee Wells, representing the Granby Hemp Co-op, introduced a proposal to refuse membership to anyone who had ever publicly favoured marijuana. Taylor threw what he now regretfully calls a "hissy fit," and stormed out. Since then his bitterness has subsided. "The people who first brought hemp forward are pot smokers, but the new guard, people moving into influence, are anti-pot," he admitted. "That's fine. It's a personal choice, like coffee or tea."

His jitters the previous summer about the border crossing might almost have been a premonition. One day while crossing into the U.S. on his weekly dairy run, he was asked point-blank if he'd ever smoked marijuana. He declined to answer and was denied entry. On November 3 he's scheduled to appear before a U.S. immigration judge in Seattle, who will decide if he should be allowed to enter our neighbour to the south. The reasons for refusal: not merely admitting to smoking, but also allegations that Taylor had trafficked in marijuana. The evidence: media records of Taylor's growing those fifty-foot HEMP letters up his hill, even though charges have since been dropped by the Crown. "The Americans have put this dossier together on me that just amazed my lawyer," Taylor says. "They obviously want to make an example of me."

Through it all, Taylor has remained a popular mayor. When I asked Richard Finnigan, then the editor of *The Grand Forks Gazette*, if he thought Taylor was re-electable, he didn't hesitate to say yes. "Most people around here are on the side of liberal mind-your-own-business," he said. Taylor professes to be amazed at the support he gets on the street. "Everyone tells me to keep at it," he says, with what John Prine would call an illegal smile. "And some of them want to know where they can get some pot." ■