

SEX GURU'S CHARM OFFENSIVE How a cult leader totally took over an Oregon town and destroyed lives

Kaplan, Michael. **New York Post**; **New York, N.Y.** [New York, N.Y.]18 Mar 2018: 26.

Before the cult leader arrived, Antelope, Ore., was a sleepy town: less than a square mile in size, with just 45 residents who were mostly retired or working as ranch hands. According to Maclain, "there was an assassination attempt" when a fundamental Hindu threw a knife at Bhagwan during a sermon. [...]the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] got involved and they backed off [from the poison water plan]."

Before the cult leader arrived, Antelope, Ore., was a sleepy town: less than a square mile in size, with just 45 residents who were mostly retired or working as ranch hands. But a bling-obsessed guru changed all that.

It happened in 1981, after free-love sage Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh bought a 64,000-acre ranch adjacent to Antelope for \$5.75 million. His aim: to create a utopia where followers - many of them Western professionals - could adhere to his teachings. There was naked meditation, chanting and group sex. Soon, some 1,600 acolytes materialized. They built houses and stores and created their own police and fire departments. But the utopia collapsed within three years, amid a storm of power grabs, botched murder and arson.

Now, the story's being told in "**Wild Wild Country**," a new six-part documentary series streaming on Netflix.

Born in 1931 in India, Bhagwan - the son of a cloth merchant - received an M.A. in philosophy and, by 1970, had developed a way of thinking that merged Eastern teachings (including yoga and Buddhism) with penchants for carnality and wealth (he boasted of owning 93 Rolls-Royces). He was so charismatic, people predicted he could be a second Buddha. "Bhagwan had a vision to transform humanity," said Chapman Way, who created the series with his brother Maclain. "Westerners flocked." They paid to stay at Bhagwan's ashram in India, and made him so rich that he started his own bank.

As Bhagwan filled 20,000-seat stadiums, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi viewed the guru as a societal threat. According to Maclain, "there was an assassination attempt" when a fundamental Hindu threw a knife at Bhagwan during a sermon.

So he dispatched his spokeswoman, Sheila "Ma Anand" Silverman, to search for a location in America. The burgeoning Oregon community, incorporated as Rajneeshpuram, caught the attention of Arianna Huffington, actor Terence Stamp and Francoise Ruddy (ex-wife of "The Godfather" producer Al Ruddy), who contributed \$200,000.

"At first, they were seen as strange - not as a threat," said Antelope resident John Silvertooth of the followers. "Then they started buying property."

SILVERTOOTH added, "They moved enough people in to get a majority on the town council . . . which changed the name of Antelope to Rajneesh. Main Street turned into Bhagwan Boulevard." Nudists took over the town park.

One former ranch resident, who spoke to The Post on the condition of anonymity, said that the Rajneeshees took part in ritualistic dances to "open up your heart." Her family had been involved with Bhagwan since the mid-1970s, but she didn't really buy into his teachings. Still, when her husband wanted to take their children, then 8 and 12, to the commune, around 1983, she went.

"It just struck fear in me," she said of the scene. "It was a cult."

Group therapy sessions included sex as a tool for releasing repression. As Silverman wrote, "Everyone was so crazy for enlightenment . . . [that they] took part in sexual encounters, emptied their pockets and proved their devotion [through] expensive gifts."

The former ranch resident said that "free love" was rampant.

"It was part of finding yourself and opening your heart to whomever you felt attracted to," she said, adding that her husband strayed from their marriage during his time in the cult. "I actually never had any contact with him [in Rajneeshpuram]. It was part of my struggle. He was there with someone else."

Silvertooth remembered picking up a teenage hitchhiker who fled the ranch: "He told me he was sick of being raped."

Seemingly unstoppable, Bhagwan launched a power grab to take over Wasco County - where the ranch resided - in the same way he had taken over Antelope. His followers claimed that it was for the survival of their community, which politicians had threatened to shut down.

A plan was hatched before the November 1984 county commission election: Bus in homeless men and women who, per state law, could gain voting rights by living there for 20 days, and get two Rajneeshees onto the commission. Some 5,000 people were recruited from shelters in New York City, Phoenix and San Diego with the promise of "A beautiful city in Oregon . . . where you can get two beers per day." But county authorities refused to register them, saying that the Rajneeshees were trying to rig the vote.

Back at the ranch, there came a more devious plot to make the county's non-Rajneeshee residents so sick that they wouldn't be able to vote. As a dry-run for poisoning the water supply before the election, said Maclain, "They put salmonella in the salad bars of 10 [local] restaurants; 700 people got sick. Then the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] got involved and they backed off [from the poison water plan]." No Rajneeshees made it onto the commission.

"That whole episode with the poisoning - it showed the extreme nature of some of the people there," the former ranch resident said. She and her family left the ranch after eight days, but her husband went back - until he got sick and returned home to Long Island.

"I feel like he was experimented upon," she said of her now-former spouse. "I think possibly . . . they were trying to see [how] their germ warfare . . . would affect someone."

By early 1985, things were unraveling. One Rajneeshee disciple burned down the Wasco County Planning Office, where there were said to be documents related to a real-estate investigation against the cult.

Silverman orchestrated a botched poisoning of Bhagwan's physician, believing the doctor was keeping the guru addicted to drugs. And then there was the planned, but never attempted assassination of Charles Turner, a US attorney investigating illegal activity on the ranch.

That fall, Bhagwan escaped to India via Learjet, but Immigration and Naturalization Service agents arrested him in Charlotte, NC, during a refueling stop. He was charged with immigration fraud (stemming, in part, from a series of sham marriages conducted to gain citizenship for non-American Rajneeshees). Negotiating a suspended sentence, he agreed to stay out of the US. He changed his name to **Osho** and died in 1990, in India, at age 58.

Today, the Antelope property is a Christian camp, but Bhagwan's teachings live on with **Osho** International, which has nearly 2.5 million Facebook followers. Maclain said celebs still believe: "Will Smith's children Instagrammed about him, and Madonna says that Americans missed the value of him."

Silvertooth disagrees. Referring to Bhagwan's stint in Antelope, he said, "When it ended, it was like hearing, 'Your cancer has been cured, sir.' "

With additional reporting by Raquel Laneri