

Daily Planet, Foster Kids And The Big House

Paul Carlson
November 8, 2022



Daily Planet and Foster Kids

So I was back in the "straight" suburbs. But not, having completed 9th grade, back to Pinel.

Several of my Pinel friends mentioned their plan to attend a newly-forming school to be known as the Daily Planet. Several school teachers from Berkeley, inspired in part by Pinel, got together to make this effort. (Many other Pinel kids went on to Maybeck, a long-established private high school in Berkeley.)

I began there in Sept. 1972, and turned 16 that month.

They held a preliminary gathering, at a house nearby, which included a few individuals I never saw again. Mainly, I got to meet the teachers. Things at the gathering, almost a party, were quite casual. I might have been uncomfortable, if not shocked, were it not for my recent experiences at Whale Gulch.

Phil R was a old-time leftist, and would teach a course in Marxism and Capitalism, with a potent emphasis on the former. Although, I overheard a later conversation with one student's dad, in which Phil was vague about this, not contesting the man's declaration "as long as this puts capitalism first."

Mark S came from England, and was a brilliant math teacher. Ann VS had some connection to South Africa, and I do not recall what she taught. John R was a modern artist, friends with some well-known art and counterculture figures, and he taught various crafts.

The school was some 6 miles from our house, and I rode my three speed bicycle every day. Monument Blvd. and Clayton Road went straight there, but for safety reasons, I soon found a route that was almost completely along suburban back streets.

As the year commenced, and I got to know folks better, I began to teach a science class. I came up with a series of familiar topics, and explained them as best I could, with no textbooks or course materials at all. My talks were well-attended, and (as with all the classes) the only rule was: if you're too stoned to follow along, don't bother to show up.

In fact, the school ID card said, on its face, "Paul Carlson is a student of the Daily Planet school, and in no way shall be considered truant." Sure wish I'd managed to hang on to it!

The school rented an ordinary one-story house on Clayton Blvd., right next to the Contra Costa Canal. At the time a gigantic black walnut tree stood in the back yard, and we built a sophisticated tree house, 15 or 20 feet up. It soon gained the nickname Pharmaceutical Testing Laboratory. Even so, I continued to decline any "substances," being content with the brain provided me by God and Nature.

At least one girl from Pinel, Debbie C, also moved over to the new school. Sheldon W attended that year, and we made new friends, especially Mike, an amateur chemist. Mike lived nearby, and with the consent of his parents, had a small lab in their garage. Once in a while we'd watch him doing experiments, Being a teenager, one time he synthesized some ethyl mercaptan (the key ingredient in a skunk's spray) and discreetly caused a local fast food place to be closed for a day. Yikes!

I recall a kid named George, who was a dead-ringer for a younger Pinel kid named Neal. Yes, the same Neal who'd been light-heartedly faulted for so very much. They were not, so far as anyone knew, related.

We went on field trips, and camping trips, though I no longer recall a lot of detail. One time we spent several days at Julia Pfeiffer Burns state park, down in Big Sur. Gorgeous area, with a quiet beach.

I recall one kid, Richard, having a 'bad trip' on LSD. He freaked out completely, and nearly drowned himself at that beach. An important lesson for me.

There was an awesome sunset, and I found a viewpoint above our camp site, inviting others to make the short hike to enjoy it.

A survey crew had staked out an area near Highway One, I have no idea what for, then one kid pulled up all the wooden stakes and made a gigantic peace sign. It seemed a very minor blow, made for the environment, but in thinking back, they might well have been checking for endangered-plant zones or something.

A park ranger agreed to take us on a nature walk, to describe the area in more detail. Many of us gathered to await the man, and he did not show up. So we decided, after a while, to go ahead with a group hike of our own. We walked east up the canyon (possibly McWay creek), well past the campgrounds.

Then someone, with sharper ears than mine, heard a cry for help. We headed that direction, and finally I could hear this. It sounded like two boys, maybe ten years old. We spotted them, high above, where they'd climbed the north side of the canyon and gotten stuck. Of course I was up there in a jiffy, joined by pretty much the whole group.

Someone took hold of one boy, and me the other, and we guided them down to the creek, then across it to the trail. My kid slipped, and got his feet wet in the swift stream, but fortunately I didn't lose my grip.

That evening, the ranger came by to apologize. An emergency had come up. We kind of chuckled at this. Yes, we know, we replied, and we found those missing boys.

Another fellow student was Jennifer R, who lived in Walnut Creek. She's quite intelligent, fluent in Spanish, and we got along well. Two other students I recall were Vicky and Bonnie, statuesque young ladies who I nearly had a crush on. However, as per usual, Vicki found older (and less nerdy) boys appealing, while Bonnie was solidly the girlfriend of fellow student Scott. I did not actively pursue any of those ladies.

Jennifer's older sister Chipper R became a part-time teacher, offering a class in Kundalini Yoga. I was, no surprise, very interested. This included the familiar yoga positions, however, focused on deep meditation. I really took to it, and got close to the point of being able to consciously control my own heartbeat. All my life since, these ancient techniques have proven quite helpful, in a modern world full of stress and pressure.

Once or twice, we Daily Planet folks drove up into the Sierra mountains, and camped along north fork of the American river. This was near the town of Colfax, on National Forest land. The Union Pacific tracks ran somewhere nearby, so trains would roar along day and night. One advantage of being half deaf, I could sleep on my good-ear side and not hear a thing. (It's the same railroad line I'd visited before, much farther up into those mountains, with the Sierra Club Lodge folks.)

The area is beautiful, all granite boulders and tall pine trees. Downstream from the campground (along a trail) there's a waterfall, which has a deep pool beneath. The water, being snowmelt, is icy cold.

Many of us went swimming, and I learned to, not leap straight in, but to slip in halfway and stop, overcome my instinctive response, and then dunk all the way. I'd dive to the bottom, maybe 20 feet down, and pick up litter. There are jumping-off points alongside the waterfall, some maybe 15 feet above the water. Many of us swam in the nude, not an overtly sexual thing, though undoubtedly most of us males appreciated the additional scenery.

I might as well mention, at one point (then or on a later visit) I got into place to leap down into the river, and spotted a man with a camera, pointed right at me. An artist, a perv, a surprised tourist? I may never know, but by the time I'd made the leap and emerged, the guy had vanished. Obviously, and more so without having checked my age, the guy broke a whole panoply of laws. I brushed it off.

The Daily Planet continued a second year, and remarkably, speaking of laws, avoided direct police attention. By the third year there was budget trouble, and talk of merging with a better-established East Bay outfit called the Rurban School. We Carlsons, however, had moved on.

We continued to participate in 'EST' via their east bay office, and sometimes with activities in San Francisco. A while later, on August 6th of 1974, I'd be helping at their San Francisco headquarters when Richard Nixon gave his resignation speech. I wasn't all fired up about this, either way, but definitely (at the time) leaned against the man. Unbeknownst to me, on the other side of the country, a bunch of young folks who'd become my companions were fasting, praying, and holding vigils in support of the man; more generally for an attitude of forgiveness, and advocating gracious political unity.

Our Carlson family needed finances, and I thought of a few money-saving ideas, sincere and even practical, though I now understand, comparatively trivial. Through her JFK U contacts, mom decided to become a foster mother.

We soon signed up with a county level program, and took in an older teen boy named Bob. He was all

right, but too much for my sisters, who by then were reaching puberty. So, he only stayed a short time.

Next, mom signed up for a state level foster care program, which happened to pay more, and we took in four kids. Donny was youngest, maybe ten. Blake was older, maybe fifteen, so almost my age. Carlene and Mindy were also around fifteen. All four had been through a hard life, and were scrappy survivors. By their preference, and given my usual introversion, I never spoke to them about their past family lives.

Donny had been abused, and it showed in a bizarre sense of humor. Blake liked to share stories, real experiences which rapidly morphed into outrageous tall tales. All fine, if you understood the process.

The two girls got along well with my sisters, and had zero interest in being anyone's girlfriend. Which overall, and especially in the long term, was a good thing for me. In any event, we all got along well.

During that tenth grade year, I really wanted to see Whale Gulch again. Somehow we arranged for me to utilize a house near the Big House cabin, about halfway toward Peter and Nancy's place. (Those backwoods houses were, and still are, spread far apart.)

I packed up my meager belongings, and some food, and hitchhiked on up there. Into San Francisco, then north up 101 to Garberville, next west into Whitethorn. (Hitchhiking was very popular then, and not especially dangerous; I never had any sort of problem. Back then!!!)

Arriving at Thompson Creek, I got situated, and again enjoyed the peace and quiet. Peter and Nancy soon learned of my situation, and insisted I stay with them. I wasn't insistent, either way, and moved in with them. This time, youthful obliviousness aside, I did my share of the chores.

They were, much like my mother, into health and natural practices. Nancy grew cucumbers and pickled them, also tomatoes she'd boil down into ketchup.

One time they had to go somewhere, and asked if I could handle the place for several days. This included watering their garden and feeding the chickens and more. Of course I agreed. In all my life I've never enjoyed a breakfast so much: fresh laid eggs, organic cheese, homemade ketchup, smoked salmon, and more. The very best of a backwoods life.

All too quickly a month passed, and I knew I had to get back home. So I resumed my place at the Daily Planet. I don't recall, but I think our four foster kids were attending local public schools; we could not have afforded to send them to Pinel. In fact, my sisters and I had to dip into our own child-size Wells Fargo accounts, in order to finish off that 72-73 school year at Pinel and the Planet.

Mark's math classes were awesome, at least for those of us who were interested, though one hardly needed an extensive background. I remember one class in which he led us through a sequence, from addition to multiplication to exponentiation to titration and onward. Tragically, when I tried to look him up more recently I found that he'd passed away from some kind of wasting disease.

John the artist got some fire bricks, and built a kiln on the house's concrete back porch. He put together a clever inexpensive system, with an old vacuum cleaner hooked up backward, and a gas can with a metal tube leading to the air hose. It did the job, getting things glowing-red hot.

One time he got careless, and tried to refill the gasoline while the kiln system was running. The metal gas can caught fire! I was standing nearby, heard him curse, and rushed over. He'd set it down, on the concrete, to avoid burning his hand, but left alone there might've been an explosion.

I took a quick gamble. John was wearing heavy boots, so I told him, put your foot on the can. So he did, and that snuffed any fire inside the can. Meanwhile I leaned down, and simply blew out the external fire. It was done in a matter of seconds. Might've been much worse, from inaction or botched action, but thankfully my intuition proved correct. As it would, on several key occasions, in the future.

Phil taught us Marxism-Leninism, as distinct from plain-vanilla Marxism. Harsh stuff! Vanguard of the proletariat, here we come. Excellent criticisms of society, soaring visions of the future, and a horrific program which had (I soon learned) already killed a hundred million innocent people. I did not know it then, still I was cautious.

About a year later, I'd have a battery powered radio with short wave, and found Radio Moscow. It was so ludicrous, this quickly disabused me of any Soviet, or generally doctrinaire, leftist idealism. The old bad stuff.

Also, some SF novels dealt with politics and ideology, here on Earth or in imaginary parallel situations. Vastly more creative and fraught with possibilities, than Marx and company ever imagined. For example, Asimov's "Foundation" novels are predicated upon a science called psychohistory, while A.E. van Vogt's

Voyage of a Space Beagle is quite insightful, and describes a future Nexial science.

I was coming to realize that insightful new truths were desperately needed, in order to help foster a new and better society. Any school of thought which could reconcile hard science and personal spirituality would be all the better.

I continued to read many classics, science and history books, and SF novels, from the Pleasant Hill library. Histories such as the pair *The White Nile* and *The Blue Nile*, by Alan Moorehead, proved fascinating. Later, Wilbut Smith's "Taita" novels brought that history to vivid life.

These days I support our local library, however I tend to read half a dozen books at a time, deploying them around the house and in the car. So it might take me days, or months, to finish a particular title. Then I'll want to reference a book later, and recommend it to friends.

Life in Pleasant Hill proceeded much as it had up on the hill. Once again we made friends with some of our neighbors, but unintentionally, rubbed some of them wrong.

One time the bunch of us decided to do some role playing, as mom and I had learned at JFK U. This involves play-acting with each other, taking on roles as each other, then carrying on exaggerated conversations, "letting it all hang out" as the current phrase went. This is a valid method of relationship and family therapy, though we took to it, perhaps, with too much enthusiasm.

We ended up in mock arguments, shouting at the top of our lungs. This prompted our beleaguered neighbors, an older couple, to call the police. So a Pleasant Hill cop arrived at our doorstep. We laughed delightedly, and invited him in to share some home baked bread and herbal tea. Promising, I am sure, to be more quiet in the future.

Around that time a new friend entered our lives. I'm not sure if mom encountered Jan at 'est' or elsewhere, but they really hit it off. Mom was always straight, and still, if you called the mythic Central Casting for a butch lesbian, they'd have sent you Jan. She was, I think, in her thirties, heavy set, with a buzz haircut. Her parents lived nearby, though we did not see them. From round that time, or maybe starting later, Jan had a career at the huge Shell oil refinery in Martinez.

So we had one more person in the house. My sister Elaine tells me I was upset, at first, when Jan came along, although I no longer recall this. In any event, we were very different, yet managed to get along well.

We kids continued with my adventurous activities. One warm evening, we walked all the way to Pinel, up into Briones park, and spent the night. We literally slept on the ground, and I'm afraid that some of the crew wasn't totally happy with it. Still, it was a good experience, and no cops or park rangers busted us. We got cleaned up upon arriving back home. I wasn't shaving, at that point; wouldn't for a few years yet, so that made such things easier.

The Big House

When the school year drew long, mom had an idea. We'd buy the cabin at Thompson Creek, and move up there.

A middle aged couple, Lewis and Ana, were currently living there, I'm not sure if they'd bought or rented the place. They'd certainly bought land north of the creek, on a steep hilltop, and were building a marvelous house on the peak.

Once again mom sold our house, and continued changing her name, then all two adults and seven kids headed north. Mom bought us a used Land Rover, the sturdy old double-roof kind you see in classic safari adventure movies. The spare tire sat bolted atop its hood.

Lewis was an artist, had been an international art broker, and he designed the house. Octagonal, with two stories, both floors with large windows facing southeast toward Queen Peak and the ocean. A smaller window came from a NASA contractor, it had some invisibly tiny flaw and couldn't be used on an actual space capsule. Two center posts, one for each story, were made of madrone and (I think) redwood trunks.

When it was done, they lived up there for a while, and Nancy later told me the Mexican Mafia bought the house. (Having horned in partway on the local marijuana growing.) By now, I cannot see it on Google Earth, but it might have gotten overgrown with large mountaintop trees.

Oak, chinquapin, madrone, bay, pine, redwood, Douglas fir, alder, and several other types of tree grew quite large. Some, such as the creek-side alder groves, grow very quickly.

But, we couldn't claim the Big House cabin yet. Lewis was feeling sick, tried to shake it off, but then was diagnosed with hepatitis. He'd have to recover, then finish building the new place. Therefore, we nine people arrived, and had nowhere to stay.

Our backpacking ventures, and my bringing the foster kids up to Briones Park overnight, then paid off. We set up a camp, in a clearing (from a fairly recent logging operation) in the middle of the property, at the head of a small valley. The cabin's water pipe ran nearby, though as I recall, we used water jugs and took care of other business down at the cabin.

We had several large tents, and as usual it was a rainless summer, so we settled right in. I wanted more room for my introverted self, so I hiked up the steep west-side ridge, and made a camp on top. At first it was a simple lean-to, but soon I made plans for a small cabin. It was a clearing with a snapped-off redwood tree, but otherwise, with the height of the surrounding forest, not much of a view.

People continued to come and visit. Friends from Berkeley, such as Sheldon, and Eric, a mutual friend via 'est,' would hitchhike up and stay for a while.

One incident marred our camping days, a candle burned too low and set one of the tents on fire. Neighbors rushed to help, and we got it put out quickly. Mom and Jan's tent had a lot of personal belongings; and of some value, a collection of recorders from soprano to bass. Quite a loss, though nothing we could not live without. Fortunately the fire did not spread, however within a year or so, a major fire did threaten the whole area.

I loved to hike all over those hills. A dirt lane called the Yellow Dirt Road wound down into the Gulch, and several friends lived along it. One time I walked to the bottom, then bushwhacked along the stream, until I reached the ocean and turned south onto the black sand beach. You could also head east, maybe half a mile to the end of the dirt road, then through the forest into Whitethorn. Only one house, Danny's, was down that way, later a newer lady build a second.

Above our camp to the south, one guy lived on the ridge top, and from up there the view is fantastic. (Now, from Google images, someone has built a huge house up that way.)

A friend from Boston, David M, had a small telescope. He mentioned being family friends with some astronomical luminaries such as Harlow Shapley. One morning he showed me how to use it in a rather unusual way: pointed directly at the sunrise, to discern silhouettes on a white card. The disk of the sun showed individual trees, sharp enough to see what type, on the horizon maybe 30 miles away! David told me, though I didn't see it myself, that pointed to the sunset, he could see individual leaves and pine needles, on trees atop Queen Peak.

On cold winter days we'd get valley fog along Thompson Creek, and a layer of oceanic fog over the Pacific. I could stand up there, and watch the cold, foggy air pour like a waterfall into the Gulch, flow down to the ocean, and push that (comparatively) warmer ocean fog aside.

Dare I say, we were not too keen on safety. We did have a chain saw, needing a whole lot of wood for cooking and heating fires, but I let Jan use it, while I had an ax and bow saw. I felled many trees, and no environmental trouble, they grow back plenty quick. I'd go everywhere barefoot, and have a scar on one foot, from accidentally kicking the blade of the bow saw. No serious injuries, then or at any time, thankfully.

We learned to ride into Whitethorn outside of the Land Rover. One person could sit inside the spare tire, and needed to lean right during a turn, so as not to block the driver's view. All three of us kids could ride on top, thanks to the old double-layer roof, fingers grasping the front and toes the back. Only into Whitethorn, as we could not risk high speeds, or being spotted on the highway. Yeah it was unsafe, and what can I say, we were fine.

We had a dog, and Mindy brought another. But they caught mange, and then something else, I think distemper. A friendly young veterinarian had set up a clinic at the store in Whitethorn, and made the diagnosis. I recall he let us see, in his microscope. Those sarcoptic mange bugs are ugly!

We learned another thing, the hard way. When transmitted to people, it's known as scabies. Yuck. We got a prescription lotion, and I somehow got re-infected, but killed it with flower-of-sulfur powder.

With that double whammy, we reluctantly had to put one the dogs down. Danny had a gun, and Lewis volunteered to help, so we buried the poor doggy in the forest. Knowing it was still contagious, we had to tie up Mindy's dog some distance away. For reasons unknown, we found it dead in the morning.

Then came an adventure. In communication via postal letters, Blake arranged to visit his older brother in Livermore. No hitchhiking this time, mom bought us Greyhound bus tickets, round trip via San Francisco.

We made it okay and, on schedule, the brother retrieved us at the bus station. At that point I learned he was a Hells Angels motorcycle club member, who lived at their chapter house at the northern edge of town. Interesting!

By then I'd broken down a little, with my health food attitude, and smoked marijuana sometimes. Thank God, back then, it wasn't laced with other drugs, and the super-potent strains hadn't been developed yet. So it was more of a "when in Rome" thing, and we all got along great. Blake and I stayed two or three nights, then despite some reluctance on his part, back we went on the bus.

I remember watching guys, on their Harleys, riding up and down the country lane out front. One guy did some impressive wheelies, and we were told he held some major records for this.

Over dinner, there were rap sessions. Perhaps with awareness of a new audience, the different guys boasted about their personal violence, how they'd meted out instant justice to all sorts of fools, mostly while on the road. For me this was immensely instructive, then, and more so, today.

Their founder Sonny Barger came from Modesto, and lived on Livermore later on, however I do not know if he was there around 1973. Quite possibly. These would also be the same crew who'd become infamous, three years earlier, with the Rolling Stones at nearby Altamont. I did not know much about it, at the time.

When I tell folks about this experience, I suppose a few will think I'm making it up, but, nope. This was before the 680 freeway went in, so the old highway went through downtown Livermore, while that humble little house was at the edge of hilly ranching country which stretched for miles.

After Blake and I returned to Whitethorn, as we might call the area from far away, one blow hit is pretty hard. One day we were riding into town, and passed two sheriff's cars headed toward the Usal junction. We knew of no trouble, and there weren't phones for anyone to call 911, not that hippies would do so, except in a genuine emergency.

When we got back to camp, we found a note. Conditions had been deemed unsuitable, and the state was withdrawing mom's permission to keep foster kids. The four were incensed, especially the girls, and they vowed to press for staying on with us. But that system is inexorable, and to outsiders there's no way our plain backwoods camp would gain any sympathy.

I don't recall the logistical details, but soon all four were back with the tender mercies of The System. (With no internet then, and our own family moving around, and strict privacy laws, we never did learn how they each turned out.)

School

The summer passed, Lewis and Ana's house was completed, and we moved in. Whew! Ten cords of wood a year, to heat the house in winter, also supply the little stove in the sauna. So I got plenty of exercise.

Mom had plenty of ideas. Based on her years of experience, we launched a local school. Almost all the local kids were younger, so in practice it was more like a day care center, but never mind. Each day we hosted a dozen or more students. We had no strict tuition. Often folks would pay with food or skilled labor, help our household to flourish.

Across the dirt road was a clearing, at the edge of the creek. We put in a huge garden, enclosed against forgers with a tall wire-mesh fence. I learned the utility of alter saplings, whose long narrow could easily be made into all sorts of things. The wood is soft, and doesn't last very long, but under the circumstances we didn't need it to.

There wasn't enough water for all of this, so I got to thinking. During winter downpours, the hillside sometimes flowed with so much runoff it kicked the pipe into the air, and we'd go dry. But in summer the spring shrank to a steady trickle.

One of my favorite shops was Burl's Surplus in Redway, they had a marvelous assortment of useful odds and ends. McKee's lumberyard sold things like coils of PVC piping, and huge rolls of 6mm plastic sheeting.

Burl's sold me two grey plastic pickle barrels, which I put 'upstream' on the pipe, to let sediments settle out. Then we bought a simple 500 gallon kiddie pool, and I dug a level bench near the creek to hold it. Finally I used an old honey can, filled with activated charcoal, for a filter. A simple siphon arrangement pulls water through the filter and out of the pool.

That next winter, the pipe froze, so I got out our shovel and buried the pipe, just a few inches deep. The uphill half, constantly flowing, fortunately did not freeze. Too close to the ocean to get super cold, though it would snow a few times each winter.

By then mom was going by Nicki Petrowski, I think legally. She decided to make the school official, and sought formal paperwork to establish it as a recognized private school. For this we needed inspections. The fire marshal had us cut a second door, in the east wall of the house, also insisted we replace the ladder with a stairway to the upstairs area.

Which was fine, we should have done that anyway. A carpenter friend did a great job, and I used the triangular and straight board pieces to make a bookshelf, built onto the wall. This held our Compton's Encyclopedia set, and some other books, which had accompanied us all the way from San Carlos.

There was also Health Department inspection, carried out by a relaxed old timer and his young assistant. The cabin had indoor plumbing, hot water, and a regular septic tank system, so that part was fine. To my everlasting pride, I showed them my homemade water system, and they readily approved it.

The regular kids were named Deva, Dawn, Damien, Danielle, Hana, Ana, Ona, Osha, Isha, Niesha, Kiesha, Kailan, Arlen, Ali, and Alia; also Jessica, Orion, and several others. Inventive names, largely based in New Age and pagan traditions. To this day I am Facebook friends with some of them. In the area, only two other kids our age, were brother and sister Marco and Della. They had other things to do, didn't attend our school.

With a real school going, mom reached out again. A young lady named Vikki moved in with us, as a helper. For a while, two teenagers Tom W and Landy T, stayed as high school students. Many other friends, and their friends, came and went.

One day mom was in Garberville, went by the hospital for something, and came upon the aftermath of a terrible emergency situation. Seems a man had been driving on 101, and picked up a young woman hitchhiker, and then two young men from Canada. Then he made an awful mistake, and let the young lady drive.

She promptly took them down a steep embankment at high speed. As I recall, the man was killed and the lady severely injured. The two Canadians, possibly in the back seat, were injured. They did not have to stay overnight, but needed to recuperate. So of course we offered, and they stayed with us for several days. Later, in a Eureka newspaper article, our Big House was described as a commune. Not quite, but functionally, pretty much.