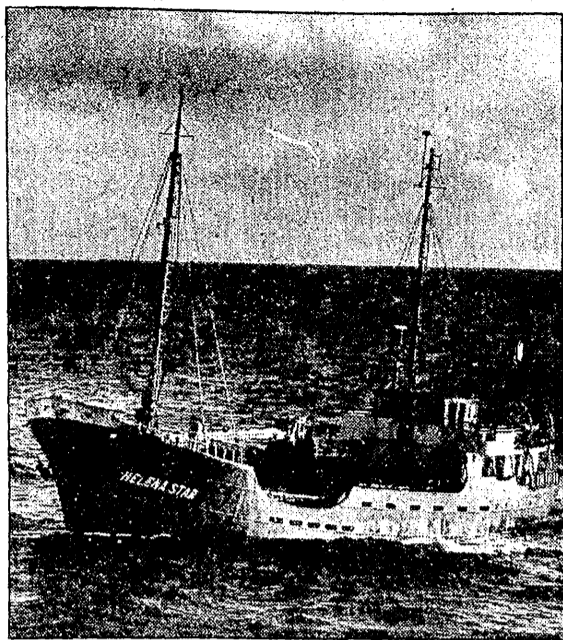




Rick Anderson

Times staff columnist



The Helena Star

Did they really burn all that marijuana?

On the streets, when a rumor hits as this one did, you can't stop it. You can say it isn't true. You can swear it, under oath, as the federal agents did. But with this kind of suspicion attached to it, denials are laughed at and the rumor floats to the next ear.

"I've been hearing it for months," one man said. "There's scuttlebutt on the waterfront, in taverns, at ball games. You hear it so often, you start to wonder. And you have to admit, it's possible."

The talk began almost immediately the day of April 19. The 31-year-old, Dutch-built freighter drifted into the Coast Guard pier and everyone was stunned.

The 497-ton ship once was called the Violette Erica. It was also known as the Fraternite. But on this day, it was named the Helena Star. The name will live forever. In her hold was a cargo of \$74 million in marijuana.

They did not have to telegraph the Helena Star's arrival, as they did on this same waterfront in July, 1897, when the steamship Portland arrived from Alaska. Aboard the Portland was a ton of Klondike gold.

Aboard the Helena Star were 37 tons of Colombian gold. Spectators lined up along the docks and wept. "This bust is going to drive the price of pot out of sight," someone said.

"If," someone else said, "they burn it."

And there it began.

Within two days, the government of the United States, as only it knows how, had turned this possibility into a believable thing.

A story in the April 22 paper explains this:

"It began yesterday with what was considered a routine court order to destroy several tons of marijuana.

"It ended several hours and many phone calls later, with two reporters standing outside the gate of the Scott Paper Co.'s Everett plant as tons of South American grass apparently went up in smoke."

There is the key word. Apparently.

A confusing court order, a federal drug agent and the manager of the paper plant together worked out a plan that prevented any outside observers from actually seeing the marijuana being incinerated. If it was.

The ban was a silly thing. An unnecessary thing. And a suspicious thing. And now, naturally, there is this talk all over.

"This was the largest seizure of dope on the West Coast," someone said. "With that kind of money involved, you really have to wonder if they burned it all.

"I began hearing the rumors that everything wasn't destroyed. There were supposed to be bales of it sitting around, accessible, on the docks. Some of it was supposed to be being passed around quietly. I heard someone got busted with some of it in Renton.

"You hear that kind of talk and you say, 'Someone's got a great imagination.'

"Except then you begin to take note of the supply on the street. Suddenly, there is Colombian all over the place.

"And the price. It had been about \$80 a lid (ounce). The bottom fell out. It was down to \$40.

"People start coming up to you and saying, 'Hey, man, that stuff I had last night? I think it had scorpion legs in it.'

"Really, you gotta wonder."

Ron Sim was shaking his head and saying it's not true, it's not true! "Where did you hear this?" asked the assistant United States attorney.

On the streets, he was told. The talk is everywhere. They're saying you didn't burn it all.

"Oh, it was burned," Sim said. "What did they have, two trucks and a U-Haul or something? They hauled it all to Everett and it went in the oven. The federal drug people have sworn under oath as to how it was all burned.

"Well, most of it, anyway."

Haw?

"They saved a couple bales for evidence," said Sim. "I'm not sure what a bale weighs; it depends on how it's packed. It might be 80 pounds, it might be 40.

"The Drug Enforcement Administration keeps it in their evidence locker. They'll probably have it for a long time. They have to retain it through all the appeals involving anyone convicted in the case, any of the smugglers, and there's still one we haven't caught yet, Lund.

"Maybe that's what they're talking about, the stuff the D.E.A. saved.

"Everything else was burned. Up in smoke. Gone."

Fine. Thirty-seven tons of dope, \$74 million worth, put into an oven no one could see. Out on the street they are saying, "Uh huh, oh sure, whatever you say, Ron."



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V.F.W. opens essay contest

The Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Ladies Auxiliary are encouraging students of grades 10, 11 and 12, in public and private schools, to enter a writing contest on the subject "Why I Care about America."

Prizes will be awarded to high-school, district, state and national winners. The state winners will receive a five-day, expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., and be able to compete for one of five scholarships totaling \$22,500.

Entries for the Voice of Democracy contest must be submitted by the end of November. Information is available at schools and V.F.W. posts.