

William Pickard's long, strange trip: Suspected LSD trail leads from the Bay Area's psychedelics era to a missile silo in Kansas

Seth Rosenfeld, Chronicle Staff Writer Published Sunday, June 10, 2001

Oblivious to the trap, William L. Pickard, Jr., a University of California at Los Angeles researcher who studies psychoactive drugs of the future, took several aluminum canisters from a silo shed, put them in his rented Buick and merged into traffic.

Minutes later, red lights and sirens pulsing, Kansas Highway Patrol officers stopped Pickard and a friend following him in a van. Clyde Apperson, a Mountain View business consultant, was arrested. But Pickard bolted from his Buick, which rolled into a ditch as the marathon-running vegetarian vanished into the heartland dusk.

Inside the vehicles, agents found sophisticated laboratory equipment and what they allege is enough raw material to make 16 million doses of LSD. Pickard, they say, was poised to use the missile base, built during the Cold War to defend the American way of life, to make the drug that helped launch the 1960s counterculture and inspired Timothy Leary's exhortations to "turn on, tune in and drop out."

This is the story about the life and times of Pickard, a brilliant chemist who was deputy director of UCLA's Drug Policy Research Program, and how he came to be accused of conspiring to run one of the nation's largest LSD labs.

The tale unfolds amid a budding psychedelic renaissance rooted in the Bay Area. Hallucinogens have turned up at raves where they are used to party, at psychiatrists' offices where they have been part of therapy and at universities where scientists are conducting the first authorized human tests on them in decades.

The case highlights law enforcement suspicions that since the hippie era, Northern California has been a haven for elusive, close-knit groups who supply most of the nation's "acid" in the belief that it fosters enlightenment.

The Chronicle has learned that the Drug Enforcement Administration has investigated whether a surreal assortment of other people played a part in the alleged conspiracy - including women from a San Francisco strip joint, a Harvard psychiatrist, and a Manhattan financier who is a trustee of the American Ballet Theatre.

The DEA also has probed claims that Pickard funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars in LSD profits to fund his own position at UCLA and to support ostensibly legitimate drug researchers at Harvard and the Heffter Research Institute, a Santa Fe, N.M., group leading the push for more studies of psychedelics. Heffter's lawyer denied the claim.

Pickard, 55, and Apperson, 46, have denied charges of possessing LSD and conspiracy, and face a June 21 hearing in Topeka.

Pickard's lawyers, William Rork of Topeka, and William Osterhoudt of San Francisco, contend their client was framed by an Oklahoma con man who owned the missile silo and became an informant to avoid his own charges of making LSD.

In a phone call from Leavenworth federal prison, where he is being held without bail, Pickard said he opposes drug abuse and is straighter than most narcs. "I'm not a drug user at all," he said softly. "Nor do I synthesize controlled substances or distribute them. I don't even drink. A big drug experience to me would be a cup of coffee."

It was 1974 and Pickard went to San Francisco's federal building to pay his respects.

Tim Scully was on trial for making huge batches of LSD in a Sonoma County farmhouse. Scully believed the drug could raise people's consciousness and had bluntly told the court he had wanted to "turn on the world."

"There was a break, and I walked out into the hall, and he introduced himself as a fellow chemist," recalled Scully, once an "apprentice" to Augustus Owsley Stanley III, the most infamous psychedelic sorcerer of the '60s. Pickard smiled and handed Scully a U.S. Army Chemical Warfare Group pin with a flask and test tube design. "He was trying to express some brotherhood of underground chemists," said Scully, noting that many acid chemists felt "we were doing a public service."

Later, Pickard paid \$5,000 for a print by Dutch artist M.C. Escher, "Heaven and Hell," that Scully sold to pay legal fees. It showed angels and devils and seemed to reflect the LSD experience.

Nowhere was that experience more concentrated than the Haight in the sixties, which became a world center of a counterculture electrified by LSD.

The most potent hallucinogen known, LSD can produce kaleidoscopic hallucinations, profoundly alter perceptions and cause experiences ranging from transcendent to terrifying. Used initially to study personality disorders, LSD had seeped into the mainstream before the government banned it in 1966. Then clandestine chemists like Scully filled the void.

Pickard, a bright young man who had had trouble with authority and a special interest in chemistry, was among the throngs drawn to the Bay Area in 1967. "No one had quite seen anything like it," Pickard said, "so many people stepping out of line . . . discussing theology and philosophy, seeking explanations, exploring their place in life."

Pickard was raised in a Baptist family in the Atlanta suburbs. His father was a lawyer, and his mother was a fungal disease expert at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In high school, he was an honors student, played basketball and was named "most intellectual." But in 1965, he was arrested for driving a stolen car.

Pickard still won a scholarship to Princeton University. But he cut class to hang out in Greenwich Village jazz clubs and withdrew after one term, he said. By 1971, he had landed work as a research manager at UC Berkeley's Department of Bacteriology and Immunology, a job he held until 1974, when his academic resume begins a 20-year gap. Public records show he studied chemistry at San Jose State and Stanford universities. And at San Francisco State University, he took a course on social drugs taught by Alexander "Sasha" Shulgin, whose pioneering research on the hallucinogenic amphetamine MDMA has earned him renown as the "Godfather of Ecstasy." "He was a very interested student," recalled Shulgin.

In 1976, San Mateo County Sheriff's deputies arrested Pickard for possessing hallucinogenic peyote cactus. In 1977, they raided his Portola Valley home, seizing a small Ecstasy lab. He served six months. On his release, he faded into the background, favoring inconspicuous [cars](#) and clothes. "He looked like a guy on his way to a golf course," said Mark Dowie, a former Mother Jones editor who met him in the 1980s. "He was, in a way, part of the love generation. He really believed LSD and its derivatives could produce a better culture."

And he could be dramatically romantic, a friend recalled, and once hired Stanford University Band members to serenade a woman friend.

By the early 1980s, Scully was out of prison and home near Mendocino. Pickard dropped by. "He wanted to compare and contrast methods of making acid," said Scully. Pickard said his interest was purely academic, but the elder

chemist declined. He had quit the psychedelic scene. Pickard left after an hour, said Scully, now a computer engineer. "All I could do is be friendly and offer him a cup of tea."

In December 1988, a neighbor noticed an odd chemical odor emanating from the architectural shop at a Mountain View industrial park and phoned police. Agents found a lab and seized more than 200,000 doses of LSD, including blotter paper featuring Grateful Dead album covers. When officers shined a black light around the lab, the surfaces glowed eerily with LSD dust. While taking the lab apart, one agent became so heavily dosed he collapsed in convulsions.

Pickard was charged with making LSD, pleaded guilty and served about five years. Later, officials revealed that Pickard "had been an informant" for state and federal drug agents.

Pickard said he helped police investigate people supplying equipment to make methamphetamine, which like heroin and cocaine is addictive. He seemed to see psychedelic drugs as beneficial, but eyed addictive drugs as a blight: "I agree with (hippie leader) Wavy Gravy. There's blood on heroin and cocaine."

At a hearing related to his LSD bust, U.S. District Court Judge Marilyn Hall Patel warned the then-44-year-old Pickard: "I hope that the . . . years in the federal penitentiary will be spent wisely. You don't have much time left to straighten out your life."

Released from Terminal Island prison near Los Angeles in August 1992, Pickard went straight to the San Francisco Zen Center. In prison, he had become a vegetarian and learned to meditate. He would later be ordained as a Buddhist priest. Pickard lived at the center two years. Each morning, he would ring the temple bell, calling people to 5 a.m. meditation. And after sweeping the sidewalks outside the center, Pickard went off to classes at UC Berkeley.

To journalist Dowie, Pickard seemed "set on his science and doing something with his life."

Occasionally, Pickard attended potluck dinners that brought together some of the leading thinkers on altered states of consciousness. The psychonauts, as many of them called themselves, met monthly at the Marin County home of John Weir Perry, a Harvard-trained psychotherapist who died in 1998. Perry had studied with Carl Jung.

Shulgin, who had taught Pickard 20 years earlier, was among the resident elders. Astronaut Buzz Aldrin, computer engineers, scientists, writers and artists also dropped in, the Shulgins said. The talk lasted into the wee hours and covered consciousness, drugs and policy. Ann Shulgin noted drug use was forbidden. Mark Kleiman, a professor of public policy at Harvard who had dined with the psychonauts, said Pickard was seen as a "superbrilliant chemist."

In 1994, Pickard enrolled at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where he became personally and professionally close with research fellow Deborah Harlow. They wed, had a daughter, but later separated. Harlow was a Bay Area therapist who helped pioneer the use of MDMA - before it became illegal in 1985 - as a tool to help clients become more emotionally open. She also worked on a federally funded study of MDMA users.

Over the next few years, Pickard co-wrote a series of brief papers, including a 1994 study on 12 raves that found LSD more common at New York raves and MDMA more common at California raves.

He focused on drug abuse in the former Soviet Union, theorizing that the booming black market and many unemployed chemists could flood the drug market. As part of the school program, some of Pickard's Russian research was reviewed by Robert S. Gelbard, a Harvard graduate and then-Assistant Secretary of State for

International Matters and Law Enforcement Affairs. Gelbard's involvement helped Pickard meet top Russian drug officials, Pickard said. Gelbard did not return calls seeking comment.

The research resulted in a paper, "What can the State Department do about drug problems in Russia?" But according to DEA records, Pickard himself was about to resume work as an underground acid chemist.

On a spring day in 1995, Pickard showed up at the New Mexico home of Al Savinelli, a subject in the first authorized test of psychedelics on humans since the 1970s.

Savinelli had been given successive doses of a powerful hallucinogen called DMT at the University of New Mexico. The experiment drew attention from drug researchers including Pickard, who that day met one of his more prominent colleagues at Savinelli's house.

John Halpern, a psychiatric resident at Harvard University Medical School, had a strong interest in psychoactive drugs. He had recently published a study finding "the illicit use of hallucinogenic drugs is a re-emerging public health problem, especially among well-educated adults and teenagers."

But that day in Taos, Halpern himself was using ayahuasca, a potentially dangerous hallucinogenic tea made from rain forest plants. He was having a bad trip. He was lost in thoughts of despair and death, he later told the DEA, and Pickard calmed him.

Pickard confided that he had taken "more LSD than anyone on the planet," said Halpern. And as the two Harvard researchers discussed mutual interests over the following months, Pickard became a father figure.

According to a statement Halpern gave the DEA, Halpern told Pickard he was financially strapped and might have to stop his research to take a better-paying job. Pickard replied that he had more than \$1 million in cash from an inheritance - and other money from "the old days," which Halpern figured meant his 1988 LSD operation. But when Halpern returned to Taos in 1996, Savinelli suggested another source of the money: He said he'd helped Pickard set up an LSD lab.

Halpern claimed he didn't know whether Pickard was doing anything illegal. But he told the DEA that, within a year, Pickard said he was generating lots of cash and wanted to invest it. Halpern set up a meeting between Pickard and an old friend and financial adviser, Stefan Wathne, 31, who lives in Manhattan and is a trustee of the American Ballet Theatre. In return for the introduction, Pickard offered Halpern a 10 percent commission on any deals with Wathne. Both Pickard and Wathne later told Halpern that none materialized.

But in January 1998, Pickard handed Halpern a cigar box containing \$100,000, Halpern said, which was followed by another \$199,000 in cash.

The DEA has investigated whether Wathne laundered LSD profits for Pickard, records show, and whether Savinelli helped set up LSD labs. Halpern and Wathne both refused to comment. Pickard denied giving either man drug money. Savinelli denied wrongdoing.

Pickard had said he was not making LSD, Halpern told the DEA, and that he was working for the FBI, the DEA and American spy agencies. That, he said, might explain his "sometimes bizarre and secretive behavior."

Pickard had other means of moving money, an informant told the DEA. He may have shipped \$1.2 million to Los Angeles with help from three exotic dancers who worked at San Francisco's Mitchell Brothers' O'Farrell Theatre, the informant said. But the women denied the claims, telling the DEA that they knew Pickard only as a frequent customer of the theater who sometimes dined with them.

And in 1998, the informant said, Pickard used Federal Express to send \$97,700 in LSD profits to Heffter Research Institute, which supports medical studies of psychedelics. The institute is financing federally approved human experiments with psilocybin at the University of Arizona, and funds studies at Harvard and universities in Switzerland and Russia. Founded partly out of frustration with what it sees as inadequate government support for such research, Heffter has raised funds from Laurence S. Rockefeller and includes respected scientists at the University of California and other schools. Halpern is a consultant; Shulgin is an adviser.

Jerry Patchen, Heffter's lawyer, said in a letter to The Chronicle that the institute had received no money from Pickard, has complied with all laws and was not the subject of any investigation.

David Nichols, Heffter's president and a professor of pharmacology at Purdue University, said he's seen growing interest in the scientific study of psychedelics. "I'd like to think its the beginning of a renaissance," he said.

By 1999, Pickard's academic career was peaking.

Kleiman had left his Harvard post to head UCLA's Drug Policy Analysis Program, and named Pickard assistant director. Funding for Pickard's post mysteriously materialized. "I got a letter one day from some guy I didn't know," said Kleiman, followed by two checks totaling about \$140,000. Pickard used LSD profits to fund his own post, but disguised its origin by sending it through financial adviser Wathne, the informant said. Pickard denies this.

While at UCLA, Pickard did research in Russia, learning about a plan to make a synthetic opiate and told former DEA head Robert Bonner. "I referred him to a DEA official," Bonner said.

Pickard's main focus at UCLA was the Future and Emerging Drugs Study (FEDS), a proposal for an international group of experts to monitor new drugs that could have "novel effects upon personality, memory and learning, addictive behavior, and human performance."

Despite Pickard's academic achievement, Kleiman said, Pickard was rarely around the office and produced few finished papers.

"That was making me nervous," he said.

It was at the Palace of Fine Arts, at a 1997 conference on entheobotany, the study of hallucinogenic plants, that Pickard encountered an eccentric Oklahoma man with an interest in psychedelics and a history of legal trouble. Gordon Todd Skinner, 36, had lots of cash, Porsches and a missile silo near Topeka, in Wamego. He bought the Atlas E silo in 1996, lavishly remodeling it and turning the silo grounds into a menagerie of Clydesdale horses, llamas and rare rabbits.

In 1989, he was arrested in New Jersey on charges of selling a large quantity of marijuana. To avoid a stiff sentence he offered to sell three people 30 pounds of pot, then turned them in. The case was dismissed in 1995 after a court said the suspects were illegally wiretapped and "the credibility and character of Skinner was . . . questionable."

Last month, he was arrested for involuntary manslaughter in connection with a 1999 incident in which a man overdosed on depressants at the silo. Skinner has denied the charge.

Skinner also found himself facing potential charges of bank fraud and manufacturing LSD.

Last October, he met with DEA agents and in return for immunity admitted he had laundered LSD profits, delivered thousands of doses and secured lab sites. He claimed Pickard was a longtime LSD chemist, had laundered money through Wathne and sent profits to Heffter. He offered to help ensnare Pickard. Skinner and his lawyer could not be reached for comment.

In recorded calls, Skinner asked Pickard to help move a piano and some boxes from the silo, Pickard said.

In early November, he met Skinner at the silo grounds and discovered that the boxes held an illegal drug lab, Pickard said in court. He said he wanted to call the DEA immediately, but Skinner refused and drove off.

On Nov. 6, Pickard loaded the boxes with plans to destroy the lab, he said.

But when he tried to enter the silo, DEA agents hidden inside held the door shut, as if it was locked. Then Skinner called on a cell phone, telling Pickard to go to the shed and take some aluminum canisters - allegedly containing the raw material for LSD.

When the officers stopped his Buick, Pickard said, he panicked and fled into the fields. The next day, a farmer found him in his barn and phoned police.

Again Pickard ran - but the squad car chased him through the mud until he stopped. "You've got me," he said.