

Swamp's Last Day on Earth

And other true tales of the anarchist underground

Evan Wright

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It's a couple of Saturdays before Christmas at the Out of the Fog coffee shop in Eugene, Oregon, a place where Santa Claus is just another capitalist oppressor. The Fog, ground zero for Eugene's thriving anarchist population, is located in a warehouse at the edge of town. A young man named Swamp sits at a rickety wooden table on the loading dock. A week ago he was living 170 feet up an old-growth fir tree west of town, but in just the past few days his life has gotten considerably more complicated, and now it looks like he had better get out of Eugene quickly.

Swamp, 26, is one of about twenty local anarchists who crashed the mostly peaceful demonstrations at November's World Trade Organization conference in Seattle, unleashing such a vicious and efficient reign of angry vandalism that 400 armored riot police responded by tear-gassing the entire downtown — enveloping nonviolent protesters wearing endangered-sea-turtle costumes, labor-union marchers and businessmen who were caught up in the spectacle on their lunch breaks. For four days, the Eugene anarchists roamed downtown Seattle, busting windows, setting fires and re-decorating storefronts with anti-corporate slogans. The rampage cost Seattle business owners at least \$17 million.

Swamp was at the center of the action, earning a reputation as one of Eugene's most hard-core revolutionaries. He fought cops, brawled with security guards, "unarmed" three friends by yanking them from the arms of the police, and played a key role in defacing a Starbucks, a Gap and a McDonald's. "He kicked a lot of ass for all of us," says Carlos, one of the anarchists who was with Swamp in Seattle. And while most anarchists tend to take themselves very seriously, Swamp treats his felonious activities as a form of good, clean fun. When a riot cop took a swing at him with a club, Swamp says he blocked it with his hands and taunted his armored attacker: "Hit me! Hit me!"

"That probably wasn't the best tactic," Swamp says, laughing. Right then, three other riot cops stepped forward and complied. They clubbed him, shot his eyes full of pepper spray and tear-gassed him until he puked all over himself.

Fueled by endless cups of militantly correct coffee — made from beans picked by supporters of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico — the anarchists are blitzed on triumph. "The inferno is way out of control," says Shade, a local rabble-rouser. In his midthirties, with thinning blond hair, Shade is one of the oldest anarchists in Eugene. Before moving to Oregon, he fronted a Seattle punk band called Total Toxic Rebellion. "The Man just wants to tighten his fat fucking white ass on the throne," says Shade. "They can't crush us like in a Raid commercial. If they try, it's going to be North Vietnam all over again, and this country will know what it's like to lose a big one."

Swamp's uniform would be familiar to anyone who has ever seen the FBI's composite sketch of one of his heroes, the Unabomber. He's wearing a black hooded jacket and camo pants. His face is obscured by a wild beard. Dreadlocks hang to his shoulders. He claims he has not combed or cut his hair in five years. His only nod to vanity is the wing nut woven into one of his dreads. From a distance, Swamp has the feral appearance of a man who has been living under a freeway bridge, but his quick eyes reveal alertness, humor and intelligence. He is slightly built but has the large, powerful

hands of someone who is good at things like laying bricks, fixing cars, assembling land mines from objects commonly available at the hardware store — all of which are activities he discusses with familiarity.

He is also an accomplished Dumpster diver and shoplifter. Theft from corporations is an honorable means of survival, according to his anarchist code. It ensures that as little capitalist lucre as possible dirties his hands.

Swamp says he may as well be called Pine Cone or Scrotum. Whatever name he has doesn't matter, so long as his identity remains hidden from the authorities. In fact, Eugene's anarchists conceal their names even from one another; only one person in town knows Swamp's real name, and Swamp won't tell anyone who that is.

Tomorrow morning, Swamp will leave town and head for L.A.; after that, "Swamp" will cease to exist. He does not know where he'll go or who he will be. All he knows is that he will dedicate himself to the goal — revolution — maybe by hooking up with some animal-rights activists and anarchists from the Southwest and taking it from there. "After the new year, there will be no more Swamp," he says. "You can't fight a revolution from jail."

The Anarchists who set fires and defaced storefronts during the protests against the WTO conference in Seattle were only the most visible elements of a growing radical fringe. Arson fires and acts of destruction carried out by animal-rights and environmental activists have increased markedly in the past few years. Early in 1999, FBI director Louis Freeh testified before a Senate subcommittee that "the most recognizable single-issue terrorists at the present time [in the U.S.] are those involved in the violent animal-rights, anti-abortion and environmental-protection movements."

Freeh singled out the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front as organizations posing significant challenges to law enforcement. According to Steven Berry, an FBI spokesman, "Environmental extremists tend to disregard legitimate public debate over environment and resource protection, and instead employ various forms of illegal activity in defense of the environment."

Last September, a series of articles on ecoterrorism published in the Portland Oregonian identified too significant acts of destruction in the West since 1980 that were linked to environmental saboteurs. One-third of these occurred in the past four years, most notably the pipe bombing of a Utah fur-breeder-supply company in 1997 by straight-edge punk rockers; the Vail, Colorado, lodge burnings in 1998 by the Earth Liberation Front; and the partial destruction of an Orange County, California, animal-testing lab in 1999 by the Animal Liberation Front.

Though the word *anarchist* seldom appears in the names of groups that claim responsibility for these actions, anarchist principles are behind them, and many members interviewed identify themselves as such. "Anarchists have created a leaderless resistance movement," says Bryan Denson, a co-author of the Oregonian series. "It's not a unified movement in the traditional sense. It's a polka-dot thing that's not easily tied together."

“Anarchism has been on the uptick in the last decade,” says University of Oregon sociology professor Michael Dreiling, author of a forthcoming book on the politics of international trade. He explains that anarchism first took root in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century, on the radical edge of the labor movement. Anarchism was wiped out before World War II, Dreiling says, but in the past fifteen years, anarchist tendencies developed among forest activists in the West, the anti-racism movements in the Northeast and Midwest, and the rising labor movement across the U.S.

The current movement is loosely organized in a series of co-op houses in a dozen cities in the country. Anarchists are active in anti-hunger programs like Food Not Bombs. They have lent support to labor strikes. “They avoid traditional employment,” says Dreiling, “They avoid using money. It’s a movement that’s difficult to categorize or quantify. Anarchist tactics are based on direct action – the destruction of property — carried out by small ‘affinity’ groups of, for example, two to six individuals. Affinity groups are a highly effective tactic for mobilizing wide groups of loosely networked individuals.”

Many factors are converging to create today’s anarchist movement, Dreiling says: “The 1970s and 1980s were a period of consensus and conciliation between environmentalists and the power elite, but the economic boom of the Nineties has primarily benefited the upper reaches of society. The kids identifying themselves as anarchists today are mostly middle-class white kids. They are offered the neon-pleasure-dome vision of society on TV. They are promised life will be an endless Mountain Dew commercial, but they end up with jobs assembling burritos. They have a lot of anger. No one wants to hear their rage. And they can’t afford to plant a million-dollar lobbyist in the Beltway to solve their problems.”

Eugene, Oregon, has long been a haven for militant anarchists, but recently they have stepped up their actions. Last June, anarchists smashed storefronts and tagged shops along the main commercial strip. A year before, they trashed the local NikeTown. After the chaos in Seattle, instigated by Eugene anarchists, Eugene’s mayor said his city was “the anarchist capital of the world.” If you ask one of the locals what his goal is, he will answer, “Global revolution.” But even some of the most ardent brick tossers from Eugene also say that their job is to create the outer edge of liberal protest, As Shade says, “When the anarchists do their thing ... the liberals look middle-of-the-ground all of a sudden.”

Swamp arrived in Eugene in the spring of 1998. He had just been paroled from a California jail after serving six months for dealing marijuana. Swamp had supported himself for several years as a pot and LSD dealer. He says he made \$200 a day dealing acid in San Diego. His activism began in a haphazard manner. Traveling through the South, he says, he vandalized signs on churches that had anti-homosexual messages. He claims that on another occasion, he sabotaged a Pepsi bottling plant by dumping several trash bags of weeds into the building’s air intakes.

Around the time of Swamp’s arrival in Eugene, Zip-O-Lumber, a local company, was about to follow through on its intentions to clear-cut the last remaining old-growth firs

in the Fall Creek area of the Willamette National Forest. Thus was born Red Cloud Thunder, a small collective formed to protect the trees. “We were just a bunch of fuck-ups — gutter punks and anarchists,” says Pacific, an early member of Red Cloud Thunder.

Swamp heard about RCT while smoking a bowl on a back porch in Eugene. The next day he caught a ride to Fall Creek and joined a road blockade, an extreme form of civil disobedience that involves sitting on something called a monopod, a long pole held upright by a tight web of ropes. No violence is involved, but the sheer danger of manning a monopod appealed to Swamp. There’s no way for authorities to remove a protester from a monopod without the possibility of death. Day after day, Swamp would perch on his monopod while U.S. Forest Service agents — known as Freds — would try to force him down. Sometimes protesters would tie nooses around their necks, which meant that if the Freds tried to pull them down, their necks would snap. So the Forest Service agents tried other means: They harassed the tree sitters with low-flying helicopters. At night they saturated the forest with ultrabright floodlights, and at all hours of the day they blared country music from their trucks.

“The kids out there stick up for each other,” says Terry Bertsch, a federal law-enforcement officer with the Forest Service who has fought the activists at Fall Creek since the beginning. “What they do is insane, but I guess that’s part of the anarchist belief.”

After a few weeks of standoff with the road blockaders, the Freds brought in cherry pickers, wrestled the protesters down from the monopods and arrested them. When Swamp got out of jail a few days later, he returned to Fall Creek and moved into a tree, where he remained as a part of the campaign for the next eighteen months. Recently, Red Cloud Thunder won a victory of sorts when a federal court ruled that the logging of all trees in the ninety-six-acre Fall Creek area was to be postponed indefinitely, pending environmental-impact surveys. It was while he was living in the tree that Swamp first read the Unabomber manifesto. Until then, he says, his political thoughts had mostly been formed by listening to music: punk rock and speed metal. The Sex Pistols, Metallica and the death-metal band Sepultura were major influences on his political development.

“The most important thing about the manifesto,” Swamp says, “is that Ted Kaczynski says ‘we.’ He says, ‘We believe,’ ‘We are revolutionaries.’ The manifesto was written for everyone.”

If you go back to the origins of the contemporary anarchist movement in the Northwest,” says Michael Dreiling, “there is an inescapable connection with Earth First!” In 1975, Edward Abbey published *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a novel that fictionalized the real-life exploits of four radical activists who roamed the West sabotaging machinery and property to defend the environment. “Monkey wrenching” entered the lexicon as a verb meaning “to sabotage property.” Earth First! was founded in 1980 with the motto “No compromise in defense of Mother Earth.” Monkey wrenching has been a contentious issue within Earth First! since the beginning. Today many of the group’s

activists publicly disavow monkey wrenching, even though a book called *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, written by Earth First! founder Dave Foreman, is still sold on the Earth First! Web site.

Perhaps no one speaks more authoritatively about the nexus of monkey wrenching, radical environmentalism and anarchism than Doug Peacock. An ex-Green Beret medic and a Vietnam vet, Peacock was the model for George Hayduke, the protagonist in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Peacock now calls himself an anarchist and says: "I'm right up there with [today's anarchists] when it comes to throwing bombs at the system. Out of monkey wrenching came Earth First!, and out of Earth First! came anarchy. I see new hope in the upswing of the anarchist movement. I thank those kids for doing what they did in Seattle."

Despite Swamp's determination to hide his pre-anarchist identity, he lets slip innumerable details. He describes the wet snow that fell in the small New England town where he was raised in a close-knit Portuguese family. Growing up, he says, he wrecked nine cars, nearly chopped his thumb off with a hatchet, shattered his ankle into 260 bone fragments, popped his kneecap through his skin, burst cartilage in his nose and drove a four-inch screw into his ass cheek by wiping out on a skateboard. Swamp's grand mother gave him the nickname *mosca tonta*, Portuguese for "dizzy bug."

Not surprisingly, his school years were characterized by rebelliousness, which began when teachers asked him to say the Pledge of Allegiance. "I didn't believe in saluting a piece of cloth," Swamp says. "I may as well salute my pants... . Pledge of allegiance to the flag. Why? So I'll run into a burning building and pull it out? Fuck no. I'll be the one lighting the flag on fire to start the building burning."

His real education, he says, began after he took twenty-five hits of LSD one afternoon when he was fourteen. "I wouldn't be who I am without acid," he says. "In general, if I take acid, I hallucinate so hard, I don't even know I'm a being anymore." That same year he ran away from home for the first time. He rode his first freight train then and began picking up the rules of the road. He learned that you can buy good hash in the bus terminal in Cleveland, that Chicago cops can be bribed if you offer to pay them your bail in advance, that slinging nuggets is good business everywhere. One time in Nebraska he broke into what turned out to be the back lot of a police station to smoke a joint. Once he walked around for weeks with the impression of a steering wheel bruised into his chest after a drunken car accident.

Eventually he drops enough clues about himself that a twenty-minute Web search yields the phone number of his parents' house. Swamp's father corroborates Swamp's description of him as a Reagan Republican and a gun advocate; he adds that he was a combat engineer in Vietnam. But he has no problem with his son's chosen path.

"I wish that more people had more guts to do a little bit of civil disobedience," he says. "He's happy, he's healthy. He's not filthy. The dreadlocks don't look clean, but that's what he's happy with. He's living in a tree — who cares what he looks like?"

Then Swamp's father launches into a tirade, accusing the federal government of training Russian troops in Texas to fire on U.S. citizens. He praises the Michigan Militia as an outfit that "keeps the government a little bit honest."

The drive from Eugene to L.A. takes approximately sixteen hours. Swamp catches a ride with two other anarchists, Siren and Panic.

Swamp expounds on the evils of civilization and focuses his ire on the common toilet. "A toilet is a fucked-up thing," Swamp says. "The first rule of living in the forest is, never piss or shit in good drinking water. What's a toilet? You piss and shit in good drinking water — push a button and throw it away."

Siren's pants hang in ragged strips at her ankles. Her dyed-black hair is dirty blond at the roots. She has a pierced nose, and the skin rises around her piercing in a gray-pink bubble that indicates a nasty infection. In L.A., she aims to hook up with an ex-boyfriend. She is estranged from her parents, who are, she says, Christian fundamentalists: "My mother doesn't even listen to music. She is not human. She only listens to Dr. Laura. My father is the ugliest man in the world. I can't stand his smell. I can't eat meals with my family. The sound of my father chewing makes me want to vomit."

Six weeks ago, Siren ran off to Eugene and lived under a tarp by the river. "Anarchists give me hope," she says. "When I'm around them, I forget there is racism and sexism." She chose Siren as her name because "sirens sang the most beautiful song, and it killed men. Isn't that crazy? I want to paint a picture of that in my mind."

Panic, who is in his late twenties, is tall and thin to the point of looking starved. He says he has been an anarchist since he got into punk at age ten. He has lived in anarchist-punk squats in San Francisco, New York and abroad.

On the outskirts of Fresno, California, he makes a confession. "I was a Nazi," he says. "Just a few months in high school. My girlfriend helped me get out of it. She came over to my house one day, and she said, 'This is not you.' She brought out my old records, she got me back into my punk." Panic's second-most-shameful episode occurred during a dark period when he worked for a bank and wore a tie. "It all happened during a really fucking bad acid trip," he says. "I heard my dad's voice telling me I was all wrong, that I was a loser." Shortly thereafter, Panic got a job counting money in ATM machines. It lasted only a few months. "Yeah, punk brought me back to sanity again," he says.

At a refueling stop outside Bakers-field, Siren wanders barefoot on the asphalt, looking for a ladies' room, while Swamp and Panic go across the street to a McDonald's. When they return a few minutes later, they are in getaway mode. "Let's go, quick," Swamp says and piles into the car. For a few minutes no one says a word; then Swamp and Panic crack smiles.

"We wrote 'McMurder' on the walls of the men's room," Panic finally says. "The red paint dripped perfectly, like blood."

"Break it! Break it!" Swamp says in a Beavis voice.

Panic and Swamp giggle together.

“You guys?” Siren says, frowning. “I’m left out of things because I’m a woman. I wish you guys would include me in everything.”

The L.A. co-op is a ramshackle stucco house in a suburban section of Inglewood, under the landing path of jets flying into LAX. A FREE MUMIA banner is draped across the backyard fence. There are car seats on the lawn. Inside, more car seats serve as living-room furniture. Posters tacked up in the kitchen depict small, furry animals being tortured in scientific labs. The four full-time residents are all vegans.

A harried-looking twenty-year-old named Kendra is the only co-op member home when the Eugene anarchists show up. Kendra and her three housemates are helping to organize an event called Solidarity Fest, a three-day festival of punk bands and political workshops at a community arts center down-town. It is scheduled to begin tomorrow.

Siren finds her ex-boyfriend in the living room; he’s a sixteen-year-old who is sitting on the floor fiddling with wires on a guitar amp. In happier times, they carried protest signs that read “You’re eating kak burgers” outside a local McDonald’s (Siren explains that kak means vomit, penis or come, depending on the context). But today their reunion is strained. Siren sits in a car seat across from him and smiles. He avoids eye contact with her.

“What are you doing for the holidays?” Siren asks.

“Dose on acid to write songs for the band,” he mumbles. “Fry some more on Christmas. Go to San Diego on New Year’s and fuck shit up.”

As the sun sets, a cluster of punks from Phoenix arrive in two beat-up vans. Among them is a sixteen-year-old girl who ran away from her home in Texas. She says her parents had her under virtual house arrest. She escaped by propping the automatic garage door open with a paint can and wiggling out after her parents had gone to sleep. “I’m not really an anarchist,” she whispers. “I’m just looking for a place to stay until I find my sugar daddy.”

A gangly boy comes up the driveway with a guitar and a backpack slung over his shoulder. His name is Sorrow, and he rode a freight train into L.A. two days ago. He has walked approximately forty miles across the city looking for the coop. He is dead tired and famished.

Sorrow, 16, came to L.A. from the Minnehaha Free State, an organized blockade of a highway expansion across sacred Native American grounds in Minnesota. Like Swamp, he has battled Freds from atop a monopod and lived in a tree. Unlike Swamp, Sorrow identifies himself as a “nonviolent anarchist.”

Swamp offers Sorrow a smoke, and he joins the circle of young punks sitting at Swamp’s feet. Swamp begins to tell the young punks about the Unabomber manifesto and the need to take up armed resistance against the state.

“The Unabomber just killed people,” Sorrow says. “It was wrong.”

Swamp asks, “If people broke into your house and were raping your mother, would you fight back by any means necessary? What about Mother Earth?”

“You can’t win against the U.S. Army,” Sorrow says.

“A single Molotov can take out twenty-five troops,” Swamp counters.

Swamp launches into his favorite parable, about militiamen defeating the much more powerful British army in the American Revolution. The three punks side with Swamp, and all agree that a violent struggle must be fought. A punk who looks like a young Johnny Rotten sneers at Sorrow. It’s a schoolyard look of contempt — pacifists are wusses. Sorrow takes his guitar and goes off.

The Solidarity Fest opens at the Aztlan Cultural Arts Foundation the next morning. The building is a barely refurbished former county jail north of downtown. There are still bars on the windows and cells upstairs.

A hundred anarchists and punk rockers in black leather, mostly from the Southwest, arrive by noon. Half of them sit on folding chairs arranged in a circle. A lone black man enters the circle and takes a seat. He introduces himself as Bloodhound, a Blood gang member, and says he represents his chapter in an outreach program aimed at white outlaw groups.

Bloodhound asks the assembled white kids what punk rock means. A few raise hands. The room has the politely strained atmosphere of a twelve-step meeting. A guy with his head shaved down to a mohawk defines punk as “resisting the system.”

“That’s about the same with us,” Bloodhound says. “That we was an outlaw criminal gang was just a smear put on us by the media.” Bloodhound then regales his audience with tales of being shot at by rival gang members, being beaten up in alleys by cops who then dropped him into rival gang turf to be killed. He asks whether any punk rockers have similar stories.

The room is silent.

It is just after sunset on Swamp’s last night in L.A. — his final hours as Swamp. He emerges from a Marina del Rey supermarket, the pockets of his camo pants bulging with handfuls of Super Glue he’s lifted, along with a box of Top tobacco.

“Let’s hear some fuck-shit-up music,” Panic says, sliding a CD by Crass, his favorite anarchist punk band, into a boombox.

Siren tears open the containers of Super Glue. “Look at all this wasteful packaging,” she frets.

The glue will be used to sabotage select retail establishments by squirting it into their door locks after closing time.

Siren wants to tag anti-corporate slogans on a local Tower Records store.

“What are their specific offenses?” Panic asks.

“They’re a huge corporation,” Siren responds.

“Selling crappy corporate rock isn’t good enough,” Panic adds. “According to Martin Luther King, the first principle of direct action is identifying a specific offense committed by your target.”

Swamp makes a bold proposal. “Let’s fill buckets with paint, go into a Gap and heave the shit at racks of clothes.”

Swamp’s proposal is particularly bold in light of the fact that he is on parole. If he is picked up for even a misdemeanor violation, he will be sent back to jail.

Siren shoots down Swamp's idea as wasteful. They all agree they will try to hit as many Starbucks as possible, though no one can think of a specific offense committed by Starbucks.

"It doesn't matter," Siren reasons. "There are really only six corporations that own everything in the world. It doesn't matter who you hit. It's all the same."

Panic wants to tag a Starbucks with "I came in your coffee."

"That's offensive," Siren counters. "And it doesn't educate people."

An hour later, Swamp enters a Gap in Santa Monica. He pulls his bandit mask over his face and walks up to a customer. She is picking through a stack of khakis. "Did you know these clothes are made with slave labor?" His voice is midway between speaking and shouting.

The woman jumps. In the brightly lit Gap, Swamp is a gnomelike figure in his black mask and hoodie. The woman is blond and in her late twenties. She has probably devoted more time to grooming herself in the past twenty-four hours than Swamp has in the past five years. She hurriedly exits.

Swamp shouts, "The Gap uses slave labor!" A dreadlock falls from his hoodie and shakes over his mask as he repeats himself.

A salesgirl giggles nervously.

Swamp walks out.

Siren and Panic have tagged the outside wall of the Gap with the anarchy symbol in black and the word *greed* above it in red.

Swamp runs down a side street and pulls his mask down and yanks his hoodie off and jumps into the car with Siren and Panic. Emboldened by their success at the Gap, they spend the next several hours cruising L.A., attacking outposts of capitalist oppression. Between hits, Siren is quiet, focused. Swamp is a font of tips, like, "Hold your cans closer to the wall so the paint doesn't come out flaky."

They write "We won WTO" on the wall of a Jaguar dealership. They tag a Starbucks on Olympic Boulevard with graffiti accusing the corporation of raping rain forests. They hit a McDonald's with "McMurder." By the time they get to Long Beach, Swamp is coughing heavily, a lingering effect of his tear-gassings in Seattle. He suggests they call it a night. But Panic and Siren want to keep going, so they leave Swamp by the curb and head for a nearby Gap.

Panic and Siren stride to the Gap, shaking their spray cans. They have done this so many times in the past couple of hours, it has become routine. Failing to look over their shoulders or up the street for threats, they cover the wall with a particularly long list of the Gap's alleged crimes of clear-cutting redwood forests, and using child and prison labor.

A cop car zooms onto the curb a few feet from the taggers. Panic takes off down an alley. Siren stays behind and two cops hustle her to the ground.

Swamp watches helplessly from a hundred feet away. He throws down his cigarette and rocks from side to side on his feet, poised to run toward Siren. Panic's fate is unclear. He's disappeared. Long Beach Police Department and black-and-white sheriff's cruisers

swarm on the Gap. A police helicopter beats overhead, washing rooftops and pavement in white light. Rather than run away from the cops, Swamp strides right over to them, a ripe target. He doesn't say anything. A few of the cops look as he approaches. One of them beams a flashlight in Swamp's face but otherwise ignores him, assuming he is just some homeless kid, not a property-destroying felon violating parole. Nor does the cop pay much attention when Swamp walks away shouting "Panic" into the night, looking for his lost friend.

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