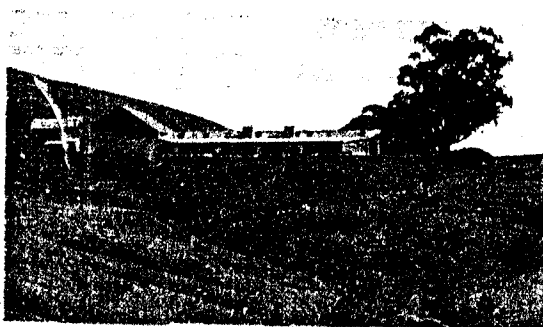


Santa Rosa, California, Sunday, February 9, 1992

Millennial mission



Scientists paid more than \$6 million for the 3,600 acres of land the complex sits upon.



A sign warns the curious not to venture near the Scientology complex near Petrolia.

CHAD SURMICK/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Underground vault holds Scientology teachings

By CHRIS SMITH
Staff Writer

PETROLIA, Humboldt County — The people who have been allowed to see the colossal tube that's buried in a velvety green hill just up the road from Petrolia say it's the strangest thing they've ever laid eyes on. And the most mysterious. The huge, pipe-shaped vault is as wide and high as the cabin of a Boeing 747. It is more than 140 feet longer than one of the jumbo jets. Disciples of the late L. Ron Hubbard, founder of what has been called the world's most ruthless cult — the Church of Scientology — have sunk the herculean cylinder into the ground like a bomb shelter.

Well out of view, it is embedded in a cattle-ranch hill high above the coast. People who have seen it say all that's visible is one exposed end and a ventilation tower poking above the ground like the periscope on a submarine.

Constructed of concrete-clad steel and buried under 14 feet of earth, the nearly completed vault is designed to last 1,000 years and withstand any destructive act of man or God short of a direct hit by a nuclear bomb.

In fact, Greg Bish, a Humboldt

County planning commissioner who has seen the thing three times, said he thinks the Scientologists chose this remote, sparsely populated area precisely because it's so non-strategic.

"There's no reason to drop a nuclear bomb on Petrolia," he said.

So there is no question the vault is virtually impregnable and will be around for a very long time.

The question in Petrolia is: Why is it here?

"I can see where it is from my house. It's five or six miles away," said 67-year-old Petrolia resident Hardy Hogan, a retired lumberman.

"But what it's for, I have no more idea than nothin'."

The Scientologists paid in excess of \$6 million to buy more than 3,600 acres of grazing land to build and then bury the vault.

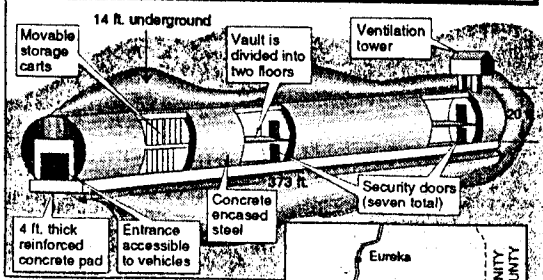
The construction of the thing, which began in 1987, was the grandest undertaking that people in Petrolia have ever seen. The spectacle gave rise to all sorts of rumors about why the Scientologists would go to all that trouble and expense.

"In the beginning," said Elizabeth Poston McHarry, publisher of the weekly Ferndale Enterprise newspaper, people "thought they were going to store refrigerated bodies."

The talk was that the Scientologists would cryogenically preserve corpses of church members, perhaps even the corpse of Hubbard himself, until they are re-entered by eternal souls — Scientology calls them "thetans."

What's buried in the hillside

Followers of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard say the enormous vault near Petrolia will preserve his writings and talks for the enlightenment of future man. Members of the Scientology-affiliated group responsible for the curious project have told county officials the crypt will withstand the destructive forces of man and nature for 1,000 years.

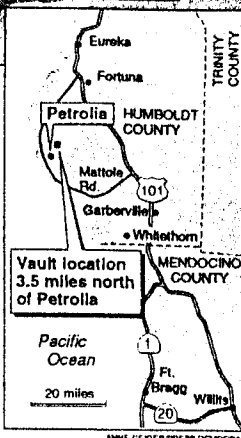


The people responsible for the vault have said such talk is ridiculous and, anyway, Hubbard's body was cremated following his death. Beyond those denials, literature on Scientology says "thetans" are believed to inhabit the bodies of newborn babies, not of dead bodies.

And at the county seat in Eureka, Humboldt County officials said they are fully satisfied the vault will be used exactly as the owners have told them it will be used.

The Scientologists' explanation: the massive capsule will be used to preserve, through the most durable and dazzlingly high-tech

See Vault, Page B2



ANNE GEORGE/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Vault

Continued from Page B1

archival technology available, the multitudinous words and writings of the man they value above all others: Lafayette Ronald Hubbard.

He was the science fiction writer who founded the Church of Scientology and called it mankind's most important spiritual discovery. But some defectors and investigators hold a decisively different view.

"Scientology is quite likely the most ruthless, most classically terrorist, most litigious and the most lucrative cult the country has ever seen," said Cynthia Kisser, executive director of the Chicago-based Cult Awareness Network.

Reverence and suspicion

At the time of his death in 1986 at the age of 74, Hubbard was a recluse accused by some high-ranking defectors of pocketing about \$200 million of church revenues. But he's so revered by some Scientologists they use their own system for counting years in which A.D. stands for After Dianetics.

Dianetics, which gave rise to the creation of Scientology in 1954, is Hubbard's theory the painful parts of a person's life can be erased like unwanted noise on a recording tape, leaving the person enlightened or "clear." Scientology holds that the erasing process requires a person work with a trained "auditor," a service that costs thousands of dollars.

"In reality," said a Time magazine cover story from last May, "the church is a hugely profitable global racket that survives by intimidating members and critics in a Mafia-like manner."

The organization that bought the rural ranch land near Petrolia is the Los Angeles-based Church of Spiritual Technology, a business affiliate of Scientology. In papers filed with Humboldt County, the organization states it was founded in 1982 to ensure Hubbard's collected writings and talks "do not fall prey to the ravages of time and will still be in existence in the centuries and millenia to come." The property at Petrolia is off-limits to the media, and numerous phone calls The Press Democrat made to Scientologists involved in the project were not returned.

Nuclear war

Bish, the past chairman of the Humboldt County Planning Commission, said it appears to him the people who built the vault believe eventually "we're all going to be nuked and gone, and that man is going to start over."

So if modern man's successors begin a new civilization and come upon the exotic archives inside in the vault, he said, "they'll have L. Ron Hubbard." Even if members of the future race don't find the Petrolia cylinder, they might stumble upon one of at least two others near San Bernardino and in New Mexico.

Before Petrolia was discovered by Hubbard's followers it was a contentedly unknown logging and ranching town 30 miles south of the famed Victorian village of Ferndale.

Petrolia's previous claim to fame came in the early 1860s, when California's first oil well was drilled there. The coastal settlement had been named Mattolia, for the close-by Mattole River, but was renamed Petrolia in anticipation of an oil rush that never quite happened.

"Scientology is quite likely the most ruthless . . . cult the country has ever seen."

CYNTHIA KISSER,
CULT AWARENESS NETWORK

Word spread fast among the approximately 500 residents of Mattole Valley when, in 1984, some uncommunicative strangers began buying up ranches and homesteads in the gorgeous, sea-view hills near Petrolia.

And people really started buzzing when they heard the newcomers had acquired more than 3,600 acres of land and were going to sink into the fertile soil an armored cylinder 20 feet in diameter — that's wide enough to drive a big-rig truck through — and 373 feet long.

The Church of Spiritual Technology people are secretive with locals and the media, but county officials said the spiritual technologists have been forthright with them.

"They've been totally open," said Stan Dixon, the county supervisor whose district includes Petrolia. In fact, Dixon said, now that work on the vault is virtually done, he and other county officials have been invited by Spiritual Technology to come for a tour later this month.

Mammoth dimensions

In essence, the vast project involved scraping away the top of a remote hill. A ponderous concrete base, about 4 feet thick, 20 feet wide and 373 feet long, was laid in a trench.

Then the cylindrical vault was assembled from great, interlocking steel panels. A second floor was installed down the center of the great tube.

Once the vault was fully assembled, it was encased in several inches of concrete, then covered over with 14 feet of gravel and dirt. All that's visible is the one exposed end and the ventilation building equipped with fans that push air down into the crypt.

Todd Sobolik, Humboldt County's chief building inspector, remarked, "It's very impressive."

The Church of Spiritual Technology used local labor for the vast excavation and for construction of the concrete foundation, of miles of paved roads and of a stately, 8,000-square-foot staff house located some miles from the vault. The property owners have assured Humboldt County only "four to six" church members will live in the house.

'Good for business'

Locals said money seems to be no object with the Scientologists and that the project pumped a windfall of cash into a remote, rural area in need of work and income.

"It's been good for business," said a publicity-shy worker at Petrolia's Hideaway restaurant. "They've put a lot of people to work."

The project is profitable for the county, too. The Church of Spiritual Technology will pay \$64,500 in property taxes this year — a kingly

sum in southwestern Humboldt.

By this time, suspicious the vault might store frozen corpses have pretty much died out.

Because Scientology members so revere Hubbard, said Kisser, of the Cult Awareness Network, "it's quite possible" the only intended use is to preserve his writings and lectures. A Los Angeles Times series in mid-1990 said Scientology has spent \$15 million to carry Hubbard's word far into the future.

Right to inspection

Should the vault's Petrolia neighbors ever come to suspect the thing is being used for something other than the stated, archival purpose, county Supervisor Dixon said Humboldt officials could insist on an inspection.

"Certainly we have the right to see that people are doing with the property what they said would," he said.

In documents filed with Humboldt County, the Church of Spiritual Technology says most conventional methods of preserving written and spoken words are subject to deterioration — paper yellows and recording tapes decay. The documents say the organization was created "with the purpose of researching methods and ways to counteract these factors."

Archives have not yet been moved into the vault, but the documents in Eureka say the high-cost, high-tech methods of preserving Hubbard's spoken and written words, as well as other materials from the Bible and other religious sources, may include:

- Audio discs made of gold.
- Writing that is chemically etched into stainless steel.
- Long-playing records that are made of steel and, in the absence of electricity, can be played on a hand-crank phonograph.
- Archival paper that looks new for centuries.
- Gas-filled titanium time capsules in which records are preserved for "a minimum of 1,000 years."

If all goes according to the Church of Spiritual Technology's ostensible plan, a successor of modern man might find the Petrolia vault a millenium from now, even if all else on Earth has been lost.

But, because they would not talk to The Press Democrat, officials of the organization could not be asked how that future being might get at the wisdom of Hubbard — that is, how the being will open the impregnable vault.

"That's a good point," said Bish, the county's planning commissioner who has toured the great underground cylinder with Scientologists.

"They never explained that to us."