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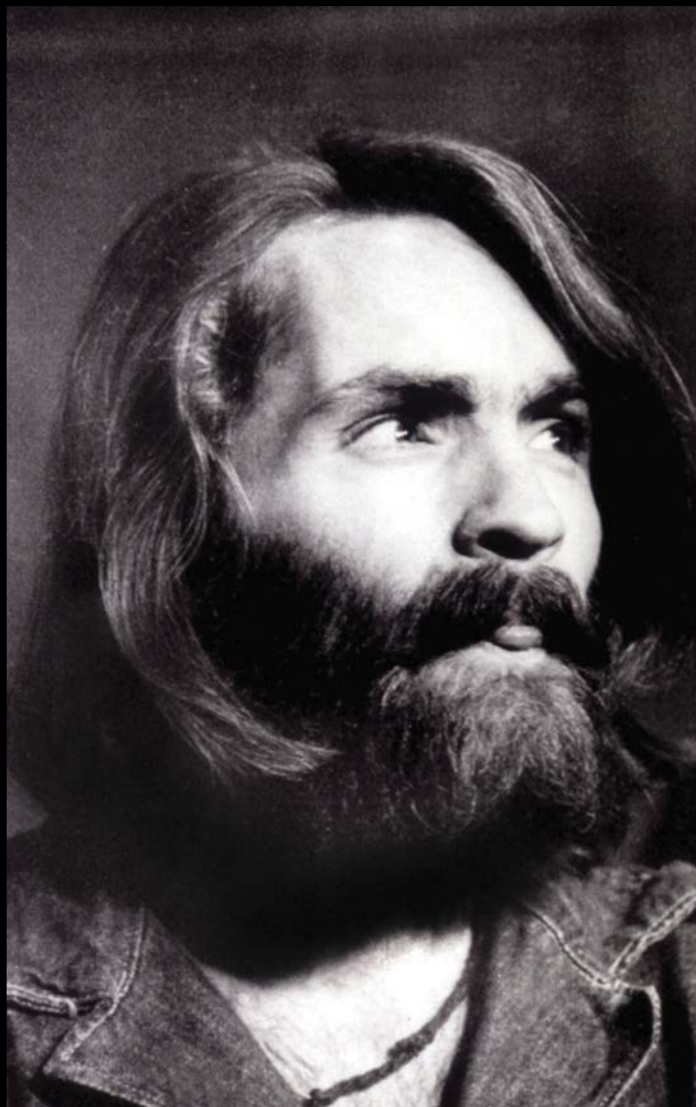
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**The year 2020 marked a half century since the sensational trial of Charles Manson for the Tate/LaBianca murders, and the passage of time has not diminished the place the murders and trial occupy in the American psyche. The following is the first of a three-part series regarding the Manson murders, the investigation, and the trial.**

**Charles Manson in 1969.** *Photo credit: Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo.*

# Charles Manson

## Fifty Years Later

### Part I: The Murders

*By Mark J. Phillips and Aryn Z. Phillips*

**T**he summer of 1969 had been blisteringly hot in Los Angeles, the kind that most residents would prefer spending at the beach, laying by the pool, or sitting beneath blasting air-conditioning units. Among those just trying to beat the heat were young Hollywood starlet Sharon Tate who, clad only in a matching bra and panty set, entertained a few friends at her posh home in the hills above Hollywood, and Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, a couple returning home from a day spent at Lake Isabella, a popular vacation spot 150 miles outside the city.

Less concerned with the heat were their killers, who invaded their homes and murdered them in the strangest and most gratuitous of ways. They strung their victims together by rope, masked them with pillowcases, stabbed them dozens of times, and scrawled cryptic words in blood on the walls. This cabal of long-haired, barefooted youths, no older than the local college kids, lived on a ranch not far from the city as members of a cult calling themselves the “Family.” They had been sent to kill these innocent strangers by the persuasive, mysterious, and terrifying Charles Manson, whose apprehension and trial in 1970 combined into a milestone event of the Twentieth Century.

In 1969, Charles Manson was in his mid-thirties. He was small, only 5’2” and slim, with petite facial features and dark brown hair that he wore long and wild, down to his shoulders. His face would soon become one of the most recognized faces in America. Born November 12, 1934, in Cincinnati, Ohio, to sixteen-year-old Kathleen Maddox, he never knew his biological father; the name Manson was adopted from one of Kathleen’s later husbands. He spent his early years bouncing around different foster facilities and getting into trouble. Paroled and rearrested several times, when

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he was finally released in the spring of 1967. Manson was thirty-two years old and had been institutionalized for a total of seventeen years.

He had missed the development of the counterculture movement while he was locked up, but he liked what he saw when he was released. He moved north to Berkeley, California, where he sang, played guitar, and panhandled on the streets of the ultra-liberal college town. There he met Mary Brunner, a twenty-three-year-old college-educated assistant librarian at the university. She was lonely and plain looking, but he made her feel special. He moved in with her and lived off of her income, inviting other young girls he met to do the same.<sup>1</sup>

In April, he began spending the majority of his time in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. The neighborhood was widely known to be a hippie refuge and a place where peace-loving people could find acceptance, cheap rent, and an overabundance of music, drugs, and free love, attracting thousands. Many of these arrivals had a real dedication to the hippie philosophies and political goals of peace and acceptance, but many others were simply aimless wanderers or runaway teenagers, naïve and lonely misfits looking to belong. The area was also full of sidewalk preachers and gurus, people sermonizing their various ideas on life to anyone who would listen. Manson quickly became one of them. His unique brand of thinking combined Beatles lyrics, passages from the Bible, and Scientology. Being a talented orator, he explained it all in a charismatic and dramatic fashion. Before long, he had attracted many willing followers, both women and men in their late teens and early twenties, and the Family was born.<sup>2</sup> Some were from disadvantaged circumstances, others abandoned paying jobs and supportive parents, but all were lonely, unsatisfied, and troubled, eager to believe and belong.

The Haight soon became overcrowded, with hundreds of young people arriving each day, and Manson tired of it. He packed his followers into an old bus and took to the road. For over a year, the group roamed the coastline from Washington to Mexico, spending much of their time in Los Angeles. They camped, rented, squatted, and stayed with various friends and peripheral acquaintances, including Beach Boy

**August 7, 1970—Los Angeles, CA: The three female defendants in the Tate-LaBianca murder trial walk from the jail section to the courtroom as their trial continues from August 6th. The girls are (left to right) Leslie Van Houten, Susan Atkins, and Patricia Krenwinkel. Photo credit: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy Stock Photo.**

Dennis Wilson, while Manson tried to make it in the music industry. Eventually, they settled at Spahn Ranch, a decrepit and isolated ranch outside Los Angeles that had, in its former days of glory, been a filming location for movies and television shows. Manson continued to recruit followers along the way, and within months, the Family at Spahn Ranch numbered at least thirty-five. The ranch's elderly owner, George Spahn, allowed them to stay partly because he was unaware just how many members of the Family were living on his land, but also partly because Manson assigned one of the young girls to take care of him, physically, emotionally, and sexually.<sup>3</sup>

Life under Manson's rule was bizarrely unconventional. All Family members were expected to turn over their money and personal property to him, but even so the group needed more to survive. They scattered into the surrounding area to panhandle, steal, and go on “garbage runs,” in which they took unsold food out of supermarket trash cans.<sup>4</sup> As expected, Family members were constantly arrested for loitering, robbery, and grand theft auto. Manson gave everyone new names, sometimes more than one, depending on what he felt fit their personalities.<sup>5</sup> Meals were communal, and no one was served until Manson was seated.<sup>6</sup> Children were separated from their parents and cared for as a group. The Family commonly went on “creepy-crawly” missions, entering random Los Angeles homes and silently crawling around while the occupants were asleep, moving and rearranging small items.<sup>7</sup> There were countless rules to follow. Wristwatches, calendars, clocks, and glasses were forbidden. Female members were forbidden to carry money. If Manson walked past someone at the ranch, he would make faces and wild gestures, and that person was required to mimic him until he stopped.<sup>8</sup>



Sex with random partners was encouraged to increase the unity of the group, and it was not uncommon for Manson to assign two people to, or to forbid two people from, each other. There were orgies that Manson would orchestrate and lead, assigning each person a position and task. For the women, sex with Manson was a privilege. Drugs, particularly marijuana and LSD, were free flowing, although Manson often took less than everyone else when they embarked on communal “trips,” enabling him to retain more control over the situation.<sup>9</sup> Violence was constant. Manson acquired a large cache of guns and knives and threatened anyone who disagreed with him. He killed, or at least ordered killed, several people, including Spahn Ranch hand Donald “Shorty” Shea, several defecting Family members, and peripheral hangers on. He shot a drug dealer with whom a deal went awry and left him for dead, though he survived. Manson explained to his followers that fear was beautiful and that the more fear you have, the more awareness you have, thus the more love you have. He claimed that death was beautiful because people feared death.<sup>10</sup>

The combination of sex, drugs, and fear made Family members not only loyal and submissive to Manson, but somehow made them love and adore him. They never questioned his authority. “Charlie is love, pure love,” one member explained.<sup>11</sup> It was clear to anyone who spoke to a Family member that he or she would go to the ends of the earth for Manson, many believing him to be the second incarnation of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Manson preached often and intensely to his avid followers, and his philosophy, while still loosely based on Beatles lyrics and the Bible, had grown and developed over the years. He believed that the world was on the brink of an apocalyptic race war, which he called Helter Skelter. Blacks would win this war, he claimed, and embark on the elimination of the white race. But they were not smart enough to run the world they would inherit, so they would naturally ask for help from him and the Family, who would be hiding out in a “bottomless pit” in the desert. They would hand over the reins of power, and Manson would rule the world.<sup>13</sup>

This revolution would start, Manson believed, with blacks committing heinous crimes in wealthy white neighborhoods of Los Angeles, but no such crimes were occurring. Manson became anxious, upset by Helter Skelter’s slow progress. He decided to get the revolution started himself by committing a terrible and upsetting murder in a white neighborhood and make it look as if it had been perpetrated by the black community. Such a crime would spark animosity between the races, ignite the revolution and, as explained by a former Family member, “show blackie how to do it.”<sup>14</sup>

On the night of Friday, August 8, 1969, Manson gathered some of his most loyal followers and instructed them to dress in dark clothing and find their knives. Chosen were twenty-one-year-old former topless dancer Susan Atkins, called Sadie Mae Glutz; twenty-one-year-old Patricia Krenwinkel, called Katie, a dark-haired girl from Los Angeles who left her job as a process clerk for an insurance company to join Manson; and twenty-three-year-old Charles Watson, called Tex, former high school jock, college dropout, and Manson’s right hand man. The final member of the cabal was Linda Kasabian, a twenty-year old who had been on her own since age sixteen and had spent the past few years living in communes and experimenting with drugs. A relative newcomer to the Family, she had only been living with Manson for a month but was included because she was the only member of the Family with a valid driver’s license.

The four set out from Spahn Ranch and drove to a home on Cielo Drive in Benedict Canyon, the area above Hollywood and Beverly Hills. The house belonged to Rudi Altobelli and was being rented by

movie director Roman Polanski and his beautiful wife, twenty-six-year-old actress Sharon Tate, then eight months pregnant. The Polanskis had spent much of the summer in Europe, so the house was being tended to by their friend, twenty-five-year-old Abigail Folger, heiress to the Folger coffee fortune, and her boyfriend, thirty-two-year-old Wojciech “Voytek” Frykowski. Tate had returned from Europe a few days prior and was staying at the house with Folger and Frykowski until Polanski came home. Manson and Watson had been to this house before. Dennis Wilson had once introduced Manson to the house’s previous occupant, Terry Melcher, record producer, son of Doris Day, and boyfriend of Candace Bergen. Melcher had declined to sign a contract with Manson, but Manson chose the house not out of revenge but because he knew it would be isolated.<sup>15</sup>

The group arrived at the house after midnight, cut the telephone lines, climbed the gate, and slaughtered everyone inside. Afterward, they got back in the car, changed clothes, tossed their bloody garments and weapons over the side of the canyon, and drove back to Spahn Ranch.

They left behind a horrific scene. On the front lawn lay the bodies of Frykowski and Folger. Frykowski had been shot twice, hit repeatedly in the head with a blunt object, and stabbed fifty-one times. Folger had been stabbed twenty-eight times, her once white nightgown completely stained with blood. Inside the house was the body of the pregnant Sharon Tate, stabbed sixteen times. With her was the body of Jay Sebring, hair stylist to the stars and Sharon Tate’s close friend. He had been shot once and stabbed seven times. Sharon lay in a fetal position and Jay looked as if he died trying to ward off future blows. Tate and Sebring had been tied together by a rope that had been strung over a ceiling rafter and looped around their necks. A blood-stained towel had been thrown over Sebring’s face. The word “PIG” was written on the front door in blood.<sup>16</sup> In the driveway, slumped in the driver’s seat of a white Rambler, was the body of eighteen-year-old Steven Parent, shot four times. Unconnected with Tate or any other victim, Parent had been visiting William Garretson, a young man Altobelli had hired to live in the back house and take care of the property while he was away.

The next day, news of the murders spread quickly, but back at Spahn Ranch, Manson was unhappy with how the events of the previous evening had unfolded. He felt that it had been “too messy” and prepared his team to strike again that night. This time, they were joined not only by Manson himself but also by Leslie Van Houten and Steve Grogan. Twenty-year-old Van Houten had gotten hooked on LSD at age fourteen and had lived on a commune until meeting Manson.<sup>17</sup> Grogan, an eighteen-year-old known to the Family as “Clem,” had been arrested countless times and diagnosed as mentally ill. Sentenced to a stay at Camarillo State Mental Hospital, he had managed to escape with help from the Family. Together, they drove through Pasadena and east Los Angeles. Manson gave directions and looked for a random home to target, passing over his first few choices because he saw pictures of children in the window or because the houses were too close together.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, Manson settled on a home in Los Feliz belonging to Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. Leno, age forty-four, was the president of a local grocery store chain, and his thirty-eight-year-old wife, Rosemary, to whom he had been married for ten years, owned and operated a successful clothing boutique. Manson entered the home alone, tied up the couple, and returned to the car. Watson, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten then entered and slaughtered the LaBiancas. Leno was left in the living room, a pillowcase over his head and a lamp cord wrapped around his neck. His hands had been tied behind his back. He had been stabbed twelve times with a knife and an additional fourteen times with a two-pronged kitchen carving fork, which was left protruding from his abdomen. The word “war” had been carved into his skin. Rosemary’s

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body was found in their bedroom. She had been stabbed forty-one times in the back and legs and, as with her husband, a pillowcase had been placed over her head and a lamp cord wrapped around her neck. The words “DEATH TO PIGS” and “RISE” were written in blood on the living room walls, and “HEALTER SKELTER” was incorrectly spelled out in blood on the refrigerator door.<sup>19</sup>

Watson, Krenwinkel and Van Houten hitchhiked back to Spahn Ranch. Manson, on his way home, stopped for milkshakes.<sup>20</sup>

Next, the investigation. ★



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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Vincent Bugliosi, *Helter Skelter* (New York: W. W. Norton 1974), 224-26.

<sup>2</sup>Jeff Guinn, *Manson: The Life and Times of Charles Manson* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2013), 95-96.

<sup>3</sup>Bugliosi at 226, 237; Guinn at 173.

<sup>4</sup>Bugliosi at 238.

<sup>5</sup>*Id.* at 157.

<sup>6</sup>*Id.* at 334.

<sup>7</sup>*Id.* at 238-239.

<sup>8</sup>Guinn at 180-81.

<sup>9</sup>Bugliosi at 317-18.

<sup>10</sup>*Id.* at 319.

<sup>11</sup>*Id.* at 128.

<sup>12</sup>*Id.* at 315.

<sup>13</sup>Bradley Steffens and Craig Staples, *The Trial of Charles Manson: California Cult Murders* (San Diego: Lucent Books 2002), 50-51.

<sup>14</sup>Steffens and Staples at 50; Bugliosi at 332.

<sup>15</sup>Bugliosi at 24, 55-60.


<sup>16</sup>*Id.* at 27-61.

<sup>17</sup>Murphy at 43.

<sup>18</sup>Bugliosi at 356.

<sup>19</sup>*Id.* at 68-70.

<sup>20</sup>*Id.* at 358.



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