

# The Lore of Cocaine

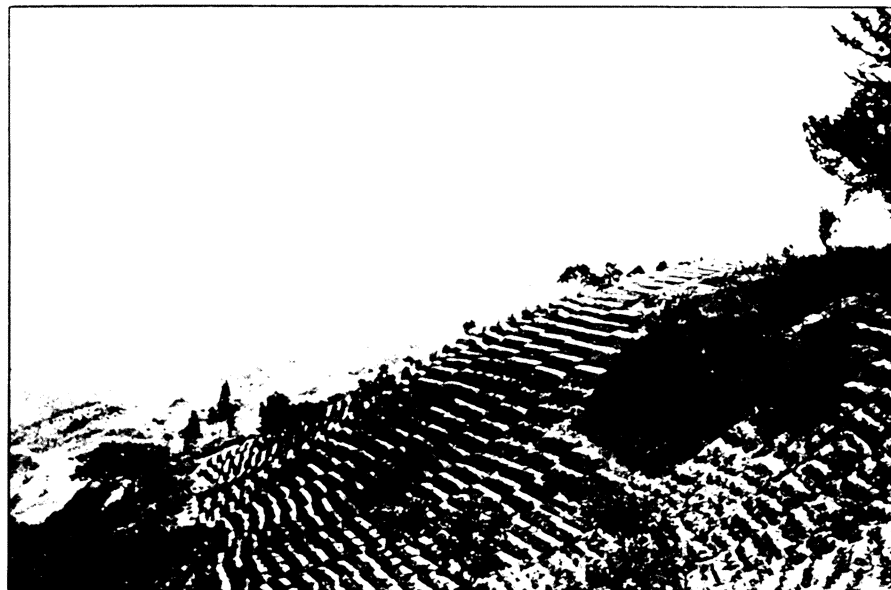
A tale of "snow lights," "bugs" and "herringbones." But what makes coke so desirable?

BY JOEL GREENBERG

Perhaps the only eyebrows raised over Peter Bourne's alleged cocaine use were those within the Carter administration. As an indication of the growing acceptance of coke use, the Bourne episode — during which the deposed White House drug advisor reportedly snorted cocaine through a rolled up currency bill of undisclosed value — was witnessed by one or more Washington Post reporters who apparently didn't even think it was worth a story at the time. The item was publicized only when Bourne resigned after admitting he falsified a patient's name on a Quaalude prescription.

If there is any illegal substance that has enjoyed "good press" and comparative public tolerance over the years, it is cocaine. Heroin and other narcotics are seen as killers that at best reduce human beings to needle-pocked addicts. Marijuana has settled into an era of benign acceptance and in the process appears to have lost some of its mystique. And alcohol, the staple of chemical mind-alterers, is still widely consumed by all classes of people despite its long-acknowledged role as destroyer of livers and exterminator of brain cells.

Cocaine, on the other hand, seems to carry a type of respectability, sophistication and even desirability among drug takers and observers of the "drug scene." Much of the mystique stems from coke's limited supply and high price. The current street price ranges from \$60 to \$100 a gram. But at least an equal contributor to cocaine's lure is its lore: "...the exotic properties attributed to it have contrib-



Photos: U. S. Drug Enforcement Agency

uted to cocaine's street reputation as *the* status drug," says the National Institute on Drug Abuse's Robert C. Peterson in NIDA's recent research report on the drug.

Among the first to articulate a sense of the cocaine high was Paolo Mantegazza. In his 1859 "The Coca Leaf and Cocaine Papers," Mantegazza reported a rush of "phantasmagoric images" after chewing a quantity of coca leaves. In addition to a doubling of his pulse rate, the scientist described a state of delirium that produced a sensation of flying through colorful visions.

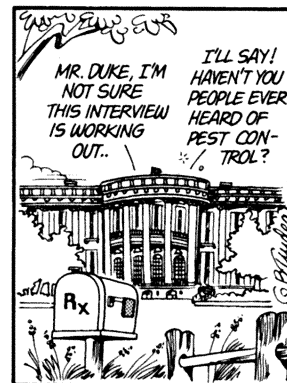
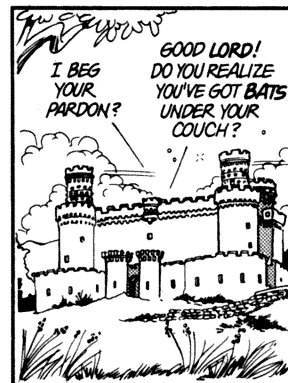
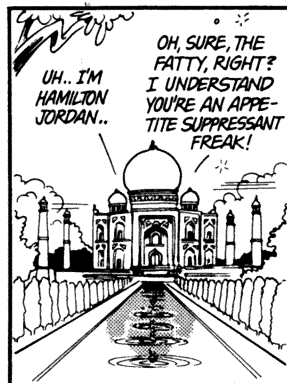
Sigmund Freud was one of many to describe "cocaine bugs," or "the hallucination of small animals moving in the skin." Such visions have been sufficiently realistic in some cases that users have been known to injure their skin in futile attempts to remove the offending coke critters. French researchers have published accounts of one patient who, "scraping his tongue, imagines that he sees small worms coming out of it. ... The (second patient)

tears off his skin and again, looking in the bottom of the wound, pulls out the microbes with his fingernails or with the point of a pin. The third ... occupies himself with looking for crystals of cocaine under the skin."

Aside from such isolated reports, however, the bulk of cocaine research has yielded little evidence that the drug is dangerous when taken in moderate doses. In the NIDA report—a four-year, \$4 million undertaking — Peterson states that "serious adverse effects of use may be quite rare." One reason might be that because coke is so expensive and hard to get relatively few Americans use the drug — and when they do it is in small quantities. Data from several nationwide surveys show that among persons 12 years of age and older, 3 to 4 percent say they have tried cocaine and fewer than 1 percent said they had taken the drug within the month prior to the survey. In the 18- to 25-year-old group, the peak age group for all illicit drug use, 13.4 percent say they have tried

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