

“The San Diego Crack Pot”

Shivering like a nudist in a rumble seat and leaving a trail of bayfront water behind him, C. Leon De Aryan, editor of The Broom, appeared at the police station today charging that five longshoremen had thrown him into the bay off the Municipal pier.

--San Diego Sun, Nov. 24, 1936

Public hostility rarely bothered C. Leon de Aryan. The owner and publisher of the San Diego newspaper called *The Broom* craved attention of any kind and often received it from his provocative editorials denouncing organized labor, international bankers, Communists, Jews, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

San Diego’s notorious dissenter was born in Romania in 1886. The son of a Greek father and a Polish mother, he was christened Constantine Leon Legenopol. After the death of his father, young Legenopol and his mother moved to Austria. At age nineteen, his mother placed him in an insane asylum but he was released after doctors in Vienna diagnosed his condition as “family persecution.”

Legenopol trained as a civil engineer and worked on engineering projects for the British in Egypt and India before immigrating to America in 1912. He soon joined the U.S. Army but soldiering proved a poor career move and after a dishonorable discharge he fled to Mexico. He returned to the United States when World War I ended. Living in Los Angeles in 1926, he became a naturalized citizen and changed his surname to “de Aryan” to reflect his ambition to champion the philosophy of the “Aryan Race.”



C. Leon De Aryan

De Aryan arrived in San Diego four years later and worked for a short time for the city of San Diego in the Public Works Department. His newspaper premiered on October 6, 1930. For the next 35 years, *The Broom* appeared on Monday in San Diego--its pages filled with news and editorials expounding the virtues of personal free will, vegetarianism, and faith in Jesus Christ. De Aryan’s columns also vented anger against labor unions, taxation, and government interference in daily lives.



In 1935, de Aryan ran for mayor. As the “anti-vice candidate” he pledged to free the city from “domination by the gamblers and the brothels” and to make sure “the underworld riff-raff of the nation” would not flood San Diego during the Panama-California Exposition. Voters were unimpressed. In a race won by Percy J. Benbough, de Aryan garnered less than 1% of the votes cast.

The next year the publisher’s anti-union writings got him in trouble with the local longshoreman’s union. Confronted at the foot of Broadway by several dock workers, de Aryan was asked if he was the one writing articles against strikers.

When he answered yes, the men pummeled de Aryan and then tossed him in the bay. Dripping wet, de Aryan marched to the local police station and filed charges.

But de Aryan's diatribes against organized labor paled in comparison to his published views on Jews. Always denying he was anti-Semitic, de Aryan claimed that his critics were "ignorant and narrow-minded people." "I stand with the Truth" became his mantra.

De Aryan's "truth" revealed that Jews were "conspirators" who were driving the world to war in order to "plunder their dupes." He decried the "bloody exploitation carried on by International Jewish Bankers."

In September 1940, after most of Europe had fallen to Nazi Germany, de Aryan wrote: "the Jews are scuttling like cockroaches out of Europe. Their international bankers and wholesale murderers and betrayers of France are safely esconded in New York and Canada; thousands of other Jewish refugees are taking jobs from American employees. De Aryan added, "Still I do not hate them because it is against my religion."

His confrontational views drew the attention of the California Senate's Un-American Activities Committee in April 1942. Testifying in Los Angeles, de Aryan proudly told the committee he had pursued an active anti-Communist policy in *The Broom* from "practically the first issue." Because of this, he claimed, the Communists were after him and even threatened him on the telephone. Fortunately, he could identify the Reds on the telephone, explaining to the committee that all Communists have a "guttural sound" in their voices. Examining de Aryan's testimony, a government attorney concluded that the publisher was a paranoid "crack pot" who would probably savor prosecution for the sake of publicity.

That summer, as de Aryan prepared to run as a Republican candidate for Congress, a federal indictment for sedition was served by a telegraphic warrant from Los Angeles. De Aryan was booked into San Diego County jail. Blaming his arrest on the C.I.O. and Communists, de Aryan began a short-lived hunger strike but continued to publish his newspaper with the aid of friends and a sympathetic printer.

He was released after several weeks, but a new indictment brought de Aryan and twenty-seven other suspected Nazi sympathizers to Washington D.C. where they went on trial in April 1944; all were charged by Attorney General Francis Biddle with conspiracy to break down the morale of the U.S. military.

De Aryan's fellow defendants in the "Great Sedition Trial" included several well-known American fascists such as William Dudley Pelley, Lawrence Dennis, and Robert Noble. The dissidents all opposed the war and shared a loathing of organized labor, Jews, communism, and President Roosevelt. A reporter noted: "Seldom have so many wild-eyed, jumpy lunatic fringe characters been assembled in one spot, within speaking, winking, and whispering distance of one another."

The indictments of the American "fascists" were popular with the public but with no evidence to support charges that they had aided the enemy the trial was a fiasco for the government. The defendants were unruly in court and alternately "moaned, groaned, laughed aloud, cheered and clamored" and on one occasion, wore Halloween masks. The case was never submitted to the jury and was finally dismissed in December 1945—seven months after the war ended in Europe.

De Aryan returned to San Diego and continued publication of *The Broom*. He drew public attention again in 1952 with a lawsuit to block fluoridation of the water system in San Diego. His suit failed but voters would ultimately reject the water treatment plan. With lessening fanfare, de Aryan continued weekly publication of his newspaper until his death on December 13, 1965 at age 79.



Images courtesy Special Collections, San Diego Public Library

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