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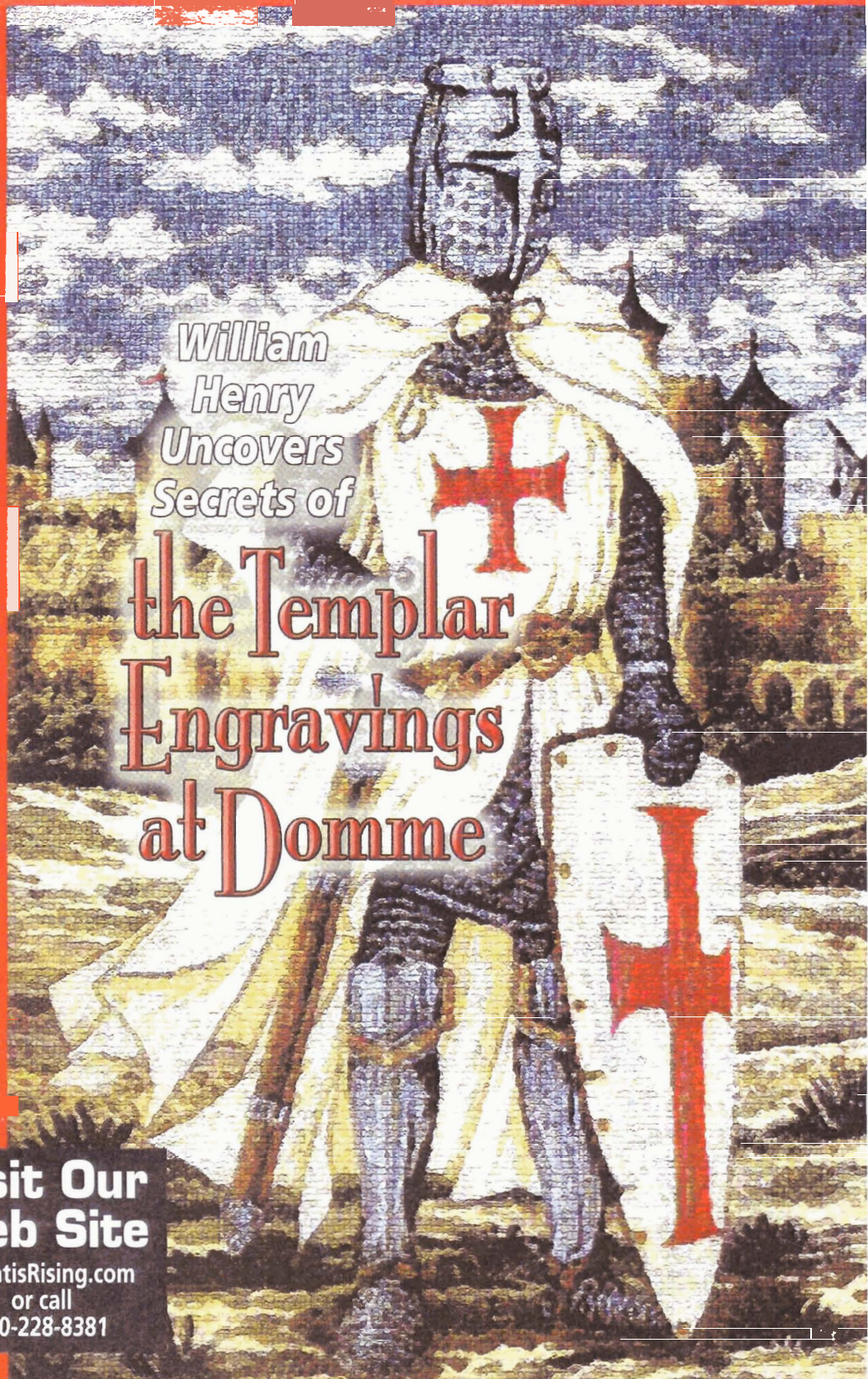
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● BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

India Supera is pointing to a small area overlooking a sparkling lake on the nearly 100 acres that comprise the Feathered Pipe Ranch in the Rocky Mountains just outside Helena, Montana. It's her garden, and she's telling guests they should "feel free to weed it." She raises a hand expressively towards the expanse surrounding them. Her fingernails display rich, dark dirt—she's a woman of the land she loves and believes to be as sacred as any spot on earth. As director of the Feathered Pipe Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to furthering humanitarian efforts and preserving endangered cultures and traditions, she and her staff plan and run the programs she hopes will help participants develop resources of body, mind and spirit. Her own resources are generous and well developed—you're tempted to think of her as Mother Supera, Mother India.

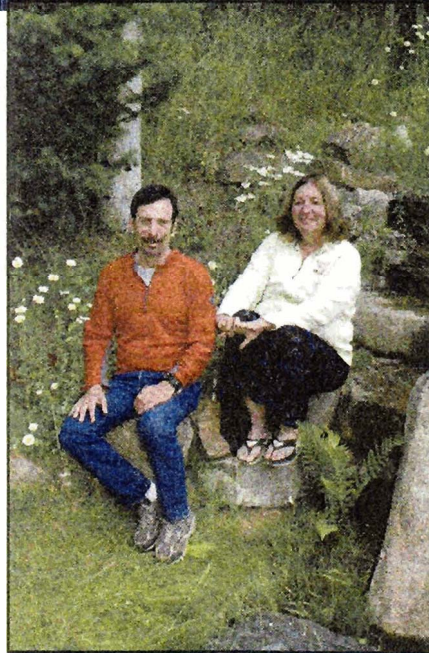
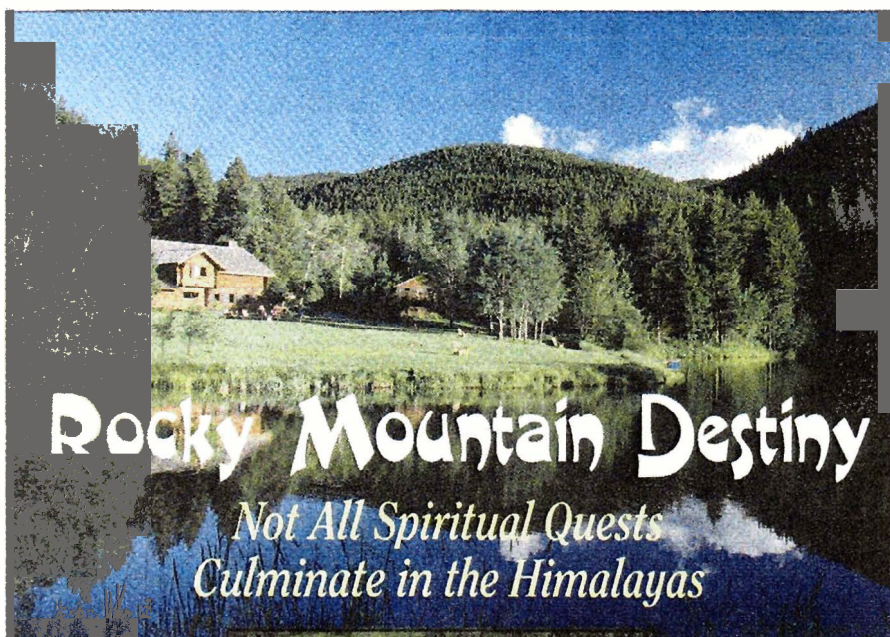
An A-student who had always been at the top of her class in Downey, California, Supera dropped out of high school in the '60s ("we moved to Orange and my new Latin teacher didn't know Latin") and began an adventure to rival those of Indiana Jones. It culminated in her being given the land she now lives on year-round, with just enough money to keep it up for about a year. Thirty years later, after having seen and led tours to nearly every sacred site on the planet, Supera feels it's just as awe-inspiring as any place she's visited. "You can trace history in Montana," she says. "The earth still has a large voice here; this [ranch] land is older than the mountains that surround it—granite outcroppings, essentially crystal conductors, help create a vortex of energy almost like a 'reverse pyramid.'" (She says granite has been discovered to be "something like 90% air" at the subatomic level, and thinks the Pyramid builders may have tapped into that lightness to move those rocks!) With 180,000 acres of national reserve hugging it, Supera considers this land "kind and gentle," the yin counterpart to the nearby Blacktail Ranch in Wolf Creek, Montana. "You won't encounter anything poisonous or dangerous here," she states. "You will find abundant wildlife, healing plants and beautiful flowers. You can hike any-

where in the vicinity, get lost and find your way to a road within two hours."

As the yang component of this tai chi, the Blacktail boasts more rugged terrain, and does hold out the possibility of an encounter with bears and other animals. A jewel at the base of the Continental Divide, Blacktail's 8,000 acres are surrounded by

have been the most sacred of sites. "I love the Feathered Pipe," exclaims Supera, "but the Blacktail takes my breath away—I felt like I was betraying a lover when I first set foot here and felt the way I did." Rich with archaeological sites, it holds an extensive cave system dating back to the Ice Age, as well as tipi rings, and Medicine and Sun Wheels. An on-site museum houses artifacts from the cave—the deepest in the world, and largest in the Americas. Evidence suggests it cradled people as far back as 18,000 years B.C.E. Sitting inside around a natural stone altar with a group offering chants and prayers by candlelight, time stands still, ancient offerings still reverberate against the womb-like walls, echoing down through the ages. You feel a deep connection to those who warmed and worshiped here so long ago, as well as to the earth herself.

Owner Tag Rittel discovered the Blacktail cave when he was a teenager. Exploring the property with four younger boys, carrying a knife in his mouth ala Errol Flynn and wielding a weak flashlight, he came across the entrance. Uncovering enough to send the smallest boy through ("it was a belly buster, you had to go in at a 45 degree angle"), he says the boy returned quickly, eyes wide, sure he'd seen a bear's eyes glinting back at him. "I braved the next one up and sent him in," recalls Rittel. "He came back just as quickly, saying there was definitely a bear in there. It was just like being Tom Sawyer!" He sent the third boy in, then the fourth. Each returned with the same wide-eyed fear. He finally dug out enough to lower himself inside, saw the same "eyes" and had to force himself not to run. The eyes turned out to be light filtering through an opening and playing over green leaves. Through the years, explorations have yielded 28 different ice-age animal remains, including a musk ox and a Kodiak bear (the first to be found on the mainland), each dated as being 15,000-20,000 years old. Overseen by Montana State archaeologists, 15 five-gallon buckets of bones, including those of humans, were unearthed in the 1960s. During the next decade, a new chamber was discovered within the five-mile labyrinth. Psychic an-



(above) Feathered Pipe ranch (below) Ranch manager Howard Levin and India Supera (all pictures by Deborah Anderson)

the Helena National Forest, the largest roadless area in the lower 48 states. Pine and fir trees roll into broad fields of natural grasses and wildflowers. Not far away, the Bob Marshall Wilderness is home to an ancient Indian camp considered by many to

thropologist George McMillan has stated there is a yet undiscovered southern entrance, and there are hundreds of people buried nearby. Other seers believe Chief Joseph is buried on Blacktail property.

Both the Blacktail and the Feathered Pipe ranches receive guests for retreat, recreation and renewal. Both offer sweat lodge ceremonies and feature prominent spiritual workshop leaders. Though you might think of the Feathered Pipe (the name signifies finding new direction, after an Indian Pipe ritual) as similar to California's Esalen, Massachusetts's Kripalu Center and New York's Omega Institute, Supera sees them as distinctly different: "Esalen focuses more on the intellectual life, and we're much smaller than either Kripalu or Omega. People really have to make a pilgrimage to come here." Then, there's the land. Supera believes that "scarcity of use" preserves its integrity and sanctity. "The trails to the Himalayas had to be closed for awhile because of the intense traffic," she notes. (Recently, a Montana-based company found a creative solution for the problems of human waste caused by pilgrims trekking to sacred sites around the globe.) Though early programs focused on astrology, psychic development and biofeedback, and introduced pioneers like Paavo Airola, Dr. John Lilly, Dr. Andrew Weil and the renowned Dr. Bernard Jensen, the Feathered Pipe Ranch has become synonymous with Iyengar Yoga, a style of Hatha yoga that focuses on alignment of the body according

to techniques introduced by BKS Iyengar. "We really helped shape the Iyengar community," says Supera, who, though she also helped to found the *Yoga Journal*, doesn't look like she puts in much mat time. Though she feels the body is the gateway to the spirit, hers has been a meditative embodiment.

As a child, Supera eagerly spent her allowance on *National Geographic* magazines, as long as they contained articles on India. Her father, a linguist as well as an artist with a keen interest in Vedantic thought, often entertained East Indian visitors. The two traveled to Mexico ("I was the only sixteen year-old who left home and her father came with her," she jokes). "My parents were pretty straight, but dad had some



Ancient graffiti in Blacktail Cave

strange friends. I met John Lilly, Richard Albert (Ram Dass) and Timothy Leary. They encouraged me in my adventure—and introduced me to mushrooms, acid and grass." She says the drugs helped her accept her mind as it was. She'd always meditated and would imagine she could fly ("I knew where everything was from studying the *National Geographic* magazines"). "I went from being an outcast to being the Hippie Queen." After her father returned to America, Supera stayed; on while in a remote area, she was bitten by a poisonous spider. "Indian shamans cut my ankle and started to bleed it, then put me on a donkey with some guides for the two-day journey to a hospital. Along the way they gave me substances to help me survive. I had flashbacks to former embodiments that grounded my belief in reincarnation," she remembers.

Back in the States in this lifetime, Supera found herself smack in the middle of San Francisco in 1965, going to concerts and starting a small business. For a while, being a Flower Child was satisfying but, still drawn to the East, she decided to hitchhike to New York, fly to Europe and go overland to India. She got as far as Utah when she learned her parents had been in a serious car accident. Her mother died 12 hours after Supera arrived. "She was the first person I'd seen die, and I was elated," she relates. "Though people thought the trip to

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Mexico had flipped me out, I was overjoyed because now I knew death was a transition and that we're not our bodies." After a time of healing with her father, Supera continued on to New York with a friend, where the Village Voice was doing a series of radio shows on teen-age runaways. "They paid us for our stories—just enough to get us to Luxembourg and spend one night in a hotel," she says. "This is how I learned to fast, since we didn't have money for food every day." In Italy, the two were arrested arbitrarily—and Supera was sent to a convent. "I loved it. I could wash the statues of Christ and live in the cloister eating great spaghetti." After three weeks, she was sent back to New York.

Her third attempt to get to India brought her through Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Afghanistan. "I went weeks without a bath going through the desert. When I experienced my first public bath I thought I'd found enlightenment!" Cleaned up, she arrived in Afghanistan and was entreated to deliver a baby, immediately becoming part of the family. Things were going well when the foreign diet and culture shock caught up with her; Supera contracted hepatitis and went into a coma. She was revived by the daily prayer vigil held by village

women—along with the opium they gave her three times a day. Still thinking she was going to die, she shaved her head and took a vow to give away everything she had at the end of the day other than her clothing. With revolution erupting in Afghanistan, a 90-pound, bald Supera traveled to India with a translator, planning to go to the foot of the Himalayas to sleep naked in the snow. Admitting she has addictive tendencies, she comments: "I used to be a very rowdy person...if I hadn't been introduced to opium it would have been beer, wine or something else. When I was going through my sadhu stage, I was totally addicted."

While Supera was living under a tree with beggars and lepers, her sister was paralleling her trip along a different pathway. They met spontaneously under a full moon at a river in India, where Supera had come to wash her dishes. "We were always very different and fought," she remarks, adding with humor, "You know, there was no toilet paper—I almost killed her when she used a page from my journal instead of her own!" Nevertheless, the two decided to join forces and walked to southern India, where they met Satya Sai Baba, who invited them to stay at his home in Bangalore. Supera was still dangerously underweight and had such severe rheumatism she couldn't get up

off the floor unassisted, and such bad tooth pain she'd frequently faint. She credits Sai Baba with freeing her from these conditions and her addiction. "He healed me physically and spiritually," she says. She spent her next life phase in service with Sai Baba, working in a hospital he'd set up, helping the increasing number of foreign devotees adapt to the lack of modern hygiene, impure water and a radically different diet, gaining skills she would need for her life's work.

While serving at the ashram, Supera met a woman who owned the Feathered Pipe Ranch property. Germain Duncan knew she was dying and wanted to leave the land to her. Supera wanted nothing more than to live a simple, sequestered life, but agreed to take the property, which she promptly put on the market. It didn't sell, and after four

days of fasting in the mountains and a visionary "maiden sweat," she saw clearly that her calling was to establish an educational center, as both Duncan and Baba had told her she should. The next day a limousine pulled onto the property its occupants, a Las Vegas gambling family, offered her \$500,000. "That was a huge test," she sighs. "I've sometimes regretted not just having taken the money!" But by then, her decision and dedication had been forged, and Feathered Pipe began its journey.



The Feathered Pipe Gong