WHO did the Bohemian Grove encampment cease to be the pivotal cultural event in the West and become the playground of the rich and powerful? That's a tough question to answer. You won't get a definitive response from Bohemians since the official position is that it never happened, that the focus is still artistic. Club literature indicates the press and public have an exaggerated view of the encampment as a power-broking event. In fact, the club is a refuge from decision-making and other pressures and strictures of government, politics, business and commerce, it says in the official background information packet released to the press, pointing out that the club's motto is "Weaving spiders, come not here."

"Members are most respected and valued for their artistic talents," says the information paper, which acknowledges that "There are, it is true, many members of business, political, scientific and academic prominence in the club. To Bohemians," it says, "somewhat disingenuously, 'any Bohemian who contributes to the club's purposes is a celebrity' and worldly fame impresses the members far less than the gifts of talent, time, and effort."

It is "against the club's grain to name or discuss living members," and the guest list for each year's encampment is kept in secrecy (with frequent "leaks" to the media), just as the confines of the Grove are guarded against intruders.

IF THE BOHEMIAN Club has changed through the years, so has the rest of the world. Quantum leaps in transportation and communication technology have narrowed the cultural and artistic gaps between the coasts. While it is sad to suggest, it may also be true that artistic achievements outside film and TV are not valued as they once were. And, certainly, money and power are, in some aspects, more feared.

In the more recent decades women have protested the sexism in membership and hiring practices, peace activists have staged sit-ins to protest the presence of the leaders of the military-industrial complex. Scandals about call girls in nearby resort areas have come up more than once.

The organization whose early members were afraid that frivolous — yes, bohemian — lifestyle would detract from their serious purpose, now protests that it is taken too seriously, that it's all good clean fun. The troubled encampments of the 1980s — when screaming protesters lined the road to the Grove and goon journalists sneaked in to write tasteless pieces on who was there (always a former president or two), how much they drank and who was seen watering the redwood trees — have diminished in the '90s. The biggest news story from the Grove encampment last year was a fuss over who would benefit from the Bohemians' annual "thank you" show for the Monte Rio community. The show went on as always, with Art Linkletter as emcee, benefiting the area's schools.

This new serenity doesn't mean that all is forgiven — as many of us will attest to until I'm sure. Nor does it mean that reporters and photographers won't be hanging out at the airport in the next two weeks. After all, how often do Ronald Reagan and George Bush, creative souls that they are, come around?