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Ken Kesey and His Pranksters

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

What Tomothy Leary was doing from the East Coast in the mid-1960s, Ken Kesey was doing from the West Coast, but with none of the trappings of science and academia. Kesey's role was so significant in the spread of psychedelic drug use that someone once referred to him as the Johnny Appleseed of LSD. His role in spreading LSD across the United States in his 1939 International Harvester school bus tours with Neal Cassady and the "Merry Pranksters" was made famous in the Tom Wolfe book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Kesey and his Pranksters sponsored "acid tests"--musical and visual extravaganzas in which hundreds of people were turned on to LSD.

In a twist of irony that fills the history of illicit drug use in the United States, Kesey was first exposed to LSD as a paid volunteer (\$75 per day) in a government-funded research project at Menlo Park Veterans Hospital. Enamored with his new drug experiences, Kesey sought out marihuana and under its influence began writing a novel about his experiences as an aid in a psychiatric hospital. The popular success of this book, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, thrust Kesey into the role of folk hero and provided the funds to subsidize his role as LSD promoter.