TASTE FEATURE

Before Stonewall

By William Mcgowan

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"N ationwide ring preying on prominent deviates." So ran the headline of a front-page story in the New York Times on March 3, 1966, announcing the police crackdown on an extortion scheme. In hindsight, the headline language seems offensive. But what really makes the jaw drop is the scale of the scheme as well as the prestige of the men who were victimized by it.

According to authorities, the blackmailers had been operating for nearly 10 years, shaking down more than a thousand men and netting more than a million dollars. Announcing the indictments, the Manhattan district attorney declined to identify those who had been blackmailed out of concern that they would be professionally and personally destroyed. He did disclose, however, that they numbered among them leading figures in government, business, entertainment, academia and the military. As a Times follow-up report noted, all the victims were told "that their homosexual proclivities would be exposed unless they paid for silence."

This extraordinary but now forgotten case is worth examining in detail. Every June, gay activists celebrate the Stonewall uprising of 1969, when a Greenwich Village raid erupted in a riot. But the image of mad-as-hell drag queens defying the police jackboot does not capture the whole story of the time. "The Chickens and the Bulls," as the extortion case was known, reveals a law-enforcement ethos of far more sensitivity and responsiveness than current-day orthodoxy allows.

In the 1950s and 1960s, "fairy shaking" was a real worry for closeted homosexuals. Such extortion usually happened in isolation, but in this case the blackmailers "took it to another level," recalls Andrew Maloney, a federal prosecutor on the case. They coordinated efforts in New York, Chicago, Washington and elsewhere.

Leading the Chicago ring was a retired cop named John Pyne. In New York the leaders were Sherman Kaminsky, who claimed to have fought in the Israeli army, and Edward "Mother" Murphy, a ruthless West Side tough. In league with them were two-dozen henchmen posing as corrupt cops ("bulls") and about as many young male prostitutes ("chickens").

The extortionists would stake out places like New York's Astor Hotel, where older men in fedoras and business suits found it easy to hook up with younger male companions. Sometimes the "chickens" would beat and rob their victims in a hotel room, making off with wallets and ID. Weeks later, after finding out who had families, jobs or reputations at stake, members of the ring posing as detectives would approach a victim, explain that they knew he was involved in shady doings and claim they had an arrest warrant. If the victim paid up, the arrest wouldn't happen.

In other cases, the blackmailers, again impersonating cops, would pay off hotel security and burst into the room while sexual activity was taking place, making an "arrest" on sodomy charges. Then they would suggest a bribe or promise to process the arrest through back channels if "bail money" was proffered.

The ring was brazen. Those who resisted might be brought downtown right into night court, while the blackmailers would kibitz at the rail with real court officers. In one case, the phony cops bluffed a desk sergeant into putting a victim into a cell overnight.

Among the victims were the head of the American Medical Association, two Army generals, an admiral, several Hollywood entertainers, and more than a few college professors and prep-school instructors. A GOP congressman, Rep. Peter Frelinghuysen, was hit for $50,000 and marched right out of his Capitol Hill office so he could fly back to New Jersey to get money from his bank. One Kansas City businessman gradually handed over nearly $150,000 until he pleaded with the criminals to kill him because he had no more money to give.

The case was broken by detectives working for the Manhattan district attorney and by federal authorities. In New York, the investigation began on a slow Sunday morning in July 1965, when Detective James McDonnell arrested a man impersonating a detective in Grand Central Station. This low-level arrest led to several key players. The feds got involved when a Princeton professor who had fallen for the "bail money" scam went into an FBI field office looking to get his $11,000 bond back.

Although many of the New York detectives were socially conservative Irish Catholics, whatever distaste they might have felt for the proclivities of the victims was eclipsed by sympathy for the men, their wives and families, disgust at the cruelty of the criminals, and outrage that the good name of the NYPD was being sullied.

Once the arrests began, ring members rolled on each other readily. Getting the victims to testify proved difficult. Many lied to investigators out of fear of being exposed. Some refused to cooperate out of lingering mistrust of the cops. In the end what paid off for detectives was persistence and discretion. "I did everything in my power," recalls Detective McDonnell, "to make sure their families and their business associates did not get involved."

Underscoring the delicacy of the situation was the case of Adm. William Church. Facing the end of his career, he was "reluctant" and "withdrawn" when approached by Detective McDonnell in Washington. The detective would have preferred Church to fly up to New York with him right then for an interview with investigators, but it was agreed that he would drive up by himself the next day. That night Church drove to a motel in Bethesda, Md., and shot himself in the head.

This tragedy aside, authorities on the whole were able to limit personal and professional damage. Although the Justice Department discreetly informed the congressional leadership about Rep. Frelinghuysen, he was not forced to resign from Congress or from his committee assignments. Military officers who admitted to being targets, however, had to retire.

Although prosecutors often possessed enough evidence to win convictions at trial, "we got most of the perpetrators to plead because we really did not want to put the victims on the stand," Andrew Maloney says. His boss, Robert Morgenthau, then a U.S. attorney and now the Manhattan district attorney, recalls: "We made every effort to protect them." News organizations were equally discreet.

Ringleader John Pyne from Chicago got two five-year sentences. His New York associate, Sherman Kaminsky, became a fugitive and was caught 11 years later. Edward "Mother" Murphy served part of a five-year prison term.

Murphy later became a prominent gay activist. Four months after his death in 1989, he was named honorary grand marshal of the Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade.

Mr. McGowan is at work on "Digital Black," a novel about New York detectives.