

Vice Squad Harassment of Gays Continues

Michael Betzold

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Two summers ago all we heard on the news were stories about the gangs that were terrorizing the citizens of Detroit—vicious, sadistic teen-agers who beat people up during rapes or robberies. People on the East side were afraid to come out of their homes. (See FE #276, September 1976). All the publicity about the gangs has died down what with the “Renaissance City” hype and all, but there is one gang that was operating then and that is still at large today. The members of this brutal gang are employed by the City of Detroit.

The Case of Robert Rope

On the night of August 1, 1978, shortly after midnight, Robert Rope, a resident of the Palmer Park district, was walking along a street near his home. A car approached him from behind and the driver of the car began yelling at him, “Where do you live?” and ordered him to come over to the car. The driver pulled out a badge and began screaming at Robert, “Where’s your ID and what’s your address?” Robert began walking away.

The driver jumped from the car, grabbed Robert’s hair and threw him to the street yelling obscenities and warnings about walking away from a cop. He then threw Robert into the back seat of the car, drove to the precinct station where Robert was booked for accosting and soliciting. At the station, Robert was subjected to a humiliating “interrogation” at the hands of the vice cop, an officer Marshall Schaeffer.

Robert stated in part, “During this interrogation he (Schaeffer) threatened to kill me, to bash my teeth in and specifically, ‘If I ever see you at Menjo’s or Bookie’s I’m going to castrate you.’ Rope was also not allowed to make a phone call and when he told Schaeffer that he “would be heard in court,” the vice cop threw him to the floor injuring his head and back and handcuffed him screaming, “If there’s anything I hate worse than a queer, it’s a punk queer.” Rope suffered cuts and bruises, hair ripped from his head, torn clothes and heavy emotional damage.

Rope is a gay activist and anarchist and from the reactions of the police must threaten the whole fabric of law and order in this society. Actually, the kind of open, completely unprovoked attack by which this Vice squad cop arrested Rope is a little bit unusual. Most Vice squad assaults against gay people in Detroit take the form of entrapment. Unconcerned with legal niceties, Vice squad undercover cops inhabit areas of the city noted for gay activity or “cruising” and regularly entrap and arrest gays in city parks, movie theaters and public restrooms. Only infrequently do the police operate in gay bars, where they seem to have made a rather nefarious peace with the bar owners, but often patrol in the near area to intimidate customers.

The extent of vice squad activities against gays in Detroit can only be estimated from the complaints received by the Gay Switchboard, a local clearing house and resource center for the gay community. However, it can be assumed that only a small percentage of the people arrested by the Vice squad call the Switchboard and that only a certain percentage of gays harassed by the police end up actually getting arrested and charged with a crime.

The Switchboard “bust sheets” detailing Vice squad arrests of Detroit gays read like some bizarre, pulp paperbacks. The scenarios involve cops leaping out from heater rooms in lavatories to arrest men sitting on the toilet,

cops approaching gay men in straight porno theaters, and other similar strange encounters. The officers launch an entrapment either by a direct solicitation of the gay victim or by merely nabbing a gay man in a known “cruising” area. No matter what one’s feelings are about “cruising,” one thing is clear: heterosexual males looking for anonymous sex in bars, on beaches or on the streets are not subjected to entrapment by the police.

Harassment of gays is precisely effective because the Vice squad operates in street clothes and often affects the dress styles of the gay culture, hence there is no warning that one is dealing with a cop. The psychological impact of the always suspected presence of the Vice squad is enormous. Gays feel no one can be trusted—a stranger met for the first, or even second or third time may turn out to be an undercover cop. It doesn’t really matter whether you are looking for a sexual encounter or not: if you’re not interested, the cop will make the come-on. “Minding your own business” is not sufficient protection from a Vice cop.

Fortunately, Robert Rope was not forced into the indignity of a trial since his case was dismissed by Traffic Court Judge Haig, who, in an ongoing dispute with the prosecutor’s office has routinely been dismissing all Accosting and Soliciting cases brought before him. Had the case made it to court, Robert had planned to fight the charges against him and to launch an attack on the practices of the Vice squad—and this makes him unusual.

For those not publicly gay, arrest on Accosting and Soliciting charges may mean loss of job or family support, so often guilty pleas are entered with no fuss made. Rarely have the undercover cops been fought openly in court and when they are, a judge or jury seems more likely to believe the word of the arresting officer than that of a “queer.” Obviously the Vice squad cannot be challenged effectively on their own turf—within the legal system.

The Vice squad is not just a threat to gays who openly cruise. To fight this problem it must first be recognized in its full scope, and not just seen as a gay “civil rights” issue. Today, while some gays expend energy fighting for civil rights, the Vice squad prove that such rights are only pieces of paper that can be trampled on at whim. The Vice squad is part of America’s secret police, repressing dissidents with quiet, deadly violence while the “legitimate” cops and the courts struggle to keep up the appearance of a society ruled by law. In a society where wide-scale, open violence by the state is unnecessary because the strongest police force is inside people’s head, constantly reinforced by bosses at work, experts on TV, and smoldering violence at home, the Vice squad push around people who threaten the official version of sexuality.

To the extent some people, like gays in Detroit, can be cowed to the point of helplessly submitting to random violence, the tools used by the organized gangs of the State become more powerful. Today the Vice squad plagues prostitutes and gay people and are practically unopposed; they will eagerly keep searching for more victims if their power continues to grow.

This is the “liberated” ‘70s—bisexuality is chic; gay people appear on TV talk shows. In San Francisco and New York gay couples walk openly down the street holding hands. In Detroit, it’s a crime to even look like someone who is not following the dictates of the Vodka billboards and the shaving cream commercials and indulging in approved heterosexual sex. In some cities with large gay populations, the homosexual communities are strong enough to have curtailed police harassment. In order to do the same in Detroit, a campaign of relentless exposure of the Vice squad’s activities and its operatives is needed. All those who understand the nature of the state’s repression through the use of organized terrorist squads should be participants. Vice officers depend on their anonymity for their effectiveness. Widespread exposure means an end to their undercover effectiveness.

Help Ice the Vice

The Robert Rope Defense Committee formed after Robert’s arrest to fight his charges, wants to continue beyond mere defense in its project of trying to “ice the Vice.” They are asking that anyone victimized by either the Vice Squad or uniformed police call the Gay Switchboard at 577-3450 between 6 and 10 p.m. daily with details. The Switchboard also offers assistance to victims of police brutality, including referrals to legal assistance.

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