

# Pigs Riot in Park

Joe Check

1969

On Sunday, August 24, a group of men attending the Ever-Seven (Evergreen-Seven Mile Road) neighborhood association picnic in Stoepel Park harassed and beat up a group of young people who were also in the park.

There were a number of off-duty police officers at the picnic, as well as several kegs of beer and "law and order" Common Council candidate Jack Kelly.

Observers agree that by the time the incident began, at about 5:15 p.m., many of the men were under the influence of alcohol. One of the picnickers suffered a heart attack and a crowd, including the young people, gathered to watch a woman attempt to revive him with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

A scout car arrived and a uniformed officer continued the artificial respiration. Greg Smolen, one of the young people, describes what followed this way: "When a woman was giving the guy artificial respiration, it looked to me like he was starting to come around. He was turning, you know, sort of purple. Then the officer came and breathed into the guy's mouth for about 30 seconds, got up, put his hand on the guy's heart and said something like 'He's dead, no hope,' or something like that and then left. I thought that you were supposed to keep trying to revive somebody till a doctor got there to make sure whether he was alive or not."

At this point, one of the teenagers, unaware that he was standing in the middle of a crowd composed mostly of off-duty police officers and law and order sympathizers, muttered "What a pig!" in reference to the uniformed officer, whom he felt had been negligent in his attempts to revive the heart attack victim.

This made overt hostilities in the crowd that had so far been latent, and a scattered charge of picnickers towards the young people followed. Scott Zerlack, 15, was hospitalized for at least a week with a concussion and a broken jaw as a result of the attack.

When three men began to beat Scott, a 16-year-old girl, screamed at them to stop. She says, "There were three men pounding on Scott. I started yelling every thing I could think of at them to get them off. I can't really describe them except they were all huge, tremendous, with white t-shirts and shorts and big beer bellies. Then this really big guy turned me around and swung and hit me right in the mouth and knocked me down."

The officers from the scout car were on the scene watching, and did nothing to intervene, presumably because they condoned the zeal their off-duty brothers displayed in extending the fight against "crime in the streets" to kids in the parks.

Lance Davis, a 25-year-old manufacturer's representative who was playing tennis in the park and witnessed the incident says he saw uniformed police officers stand by while a crowd of picnickers "mauled and beat" young people.

The young girl approached one of the uniformed officers and pointed out the man who had hit her. The officer took the man's name, John Lee Goodhue of 15502 Chatham, and the information that he was the son-of a police officer, and did nothing. He informed the girl that if she wanted to make a complaint she had to come down to the station.

After the initial charge, Greg Smolen says, "We all left the park and went and stood across Evergreen because we didn't want any trouble. But they stood across the street shouting at us and then started to cross the street after

us. We took Scott and Mary (the girl) across to my mother's house and we were standing out front and they came across and were shouting at us. Then my mother said to one of them, 'You must be a big man to hit a 16-year-old girl.' And he said, 'Yeah, and I can hit old ladies too.' Then after awhile they went back to the park."

About 20 kids, boys and girls, returned to the park around 6:30 pm. The picnic was still in progress. The kids were sitting around some tables about 100 yards away from the picnic area when, as Ian Mack, Scott Zerlack's brother-in-law, described it, "These two guys from the picnic came over to their car and did something, don't know what, some kind of sign or something. Then they came over to us and said 'Are you happy he's dead?' (referring to the heart-attack victim). Then he started crowding me and making remarks so I hit one of them across the head with my leather.

"Then a full scale riot broke out and all started running and fighting. Ipa (Jim Ipalucci, one of the kids) was playing football and three guys went and grabbed him and dragged him over his car and dented his car and then threw him inside. Then all the squad cars pulled up and 2 guys flashed badges at the uniformed cops to show they were cops too. We split across the street finally. It lasted about a half hour I guess.

"The pigs didn't do anything but throw us out of the park. They didn't arrest any of those guys or anything."

Roxanne Smolen, Greg's wife, said, "My father used to be a police officer and I recognized some of the men. They were policemen he used to know."

On Monday the kids came down to the Fifth Estate office to try to get their story to the public since, as they put it, "We didn't want to go to the pig press with this. We don't trust them." After talking to them, the Fifth Estate sent them to the Ad-Hoc Action Group, which watches the police department closely and attempts to educate the public to the widespread police brutality in the city.

Ad-Hoc contacted the *Detroit Free Press* and broke the story to them, interviewed the young people and began their own investigation. They also contacted the Citizen's Complaint Bureau (CCB) of the Police Department and arranged for members of the group who had been hurt to talk to the CCB and file complaints on Wednesday.

The *Free Press* contacted the 16<sup>th</sup> precinct, which covers the Stoepel Park area, but there was no police report filed on the incident. The Precinct claimed initially that no such incident had occurred, then that it had been so minor that it did not warrant a report.

When calls to residents in the area revealed that as many as 100 people had been involved in a full-scale melee covering a half-hour period, and that at least 6 squad cars had been dispatched to the scene, it was apparent that another whitewash of illegal police behavior was being attempted.

Even now, after eyewitnesses have given the Citizens Complaint Bureau statements which tell that both on- and off-duty officers were involved, Police Commissioner Johannes Spreen's office has given the public a statement saying that no off-duty officers were involved, and that on-duty officers left before the incident began.

The Ad-Hoc's investigation has brought to light the fact that this incident is a major flare-up in a continuing battle between the kids who use Stoepel Park and the police who are trying to run them out.

Harassment of the kids has accelerated since they made their story public and filed complaints. Scott Zerlack's mother told CCB interviewers, "I raised my children to respect the authority of police. But how can I expect them to believe that now? It's really a shame that people have to be afraid of the people that are supposed to be protecting them. And I'm frightened."

An 8-member Ad-Hoc Cop Watching team stayed with the group Thursday night, August 28, at the park. The group that night consisted of about 20 boys and girls sitting around some picnic tables, talking.

At exactly 8:30 six police vehicles converged on the group, blinding them with flashlights and headlights.

Four officers emerged and a sergeant very hostilely barked, "The park is closed: break it up, get out." Two squad cars had pulled up about 10 feet from the table and were shining their headlights directly at the kids. Two unmarked cars had crept out of the bushes behind the group and two other squad cars were parked on Evergreen, about 200 yards away.

Ad-Hoc Director Sheila Murphy spoke to the officers and told them that according to the Department of Parks and Recreation, Stoepel Park does not close: it is open all night.

The officer then said, "We have a run for disorderly disturbance. Disorderly disturbance call, get out!"

Miss Murphy told the officer that the cop-watching team had been with the group since about 7:30 and that there had been no loud noise or disturbances. She then asked who had made the complaint, and why did the kids have to leave the park.

The officers were very tense and although they said they did not know the name of the person making the complaint, they insisted that the kids leave the park. The kids left, scattered across Evergreen or got in cars and drove off, but they have really nowhere else to go.

As Dave Skuba says, "We've been coming here for two years. This is our park. We're not out on the street causing trouble; we're not B&E-ing someplace. In the summer we just hang in the park. It's too hot to stay home, and there are a lot of us so we need a big place, so we stay in the park. The pigs throw us out 3 or 4 times a week.

"Sometimes they come back two or three times a night. One night they kicked us out, so we were all walking along Evergreen and these other pigs stopped us and said, 'Get off the streets! Why don't you go stay in the park?' So we said we had just been kicked out of the park, but we went back. So about 15 minutes later, the first car came back again and told us, 'we just told you to get out. You better get out or you'll be sorry.' So we left again. Their favorite line is, 'Hey kid, put an egg in your shoe and beat it.' Real funny."

Up to this point, the kids were not sure whether the police could legally force them to leave the park or not. Now they know that legally the park does not close. This makes no difference in the real situation, since when the squad cars pull up, you better move or you can get your head busted.

But the young people are beginning to realize that just because they do not look like 40-year-old suburbanites or police officers is no reason why they should be harassed and beaten.

The Ad-Hoc group is attempting to find a means of enforcing the law against the illegal actions of the upholders of law and justice in our city, but- the kids are impatient.

Their feeling is, "This is our park. We are here every day from noon till late at night. We use the park, and now we know they don't have the right to kick us out. If something doesn't change soon, we're going to stay here one night and have it out."

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See "Cops Continue Park Hassle," FE #88, September 18-October 1, 1969.

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