

Roller Derby

What did Oakland cops really think about the wild '60s? Go ahead, make their day, ask them.

BY KELLY VANCE

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The Thursday Club

Film Director: George Paul Csicsery

Where: At the Oakland Museum of California, Friday, February 4

Written By: George Paul Csicsery

George Paul Csicsery's documentary *The Thursday Club* is a deceptive piece of work, in the best sense of the term. We go in to it expecting a rough-and-tumble exposé of police brutality against demonstrators and political dissidents -- based on the movie's tag line, "How the Oakland Police Saw the 1960s" -- but we come away with something bigger, an intimate portrait of a pivotal time.

The film's advertising uses one of those classic '60s-era black-and-white news photos, no doubt shot with fast, grainy Tri-X Pan film, of a melee in progress -- riot-helmeted cops brandishing nightsticks wading through a group of confused, fleeing young people. The photo could have been shot in Chicago or DC or anywhere, but it was taken in downtown Oakland in October 1967, when anti-Vietnam-War protesters were trying to shut down the army induction center. The focal point of the photo, which was picked up by wire services and appeared in newspapers across the country, is a long-haired, mustachioed young man clutching a shoulder bag. He looks as if he's falling down amid the chaos. He clearly wants to get away in a hurry, but he can't. Directly behind him is a police officer, kicking forward as if about to land his nightstick on the young man's head. The young man is George Paul Csicsery at age nineteen.

The Oakland filmmaker, whose last documentary was the fascinating study of repressed-memory accusations, *Hungry for Monsters*, always wondered who that cop was. In fact, he was curious about the whys and wherefores of the Oakland police and all police in general. That nagging curiosity led Csicsery to write a story for Salon.com in 1998, about an informal group of retired Oakland policemen who met once a week to eat lunch and shoot the bull at the Clambucket, an undistinguished hofbrau near the Oakland docks, now out of business. Csicsery invited himself into the Thursday Club, befriended his former antagonists, and set about making a record of who these men in blue really were. That was a brilliant idea in itself. There are all too many accounts of the "winning" side of the culture wars of the '60s and '70s -- from Abbie Hoffman, Eldridge Cleaver, Bernardine Dohrn, Daniel Ellsberg, et al. -- and the illustrious imperial policymakers like Robert McNamara have had their day in the court of public opinion, but little is heard from the grunts on the front line. So Csicsery sat down and listened to these old men, and what he learned is essentially the story of a sea change in American life.

One by one, we're introduced to them. Sergeant Gil Souza, the son of Portuguese immigrants, grew up quick-fisted on the streets of Oakland and flew Navy Hellcat fighter planes over Japan in World War II. Souza is best described by the adjective "peppy," a word that isn't used much anymore. His attitude, of enthusiastic, good-natured combativeness crossed with a genuine desire to "help people," is a trait of the Great Depression and those who lived through it. We see that in the open, friendly pugnacity of some of the doc's other subjects -- Captain Robert Ford and Officer Hadwick Thompson particularly -- and it marks them. Ordinary working-class Americans who experienced the Depression and WWII saw the world differently than their sons and daughters, who inherited the greatest standard of living the world has ever known and who, quite often, behaved like spoiled brats during the peak of US prosperity in the '60s and '70s.

That generation gap -- quaint term of the era -- opens quietly underneath almost everything the old cops say to the camera. As one of them puts it, they felt "betrayed by the '60s," and many of the former cops harbor a lingering resentment of the news media for putting the divisiveness and disrespect up in their faces. "Nobody liked the war in Vietnam," offers one man, but they were sworn to uphold the law. You write the laws and we'll go out and enforce them, Ford explains a little abashedly. But if someone should point out that "We were only following orders" was the favorite excuse of Nazi war criminals, men like Souza and Ford would undoubtedly go ballistic. Don't you see, they would complain, we're not like those kinds of people; we *saved* you from them.

Oakland has always had a tough reputation. Running through the old cops' testimony is the idea that "you might be able to get away with that in Berkeley, but in Oakland we're going to give you a beating." One former officer describes a fellow cop going berserk in breaking up a bar fight, repeatedly clubbing one poor guy who was wedged into a corner and wouldn't fall down. Another cop recalls being told to take a pair of bolt cutters and cut the chains with which folksinger and activist Joan Baez had shackled herself to a door at UC Berkeley's Sproul Plaza. Baez cleared her throat and made ready to spit on him, claims the officer, but he told her if she did, he would hit her in the mouth with the bolt cutter. She thought better of it. In the 1967 photo of Csicsery, he is shown trying to hold onto his camera bag; the camera itself had already been cut away from its strap by a police officer, who evidently made it a practice to strip off and destroy as many cameras as he could.

With the rise of the Black Panther Party, the OPD had much more on its hands than rowdy college students. Ambushes, gunfights, cop-killing, police retaliation, and even the spectacle of one cop arresting another for brutality were the order of the day. The Panthers had a hit list of cops, and although it's never explicitly admitted in the film, the cops had their own shit list of Panthers. Little Bobby Hutton was gunned down by police, and in 1968 two drunk officers drove by Panther headquarters on Peralta Street in West Oakland and fired shots into the building.

Deadly force and its consequences weigh heavily on the minds of the Thursday Club, especially Hadwick Thompson, a Pearl Harbor veteran who was only the second African American on the Oakland force. Hadwick's son "Had," also interviewed on camera, joined the OPD like his father and was wounded by a criminal in 1985; another son, ironically, is a convicted cop-killer serving a life sentence. Police were reviled by the Panthers and student protesters as "pigs," but at least one cop, Captain Ford, took the insult as a badge of honor, and had his forearm tattooed with a pig in uniform.

Ultimately, what we learn from the members of the Thursday Club is that despite the candor and

good humor, police officers are indeed what everyone from Joseph Wambaugh to Norman Mailer has told us they are -- a breed apart, a closed fraternity with its own worldview and rules of conduct.

After his adventure with Oakland's finest, Csicsery dusted himself off and began his film career. He has worked with Barbet Schroeder and Errol Morris, and has made his own documentaries everywhere from the Philippines to his native Europe, including *N Is a Number*, a profile of Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdős, in addition to 2003's *Hungry Monsters*. But he still hasn't been able to discover the identity of the cop in the photo. "When I went to talk to the Thursday Club," he commented at the press screening of the film, "I opened a door." But despite his best efforts, the door only opens so far. His subjects' revelations don't come so much from what they said as the way they said it.

The Thursday Club receives its world premiere Friday at 7 p.m. at the Oakland Museum of California, as part of the museum's exhibition *What's Going On?: California and the Vietnam Era*. Csicsery and other participants in the film will appear in person at the screening, which is free with the price of admission to the museum. Info: MuseumCA.org or Zalafilms.com

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