

OAKLAND POST

Clobbered by Oakland Police, He Shows That 'Pigs Are People Too'

Janos Gereben - the Post [3/16/05]

"I never drew anything in my life," the old man says, baring his arm to show the tattoo of a fat, cute little pig in police uniform. He did draw this himself, he says, wanting to show his pride in being a cop during the times demonstrators screamed "pigs!"

The scene is from "The Thursday Club," a brilliant new docu-drama (much more than just a documentary) by George Csicsery. The director - a polite, low-key, old-world courteous man - appears in the film himself, setting the scene. It's difficult to imagine Csicsery squared off against a phalanx of policemen, and getting clobbered. But he did, in 1967, at age 19, protesting the Vietnam War.

You don't really see what happened during the confrontation (described in a magazine article, at <http://tinyurl.com/3hwjk>), but the outcome is documented. There was a photo on the front page of the Examiner, showing Csicsery sitting on the street, dazed, a policeman towering over him, club raised high.

Now watch Csicsery 30 years later - even more polite and soft-spoken - taking the old newspaper to an Oakland restaurant where retired policemen gather for lunch once a week, and show the picture around, asking if anyone knows the cop with the club.

What is he after - An apology? Justice? Revenge? No, he just wants to find out what makes the people "upholding the law" tick, what brought them to the other side of that long-ago confrontation.

Just as he made the idiosyncratic mathematical genius Paul Erdős "understandable" and human in "N Is a Number" and got to the essence of the Barbara Cartland mystique in "Where the Heart Roams," Csicsery has a revelation once again. He brings us together with a dozen retired Oakland policemen, the "pigs... oppressors" of those heady days, and shows what's beyond the shields and batons.

They turn out to be "just folks," like your neighbors and friends - mostly good and never deliberately bad, failing and succeeding, happy and sad... and you end up caring for every one of them. The film took several years to make, and by now, some of the octogenarian subjects are gone; when you see dates of death during the end credits, you mourn such fascinating, vital men as Gil Souza, who flew carrier-based missions over Japan before joining OPD; or Hadwick Thompson III, the great-grandson of slaves, who became one of the first black officers on the force.

Among the living: Capt. Bob Ford, the one with the pig tattoo, former marine at Guadalcanal, who became the heart and soul of the Thursday Club, after many years of police work, involved - without malice - in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement suppression and captain of the watch when two drunken Oakland patrolmen attacked the Black Panther headquarters.

One of the film's most complex and conflicted characters is Thompson's son, "Had," who served in Vietnam, joined OPD, was disabled when shot on duty; his brother is serving a life sentence for murdering a San Jose policeman. Then there is Herb Coffman, too short to become a state trooper, becoming a prankster on the Oakland force and in the Thursday Club; his stories include an encounter with (the to him unknown) Joan Baez at a war protest, and a run-in with Black Panther founder Huey Newton during a robbery.

This rich, memorable film is just beginning to make the rounds, mostly at festivals and in special showings. It's next scheduled at 7:30, on Wednesday, April 20, in the Yerba Buena Center screening room; see <http://www.filmarts.org>.