

A Witch Hunt at Amateur Hour

by William E. Jones

I.

"...it is logical to assume that this is no local phenomenon, although this is possibly the first place where it has been so shockingly and authentically documented."

— anonymous editorial in the *Mansfield News-Journal*, August 22, 1962

Over the course of three weeks during the summer of 1962, the city of Mansfield, Ohio produced an hour-long film of men having sex in a public restroom. Intended for use as evidence in a court of law, the untitled film has thus far been the only one of its type to reach a wider audience. The Mansfield Police Department publicized its efforts in developing new investigative techniques and produced the how-to film *Camera Surveillance* with some of its footage. No other police department followed Mansfield's example. The operation required more money (for film stock and equipment) and more manpower (for hours of surveillance work) than any city was willing to commit to tracking down perpetrators of a non-violent crime. Even law enforcement officers who admired Mansfield Police's ingenuity must have

wondered why the department had gone to such lengths to arrest and convict a group of men having sex with one another. Mansfield prosecuted its cases only a few years before the decriminalization of sodomy, first in Illinois, then in many other states, including Ohio.

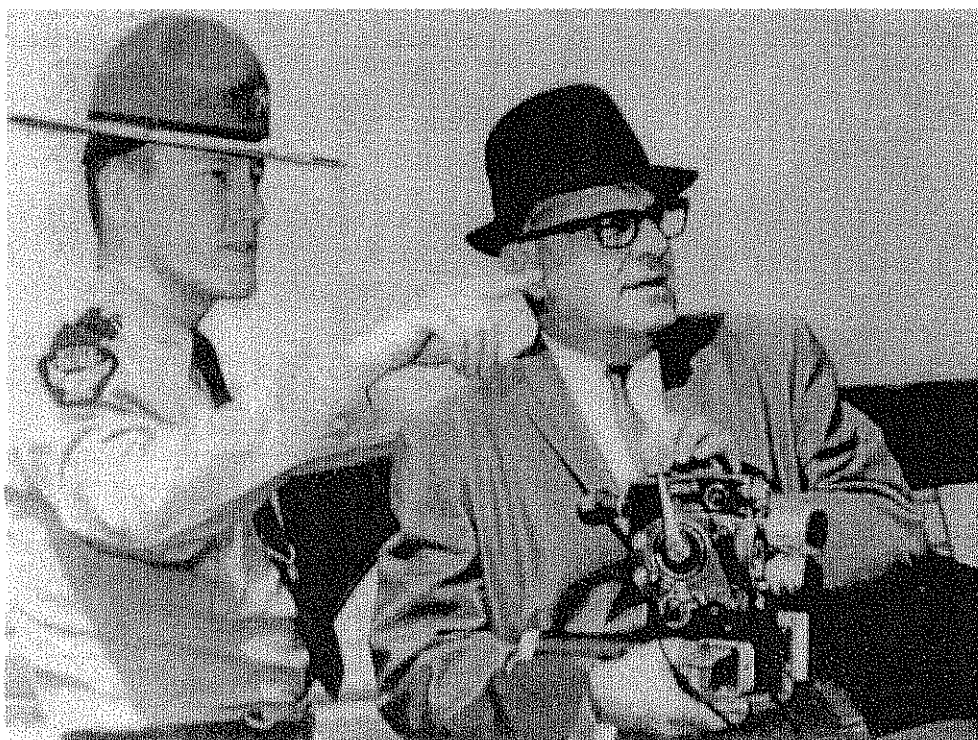
A unique set of circumstances made the production of this film possible. Earlier that summer, a man named Jerrell R. Howell had molested two young girls in a Mansfield park. When the girls attempted to escape from him, he grabbed them and stomped them to death. Police apprehended him within hours, and he quickly confessed to the crime. In a defiant gesture probably calculated to take others down with him, Howell taunted the police for not knowing what was happening in the very center of their community. He said he had gotten his first blow job — presumably the act that initiated his criminal career — in the men's room under Mansfield's Central Park. Hoping to diffuse public outrage at a savage crime and playing on what was then a popular belief in the connection between child molestation and homosexuality, Chief of Police Clare Kyler decided to crack down on "sex deviants." In this atmosphere of heightened vigilance, one particular vigilante, Richard Wayman, stepped forward to help the police, and his contribution was crucial.

Wayman, the director of a non-profit organization called Highway Safety Foundation, donated film and offered the foundation's cameras to the Mansfield Police for use in its

surveillance operation. Highway Safety Foundation had previously achieved notoriety by producing and circulating instructional films featuring gory images of car accidents. Views of this carnage were intended to scare young spectators into driving safely. The most complete history of the organization can be seen in Bret Wood's documentary *Hell's Highway*.

Richard Wayman's role in Highway Safety Foundation, his character and motivations, as well as the decline of the organization, remain controversial even now. Former Mansfield Chief of Police John Butler defends Wayman in his memoir *The Best Suit in Town*. Private investigator and former Mansfield journalist Martin Yant, in his book *Rotten to the Core*, tells a far less flattering story. (Both Butler and Yant are interviewed in *Hell's Highway*, and their complete disagreement is one of the best passages in the film.) The various accounts of Wayman's activities differ so much that it is impossible to form a precise impression of him. Apparently, Wayman himself preferred it that way. He seemed to combine in equal measure aspects of two great American types, the concerned citizen and the confidence man.

Wayman was an insomniac and amateur photographer who, like some Midwestern vernacular Weegee, listened to a police radio and went out with officers on calls. His main interest was car accidents, and he eventually obtained permission to visit the scenes of gruesome crashes. When asked about Wayman's special relationship with law enforcement in *Hell's Highway*, John Butler, not given to rhetorical flourishes or references to J. G. Ballard and Krafft-Ebing, answered simply, "he just liked police," with a trace of impatience. Butler's tone suggests a wish to hide his bending of department rules for Wayman, who as a civilian wasn't supposed to be riding around in patrol cars. Perhaps Butler's tone also betrays something else, a realization about how peculiar his friend's behavior appeared to outsiders. In the many years since Wayman made his impression on Mansfield, Butler has had time to reflect upon the impulses behind his friend's activities, and doubts may have formed about the purity of Dickie Wayman's motives.



Left: In a still from *Hell's Highway*, Richard Wayman, holding a 16mm movie camera (though not the one used by Mansfield Police in 1962) poses with an Ohio Highway Patrol officer.

With the equipment borrowed from Wayman, Mansfield Police Officer Bill Spognardi, assisted by Officer Dick Burton, photographed activities in the Central Park men's room from behind a two-way mirror. Spognardi's reflection is visible in this mirror at intervals in the film, especially when the scene is dark. (See page 17.) Spognardi was responsible for the filmmaking decisions: camera angles (quite limited, since he was hiding in a confined space), camera movement, and duration of shots. Markings on the leaders of the film indicate that he exposed only one 100-foot roll of film stock, lasting 2 minutes and 45 seconds, per day. The element of choice — Spognardi's — has an importance not previously mentioned in accounts of the case. The cameraman often filmed activities he thought might lead to sex but didn't; sometimes he filmed other moments that simply caught his attention. The film includes images of men combing their hair and washing their hands, as well as a shot of a man positioning a transistor radio to find the best reception. (See page 29.) There are also images of children, including a boy grabbing a newspaper from a trash can, and boys hiding out to smoke cigarettes. Spognardi's training had prepared him to see evidence of child molestation. When a man in a toilet stall exposed himself to one of the boys, the investigation came to a hasty conclusion. Spognardi could not film this violation, because his position did not afford him a clear view inside the stalls. The most serious crime — the sort of act the police had expected to film, the one involving a child — thus remained invisible.

What is missing from the police film exerts its own fascination. Officer Spognardi did not photograph the hours of dead time; the fleeting conversations between men cruising for sex; and quite possibly the activities of men he knew but preferred not to implicate, or men too powerful to offend. There is no reverse angle, no image of the cameraman's reaction to seeing men touch each other while he observed them unseen. At certain moments the film reveals this reaction indirectly, as when a particularly attractive young man in a white t-shirt lowers his pants for a man in a stall, and the camera tilts up and down frenetically. (See page 21.) On a couple of occasions, it is just possible to discern in the mirror an image of Spognardi licking his lips.

Spognardi's response to what he filmed might lead some to conclude that he was gay. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Mansfield of 1962,

only a man considering himself normal in every respect would allow himself to participate in such an elaborately perverse scenario. In that place and time, no gay man would feel safe enough (or secure enough in his self-hatred) to enjoy this level of complicity with authority. A man's reputation could suffer only so much speculation in Mansfield, which was a far cry from the Washington of J. Edgar Hoover or the New York City of Roy Cohn. Of course, even men who feel completely normal let their curiosity get the better of them from time to time, and there have been many vice cops who, like Mae West, could resist anything but temptation. In the words of the prosecuting attorney, "sending uniformed or plainclothes officers into the restroom for frequent observation produced no results." On the present topic — the thoughts and feelings of a man in a closet filming other men masturbating and having sex — we cannot speak of that which we do not know.



Above: Cameraman Bill Spognardi, during his walk through the Central Park men's room after the arrests in the case.

Note: The camera roll documenting the space under surveillance, shot after the restrooms were closed to the public, appears at the end of the original 16mm evidence film. In the video Tearoom, this roll has been moved to the beginning and functions as an establishing sequence. This change in the order of camera rolls is the only difference between Tearoom and the video transfer of the original footage.

II.

"The sex pervert, in his more innocuous [sic] form, is too frequently regarded as merely a queer individual who never hurts anyone but himself."

— narration from *Camera Surveillance*

The question of who was actually gay among the suspects in the Central Park men's room is one that, regardless of so much visual evidence of sodomy, will probably never be answered with any certainty. As many as a third of the men arrested were married, and most of them had children. Still others must have been sexually active with men exclusively, but were loath to call themselves gay. It is difficult, if not impossible, for modern spectators to find self-identified gay men in this film of sexual activities, but the authorities who dealt with these men at the time and in person had much less trouble. It is very likely that they singled out anyone acting like "a queer individual" (to use the words of *Camera Surveillance's* anonymous narrator) for especially harsh treatment.

If some suspects got the book thrown at them, others got off comparatively lightly. Otho Thomas, an African American man 48 years old at the time of his arrest, challenged the right of the state to prosecute him, and lost on appeal to the Ohio Supreme Court. If anyone can be said to have survived the tearroom bust with reputation intact, it was Otho Thomas. He was a married man, and remained married to the same woman, living in the same house, long after his imprisonment. He was a church deacon in 1962, and he became one again after his parole. He died in Mansfield at age 93. (This information comes from Kevin Jerome Everson, who interviewed people in Mansfield, his hometown, in 2007. He found a number of older men who knew about the Central Park tearroom, but none of them would admit to having been inside the place, for fear of being called gay.) Though Otho Thomas seemed to have experienced the least disruption in his personal life, he nonetheless served his full sentence: one year and six days, first at the Ohio Penitentiary, then at the Mansfield Correctional Institution.

By comparing the mug shots in *Camera Surveillance*, the unedited evidence footage, and the prisoner registers of the Ohio Penitentiary and State Reformatory, one can identify two men by name: Vernon Sheeks and Roger Pifer. In these two cases,

the prison records have faces, as well as names and numbers, associated with them. Both men received harsh sentences; one with an obvious legal justification, the other with none.

Vernon Sheeks appears in the fourth set of mug shots shown in *Camera Surveillance* (on page 8, lower left). Of all the men arrested, Sheeks served as an exemplary figure, since his case "proved" the connection that the police insisted on making between child molestation and homosexuality. He was 51 years old and single at the time of his arrest. Sheeks had been arrested on a charge of sex perversion in Los Angeles 17 years before and had just been released after four years in the Ohio Penitentiary for assault upon a minor. The evidence film shows him receiving anal sex from two men. (See pages 20 and 25.) Unlike the rest of the suspects, he was charged with two counts of sodomy carrying a sentence of 2 to 40 years in prison. After his conviction, he was held as a psychopath at Lima State Hospital for nearly two years. He subsequently served five and a half years of prison time, first at the Ohio Penitentiary, then at the Mansfield Correctional Institution. Vernon Sheeks was the last of the men arrested in the Mansfield tearoom busts to get his final release from parole, in December 1971, over nine years after his arrest.

Roger Pifer, age 29 and single at the time of his arrest, appears in the third set of mug shots in *Camera Surveillance* (on page 8, upper left). The film's narration mentions that Pifer had no former record, yet was being held at Lima State Hospital as a psychopath. He was transferred to the Ohio State

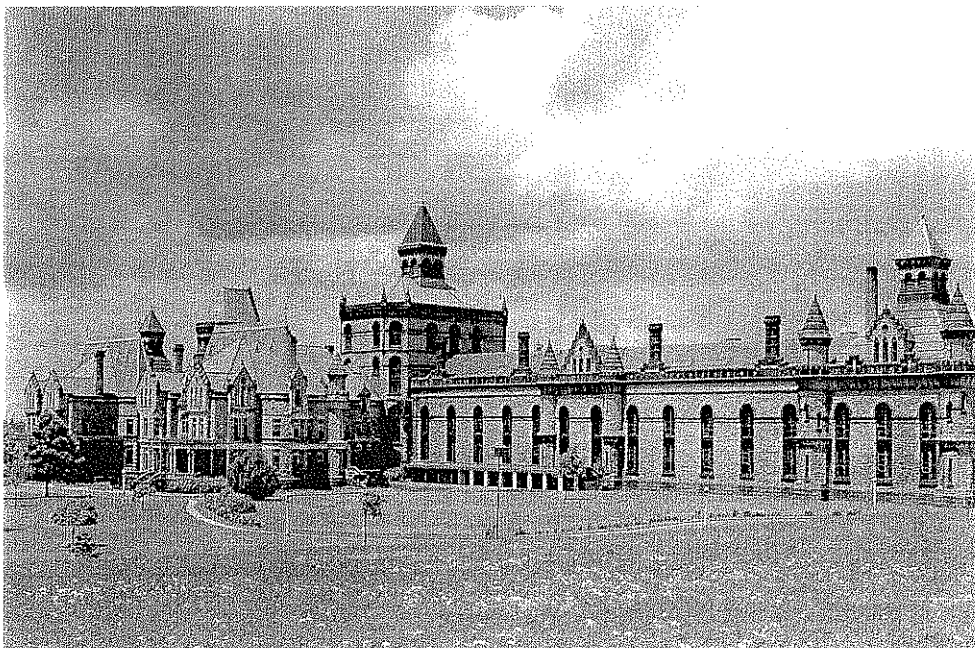
Reformatory in the spring of 1964. The O. S. R. prisoner register contains no more details of his sentence, but if he was committed immediately after conviction, he spent a year and a half in psychiatric treatment. After being deemed sane enough to join the general prison population by a state psychiatrist, Pifer served his one year sentence.

In the evidence film, there is a record of what Roger Pifer did to deserve his punishment. (See pages 18 and 19.) He engaged in conversation on one occasion, then on another day, he either masturbated or gave a man a hand job; from the camera's vantage point, it is difficult to determine which. The most incriminating activity captured on film is Pifer briefly performing oral sex on Sheeks, a man who, in the film, is passive in all his other sexual acts. Pifer's trips to the tearoom — two poorly documented and a third during which he gave a recently released ex-convict a blow job — merited nearly three years of treatment and incarceration. Perhaps a confession while in police custody or his behavior in court made matters worse for him. In the absence of any better explanation, it is reasonable to conclude that acting queer got Roger Pifer in trouble.

Although the dispositions of the Mansfield cases are not completely documented, the records suggest disparities in the sentences of various suspects not entirely explicable by their prior convictions. These disparities may not constitute a pattern. But if one accepts that acting queer — not being married, taking a passive role in sex, and perhaps confessing a gay past, talking back to the presiding judge, or

merely looking a bit odd — had serious consequences in at least one case, it is important to consider why that happened. The vague psychological term "homophobia" seems inadequate to describe what was in effect a political strategy.

From a point of view more humane than that of a moral entrepreneur or a law enforcement dupe, the Mansfield tearoom busts have an aspect of grotesque disproportion. With the hidden camera, the round-the-clock arrests, and a coda of self-righteous editorials, the whole affair, while strictly defensible in the eyes of the law in that specific time and place, looks more like a witch hunt at amateur hour. A bunch of policemen, given *carte blanche* by a public out for blood in the wake of a brutal murder, peeped on some marginal characters, perfect scapegoats who had no way of justifying themselves, and made a movie of their activities. As this nightmare unfolded for the participants, the ones who flashed a wedding ring or presented a suitably deferential demeanor received the mandatory minimum sentence, a year in prison, which was already barbaric. The real gay men — the ones who had no political clout or even a decent bar to frequent; the ones who knew that no man can truly be as normal as he says he is; in other words, the ones most able to recognize the situation in its naked idiocy — received psychiatric treatment for homosexuality, followed by at least one year in prison, with no possibility of probation. After courses of psych meds and electro-shock, these gay men were supposed to have learned their lesson, obedience to authority in thought as well as deed, if in fact they could still remember their own names.



Left: From the catalog of the Ohio Historical Society: "The Ohio State Reformatory located at Mansfield opened its doors in 1896. The Reformatory housed approximately 2,400 adult male inmates. The law provided that male youth, between the ages of 16 and 21, convicted of felonies and who had no previous prison or reformatory record, could be committed to the Reformatory. Likewise men between 21 and 30 years of age not previously convicted of crime could be committed to this institution or to the Ohio Penitentiary, according to the discretion of the sentencing court."

"The restrooms were closed after this investigation and later were filled in with dirt."

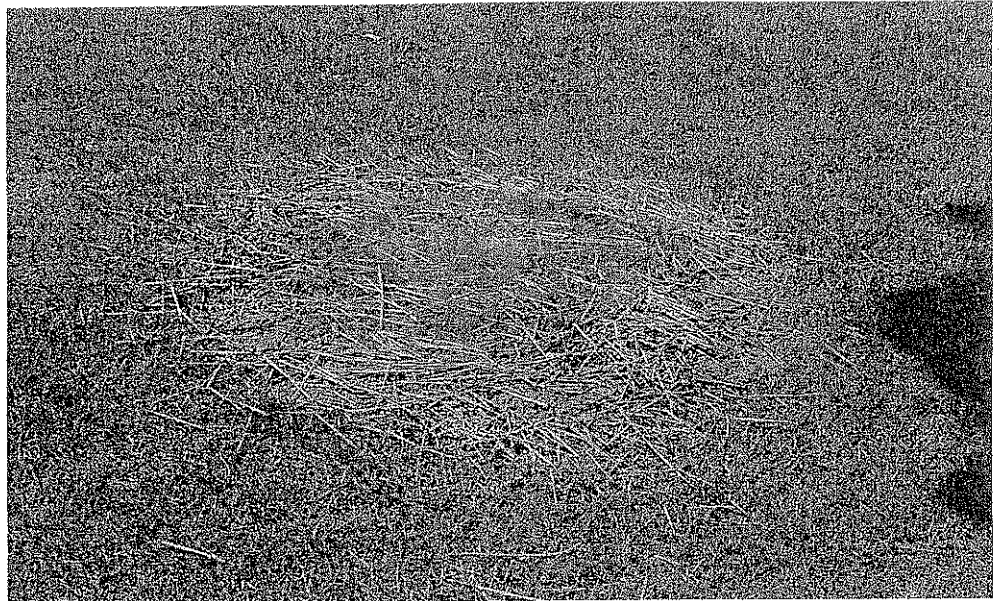
— *The Best Suit in Town* by former Mansfield Chief of Police John Butler

Mansfield Police Officers Spognardi and Burton were almost the last people to use the Central Park men's room. After the place was closed to the public, they marked measurements in chalk on the walls, filmed themselves walking through the space, and revealed the cameraman's hiding place. One of them poked a finger in the peep hole between the first stall and the urinal. (See page 11.) After Spognardi and Burton, the men's room received a few more visitors in the fall of 1962. Prosecutor William McKay explained, "The initial juries were given a view of the restroom involved. This did not appear to materially aid the trial." A chalkboard diagram showing the positions of the urinals, the stalls and the men conducting surveillance was found to be sufficient for the jurors.

When the restrooms were of no further use to Mansfield, the city destroyed them with blunt brutality. Exterior structures were demolished, and underground rooms were filled with earth, so that no trace of the tearoom site remained.

Since the 1960s, Mansfield, like other industrial cities in Ohio, has become a virtual ghost town. Most of the factories that once dominated Mansfield's economy stand empty, and the downtown area surrounding Central Park shows few signs of life. Hotels and banks have moved to the edge of the city near the highway, Route 30. There is still no gay bar in town. To all appearances, the world has changed and left Mansfield behind.

In an attempt to draw visitors to downtown Mansfield, the city has encouraged the construction of monuments in Central Park. Traditional memorials dedicated to Johnny Appleseed (once a resident of Mansfield) and to fallen soldiers of the Civil War and the World Wars have been joined by more recent structures. The visual clutter of so many monuments attracts few tourists. The travelers who do exit the highway in Mansfield tend to visit the formal gardens of Kingwood Center or the garish dioramas of the Living Bible Museum. A large Korean War memorial bearing the inscription "Freedom Is Not Free" now occupies the ground over the former restrooms.



No memorial exists to acknowledge the men convicted in the Mansfield tearoom busts, though their cases bring attention to the city to this day. The people directly involved in the episode have their ways of deflecting serious inquiries: tasteless jokes, feigned ignorance, silence. City officials would rather not endure the scrutiny of those who take a dim view of Mansfield's zeal in eradicating deviance. They have not yet acquired the cynicism or amnesia that would enable them to transform the most shameful chapter of their city's history into an attraction. There are now guided tours of the old Ohio State Reformatory building, where a number of the convicted men served their sentences. Perhaps some enterprising soul will see the visitors to the site of Senator Larry Craig's 2007 arrest at the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport and be moved to re-make the design of Central Park to accommodate a tearoom memorial. Presenting such a proposal would be a challenge to even the most fanatical civic booster.

It could be argued that the present investigation causes the convicted men and their families unnecessary pain and invades their privacy. While re-examination of these cases is potentially unpleasant, it is by no means gratuitous. An impressionistic view, untroubled by historical facts, of the "bad old days" before gay liberation does a grave disservice to previous generations of gay men. And to say that the present state of surveillance culture is somehow just like what Mansfield allowed to happen in 1962 perpetuates another ahistorical fallacy. The process of writing about specific excesses of the criminal justice system must continue if the system is to have any accountability.

The contents of this book are based upon published texts, public records, evidence collected and disseminated by institutions working in the name of the public good. Failing to bring these materials to light continues their suppression, and thereby reinforces authority that appears legitimate as long as embarrassing matters remain buried and forgotten.

Mansfield's Central Park tearoom has been buried but not forgotten. The scars associated with this place still persist, even on the land itself. In one corner of Central Park, next to the Korean War memorial and across from the building that was once the Leland Hotel, lies a circle of dead grass. The small geometric pattern with a diameter roughly equal to the height of a man was plainly visible on August 22, 2007, the 45th anniversary of the tearoom arrests. It brings to mind a line delivered by Paulette Goddard in *The Women*: "Where I spit, no grass grows ever." This dead spot looks like the result of the convicted men taking a cue from Goddard and protesting at the site where they fell into a police trap. The circle of dead grass may be gone in a season, but for now, it serves as the marker of a small-scale earthwork, an anti-monument commemorating the most famous events that ever occurred in Mansfield, Ohio.