

Through a glass, very darkly

Cops, spies and a very odd investigation

The case is almost seven years old now, but matters surrounding a mysterious group known as the Finders keep growing curiously and curiously.

In early February 1987, an anonymous tipster in Tallahassee, Fla., made a phone call to police. Two "well-dressed men" seemed to be "supervising" six disheveled and hungry children in a local park, the caller said. The cops went after the case like bloodhounds—at least at first. The two men were identified as members of the Finders. They were charged with child abuse in Florida. In Washington, D.C., police and U.S. Customs Service agents raided a duplex apartment building and a warehouse connected to the group. Among the evidence seized: detailed instructions on obtaining children for unknown purposes and several photographs of nude children. According to a Customs Service memorandum obtained by *U.S. News*, one photo appeared "to accent the child's genitals."

The more the police learned about the Finders, the more bizarre they seemed: There were suggestions of child abuse, Satanism, dealing in pornography and ritualistic animal slaughter.

None of the allegations was ever proved, however. The child abuse charges against the two men in Tallahassee were dropped; all six of the children were eventually returned to their mothers, though in the case of two, conditions were attached by a court. In Washington, D.C., police began backing away from the Finders investigation. The group's practices, the police said, were eccentric—not illegal.

Questions. Today, things appear to have changed yet again. The Justice Department has begun a new investigation into the Finders and into the group's activities. It is also reviewing the 1987 investigation into the group to determine whether that probe was closed improperly. Justice officials will not elaborate, except to say the investigation is "ongoing" and that it involves "unresolved matters" in relation to the Finders.

One of the unresolved questions in-

volves allegations that the Finders are somehow linked to the Central Intelligence Agency. Customs Service documents reveal that in 1987, when Customs agents sought to examine the evidence gathered by Washington, D.C., police, they were told that the Finders investigation "had become a CIA internal matter." The police report on the case had



February 1987. D.C. police seize evidence.

been classified secret. Even now, Tallahassee police complain about the handling of the Finders investigation by D.C. police. "They dropped this case," one Tallahassee investigator says, "like a hot rock." D.C. police will not comment on the matter. As for the CIA, ranking officials describe allegations about links between the intelligence agency and the Finders as "hogwash"—perhaps the result of a simple mix-up with D.C. police. The only connection, according to the CIA: A firm that provided computer training to CIA officers also employed several members of the Finders.

The many unanswered questions about the Finders case now have Democratic Rep. Charlie Rose of North Carolina, chairman of the House Administration Committee, and Florida's Rep. Tom Lewis, a Republican, more than a little exercised. "Could our own government have something to do with this Finders organization and turned their backs on these children? That's what all the evidence points to," says Lewis. "And there's a lot of evidence. I can tell you this: We've got a lot of people scrambling, and that wouldn't be happening if there was nothing here."

Perhaps. But the Finders say there is nothing there—at least nothing illegal. The Finders have never been involved in child abuse, pornography, Satanism, animal slaughter or anything of the kind, says the group's leader, Marion David Pettie. Pettie, too, says the group has

never been connected to the CIA. In an interview with *U.S. News*, Pettie described the Finders as a communal, holistic-living and learning arrangement. The group numbers some 20 members, Pettie says; they do freelance journalism, research and "competitor intelligence" for a variety of mostly foreign clients. The Finders work for no foreign governments, Pettie says. Their duplex, in a residential Northwest Washington neighborhood, is decorated with global maps and bulletin boards. Residents of Culpeper, Va., 90 minutes from Washington, say the Finders have operated an office there, too, from time to time. That office contained computer terminals and clocks reflecting different time zones around the world.

CIA officials say they referred all matters concerning the Finders and the police investigation to the FBI's Foreign Counterintelligence Division. FBI officials will not comment. Law enforcement sources say some of the Finders are listed in the FBI's classified counterintelligence files.

None of this fazes Pettie. He says the CIA's interest in the Finders may stem from the fact that his late wife once worked for the agency and that his son worked for a CIA proprietary firm, Air America. Overall, says Pettie, "we're a zero security threat. When you don't do much of anything, and you don't explain, people start rumors about you." To judge from the latest case, some of the rumors can last an awfully long time. ■

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