

Paid Informers: Pros and Cons

by Phil Stanford

Ever since Sara Jane Moore broke into the headlines last September for allegedly trying to shoot President Ford, there has been a good deal of attention paid to the age-old profession of informing. Sara Jane, it turned out, was working at the time as a paid informer for the U.S. Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, trying to catch illegal sellers of firearms. Before that, she had infiltrated radical groups for the FBI.

Until the day of the shooting, however, her career had hardly been unique. Virtually all law enforcement agencies—federal, state and local—use informers. Informers have been used to get the goods on Mafia activities and to crack heroin rings; they have also been used to spy on political enemies.

How many are there?

It is said that the FBI employs two informers for every agent. Various estimates put the number of informers now working for all law enforcement agencies in the United States at between 20,000 and 40,000.

Informers like these—plants, spies, infiltrators, defectors, finks, concerned citizens, or criminals bargaining for reduced sentences—have had an important role in the history of police operations.

However, in a number of cities across the country, police have come up with what seems to be a new twist.

Under a "tipster" program that was started last year in Racine, Wis., a city of 98,000, anyone can call a number at police headquarters and leave information on a crime under investigation or one that is about to be committed. The caller does not give his name; he is known to police only by a three-digit number that he is assigned when he



Tips, especially in drug-related cases, can bring an informer in Racine, Wis., Edina, Minn., and elsewhere anonymous payments, often through post office boxes.



Sara Jane Moore (center), who may be the most famous paid informer of the 1970's, goes to court on charges that she tried to shoot President Ford Sept. 22. She had sold tips to the FBI on radicals and to Treasury agents on gun dealers.

calls. If the tip is useful to police, the informer—still completely anonymous—will be paid.

Money for Racine's tipster program is put up by the Chamber of Commerce. Usually, the informer goes to the Chamber office, identifies himself by his code number and picks up an envelope of cash.

Payments of \$50 and more, according to the seriousness of the crime, are made after an arrest; a conviction isn't necessary.

Police Inspector Lawrence C. Hagman says Racine's program has been a great success. Since it began in April, 1974, there have been 43 "payoffs" for tips that have led to 73 arrests. The total includes 24 burglaries, seven robberies and three homicides.

'The only way'

In Edina, Minn., a city of 44,000, the tipster program has been especially effective in obtaining drug arrests. "In fact," says Police Chief Wayne Bennett, "payment of money is about the only way

in which we can secure evidence in a drug case."

Edina's program works very much like Racine's. Code numbers are used to guarantee anonymity to callers. Money for the program is provided through a community fund-raising campaign run by the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce.

Post office boxes

Payments—which, according to Chief Bennett, range from \$5 to \$500—are sometimes delivered to numbered post office boxes or to lockers in bus terminals.

Police Chief magazine reports that under a Kentucky State Police program, citizens "can jot down their suspicions in a letter" and mail it to a special post office box in Frankfort.

In New York and Baltimore, taxi drivers inform police if they spot a crime in progress.

In Southern California, a program called "We Turn in Pushers," or "We Tip," for short, gets financial support

from civic groups. Tipster programs against the drug traffic are in fact common throughout the country.

Frank J. Donner, who directs a project on political surveillance for the American Civil Liberties Union, says that tipster programs are increasing. He sees them as "an attempt to augment the police force with self-help from the

population.

"A great many people are either apathetic or frightened these days," says Donner. "They don't report crimes because they're scared. You remember the Kitty Genovese case in New York, when the girl was killed while the people in the apartment building looked on. That's bad. Something has

to be done to involve people. The police need cooperation."

However, while police officials are generally enthusiastic about the tipster programs, Donner has reservations.

"Of course, people should be encouraged to report crimes," he says. "The danger is that once you put in a financial incentive, people will abuse

it." For example, the tipster program could be used to "set up" someone for an arrest.

"The whole field," he says, referring to the range of police activities involving informers, "is subject to tremendous abuse."

Donner, who has written extensively about the use of informers, says that

there are two principal types: criminal and political.

In the past, informers have proved invaluable to federal, state and local agencies in dealing with purely criminal acts. One of the most famous informers of recent times was Joe Valachi, who in 1963 told what he knew about organized crime to Congressional investiga-

tors. According to the *Police Journal*, informers continue to be the key to Mafia-busting.

Police officials also attest to the value of informers in vice and drug cases, although they are quick to note that most do it for less than admirable motives. Informers in drug cases are often drug dealers themselves, just trying to get rid of the competition. Although some informers are "good citizens" who merely want to see criminals put behind bars, the type most often used by police, according to *Police Chief* magazine, "is the criminal informant who usually has a record of arrests and has chosen to become an informant for a variety of reasons—leniency, a 'license' to continue his illegal activity, money, etc.—and reliability will not be one of his stronger points."

Political excesses

Although the danger of abuse exists in all activities involving informers, the worst excesses in recent years have occurred when informers were used for political purposes. Informers, planted in organizations on both the right and left, have often turned out to be unbalanced individuals who, on their own or on orders, encouraged groups they infiltrated to commit acts of violence.

In 1968, two informers received \$36,500 for helping

police and the FBI spring a trap in an attempted bombing of a home in Mississippi. Police killed a woman and wounded a man associated with the Ku Klux Klan.

Activists acquitted

Informers also surfaced at the trials of anti-war activists, including the Harrisburg 7, the Camden 28, the Gainesville 8, the Detroit 13, the Seattle 7 and the Chicago 7. In each case the charges were dropped or the defendants acquitted. Frequently the juries felt informers had goaded the defendants into illegal or violent acts.

Perhaps the most blatant testimony to this fact came from informer Robert W. Hardy at the trial of the Camden 28, who were accused of raiding the draft board and destroying files.

"Without the FBI and me," said Hardy, "the raid would never have taken place."

Law enforcement officials say they recognize the dangers in working with informers. However, they consider them a necessary evil.