

FBI INVESTIGATION

Did Howie Vicini Pick Up Patty Hearst And Friends?

By DAVID VENDITTA
Indiana Correspondent

Did Patty Hearst pass through Indiana last summer?

Maybe, said the FBI in June when a Student Co-op Association employe here told police about three hitchhikers he picked up. Howie Vicini, 25, heading home to Indiana on Memorial Day after visiting friends in New Castle, had given two women and a man a ride from the Route 422 bypass around New Castle to an area near the Penn Run exit on the same route east of Indiana Borough.

Vicini told police and the FBI that the woman who sat next to him in his van carried a gun concealed under a blazer and that the trio had offered him \$300 to drive them east. He said they weren't familiar with the area and asked him about Philadelphia and New York.

The state police sergeant who interviewed Vicini shortly after the trio was dropped off suggested the hikers could have been Patty Hearst and Emily and William Harris, the fugitive Symbionese Liberation Army members. Later, a trooper said Vicini's description of one woman closely resembled the FBI bulletin on Emily Harris.

Although Vicini could not positively identify any of the three, his report seemed to carry more weight than the hundreds of other sightings reported across the nation. A highly placed FBI man in Los Angeles reportedly said the only intense investigation for the SLA members other than in California at that time was in Pennsylvania.

The FBI in Greensburg admitted it was shaken by the report. The agency was still conducting its main search in the Los Angeles area, where Miss Hearst and the Harrises were sighted only two weeks before on May 24, the day after the trio bungled a shoplifting attempt at a Los Angeles sporting goods store.

Fingerprints from Vicini's van, sought by the FBI two days after the sighting, failed to show because of the time lapse. State police had neglected to look at the van when Vicini notified them.

And despite an all-points alert in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey, police were unable to pick up the three suspicious persons. Vicini's story seemed far-fetched and unlikely.

But last month in Harrisburg, something came out into the open that made the casual observer think twice

about what happened to Howie Vicini early last June. It was revealed that a federal grand jury was investigating the possibility that Patty Hearst hid last fall on a farm in northeastern Pennsylvania.

The San Francisco Examiner, whose publisher is Miss Hearst's father, reported that her fingerprints were found in the farmhouse where she allegedly was hiding out last October. Federal officials did not confirm or deny the report.

The Philadelphia Inquirer said this was the biggest lead the FBI had on the SLA members since last June.

Interviewed last week, the FBI agents in charge of the Patty Hearst investigation at the agency's offices in Greensburg, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia doubted there was any connection between Vicini's reported sighting and the possibility Miss Hearst stayed at the farmhouse in South Canaan, about 35 miles from Scranton.

Cy Laffey, of the FBI's office in Greensburg, said, "As far as I know there was no connection." He mentioned there may have been conflicting reports that ruled out the possibility that Vicini picked up Miss Hearst, but said he didn't have that information with him.

Jesse Hagy, Pittsburgh, said "Let's put it this way. I know of no connection."

And John Culpepper, Philadelphia, when asked if there may be a connection, said, "Not to my knowledge." But, he said, it was "reasonable to assume" that Patty Hearst could have been staying at the South Canaan farmhouse. "I'd call it a big lead," he added.

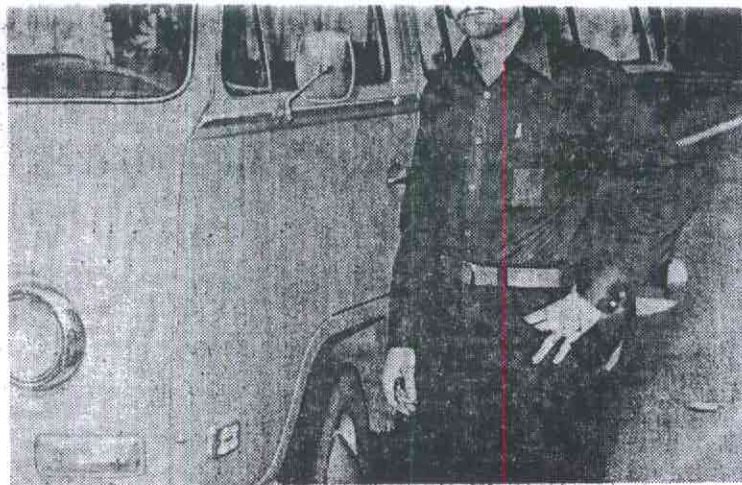
In a further disclosure Mar. 21, The Scranton Times reported that police were checking out the possibility that a missing 1968 Volkswagen found in a junkyard in West Nanticoke, Pa., may have been the one in which Miss Hearst traveled east to the farmhouse in South Canaan last summer.

With the investigation of the Patty Hearst case focusing in Pennsylvania, and the apparent assumption by FBI and police that Miss Hearst did travel from the West Coast to northeastern Pennsylvania last summer, Howie Vicini's story would seem more credible.

But as one of the FBI agents explained, no sightings of the fugitive could be determined true until Miss Hearst is picked up or surrenders and admits having been any place where she was reported seen.

No one will know anything for sure until then.

*Greenburg
Tribune Record 13-April 75*



PICKED UP PATTY? — Howie Vicini, former employe of the IUP Student Co-op stands in front of the van in which he believes he carried Patty Hearst and William and Emily Harris from New Castle to Indiana last summer. The FBI is still investigating.