

RavensYard Excerpt
Non-commercial use only

New York: Cityside – Hunting the Sultans (1976-77)

Excerpt from *NewsWalker – a Story for Sweeney* (ISBN 1-928928-03-X) by R. Thomas Collins.
Copyright © 2001 R. Thomas Collins. All rights reserved. RavensYard Publishing, Ltd. Fairfax, Va.

RavensYard Excerpt
Non-commercial use only

Note to reader about this excerpt: The text in this PDF is being provided free-of-charge for the private use of readers. Use of this text for any commercial purpose is prohibited, unless specifically approved by the publisher. The excerpt that follows is from a series of travelogues and essays written by R. Thomas Collins, and which are contained in the multi-volume *NewsWalker Series* available from *RavensYard Publishing, Ltd.* Copies of the book from which this excerpt is taken and other *RavensYard* titles are available for purchase from amazon.com and wherever books are sold. For further information see: www.ravensyard.com

IN MARCH 1976, I WAS TRANSFERRED OUT OF QUEENS onto nightside, where I worked from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m.—long enough to earn stripes and then get moved to the “lobster” trick, which made me boss of all the Daily News editions from 1 to 9 a.m., the overnight shift, for half a year. At the News, the graveyard gig was called the “lobster” shift, because it meant working at hours suitable only to lobstermen.

I loved nightside. My body clock thrived on the hours. And my job was to write on deadline only those stories that had a lock on the main news pages of the paper in the 3rd, 4th and Final editions, which was more than 80 percent of the press run, or 1.6 million copies. This was the cream of the readership, and we worked on the cream stories.

The city room was alive with the action, night after night. A crew of editors, reporters, rewriters occupied a closer and more intimate space around the city and news desks than during the dayside hours. Police and fire scanners squawked in the background. Smoke from cigars and cigarets hung in the air like a cloud. Copy boys responded to shouts for more coffee or library slips, moving quickly against deadline pressure. As they took information over the phone, rewriters set lighted cigarets at the edges of their desks so the ash was suspended above the floor. The Royals and Underwoods—the reliable manual typewriters that were carefully maintained by a crew of mechanics and had not failed in decades—were pounded like anvils in a blacksmith’s shop. All the while, the floor of the city room vibrated with the deep hum and rumble of the giant presses floors below printing the next day’s editions. Nightside stories were waiting in the paper when the city woke up. More likely than not, when New Yorkers read the News with danish or onion roll and a regular coffee in 1976 and 1977, they read something I had written.

On Nightside I could concentrate on those moments when calm turned to horror, when Providence butted in arbitrarily on the normal flow of life, with a seeming delight in the processes of torment—moments that for many city residents were life-changing, the highest points of tension they had ever known. My job was to bear witness, to illuminate events in exacting detail for the purposes of what? Democracy? The people’s right to know? The greater good of the community? Nah. I was grabbing a bit of fame by commanding a momentary piece of the city’s attention, as the arbiter of what people

understood was hard news. I wrote thousands of stories. Like a grunt in an artillery battery, I fired story after story about the people's drama back into the city's neighborhoods day after day after day. And it was oxygen to my fire.

A collision of fantasy and fact occurred one night in the summer of 1977 when Hollywood came to work at the Daily News. Producers of the movie *Superman* wanted to use the building at 150 East 42nd Street as a backdrop. The movie company converted the front of the News into a make-believe street scene, with fruit and vegetable vendors. To illuminate the setting, a trailer with a generator was parked on the north side of 42nd to power mammoth klieg lights.

Suddenly, about 10 p.m., as the night staff prepared for the first deadline, the power went out—not only for the movie set but also for the entire city of New York. Blackout! Filming would be impossible that night.

New York truly was the Naked City that night, home to eight million stories. As often happened during a crisis, reporters couldn't stay away from the action. Dozens came in from home, working the phones and struggling to make sense of this incredible event, which proved how dependent all these humans were on technology.

But what made the night work were the fantasy makers out front. The only devices that worked in the Daily News building itself were the phones. The printing plant on Long Island, which handled *Newsday*, agreed to typeset and print several hundred editions of the Daily News. What we needed were the stories—and how could reporters and editors produce them without light? We sat in the dark for a while, until some resourceful soul, and whose name remains unknown, walked down stairs to the motion picture crew in front of the building wondering at the strangeness of their real life circumstances. The moviemakers, hearing about our fix, agreed to lend the city room their klieg lights, which were hauled up seven flights. The lights were placed around the city room and connected by cables suspended out the front windows to the generator truck below. *Superman* came to the rescue. Now we had light to work as a new drama quick-

ly unfolded as looting and mayhem swept through neighborhoods, particularly in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

Among the most heart-felt stories was one written by a copy editor, Mike Neal, who came in the city room to write his story for the city desk. He handed the copy to me to clean up. It was brief and genuine. Mike had written how the blackout had forced his aged dog to walk up an airless stairway in their high rise. The stress of the heat and exertion of the walk had been too much. Mike was forced to carry his aging pet the rest of the way. When he finally reached the apartment, Mike's dog collapsed and died. The next morning, the city read the story about Mike's dog in the News.

Clendenin took a shine to me and moved me along at the News, making sure I met Mike O'Neill, the editor and his boss, and that I had good visibility with the city, assignment, suburban and metro editors. But within two years of my arrival, Clendenin decided to call it quits and go to work for the phone company as a PR guy—assistant vice president for public affairs, New York Telephone & Telegraph Company of the Bell System.

At his going-away party, I said to him: "Mike, you can't leave, you're my rabbi."

He put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Tommy, rabbis come and rabbis go."

Shortly after Clendenin left, I began to see my limits in daily newspapering. Sun Oak and I had two children and enough income to support ourselves in a small apartment in Queens. But we both had ambitions. We wanted, well, more. I began to expand my horizons by testing other ways to put one word after another for money. I figured I'd seen enough of the city's dark side to try writing a book. My first effort was a mystery potboiler that took six months to write and a year to sell. It finally wound up being published by a pulp house, going from paperback bookracks at airports and drugstores to paper-pulp slurry in two months in 1980. I never made more than my initial royalty check, which was rookie league pay. Eventually pirates would steal it. In Los Angeles, a young literary agent turned Hollywood wannabe took my story to make a quickie police movie-of-the-week

on ABC-TV. German and Dutch book thieves also stole my words for translation into quickie pulp books in Europe, where such yarns are popular, cheap and often stolen from the States.

In 1976, however, before all this transpired, I had loftier hopes for my work. I began to look for guidance. Among people I looked to as mentors was Louis Cowan, a former Columbia University professor and one-time president of the CBS television network. Cowan, a courtly man in his sixties, had earned his earliest fame and fortune as the originator of TV quiz shows, the most famous being the “\$64,000 Question.” During the cheating scandals in the mid 1950s his connections, innocent though they were to the ill-fated show, cost him his CBS job; the network cast him overboard to fend off any congressional inquiry into network practices.

This bitter end to his career in television, however, had not dimmed Cowan’s enthusiasm to nurture and to teach. He turned out to be a favorite instructor and eager mentor at Columbia, where he conducted a highly civilized seminar with eminent guests from the worlds of business, politics and government. It was in Cowan’s seminar that I was first attracted to the economic aspects of the media, the business of it, and the role of a producer or editor in the deliberate manipulation of a message for economic, political or social effect.

Cowan had done this brilliantly. During World War II, he was head of the U.S. Office of War Information, the Allies’ propagandist-in-chief against Nazism. Later, although a Reform Jew, he was chief communications advisor to the Methodist Church and a media advisor to Illinois Gov. Adlai Stevenson during the Democrat’s campaigns for president in 1952 and 1956. Cowan taught me that being a news reporter wasn’t the only way to participate in the storytelling dance of media, public policymakers and the wider world. What counted was your intention to do good for the public, even if you did so while remaining in private.

Cowan was a Manhattan liberal, a supporter and silent funder of the Freedom Rides in the South during the early 1960s. Among his friends and salon acquaintances were publishers, writers, artists and like-minded political activists, some of whom he had brought to his Columbia seminar. Though she never attended, one of Cowan’s pals was playwright Lillian Hellman. Another was her companion, sus-

pense writer Dashiell Hammett.

This artistic relationship grew more important after I left Columbia, began to write on my own and became familiar with Hammett's work and his influence on suspense fiction through his writings in *Black Mask* magazine and the *Continental Op* series of detective stories. I was a mystery purist by that time and understood that Hammett's best work was not "The Thin Man" series, for which he was best known. I also discounted the fact that Hammett was a Red. I couldn't have cared less. His writing was tops, period.

At Columbia, I had sought Cowan's help on a variety of projects, particularly a paper he assigned me to write about the 25th anniversary of NBC's Today Show. This paper was a major project, involving visits to NBC at Rockefeller Center, interviews with the show's producer and time on the set, which Cowan had helped arrange by making calls to the producers. I was thrilled. Cowan confessed that he had always loved the show and had given me the assignment because he had failed to compete with it when he was head of CBS. The best Cowan had come up with was *Captain Kangaroo*, the children's show, which succeeded as TV but failed to make the grade as general audience programming.

Cowan and I got along well, and he took an interest in my welfare. When Sun Oak gave birth to our daughter, Lee, in January 1974, Cowan sent along a baby gift in congratulations—one of the few people to do that outside of our family. While I was at the News, we had kept up our relationship; I had gone to the Westbury Hotel, where he had a penthouse, for lunch a few times. When he found out I was writing fiction, Cowan told me about his friendship with Hammett, and that he knew a literary agent and would be happy to introduce me when the time came.

This encouragement was all the motivation I needed to quickly finish a draft of my manuscript. But it was premature. The draft turned out to be very rough; the agent Cowan had contacted returned my manuscript, saying it needed editing and tightening. Disappointed, I went back through my story again, this time with more care for spelling and crisp writing. It was better, and when I finished the manuscript in 1977, I was eager to get it first to Cowan for his review to make sure I didn't send the agent a half-baked book.

At the time, I was assigned to the overnight or “lobster” shift at the News, working from 1 to 9 a.m. I was binding up my revised manuscript at 2 a.m. at my slot on the city desk. I typed a short letter of thanks to Professor Cowan on the Underwood at the city desk. Beside me the police and fire radio scanned through the message traffic between the dispatchers and the field units. Suddenly, just as I was finishing my letter, the bells rang on the fire radio, indicating a fatality. Through the scratchy radio chatter I heard the address for the Westbury, at 68th Street and Madison Avenue. A chill shot through me.

I took my coat and went uptown with a photographer in the News car. Hustling quickly through the firemen finishing their grim chores, I learned that the fatality had occurred in the penthouse; an elderly couple had been killed in their sleep. I went upstairs and found, lying in the charred hallway, the zipped plastic body bags containing the remains of the professor and his wife. I asked questions of the fire commander. I told him I knew the victims and suggested where he might find next of kin. After we got clear some of the protocols, he told me what happened. An electric short-circuit in a borrowed television was later blamed for the fire. As we spoke, a marshal wearing a black motorcycle-type jacket came over and overheard our conversation. He found the coincidence of me being there too much. He began to treat me like a suspect.

“You say you knew the victims,” he interrupted.

I said yes and explained he had been a professor of mine.

“And why are you here again?” he asked, indicating with his voice he clearly did not believe the fact I was a reporter for the News. “Let me see your identification.”

At this point, I began to lose my composure. I was about to challenge the marshal, when the commander I had spoken to interrupted and said, “He’s okay. Tommy’s with the News all right. He already talked with me.” Another fireman stepped in between the marshal and me and began to back him away. Not wanting to escalate this, I turned back toward the bodies to collect my thoughts.

When I had called in the information about the Cowan fire to the News, I was concerned about the lead paragraph and told the rewrite-man that I knew the victims personally and to make sure he beefed up their humanity, as activists, art patrons, teachers and mentors. By that

time I should have known better. The makeup editor knew Cowan was newsworthy because of the CBS job and the manner of his leaving it. Later that morning I saw how the limits of my craft could distort the truth. I knew Professor Cowan as an honest, nurturing mentor. But the headline on the page three story with my byline that morning read: “Ex-CBS TV Big, Sacked During Quiz Show Scandal, Dies in Fire.”

AFTER MY STRETCH WORKING NIGHTS, I was sprung to cityside, working days, and assigned to cover organized labor. It didn't work. The beat was dominated by another reporter who had been riding that road for years and considered me competition he didn't need. He worked the beat with a pal on the city desk so that whenever a labor story came up, the editor made sure it got sent his way before I got a shot. His tactics were clear to everyone. I was at sea, taking random stories here and there, and getting impatient. I missed the rat-tat-tat pace of working nights. I soon realized that nightside was the best assignment I'd ever had. I began to wonder how to get back.

As this was going on, there was a shift in the hierarchy at the News. After Clendenin, the metro editor who had hired me and kept an eye out for me, left, Dick Oliver, the city editor, moved up to metro editor. Sam Roberts, the widely respected City Hall political reporter, had been named city editor and become my boss.

Every editor has his style. Roberts liked news that could be packaged: three, four or five-part series; or stories that contained, say, the "10 worst" or "five best." For example, the city rent-control law was up for renewal soon. Why not do a story about bad guys to balance out the political accounts that landlords would be depositing in Albany? Roberts assigned me to do a piece about the city's five worst landlords.

I went to the Office of Rent Control and found a helpful staff person to let me dig through files containing 4,000 recent tenant complaints. The bad guys were easy to find. I picked five whom the staff recommended as the worst, easy, but they weren't alone. There was plenty of harassment, terror and thuggery to go around. I concentrated on the victims: the Ukrainian mother and daughter who had fled Nazis and remained in poverty on the Lower East Side, enduring the shouts of a woman landlord who said: Hitler missed you! The 82-year-old diabetic woman denied hot water in winter, who did not know her insulin had spoiled when the refrigerator went dead after the landlord cut the electricity. Then there were the son and his mother, who was dying of cancer; they were burned out of their unit by a hallway fire and would be allowed back into their building only over the landlord's "dead body."

Any nasty idea that a landlord could think of was in the files—all to get the tenants to flee the unit so the landlord could have it removed

from rent control rolls and placed on “stabilization,” which under New York law allowed for higher annual rent increases: 7.5 percent for one-year leases, 9.5 percent for two years, 12.5 percent for three. A guaranteed winner. That was just the kind of motive that allows evil to grow—a government-guaranteed profit. Lots of landlords complained that controls were killing New York real estate. Maybe so. But what other business guarantees revenue increases of that level?

I shod the horse well enough so that it didn’t go lame. My reward was that Roberts and Oliver aimed me at another story idea they had been kicking around for weeks. It involved politics and sex, the perfect combination. Roberts, the political guy, and Oliver, the investigations chief, had agreed on a story that perfectly matched my ambition to grab Page 1. It happened that Mayor Abraham Beame, facing reelection, was being criticized for his lackluster efforts to follow through on promises to clean up the smut in Times Square.

Beame had first promised reforms in October 1975, a year earlier. Beame promised his reform wasn’t going to be a glossed-over, one-shot deal. Everything would be looked at, from unsanitary streets to sex-related businesses, in his anti-smut campaign. A dozen agencies would be involved. But within months, it was apparent that the initial boost had subsided; not much had been done by any of the agencies to advance the mayor’s announced intentions. Now in the middle of 1976 it was clear that the mayor’s drive was going nowhere and was becoming an embarrassment. It seemed more of a political stunt than anything else. But there were undercurrents something more was up.

The mayor’s office was under pressure. Big-time Broadway theater owners wanted something done about the Times Square smut rackets, which were breeding like bugs in a manure pile, becoming so dominant that the sex trades were scaring away patrons of legitimate theater. Other right-thinking social conservatives (as in Brooklyn and Queens) wanted the smut shut down because it was morally obnoxious. But New York being New York, this wasn’t a universal crusade. Many of the fashionable and politically correct (read Manhattan) people of the day held that pornography was a matter of free choice and a constitutionally protected form of free speech. Besides, let’s face it, big smut was big business. Battalions of real estate owners, agents, brokers and their lawyers thought the whole thing was fine. Lots of

money was involved. And another thing, people liked it. Sex sells. It makes the blood boil. Simple.

But among the intellectual elite, the mood had begun to shift. Feminists thought of porn as a form of violence toward women. And performing artists, who were members of theater guilds, took a page from the trade-union movement, arguing that porn threatened the jobs in legitimate theater and the ability of mainstream performing artists to work.

The mayor, in his desire to be re-elected, was responding to political pressure in ways I was only beginning to understand. The city obtained a \$432,000 federal grant and established the Midtown Enforcement Project, headed by Beame's assistant Sidney Baumgarten. To help build a political base for his actions against smut, Beame established the Mayor's Midtown Citizens Committee on Jan. 29, 1976, giving it the unusual mandate to monitor and evaluate the performance of city agencies and provide guidance.

The mayor's political calculus behind the Midtown Citizens Committee was to respond to the Broadway theater producers—mainly the Shubert Organization, which owned numerous theaters and productions along Broadway on the West Side and whose support would be required to finance Beame's re-election. Baumgarten also established an advisory task force representing aspects of the midtown community. Among the citizens involved in the midtown effort were aging but still respected actresses, producers, blue-chip real estate businesses, physicians, priests and PR types from some of midtown's major employers, including New York Telephone & Telegraph Company, whose headquarters was situated in the midst of the porn district at the corner of West 42nd Street and 6th Avenue.

The phone company's designated rep on the Midtown Citizens Committee was my former boss, Clendenin, who attended committee meetings and later persuaded his successor at the News, Dick Oliver, to attend, too. The proceedings of this behind-the-scenes group were not reported in the newspapers despite Oliver's presence, because assignment editors were not convinced the mayor was serious.

In effect, what Clendenin and Oliver were doing was working with the Shubert PR guy named Joe Silver—also a one-time Daily News reporter—to see what was going on in the mayor's office. For

his part, Beame probably figured he was getting a lot of support from the media and theater people. In fact, they were keeping an eye on him. Nobody was particularly interested in cooperation; all the parties had their own agenda. Typical New York deal.

The midtown committee set up subcommittees on sanitation, obscenity laws, enforcement of existing laws, and potential new ordinances and proposals. By March 1976, the committee concluded that the midtown cleanup was caught in a bureaucratic tangle. There was no coordination among the dozen agencies dealing with midtown smut and none of them had given priority to its problems. The only agency with people intent on carrying out the mayor's request was the Police Department.

The Midtown Citizens Committee recommended in April 1976 that the Midtown Enforcement Project be given authority to cut red tape when dealing with other civil authorities. It also wanted the mayor to push the district attorney to work harder on the criminal aspects. Here's an idea, they argued: Why not hold seminars for judges, prosecutors and the city's corporation counsel to give them an overview of the criminal, economic and social implications of the sex rackets and the civil procedures for controlling them?

A tight mosaic of sex-related businesses over the years had been choking legitimate businesses and creating crime in the theater district and the nearby residential neighborhood called Clinton. The citizens committee became convinced the smut rackets were an urban disease, that sex businesses drove out non-sex businesses and took over their space.

What was at stake was the core of the Big Apple. Midtown stretched from 30th to 65th Streets, from the Hudson River to the East River. Although it covered only 3.76 square miles, or 17 percent of Manhattan, Midtown contained 49 percent of the borough's assessed property valuation, produced more than \$742 million in property taxes, 900,000 (40 percent) of the jobs in Manhattan, \$5.2 billion in payroll (41 percent); and \$3.4 billion (51 percent) of retail sales.

It was the city's business center, possessing only 7 percent of residential communities in Manhattan, with 12 percent of the borough's total dwelling units, averaging 1.54 people per unit. But since 1971, the last time the state had investigated sex businesses, a new rot had

set in. Between 1973 and 1976, massage parlors increased 425 percent, from 12 to 63 emporiums, and peep shows and dirty book joints were up 109 percent, from 22 to 46 locations. The total number of smut emporiums—topless or bottomless bars, brothels, porno movie houses, and dirty bookstores—was now at 200, and 61 of those were property tax deadbeats.

As these smut rackets grew, other businesses failed. From 1972 to 1975, property tax arrears went up 169 percent in Midtown, from \$31.6 million to \$85.1 million. During the same period, the total assessed property value grew only 21.7 percent, from \$7.4 billion to \$9.07 billion, well below the 52.9 percent growth rate of property values elsewhere. Legitimate business was losing value.

The citizens committee identified two issues: the social and economic erosion of the city, and the loss of millions in tax dollars. In effect, smut was a rotten spot on the core of the Big Apple. Setting aside the moral and aesthetic issues, from a purely fiscal point of view the city was faced with the disappearance of good taxpaying enterprises and the arrival of enterprises that paid little in taxes; indeed, many seemed to be in the sex business for the purpose of avoiding taxes. But these conclusions lay dormant on City Hall desks for months, frustrating committee members and increasing their suspicions. Was this cleanup campaign just an effort to help the mayor get re-elected?

Finally, Beame acted. In July 1976 he issued Executive Order No. 64, establishing the Mayor's Midtown Action Office with broad powers, reporting to a deputy mayor. Now Baumgarten's office began keeping tabs on the cleanup campaign. By the first quarter of 1977, 71 of 200 businesses originally targeted in January 1976 were closed. This was progress. But the citizens committee found that delays had crept back into the mayoral agencies; bureaucrats in the buildings, highways, and consumer affairs departments were sitting on their behinds. The leaders of these agencies had failed to act as ordered, and the mayor had not followed up to enforce his decisions. The agency heads justified their inaction by blaming the city's fiscal crisis and overlapping responsibilities.

And some of the action that was being taken seemed absurd. Take the simple matters of sidewalk litter and obstructions. Four city agencies—highways, planning, buildings and consumer affairs—all had

jurisdiction in regulating signs on sidewalks, and getting the city to act on sidewalk issues was like watching an Alphonse/Gaston routine. You go. No, you go. No, not me first, you. No, you first, not me.

Of course, there were individuals within the city bureaucracy—like some police officers—who worked as hard as they could. Take the guys who wrote summonses against street vendors. City records noted that 13 vendors had a history of 24,000 summonses for a variety of smut offenses: sex in premises for commercial purposes; banners on public streets promoting sex businesses; violations of ordinances dealing with how sexual businesses can be advertised in windows. But this was an utter waste of time. The lawyers working for these sex entrepreneurs just laughed. The licensing ordinance relating to exhibitions and performances had been declared unconstitutional in 1973, and no law existed to deal with this proliferation of trash.

To make matters worse, the district attorney's office and the brass in the Police Department—the city's own law enforcement agencies—were being singularly uncooperative. For example, a delegation from the citizens committee had met twice with Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau to see what law enforcement could do. One of these meetings was held the morning of Nov. 9, 1976, in Morgenthau's office. All but a few from the committee were at the sitdown with some brass from the city, including Morgenthau, his key deputy, Kenneth Conboy, Police Commissioner Michael Codd, City Council President Thomas Cuite and Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton.

Morgenthau and Codd got down to the issue quickly. They had problems with this entire concept of relying on local law enforcement to lead the cleanup. Based on past arrests and convictions, Codd asked: Why should New York cops make 48 arrests in connection with massage parlors when 44 would walk with a fine and only four go to jail? Why should cops make 148 arrests for live sex shows, when we get only 51 convictions and no jail time? Codd called it a colossal waste of time.

Morgenthau agreed: We make 300 arrests a day in Manhattan, with pimps-and-prostitutes types of crime making up about 10-15 percent of the load. Prosecutors handle 250 cases a week, all of them difficult and expensive. Of those arrested, only 20 percent are indicted, and of those, 80 percent are convicted. When you look at the pimps and pros crimes, Morgenthau said, an analysis of 210 arrests in 1976

in midtown Manhattan shows that 63 were for prostitution, 68 for obscenity (including 22 for live sex) and 24 for larceny. Of the total 210, 41 percent, or 88, were still pending, and 58 percent, or 122, had been disposed of. Of the cases disposed of, 34 percent, or 42, were dismissed, and 65 percent, or 80, were guilty findings. Of the 80 guilty, four went to jail, 16 were released for time served, eight were fined on the spot, four were given a conditional discharge, and 48, or 60 percent, were given a fine with time to pay.

In addition, 748 people were arrested elsewhere in Manhattan for prostitution in this analysis. About 98 percent of the arrests resulted in convictions. Of those convicted, 85 percent paid fines averaging \$100; only 15 percent did jail time, and only for an average of seven days. Based on these figures, Morgenthau and Codd argued all criminal prosecution of sex offenses did was to waste money and tie up court time.

The facts didn't lie. New York simply did not consider sex-related crimes serious enough to warrant criminal prosecution, and the courts didn't want to clog the jails with sex-business criminals. When asking Morgenthau direct questions, an incredulous citizens committee heard him say: no, we don't know who is behind Times Square porn; no, we do not know who is reaping the profits; and, no, we don't believe the grand jury process would work to fix this problem. Gathering facts through a grand jury was slow and painstaking, he said. Besides, the grand jury's most powerful tool, granting immunity, wouldn't work. No one involved in the sex rackets would take immunity, and you couldn't get prosecutions that way. In addition, racketeering cases were difficult to develop. The DA said the best way to deter sex racketeering was on a case-by-case basis, which he had just said was a waste of time.

A member of the citizens committee, whose identity I was forced to keep anonymous, had popped his cork: The sex rackets are turning the neighborhood into a sewer and you say you can do nothing? What is the community to do?

One of the advocates for the midtown cleanup was Michael S. Rosenthal, founder of Phoenix House, a detox center, and deputy commissioner of the city's Addiction Services Agency. He argued at the November meeting that anti-porn zoning laws would eliminate the "pathological social matrix within which criminality flourishes."

Think of the porn zone, where smut concentrates, as an organism that is host to more than one variety of social parasite, Rosenthal said. The first variety are the owners, managers and employees of smut businesses. At the moment, they are within the law, thanks to free speech. But the existence of a sizable number of these smut shops in a single area attracts a second set of social parasites, who come to practice their own deviant specialties. These include pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers and muggers. The lure for these so-called parasites was the large number of victims.

The parasites understand instinctively that thrill seekers cross a psychological boundary when they enter the districts where these sexual attractions are located. On unfamiliar ground, they are, at that moment, acting out of character; their judgment is affected and their defenses are down, and they are therefore extremely vulnerable to the secondary, often criminal, parasites. Collectively these people constitute an attractive target. But no one was more attracted to adult entertainment, Rosenthal said, than adolescents, who themselves became vulnerable to both sexual predators and to those who made their living providing flesh to satisfy others' lust.

Rosenthal argued that if you can't eliminate individual enterprises because they are legally protected in our free society, then use zoning laws to disperse them so that the pathological matrix is destroyed. He used the city's crime statistics to make his point. At the 209 police posts in midtown, crime stats, the staple of any reporter's diet, showed that in those posts designated as "morals-prone" there were 69 percent more criminal complaints than at police posts that weren't considered morals-prone. The complaints were also more serious: 25.8 percent more burglary, 142.3 percent more felonious assault, 88.9 percent more grand larceny, 185.2 percent more rape, 130.2 percent more robbery. In other words, the potential for violence in such places was very high. As a result, the community had every right to act. Zoning was the way to go. Eventually Rosenthal's zoning argument would be how the city turned the Square around. But that would be years in the future.

By January 1977 the citizens committee's distress was acute. Members were writing to each other and to Beame saying they were feeling profoundly frustrated. The issue seemed intractable. Coordination within the city was still poor and the district attorney,

courts and police offered no assurance that they were taking midtown smut seriously. Judges treated each case as isolated, dealing with pros and pimps as if with a small mugging, and one in which the victim asked for it, so to speak. The judges didn't understand that prostitution was part of a larger sex-related business and criminal enterprise.

Some on the citizens committee privately expressed bitterness over the apparent coincidence of Beame's press tours in midtown and his election campaign. Many shared reporters' cynicism that the Times Square cleanup was just another media scam, like the Bicentennial's highly successful Op-Sail extravaganza or the 1976 Democratic Party Convention. Draft segments of the committee's annual report, which would be sent to Baumgarten's boss, Deputy Mayor Nicholas Scoepetta, stated that the panel was:

Forced to conclude that the New York City government—from mayoral agencies to the prosecutor's office to the courts—neither has taken nor will take steps to do the job. The committee often found itself questioning whether it is occupying an adversary role vis-à-vis city agencies from whom it should expect wholehearted cooperation.

Some specific suggestions: that federal, state and city governments cooperate in the collection of income taxes; that the Internal Revenue Service be mobilized in enforcement; that a U.S. attorney's strike force on Times Square be activated; and that the State Liquor Authority become involved. Also, the committee urged, the Manhattan district attorney must get involved at the grand jury level:

To find answers to such important questions as to who are the owners and operators of the sex-related businesses; is there any business or other relationship between them; is organized crime involved in their operations; do they pay taxes; how large an industry do they comprise; why have they proliferated and what could have been done and what should be done to prevent further proliferation; what is their financial impact upon the city; have city agencies properly enforced those ordinances, rules and regulations peculiar to them...The committee believes these questions can be answered and the problem solved.

Some on the citizens committee said that widespread publicity about the sex business was necessary to expose it for what it was: a spread-

ing cancer that was killing legitimate businesses and theater. Unless there was a perceptible change in the mayor's leadership of this effort, his own campaign, even if born of the best intentions (which some had begun to doubt) would fail. But why wouldn't the city bust up the smut rackets on its own? Why the snail's pace? Was somebody being protected? Who? And by whom?

The Midtown Citizens Committee concluded it had two options: an all-out effort to change the zoning laws to force the breakup of the smut rackets, and a propaganda campaign to continue the official harassment of sex peddlers in midtown. The hope was that the campaign would be picked up by others in law enforcement.

In this the committee was listening to former and current Daily News guys: Clendenin, Silver, and Oliver. Each of these press veterans knew that the bureaucratic feather-ruffling taking place within the polite citizens committee was all very interesting but that more was needed, much more. What this called for, they told the committee, was a newspaper crusade, a set of stories to capture the public's imagination, to galvanize the people's will and stir things up. Obviously, they wanted the News to do the job.

By that time the city's mainstream press corps had concluded that the mayor's drive to clean up Times Square was bogus. In fact, the word in the city room of the News was that this midtown clean up was just part of Beame's re-election campaign puffery. Why had it taken six months, for example, for him just to issue an executive order authorizing the Midtown Enforcement Project to cut red tape?

It was in this context that Roberts, the city editor, decided in March 1977, with Oliver's encouragement, that it was time to take a hard look at the sex rackets. I was the reporter on the floor who came into their view. I was the second organized-labor reporter on a beat not even making use of one, I was new off nightside, and I had been tagged as a Queens guy just as Queens emerged in the smut debate because of the vote of its borough president in City Hall.

At the time, the city's Board of Estimate was considering imposing zoning rules recommended by the Planning Commission to deal with smut shops and the growing porn industry. This land-use formula, based on the so-called Detroit rule recently endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court, would in effect create porn zones in certain areas and

ban them in others. In this way, the “pathological matrix” referred to by Rosenthal could be controlled and kept to a minimum.

The problem was that Queens Borough President Donald Manes, a key Board of Estimate vote, wouldn’t go for it. He said it would drive porn out of midtown and into Queens. Besides, Manes argued, a citywide zoning ordinance wasn’t necessary because there were no smut zones in Queens. Most in Manhattan didn’t know Queens from beans; if Donny Manes said there wasn’t porn in Archie Bunker country, he must know. Of course, law enforcement and the crusaders against porn knew this was bunk and called Roberts to say so. A Daily News editorial on March 26 endorsed the zone change. The city desk saw a story and me at the same time:

“Hey, Collins, you’re the Queens expert,” the assistant city editor said, giving me a name and a phone number. “Do a porn piece to make Donny sorry he ever said something this stupid.”

My assignment was to find facts that disproved Manes’ contention that smut parlors weren’t a big deal in Queens and, in fact, the city might need an ordinance covering all five boroughs. I went to the City Planning Commission for help. The staff dug out a list of 34 joints in Queens that they had identified as porn palaces—dirty bookstores, massage parlors, nudie dance joints and peep movie houses, such as Fountain Blue, The Red Boot, Black Angel, Goodtimes, Blue Rooster, Lucky Lounge, Fiddle & Bow, Pink Orchard, New Image and Paradise Books, to name a few.

It took two days going from one to another to get an idea of what people were talking about. I asked superficial questions of shy smut patrons and disbelieving proprietors to confirm the essentials: how many customers, how much trouble with cops, community opponents, the essential nature of the smut racket at each location. One matron at a pros’ bar actually burst into laughter at my questions.

“Honey,” she said, “are you kidding? Business is great!”

This assignment was an eye-opening, mind-blowing walk on the wild side. I could hardly believe what I saw—pornography so raw it was, for me, literally indescribable. I couldn’t bring myself to explain these images to anyone. They just became part of the background context for all that would follow.

I did a full-page story on what I found. It appeared on the Queens

Page March 31, 1977. It was done in the style of an open memo to Manes; a wisenheimer hatchet job, deliberately provocative to the reader while at the same time embarrassing to Manes. One of my opening lines was: “Pssst. Hey you. Donny Manes. Want to see some dirty pictures?” I then took the reader on a colorful tour of the smut locales in Queens, all the while indicating Manes had to be blind not to know what was in his political domain.

The people at the Mayor’s Midtown Task Force loved it. I got calls telling me my story was a hit with law enforcement. Ever after, doors in the city’s smut enforcement bureaucracy were wide open to me. The midtown cops who worked this area treated me like family. The News’ treatment of Manes was so successful, Roberts and Oliver agreed to set me loose on another idea: the crusade on smut. Roberts said, let’s do the top five smut merchants in the city. That’s it: The Sultans of Smut.

I was called over to the city desk. The story idea sounded reasonable, and I started to gather my wits. The midtown enforcement people would be help, sure. But an hour in the assignment I realized that one of the best sources was in the city room, a News reporter named Bill Sherman, who was on leave doing a book about Times Square. Sherman had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974 for a series on Medicaid fraud, and much of the work had been done in Queens, at so-called Medicaid mills where bogus medical treatment was provided for which the federal Medicaid program was then billed. Sherman posed as a patient and a News photographer as his brother. News reporters often employed trickery to get a story.

Sherman’s work was first-rate, as good as any detectives’ investigation for a DA’s office. It marked the first Pulitzer the News had won since Joe Martin’s for his reporting on Fidel Castro in the late 1950s when the Cuban rebel was still in the mountains. Sherman’s editor on the Pulitzer series was Oliver, who was also a lecturer at the Columbia University School of Journalism, which handed out the prizes. Usually the Pulitzer Prize was more the province of the New York Times and other such tone sheets. A prize to a working-class tab like the News for a fraud investigation was a sign that the media elites were saying the Daily News had arrived. Most old-line Daily News hands could not have cared less; they didn’t require Ivy Leaguers’ recognition. Sherman, however, now in his late twenties and a middle-class gradu-

ate of Boston University, was more sensitive to the career and professional nuances. Since receiving the prize, Sherman had begun to chafe at hard news on deadline and was slowly weaning himself from daily journalism.

When he found out what I was after, he eagerly gave me help. He had done a lot of legwork, showed me some of his notes and leads, and gave me the names of a number of cops and other investigators he had met. This help turned out to be essential, as his nudging was always on target against the pressure to turn out stories on daily deadlines. He had his own agenda, of course, and kept plenty to himself for his own work. Nonetheless, with his help I was able to develop the story quickly.

I began to spend more and more time out of the office and in Times Square, making the rounds of all the porn houses, getting a sense of the pace, checking the action and people, learning how to blend in. I got to know a few proprietors and started to recognize the street locals who were in the area all the time. I took to wearing a garish nylon shirt, a leather blazer and jeans. I stopped worrying about whether I had shaved that day. After a while I began to tell myself that I was part of the background; in hindsight those who paid attention probably figured I was a cop.

With the Daily News coverage of the Board of Estimate hearings, the shouts of the theater folks and their publicity machines, smut was becoming a first-tier story. But on April Fools' Day it got silly. After months of doing little, Highways Commissioner Anthony R. Ameruso, to help the mayor, his boss and patron, led a barrage of reporters in a carefully staged attack on porn. Highways had jurisdiction over sidewalk awnings. The target was the Gilded Grape, a transvestite saloon at 719 8th Ave. between 44th and 45th streets. Ameruso supervised a squad of highway employees as they used an acetylene torch to cut down the Grape's tattered canopy, which hung over the sidewalk. TV camera crews, reporters, photographers and radio guys fought each other for better angles and microphone space.

When Ameruso came near me, I asked: "Is this part of the mayor's anti-porn drive?"

"No," he said. "We gave them plenty of notice to take it down. They haven't, so we are."

Why he couldn't make this simple political point to help his boss

was a mystery, and from the mayor's point of view hardly helpful. But Ameruso had gotten his job for his loyalty, not PR savvy, and he figured this was how he should be doing his job, not by saying he was doing what everyone knew he was doing—cashing in on some publicity for his boss. Who can figure? But it worked: The event was treated to a Page 1 photo and Page 3 story under the headline: "Abe's Time Square Cleanup Heats Up."

That same day, the publicity machines of the porn industry were at work, too. I attended a press conference, of all things, at a smut supermarket called Show World, on the corner of West 42nd and 8th. Show World had live and video peeps, books, films and all manner of what the cops called "rubber goods." Without the slightest indication of shame or irony, building owner Wallace Katz, 46, argued that Show World was a "stabilizing influence on the neighborhood." His colleague, sex show promoter Rod Swenson, 30, who possessed a master's in theater arts from Yale, asserted that production of live sex acts between consenting adults was no crime. Standing next to him was a modest woman in her early twenties, dressed like a secretary from a Park Avenue law firm—only with heart-shaped glasses that shielded her eyes, with lenses colored an alluring shade of purple and red.

Swenson answered my question: "Us drive out business from Times Square? No way. We employ 60 persons."

Katz, for his part, said: "I am not ashamed of being the landlord of the building housing Show World. I'm happier with Show World than I was with Chemical Bank."

Still later that day, Terrence Cardinal Cooke spoke at a ceremony attended by more than 200 volunteers and benefactors in support of the Rev. Bruce Ritter, who was opening Under 21, a 24-hour drop-in center at 692 8th Ave., between 43rd and 44th streets. Under 21 was to be a sanctuary for child and teenage runaways and refugees from the kiddie porn industry.

Cooke said the Under 21 center, which would soon be renamed Covenant House, was a sign of hope for children caught in the snare of the midtown smut rackets. "The porn profiteers, sex exploiters and street criminals have imposed themselves on the people in the area," the cardinal said, "and we must fight this moral decay."

I got to know Father Ritter as I continued to work the Square. He

said he'd been working at a parish in the East Village in 1963 when he came to understand that something had to be done for the children. He had an engaging sense of mission amid such predatory scum. He showed me around his Covenant House, weaving a tale about how such a sanctuary was necessary to save these exploited children.

Nine kids showed up the first day. It seemed like a terrific idea to me. We did a story April 4 pointing to Covenant House, just a few blocks from the Port Authority, as children's road out of Times Square porn land. It was an oasis among porno movie houses, peep shows, massage parlors and fleabag hotels with hundreds of pimps and pros.

Ritter needed help with money, so I told Billy Reel, a Daily News columnist, about him. Reel, a recovering alcoholic partial to stories of redemption and the power of Providence, interviewed Ritter and found his story compelling. On May 6, 1977, Reel's column ran under the headline: "On a Street of Sin, There Dwelt a Pimp and a Priest." It was a bleeding-heart piece about how Ritter's mission needed money. Billy pledged \$20 and urged everybody to do the same. Ritter later said that Reel's column saved him. The money that poured in in response to Reel's column enabled Covenant House to turn the corner. It grew into a multimillion-dollar social service center, helping hundreds of kids, praised by President Reagan and embraced as a darling of the New York swells. But Ritter himself was destined to fall, resigning from Covenant House in disgrace in 1990 after being accused of hiring members of his family, misusing money and having sexual relations with two boys.

I spent nights learning the midtown underworld—looking to learn, never to touch. Despite any temptation, the nuns had taught me too well. The sidewalks of 8th Avenue were often empty of all life save vice. You saw uniformed cops walking slowly while the shrill whine of sirens from nearby blocks chilled the air. I came up to one hooker. How much? \$60 for 30 minutes, \$120 for an hour. Two cops walked up to the girl: Keep walking, they advised her, keep moving, no standing.

I walked into a saloon called the Turntable, a k a Horse's Rail, at 114 West 45th St. A hard-staring but scared-looking doorman standing a lean 6 foot 5 inches said: "Have a drink, Mister?" It was not a question. The drink, or the admission fee, was \$3.50. The young girl in leotards behind the bar handed me a bottle of near-beer and took my

money. As I sipped from the bottle, she lifted her leg and set her right high-heeled shoe on the corner of the sink behind the bar, revealing the contour of her sex. She simply stared at me, waiting. A nude girl on a turntable behind a pane of glass behind the bar moved her legs in the air in seductive motions. A Hispanic woman emerged from the shadows in the back, where you could see rows of booths and curtained hideaways, and came over behind me.

“You want company?” she asked, moving her arm around my waist. Her voice was slurred. I turned around to see that her gaze was out of focus. “You want to go in back?”

I said no thanks, and she approached another patron down the bar. My next stop was another such place, Hungry Hilda’s, at 709 8th Ave. It was laid out much the same, with the girl on stage and the hookers coming up to the bar to introduce themselves. There were only about 25 patrons at Hilda’s, not crowded. I didn’t stay long. I had seen all I needed to.

The crowds were at the gay bars, which cops told me the mobsters opened in a cynical attempt to attract a clientele from an underserved market. I got to the Hay Market, at 7872 8th Ave. just before midnight. The bar was five deep with men and boys hustling, talking, laughing—and drinking. Lots of drinking. The air was thick with cigaret smoke. The jukebox played loud pounding rock music. Patrons moved unself-consciously to the beat. The bar was long and thin, with a shelf of liquor lined against the back wall. Against the opposite wall hustlers were seated against a railing, some of the boys looking as young as 15. One was staring into space, his thin frame covered with a faded denim jacket, scruffy jeans and black boots. Several of the men from the bar across the way were watching. Several of the boys wore varsity jackets with leather sleeves. Others had shiny plastic jackets. They were all working.

One of the men at the bar in his early twenties wore an elegant camel’s-hair jacket, black pants and silk ascot. A portly, balding man in a business suit sat next to him. He wore rimless glasses and could have passed for an accountant at any midtown office. Another boy came up to the balding man and whispered in his ear. Two stools down, a handsome man smiled at the mirror. Behind him stood a goon wearing a T-shirt with barbells stenciled on front, with the sleeves rolled up.

His arms were folded across his chest and he flexed his biceps. In the doorway, a young boy with a woolen stocking cap blocked the way, forcing everyone who came in or walked out to ask him to move.

It was getting late. I walked from East 42nd over to Starship Discovery I, at 350 West 42nd, between Eighth and Ninth avenues. The entry fronted on 41st. It looked like a garishly flashy nightclub. I'd been told Starship had irregular hours but was usually open after 10 p.m. On a weekend it was said to draw up to 700 people and to charge a \$100 membership. On weekdays, the crowds were smaller. For \$8 they called you a guest and you got drinks for free.

I paid the \$8 and entered a narrow corridor. The inside walls and ceiling were painted black; white and silver foil paper, cut into half-moons, were slapped on here and there. Blinking lights gave the place the feeling of outer space; hence the name. I learned later that the club had three floors with VIP rooms containing padded couches, TVs and stereo headphones for solitary reverie.

Walking around Starship's corridors, I found myself in the main entertainment section, where a stage show and band were entertaining a crowd of nearly 200 people seated at white molded plastic tables and chairs. Large plastic, pedestal-mounted globes, lit from within, were placed around the room. Bizarre statues were positioned in cutouts on the walls for decoration. Electric disco music pounded through the sound system. The waiters, who were mostly gay, wore black and silver jumpsuits on loan, I thought, from a Star Trek set. Most of the patrons were men, who all seemed to be enjoying the nightclub act.

As I sat down, a waiter came over and asked me if I'd like a drink. A Scotch and soda was delivered free, as promised in the cover charge. The comedian on stage, a porky, balding middle-aged queen, wore a Roman-style toga and a Caesar hairdo. He spoke loudly at a super-intense fast pace, like the professionals in Las Vegas. His jokes were campy. "I'm Donna Rickles," he teased one patron, in a mocking pose of threatening a heckler. Later a short, lean, wiry Vegas singer/dancer named Marc Allen Trujillo, dressed in a silver, black and red outfit, performed a fast-paced, athletic set of show tunes. It included several segments in which he changed outfits on stage. Given my knowledge of the club's owners and the nature of the overall neighborhood, I was amazed these patrons, who seemed very normal, seemed to be enjoy-

ing pretty good entertainment. On the way out, I picked up a card, which quoted Liz Smith, the News' gossip columnist, calling Trujillo "hotter than a firecracker" and boosting his appearance here for a 12-day run.

A few days after my visit, a squad from the New York Police Department's Public Morals Division raided the joint at about 2 a.m. They arrested 24 employees on liquor violations, each facing penalties of up to \$1,700. The cops told reporters that the nightclub was run by organized crime and that they hadn't found the mobster they were looking for. That, I would find, was where the real story lay.

WHILE CRUISING THESE MIDTOWN HAUNTS doing what was called skull work, I learned that, notwithstanding the frustration of the Midtown Citizens Committee with the city administration, the Manhattan DA's office and the police commissioner, a small army of law-enforcement analysts, undercover cops and intelligence spooks from a variety of government agencies had raked through midtown's smut rackets for years.

The New York State Commission of Investigation, which had offices downtown at 270 Broadway, had detailed, for example, the emergence of the sex rackets in a March 1971 report called "An Investigation of Racketeer Infiltration Into the Sex-Oriented Materials Industry in NYC."

The commission said it had begun its investigation after being tipped in late 1969 that racketeers were infiltrating what it discreetly labeled the burgeoning "industry of sex-oriented materials." Hearings in October 1970 exposed the slime under the rock: a growing business selling lust in which huge profits were to be had and from which virtually nobody knew how to collect taxes. In five years, the number of dirty bookstores in New York had gone from 15 to nearly 70. The smut rackets weren't run by rocket scientists, either. Their fixed expenses were leases on building space and salaries, both of which could be easily manipulated. The business was all in cash and nothing was written down, so details were hard to establish and taxes impossible to assess.

However you calculated it, the profit margins were worth fighting for. Store owners, for example, could buy a paperback book from a publisher for 75 cents and sell it for \$5. Dirty magazines that cost 50 cents sold for up to \$10; dirty photos purchased for 25 cents sold for \$8. If you didn't want to buy it, you could simply steal some other publisher's smut and call it yours. One such knock-off outfit called itself Pirate Publications.

There were about 1,000 peep machines operating in New York City in 1970, each of which was activated by some guy's quarter. The 15-minute films shown in the machines cost about \$2.50 to make, were sold to the peep machine owner for \$40 each. They remained busy round-the-clock with viewers putting in quarter after quarter to see the reel, just three minutes at a time. Earnings from one machine in a store with 10 could pay the store's rent.

Clerks could also sell films off the books. Some peep booths had

live shows going on behind the quarter-activated screen windows. For a quarter you got a short view of some naked girl, or if you paid \$6 you could watch a man and woman having sex. These were the days before X-rated movie houses and porn videos were widely available. Serious-minded arguments that victimless porn was an instrument of freedom and liberation weren't being made yet either. Movie theaters that showed "art films" were still considered fringe operations where patrons knew they were walking on the wild side. But the 16 mm films shown there ran for 18 hours a day, and the theaters could seat 300 patrons paying up to \$6 each to watch, generating for the exhibitor more than \$20,000 a day.

The manufacturing of these photographs and 16mm films was no artistic endeavor, either. The porn producers would put ads in local dirty magazines and newspapers: "Photo sessions: Model wanted, nude work, for sex exploitation movies—\$50 for female, \$35 for male. One film shot per session. Call (phone number)." The producers never had a problem getting actors. And the film was processed for a distributor by a friendly film lab and then packaged to be put into the peep machines, shown in the movie houses, cut for still photos for print or sold intact to buyers. However the images were cut, the business was a moneymaker: costs low, prices high, all cash.

The commission itemized all these details and said the issue was not so much the sexual nature of the industry, but that its economic activity was beyond the reach of the law. The penalties for morals violations were too low, and the arrest and evidence procedures made police enforcement very difficult. As for the more important issue of taxation, the commission found no agency was taking charge or interest. As a result, it found "many instances showing that these profits were flowing directly and indirectly to representatives of organized crime."

I had done enough midtown legwork to get the News' crusade underway on Monday, April 11. The series the editors called "Sultans of Smut" began on Page 4 with the lead-in:

Behind the pornography empire, which has spread from Times Square to every borough, are Sultans of Smut who are nameless and faceless to the public. Beginning today, The News unmask the lead-

ing porn peddlers and spotlights their often-splendid isolation from the smut they sell.

The series ran for the next five days, profiling the work and lives of five characters whose names, careers and particular smut specialties, I had learned, were well-known to the law enforcement community that had to deal with the consequences of the lust trades.

The Sultans included Edward Mishkin, then 62, of Yonkers, who for his crimes was a weekend jailbird, earning \$1.5 million a year as one of the largest producers and distributors of obscene movies and books in the country. He was best known as the promoter of the so-called “pork lady” film, a particularly grim piece of bestiality from Sweden depicting a woman and a hog; it was a favorite in midtown peeps. Mishkin pushed such wares through a company called Wholesale Books, located on the 12th floor of 48 East 21st St., where he sold books and flicks depicting bestiality as well as sex acts with and among children. In his private life, Mishkin lived on a quiet Yonkers street, among neighbors who told me they knew nothing about his vocation. He was first arrested in 1938 for bookmaking. He later racked up 15 obscenity convictions, including a contempt citation in 1955 from the U.S. Senate. In the next day’s paper the lead editorial read:

The News introduced its readers yesterday to Edward Mishkin, one of the big-time porn merchants we discovered by turning over some extremely slimy rocks. Like others in the filthy trade, Mishkin lives in quiet elegance and exudes suburban respectability while dirtying the city. Naturally, men like this are bashful about their business. But we believe they deserve to be better known for what they are and what they pretend to be.

Dealing with the smut rackets, you dealt with the mob. In the corner of Mishkin’s Wholesale Books office sat a guy with many names known to lawmen for nearly a half-century. Under the headline, “The Dirty Money Man: He Fertilized Golden Porn,” the News’ readers found out about sultan Edward L. DeCurtis, then 63, also known as Edward Costello, James Rubino, Edward Russo, Ettore Luigi DeCurtis, “Dolls,” and Guido “Eddie Dee the Toy” DeCurtis. He’d

been booked at least 18 times on counterfeiting, burglary, gun violations, arson and coercion charges.

A habitu  of The Ravenite Social Club, a Gambino mob hangout on Mulberry Street in Little Italy, DeCurtis helped organized crime get its hooks into Mishkin's Wholesale Books by providing Wholesale funds in 1973. DeCurtis sat like a shadow in Wholesale's office, keeping an eye out. DeCurtis was busted in 1975 when Nassau County vice police, investigating arsons at Trade Winds and The Flame, two Oceanside bars, raided a joint called The Magic Touch on Austin Boulevard in Island Park. Police charged DeCurtis with silent ownership of bars and of violating liquor laws. He was sentenced to a year in jail. But his career as a financier of porn literature, films, gay bars and midnight haunts on Hudson, Christopher, Mulberry and Houston streets continued. He could be counted on to intimidate any patrons of Mishkin's Wholesale establishment with a silent look from his corner desk.

In the next day's paper, the News series profiled Martin Hodas under a Page 5 headline, "A Peep Show King Has a Lust for High Life." At that moment, the 46-year-old peep mogul was in prison at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida on a 10-month sentence for income tax evasion. His company, East Coast Cinematics, of 247 West 42nd St., had installed dirty bookstores in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Atlanta; he took a 50 percent cut of all proceeds. The films, which sold for \$15 to \$40 each, were produced by Hodas' Dynamite Films or Adult Films. His 250 machines averaged earnings of \$100 a day. Hodas had resisted mob infiltration but paid up to \$5,000 a week for protection, deducting the payments from his taxes as business expenses.

The owners of the most successful dirty bookstore on West 42nd Street were a family of mob associates from Queens. Transfer of control of these smut assets within the gang was detailed on Thursday, April 14, on Page 4 under the headline: "The King Is Dead; Long Live the Smut Empire." The transfer occurred after the murder of Joseph "Joe Bikini" Brocchini, 43, at the back of his automotive business, Parliament Auto Sales, at 69-11 Roosevelt Ave. in Woodside. Brocchini's life ended as he prepared to drive home to Harrison in Westchester County on May 18, 1976; he was shot in the head five times. Brocchini, a Bonanno crime family associate, controlled three pornographic wholesale outfits that brought in \$1.5 million a year, including the lucrative Black Jack Book

Shop at 210 West 42nd. Days after his death, his brother-in-law, Alfred “Sonny” Scotti, his brother James and two pals, Ralph and Vincent Borello, all members of a Pleasant Avenue crew, divided up Brocchini’s empire over drinks in a neighborhood bar. They didn’t know that a police informant was seated nearby.

But the Sultan who turned out to be the most important was then a 39-year-old family man who lived in the posh South Shore Long Island enclave of Hewlett Harbor. His neighbors told me he was polite but kept to himself. Under the Page 5 headline “The Good Life From a Times Sq. Pornucopia,” News readers learned about Robert “Di Bee” DiBernardo. His neighbors told me they did not know DiBernardo was the principal in Star Distributors Ltd., 150 Lafayette St., the largest distributor and manufacturer of dirty books, films, magazines and sexual paraphernalia in the city, if not the nation. DiBernardo, who tax authorities said earned \$200,000 a year, was a known associate of the Simone DeCavalcante crime family of New Jersey, a Gambino affiliate.

Star Distributors had been mentioned in the State Commission of Investigation report six years before but was then of secondary importance. The most notorious mobster identified by the commission was John “Sonny” Franzese from the Colombo crime family, who in 1971 was serving a 50-year sentence for bank robbery. Despite his imprisonment, Franzese was still active in the rackets, manipulating Motion Picture Vending Inc., formed in 1967 to purchase and supply peep show equipment around town. By June 1970, Motion Picture Vending owned and operated 180 peep machines, which were supplied by Intergraphics, a West Coast distributor that listed as its bank reference Star Distributors Ltd.

Star was originally operated by Theodore Rothstein, who was arrested in 1965 in connection with photographing naked men and women on an island in New York Harbor. Shortly after Rothstein’s arrest, shipments to Star from porn producers were on a cash-only basis. After his conviction for obscenity, Rothstein turned to friends, who installed DiBernardo as Star’s vice president and financial backer. Before moving to Star, DiBernardo had owned Satellite-Wheel Alignment Co. in Brooklyn. One of the employees of the auto shop was Gaetano “Corky” Vastola, a known member of the DeCavalcante crime family, which associated the operation with the Gambino network.

In no time, DiBernardo became last word at Star. In the fall of 1970, shortly after he joined the firm, Star had acquired six bookstores in New York and Philly. Taking advantage of contacts, Star expanded into movie theaters and publishing houses in New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Georgia and beyond.

By the time the News labeled him a Sultan of Smut, DiBernardo had investments in automotive-repair franchises, a carwash, pinball arcades and several “media distribution” firms, including Bonate Distributors, which shared Star office space at 150 Lafayette Street, and C&F Merchandise Ltd. at 303 West 42nd. Star was also the nationwide distributor of Screw, the notorious porn tabloid, and used Show World, the veritable supermarket of smut at the corner of West 42nd and Eighth as an outlet for Star’s goods.

The next month, Screw’s publisher, Al Goldstein, wrote an editorial in his publication under the headline “The Press As Scavengers,” defending DiBernardo as a legitimate businessman and friend who had been unfairly tagged as a mobster. Goldstein, arguing that turnabout was fair play, identified me and another reporter and printed our Social Security numbers and home addresses, just as we had with DiBernardo and the other sultans, inviting readers to harass us as we asked News readers to harass DiBernardo.

This, of course, was not good. But it could have been worse. Goldstein was a lousy reporter. He had the identified the wrong Collins. Some poor guy from Suffolk County would get whatever heat Goldstein intended for me. These shenanigans caught the attention of press critic Alexander Cockburn, who wrote a column for the Village Voice called Press Clips. Noting Screw’s revenge, Cockburn said, “Goldstein may be starting an interesting trend.” But, he wrote, “It seems to me that Al is being a bit selective in merely targeting the writers. What about editors and publishers?”

With such intimidation, harassment and fears of worse coming into play, the high-minded First Amendment debates of yesterday were losing their charm. In the wake of the Sultans of Smut series, I was wondering whether I had what it took to pursue this kind of reporting.

Fortunately I felt I had law enforcement on my side and in the right

places as I went about my assignment. I learned about, tracked down and came to trust two detectives—call them Vinnie and Jerry—midtown investigators who were too-seasoned witnesses of the smut rackets and understood patterns of crime and social deviancy that others would rarely, if ever, contemplate. Over the years they had had a piece of most of the major investigations in midtown, including uncovering the police corruption chronicled in the books and movies *Serpico* and *Prince of the City*, which were current at the time. Vinnie and Jerry were between assignments in the Police Department. Their reputations as uncontrollable rogues made them attractive personalities and storytellers but, from the standpoint of police brass, unreliable. Because of their reactions to recent administrative decisions, they were not sure they would get reassigned or be forced to retire.

Vinnie was from Brown Goose, Minn., and had been working the “pimps and pros” squad for so many years that many regular Eighth Avenue hookers came to know even that small detail. They had heard him tell over and over how he loved to fish and hunt and how he couldn’t wait to return to Minnesota and give up the life of chasing bad guys in these parts. As a result, Brown Goose became something of a mythical place, and many hookers started naming it as their hometown, along with the fake names they gave when they were arrested, in hopes of confusing the justice system.

Other investigators, unaware of the inside joke, found Minnesota so often cited as a home state for prostitutes that, seeking patterns, they started building all manner of elaborate connections between Minnesota runaways and the prostitutes of Eighth Avenue and came to call the area Minnesota Strip. The myth took on an odd reality, prompting movies, news articles and speeches. The label became so established that a longtime New York State investigator later that year staged a hearing by the New York State Select Crime Committee in the New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry Building near Wall Street.

This investigator always encouraged his witnesses to wear black masks to shield their identities when testifying. Savvy that publicity could support his boss’s inquiries, the investigator knew that the drama of a hooded witness was catnip to photo editors and would guarantee a spot in the next day’s news.

Now, with the anti-smut campaign hot news—what with the

mayor's campaign, the Sultans of Smut crusade by the News, and the New York Times and Post doing all they could to match story for story—the investigator brought teenagers from Minnesota before the committee, who testified that pimps had recruited them for prostitution and thievery when they got off the bus from their home state in search of big city excitement.

The New York Times headline Nov. 13, 1977 read: “Midwest Teenagers Tell of Forced Vice.” A few of the girls said they had earned \$100,000 for a pimp in 14 months. The Times reporter dutifully reported that vice cops called Eighth Avenue the Minnesota Strip because of the large number of prostitutes recruited from that state. Reading this article, I thought how smart I was to have the inside dope on this little publicity scam.

Not that the central truth wasn't right; it was. What interested me was the storytelling craft involved. For all the righteousness of the anti-smut crusade, a crusader himself stays pumped because it's fun, it's stimulating, and because he desires riches or salvation. I was no different. I wanted my story to be so riveting it would have Page 1 all over it; routine was not good enough. I wanted to write it best and first, and beat my competition. I wanted to win a Pulitzer Prize, to be a newspaper hero. In the relatively small world of competition among reporters, I wanted to kick ass.

Among others working the midtown story were two reporters for the Times, Howard Blum and Selwyn Raab, who felt as I did. Their metro editors, no doubt, had done with them what mine had done with me—assigned them to look into the mayor's anti-smut campaign. They talked with the Time Square investigators I did. I smelled their trail everywhere, just as they no doubt smelled mine. With every source I spoke to, office I visited, or intelligence report I read, I knew one of these guys had either just been there or would be right behind me. We were in the hunt together. Who'd bag the story first?

By this time, the PR efforts of the Midtown Citizens Committee had succeeded beyond its original intentions. Big-time show business, and, we could tell, big-time investigators were getting involved. The Sultans series had worked. The various state and federal law enforcement bureaucracies covering New York City had dusted off their schedules to see what they could find in midtown.

I went downtown to the intelligence division in police headquarters for a meeting with a source, for example. When I sat down, he said: “I just got off the phone with the Times.” I hadn’t sworn anybody to secrecy, so he no doubt had told the Times guys he had been talking with the News. In this way, both the Times and the News reporters were energized. Reporters also become more secretive, striving for that exclusive edge. It is in such a competitive environment that having a private and trusting relationship with a source becomes so valuable, and it was in this context that Vinnie and Jerry became important to me. Trust was at a premium in exchanging sensitive and potentially dangerous information with each other—particularly when the story now was shifting to murder and the mob. Trust could mean the difference between life and death, not just embarrassment or job security as with most stories.

One of my first meetings with Vinnie was in the West End Bar at Broadway and 114th Street, across from Columbia University. We sat in a booth at the back. I drank beer while he put away rye on the rocks. It was near midnight. I listened as he told ever grimmer cop stories whose main purpose, I suspected, was to permit him a chance to gauge my reaction and take my measure. Such stories usually involved death, body parts and the ruthlessness of either the criminals or the conditions in which they operated.

In the midtown rackets, smut and lust were only the surface of the story, as they still are.

What was at work at the core of these rackets was the criminal activity—robbery, extortion, bribery, tax dodging, money laundering—that occurred in one segment of the industry or another. There was the acquisition of and exploitation of girls and boys to serve up to customers, either in image or flesh. The criminal brutality of keeping them in line—with murder if necessary. The untraceable and untaxed cash that flowed through the businesses in small change and bills. The marginal culture of homosexuals who flocked to dens in darkness to drink themselves into oblivion and seek sexual release with whoever they could find—or, I learned, who were eagerly served up by entrepreneurs who knew how to make money by satisfying a discreet population’s demand for liquor, drugs and sex.

There was the money spent by otherwise perfectly nice people who “just” liked looking at pictures of naked girls, watching a strip show and having a drink. And oh, by the way, if you were operating a business nearby—a restaurant, clothing store, newspaper stand, coffee and donut shop or whatever—you may find it prudent to get the company that worked with the smut rackets next door to, say, do your garbage pickup or laundry. You never know when some bunch would come in and start a fight that would conclude with your furniture broken, your goods destroyed and perhaps your arm broken. You never know.

It was a sweeping enterprise, which to conduct and protect involved hundreds of people, criminal and legitimate alike. But its most successful operators were capable of any crime. Murder was common, torture routine, fear and intimidation the norm.

Thus the truth of midtown’s lurid condition took on new meaning, and my own faith in my mission came under assault. I came to see that there was a network of evil running amok, of lawless exploitation and depravity that headlines in newspaper ink could never capture. And there was a foundation of social support for this evil; for a variety of reasons, some noble and some venal, the legitimate world refused to confront the evil in its midst. I came to despair that this grim picture would ever change. After all, I was merely a teller of stories in nine to 18 paragraphs. My task was to grab Sweeney’s senses. Yet Sweeney resided in a community whose sense of shock was so dulled by the mass marketing of provocative images that my own efforts to shock only made the matter worse by compounding the process.

The detective sitting across from me at the West End Bar that evening had spent years struggling with the rackets, and he was now getting around to the story he had been building, the background of a recent murder in the Bronx that we had talked about earlier. It was getting past midnight and we’d been talking for more than two hours.

“You remember the murder in the Bronx. You didn’t know that he was a snitch, did you?”

“No,” I said.

“The reason he was whacked was that he was talking to the police.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

“So what do you think?”

I made the usual noises about how this was terrible, that I hoped they got the bad guys, how did this happen and that kind of thing. I wondered if there was a news story in what Vinnie was telling me but decided that my work had gone way beyond that.

“You don’t get it,” he said, “do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t understand that he deserved it. He got what was coming to him.”

This was new, I realized. I was in a zone with rules I didn’t understand. And that made the cop smile.

“Come on,” Vinnie was saying, “this creep betrayed his guys. And when they found out, he got whacked. That’s the way it works. You didn’t know that?”

I was dizzy. It was late, I had a few too many beers in me and I was dealing

with a seasoned member of New York City’s law enforcement who was justifying the murder of a police informer as a community standard worthy of respect. We agreed to meet later that week, and our relationship continued. For a reporter whose stock in trade was confidential information, I realized Vinnie had given me excellent advice—or, as they say, an important safety tip.

After the Sultans stories ran, the regular press corps reported on the follow-up news generated by the expected range of political, law enforcement, state and local regulators and community groups. The appropriate levels of outrage were expressed. And, I would learn later, the right bells were rung in the FBI, IRS and U.S. Department of Justice. I did a few follow-up stories, but mostly I removed myself from the day-to-day “city councilman said” stuff and tried to concentrate on crafting the next breakthrough story.

In pursuit of that story, I spent more and more evenings with undercover police officers in saloons in midtown and Little Italy. The cops came to believe I wouldn’t burn them in the newspapers.

One guy, who had sever acne scars on his cheeks and who wore a suit jacket made of black leather, chain smoked during our conversation. “How do I know I can trust you,” he asked, repeatedly.

Of course he could not know it, ever. But I tried to earn his trust.

Some of the information he and his partners told me could easily have found its way into print. But I had told them it wouldn't, and it didn't. The guy in the black leather jacket and his friends in the undercover squad came to believe me. In this way I had passed whatever test was required. In time I came to learn about the threads of an investigation that a special investigative task force had been working on for the last year and a half but which had recently and mysteriously been dropped; the task force members had been sent on to other assignments, their work unfinished, the indictments unmade.

At the root of the investigation were a series of violent crimes in midtown that the investigators believed were so similar they had to be part of an overall criminal conspiracy. Evidence left at the scenes, the method of murder and the victims' lifestyles all suggested a larger and organized force of evil at work.

Hearing these stories on several occasions in the night hours over drinks, my view of the world began to transform. In this night world, relationships became intense. For a few weeks, the city desk allowed me the time away from the office to meet with my cop pals. The memories linger: streetlights reflecting off rain-covered streets in Little Italy; the sound of cabbies hitting potholes on 8th Avenue in midtown, the smell of cigaret smoke exhaled in a crowd became the background of my work environment as I strived to make sense of what I could use for the next story. I started showing up to work in clothing that would blend in easily in midtown. One outfit I used—red nylon shirt under a brown leather jacket—became the uniform I favored. Yet despite this superficial veneer, in fact I feared at the consequences of my own exposure to this evil. Still I was driven to seek ever more information to uncover its central cause. To add the sting of truth was the physical evidence of the dead, their bodies mangled and brutalized in very real ways indeed. The victims' own private vices of sexual deviancy, drugs or worse had caused their downfall, but they had been murdered nonetheless.

In this obsessive pursuit of Page 1, I found myself wandering in a wilderness of mirrors, where every lead seemed to double back on itself and every hidden relationship led to another level of seeming intrigue and duplicity. The stories wound around and around in an ever wider and ever deeper web of intrigue and danger. This endeavor came

to work on my mind, I later realized. I grew suspicious. Anyone without complete knowledge of this dark force become suspect, potential pawns of the evil you were pursuing. I began to understand the true meaning of the word “underworld.”

To protect themselves, my police pals never gave me the entire brief. They gave me names and hints and directions, which I later verified in the Daily News clip files and with police and prosecutors downtown. I played along with their half-finished stories, and in time I began to lay out the facts of the murders and the sex cases they were talking about.

The origin of their web of intrigue began in 1974 during a routine review of the two-year-old murder of a guy named Shelly Blum, a k a Allan Gold, the 42-year-old owner of the Sanctuary, a drug drop and mob hangout at 407 West 43rd St. Blum had been beaten and shot in his posh East Side flat March 21, 1972, the night before he was to testify before a federal grand jury investigating Latin American drug smuggling. Based on evidence at the scene and tips from street hustlers, the review of Blum’s murder took on new life, persuading midtown cops that the case was part of a web of as many as eight murders between 1972 and 1974, entangled in drugs, sex clubs, gay bars, child prostitution and growing mob infiltration of the smut industry to control the money it generated.

Included in this string of murders was a shipping magnate, Edward Luchenback Jr., a Midtown playboy and theater bankroller, who was found dead at age 49 in the apartment of a known CIA and Drug Enforcement Administration informer who had previously been arrested with Blum. Others killed were a Turtle Bay civic leader named Peter Detmold, who had opposed the opening of a gay bar in his neighborhood by Blum’s mob associates. Then there were three gay men, known to be friends of Blum, who were murdered in similar ways, their bodies slashed and set afire.

Then there was the murder of Bobby Wood, 41, the owner of Salvation, a Sheridan Square gay disco and drug drop. Wood was shot three times in the head and his body dumped on a street in Little Neck, Queens. Apparently, Wood had expected trouble. Police received letters Wood had arranged to be mailed upon his death, in which he told them he was being squeezed by hoods from the Gambino crime fami-

ly. Another murder was that of a woman from Shaker Heights, Ohio, who had come to the big town for excitement and got in over her head. By the time Patricia “Park Avenue Patsy” Parks turned 30, she was a habitu  of Midtown nightspots and a sometime dope courier. On February 4, 1972, just days before she was to testify to a federal grand jury, she was stabbed 10 times and her body dumped and set afire in a wooded lot in Massapequa, Long Island.

In mid-1974, the NYPD created Operation Together. For 18 months a team of as many as 56 investigators from homicide, vice, narcotics, and intelligence worked under the command of the department’s Organized Crime Control Bureau. In all, Operation Together made dozens of arrests for dope peddling, prostitution and other morals charges, and attempted bribery of police. The strategy of the investigation was to target people involved in gay bars, nab them on narcotics charges and get them to turn on their mob controllers, partners or extortionists. Among the depravity unearthed by this team was a network of chicken hawks—patrons of child prostitution and kiddie porn—as well as mob control of the gay bar scene.

Then suddenly, just as members of Operation Together felt they were getting close to making investigative breakthroughs, the plug was pulled. The task force was broken up; detectives, undercover officers and the assistant Manhattan district attorneys were reassigned. When a couple of plainclothes guys protested, they were given uniformed foot patrol. One Midtown pimps and pros expert was sent to Harlem. There was bad blood among the police. Cops I spoke to believed the worst, that the mob had pulled strings inside the NYPD and gotten the investigation killed. That’s what they suspected; fearing that whoever committed these murders would get away with it. But suspecting wasn’t enough.

Police brass said this talk of corruption was nonsense. The line from an official police spokesman was that the investigation was closed down because it was “taking too much time, too much money and its members were needed to fight other crimes which promised greater likelihood of arrest and prosecution.” The Manhattan DA agreed: The investigation was expensive and producing low-grade arrests. When stacked up against other lines of inquiry, no matter how intensely the police felt about the crimes or how heinous they were, what counted were arrests that could lead to convictions.

This cold-blooded assessment may have been true. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe the dark forces had reached far into the NYPD. Who could know? In newspaper work, if you find you have such questions of something gone wrong, you turn to the next level of authority and float them to see the reaction. If that particular level of authority finds them interesting and worth looking into, then you do a story about an investigation being launched into what you already knew was a problem. Investigators know they will get publicity for their work, so it helps stimulate the entire process. This was a game all reporters and investigators would play, then and now, to get stories into print.

Members of Operation Together who had been dismissed knew this. After all, why else cooperate with a reporter? So after learning of the dismissed investigation and its substance, I turned to the New York legislature's Select Committee on Crime, chaired by State Sen. Ralph Marino, whose staff director, Jeremiah McKenna, called Sidney Baumgarten of the Midtown Enforcement Project. They all agreed: Sure, we'll investigate.

Within hours, I crafted the story for the May 12 edition. The story on the new state probe, appearing on Page 5 under the headline "Spotlight Turned on Deadly Sex Trade Here," was quick and direct: Seven brutal murders and the mysterious death of multimillionaire shipping magnate Edgar F. Luckenback Jr. were the focus of a new probe by a state legislative crime committee into Manhattan's multi-million-dollar sex rackets. The investigation would concentrate on organized crime's stranglehold on Manhattan's deadly sex underworld. The murders included the deaths of two owners of most notorious gay bars controlled by organized crime in New York. Cops and the Manhattan DA's office spent 18 months investigating these murders, and the state wanted to know why the probe had been mysteriously suspended. This was a crackerjack piece.

What made my story even sweeter was the fact that I beat the Times. I knew the guys there had been working on the same story, and my piece ran first. The Times had to play catch-up; it ran a more thorough version of the story the day after mine ran. But my luck wouldn't hold.

As I went about my research, more and more midtown investigators

and cops talked about Matty the Horse. My notebook was dotted with the following: “Matty is the boss,” “The Horse runs this place,” “This is one of Matty’s places,” “You want that? Talk with Sweet 16,” and finally, from a bartender at a West 48th Street gin mill, “Better watch yourself, Mr. Reporter, they know who you are.”

Terrific. After the Sultans series, weeks of work in midtown, the murder investigations and the Screw magazine treatment, I came to regret a conversation I had had weeks before at Show World, the smut supermarket, with two house strongmen dressed in open-neck nylon shirts, polyester jackets, gold necklaces, large pinkie rings and razor-cut hairdos. I had approached them and introduced myself. I began a conversation.

“Listen, I’m just doing my job. I want to talk to Matty is all, get his side.”

They looked at me very carefully when I asked them to give my card to their boss so he could call me if he wanted to talk. They must have thought I was crazy or working a scam. I realize now they were wise by simply refusing to talk with me. But after a few weeks of working the Square, I had come to regret my naïve overture at journalistic fairness.

Who was Matty the Horse? Matthew Ianniello—well known to law enforcement as one of the biggest racketeers in Manhattan, a genuine golden goose for the mob. He was a made member of the Genovese crime family who paid tribute to every one of the five families and who dealt at the highest council of the notorious Mafia commission. Ianniello was fast becoming the focus of a variety of reinvigorated investigations now trying to nab midtown racketeers.

But so far, he had been hard to nail. The few clips I could find in the News morgue indicated he wasn’t yet a darling of the tabloid’s crime reporters. For example, in October 1975, Ianniello and others were indicted on bribery, extortion and conspiracy charges in Operation Cleveland, an undercover sting that had cops running Gerro Trucking Company. The defendants were charged with extorting \$5,000 from Gerro in exchange for labor peace. In November 1976 they were all acquitted.

My NYPD contacts led me to undercover investigators who got me old police Intelligence Division profiles, which explained details.

Ianniello, born in 1920 on Broome Street in Manhattan's Little Italy, lived in Old Westbury, Long Island. His history in the files began with the notation that in 1940 he had worked as a waiter for his uncle Joseph Zarrella, in the Brooklyn shipyards from 1941 to 1943, when he entered the Army. He served in uniform honorably in the South Pacific and was decorated for valor. After the war, Ianniello went back to work with his uncle and in 1949 became his partner in Matty's Towncrest Restaurant.

In 1951 Ianniello was arrested for receiving and selling 22 pounds of heroin. He was indicted, but the charges were later dropped for lack of evidence. It was this episode that led to his nickname Horse, though others believed it was his thick neck and hulking size. After the charges were dropped, Ianniello opened Matty's Mardi Gras, a night club and saloon. It expanded rapidly, as did his reputation as a tough but likable guy. Matty also ran a dice game at Shelton Towers in Manhattan for years, renting Room 2303. To mob elders he was a comer, a good front man. In 1960 he formed a partnership with one of the Sultans, Edward L. DeCurtis, a k a "Eddie Dee," financier of after-hours gay joints in the Village. Such after-hours spots were a specialty of the rackets because their patrons were homosexuals who drank like fish. You could serve liquor in private clubs without a license, and nobody watched the cash. Besides, such customers sometimes were involved in legitimate business one might wish to "invest" in.

While growing in this new line of business, Ianniello was sponsored into the Genovese crime family by Frank "Funzi" Tieri. Now a made Mafioso, Ianniello did business with John "Sonny" Franzese, one of the city's most notorious, feared and respected hoods, whose patronage put a shield of protection around Ianniello.

Another patron of Ianniello's was Anthony "Tony Bender" Strollo, a right-hand man to Vito Genovese, easily the most vicious gangster in the city at the time. In this way, Ianniello had the protection that allowed him to prosper and allowed a variety of Mafia dons to weave their way into all aspects of the modern Midtown rackets.

Strollo coached Ianniello in Midtown loan sharking and narcotics operations. Ianniello learned how to make money on a point system: Everything in this world, every business transaction, was counted in points. For example, your "protection" cost two points, or 2 percent of

your gross take; the advertising you purchased counted for a point; laundry and linen delivery service, two points; garbage collection, three points; vending machines, one point; the cigarets in the machine, another point. The argot among gangsters was: “How many points ya’ gettin’ out of it.”

Eventually they turned to the smut rackets. They got in through the bars, the dirty book stores, the gay after-hours joints and all the businesses—garbage, vending, talent, advertising, whatever—that fed off them. But they had a problem with cash: They had too much and had to find ways to hide or dispose of it. By 1964, Ianniello had grown so big that he and a partner bought a bank in Miami.

Unlike the rest of the city, which had defined neighborhoods for one crime family or another, Times Square was open to all the crime families. In the past there had been some shootings, vendettas and minor rivalries in the area, but in the bars and restaurants Ianniello was the king. But in 1971, the five families called a sit-down to ensure that Ianniello’s interests and their own were kept intact. Afterward, Ianniello, though a made member of the Genovese family, was working for them all: the Genoveses, the Bonnanos, the Tramuntis, and the Gambinos.

Through this network of enterprises, with interlocking ownerships and fronts, Ianniello and his crew were reputed to control dozens of the city’s most notorious bars and sex joints. Among them were Gypsy’s, Les Champs, The Sound Machine, the Honey Bee, the Turn Table, the Hollywood (aka Peppermint) Lounge, the Alley Pub Bar, or Broadway Pub, Carnival Bar, the Metropole, Robbie’s Mardi Gras, Stocks & Blondes, Hungry Hilda’s, the Gilded Grape, the Hay Market, and the 49er Bar and Grill. Matty also owned Umberto’s Clam House in Little Italy, which became famous as the site of the mob assassination of “Crazy” Joe Gallo in 1972. As a favor, Ianniello had reportedly suggested that the Colombos use his new restaurant to get rid of their problem.

I visited most of the establishments reported to be in Ianniello’s purview, in the spring and early summer of 1977, spending hours observing the ins and outs of the customers, conversing with the bartenders and generally soaking up the atmosphere. Today the memories of them blur into a sameness—a window onto the sidewalk, a mirror

behind the bar, booths along the side and in back, quiet conversation, music and smoke.

Ianniello had a piece of nearly every racket in Midtown, even if he was only eating at the edges of some. As I learned about the names and relationships in this network, I began to see a pattern: Everything was organized so that the origin business—be it bar, saloon or porn palace—existed solely as a mechanism to allow the peripheral businesses to flourish. Police investigators figured Ianniello was the No. 1 moneymaker in the Genevose mob. He and his crew were involved in extortion of the trucking industry in the garment center, as well as topless-bottomless bars, vending companies, talent agencies that supplied women, and advertising agencies. His companies picked up the garbage and delivered the linen.

This came together in my own mind the day I went to 135 West 50th St., which was listed as the base for many of Ianniello's businesses. Over the front door, I saw that the building was operated by the American Management Association, which I learned was a first-class management-training outfit. Despite its bona fides as a powerhouse for American business, the building had as tenants in Room 1820 Matthew Ianniello and his cohorts and their corporate monikers.

Weaving together the relationships among Ianniello, his dozens of companies and associates made one's head spin. I began to appreciate why Operation Together had been disbanded. Despite the circumstantial evidence, who would testify, to what and on which charge? Inspector Charles Peterson, who had recently retired from the NYPD after overseeing much of the midtown investigation as commander of Midtown North, told me: "Everybody knows Matty the Horse controls midtown. But you've got to have a case. You can't just go throwing a lot of Italian names around and say that's enough." Likewise, just because people knew each other didn't make for a crime.

Seasoned investigators would take years to sort all this out. And I wasn't doing all this legwork for the cops' sake. I had the reporter's problem: how to turn this into a news story fit to print against deadlines that came at 5 p.m., 9 p.m., 10:30 p.m., and 11:40 p.m., every single day. My editors wanted stories, so every day I drove myself to build facts around a news angle that would pay off. What information

could I craft into a piece that would make it through the city desk, then the news desk and finally the managing editor? Was there something I could get about Ianniello's operation that the editors would say was newsy enough?

I was working nightside again and much of my work was done before coming into the News office on East 42nd Street. In addition to the hours, I was working to piece together these details about Ianniello's rackets, I kept up the legwork, going to as many midtown joints as I could when I grabbed time between editions to get out of the office. My performance on the Sultans story and the follow up encouraged the city desk to give me a bit of latitude. I expended a lot of shoe leather and cab fare to find that few patrons and employees would talk; mostly I confirmed whatever intelligence I could and continued to gather color and detail for the story, when it might actually appear in print.

My problem was typified by an interview I had with an advertising guy named Jerry Cohen whom I visited to check out a lead. One afternoon in June, I went to the fourth floor at 160 West 46th St., the offices of Jericho Displays Service Inc. There I found Cohen lying sunburned on his black Naugahyde couch with a swollen jaw, nursing an impacted tooth. A Bronx native, Cohen, 48, called himself an "artist." His game was to charge clients between \$100 and \$300 a week for advertising and promotion services, which turned out to be a \$2 million business in annual revenue. In return, he handled all the advertising, signs and whatever promotion was necessary for midtown porn, peep, and topless joints. I had found Cohen's name on an October 1975 report that confirmed that Cohen had told State Liquor Authority (SLA) investigators he had known Ianniello and his associates for years. Cohen said he got the idea to go into the lounge business in 1969.

Said Cohen: "I was with a friend at the Peppermint Lounge, who told me if clods like this can run a bar, so can we. We surveyed our prospects. My friend went to the East Side, and I stayed in the west."

His friend later went into another business, but Cohen founded the Gilded Grape at 719 8th Ave. He later set up a number of Midtown sex joints and still later Jericho Displays, where investigators learned that Ianniello often cashed his checks, in one of his many business roles.

"Drag queens, transvestites came to my place," Cohen told me. "I

had a market and I served them. The only people I didn't let in were whores. I've been harassed by the SLA and police."

Cohen was being pressured on his permits and was accused of associating with organized crime.

"Once a cop told me they kept the pressure on me because the 'establishment' didn't like drag queens. My lawyer has been fighting all the way. I wanted to stand by my customers. They've got a right to be that way." To me, this seemed totally beside the point. He wasn't running a charity. He was making money.

Cohen said he had lost money on the Grape and was no longer in the bar business. He confirmed that he had conceived, built and owned Starship Discovery I on 42nd Street, in a building he said he owned, and that he was looking to open up Discovery II in Baltimore and Discovery III in Miami. But no, he said, it wasn't a bar, customers brought their own liquor. When I said I had been served, Cohen shrugged his shoulders, as if he didn't care that he'd been caught in a lie.

"Of course I know Matty Ianniello," Cohen said, "and I was being harassed by law enforcement just because he was reputed to be associated with the Mafia. My only connection with Matty is knowing him, and one of my partners at Jericho used to work at the Peppermint Lounge, when Matty owned it."

Cohen, lying flat on his back on the couch with his arm crossed over his forehead, must have taken some painkillers, because he was beginning to repeat himself. "Cops are harassing me," he said, holding his swollen jaw. "I admit it, I tried to bribe one. But he wouldn't take money. He said the establishment didn't want drag queens on 8th Avenue. I've got nothing to hide. I've done nothing wrong and never committed an illegal act in my life. I've been open." He said this as though he'd forgotten I was still in the room.

"Open?" I said. "Open to what?"

"The IRS was here last week."

As I left, I realized how ordinary the people in these extraordinary enterprises were. But I also realized that the heat had been turned on. If the feds from the IRS were visiting guys like Cohen, the midtown investigations were getting hot.

Though I had collected enough facts and color about Ianniello and his organization to have the outlines of a story, I still had to nail down additional facts, look for a law enforcement lead and get quotes from city brass. I met with Ken Conboy, assistant Manhattan district attorney, the chief of the Rackets Bureau on Thursday, July 28. Conboy had been at the Midtown Citizens Committee meetings the year before and listened while his boss said he had no idea who was behind the smut. Now, in mid-1977, the IRS, the State Liquor Authority, the State Commission on Investigations and the FBI were all firmly fixed on Ianniello and his crew.

The News was set to break the story about the investigation of Ianniello, and Conboy was now in a position to help his boss get ahead or be left behind—a standard setup between reporters and public officials. Given those circumstances it seemed odd that Conboy, a straight arrow, was now complacent and uncommunicative. I laid out for Conboy what we had in mind for the Ianniello piece. But aside from confirming this or that fact, Conboy seemed distracted and was not particularly helpful, leaving me wondering what was up. I got back to the city room to set up the story, get approvals for art and space and the like. We started writing the piece and got set to run it starting the next Monday, but I was too late.

On Sunday, July 31, we learned probably why Conboy had been so closemouthed. The Times had a Page 1 piece by Raab naming Ianniello in the third paragraph as the subject of a broad series of investigations at the federal, state and local levels. It wasn't everything we had, though. But the Times piece the next day had the rest. Raab had been doing just what I had, but, it turned out, was quicker. His second-day story had more information that I had at that point, and within 24 hours my weeks of investigative work for that exclusive was dust. My editor had no appetite for the News to play second-day catch-up with the Times. My reporting was now just grist for the mill, background for another day.

Raab's piece reported what I'd found out: Ianniello's operation earned millions from some 80 midtown bars and restaurants, many with nude and topless dancers, and which were connected with sex rackets catering to pimps, prostitutes and homosexuals. His organiza-

tion controlled the service companies for the bars, as well as interests in U.S. and foreign hotels, casinos and tour agencies that sponsored gambling junkets. Raab had it wrapped up pretty tight, showing weeks of work.

But the timing of its publication was another thing. Maybe my visit to Conboy in the DA's office was a mistake. Guys on the news desk knew that Raab and Conboy had worked together on the book about the Marcus-Nelson murders, which Raab wrote and which was turned into *Kojak*, the TV cop show, in 1973. They said they'd bet the minute after we walked out of Conboy's office, Raab got a call and was told the News was set to do its piece on Ianniello. However it happened, it was the Times' turn to feel good.

Ianniello, despite his new star status as a mobster of Page 1 newspaper fame, continued his midtown work, and he fell under police surveillance often in the months and years ahead. His most notorious surveillance occurred in March 1978 when a mob associate from New Jersey, Salvatore "Sally Balls" Briguglio, suspected in the 1975 murder and disappearance of Teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa, was shot and killed on a Little Italy street. The shooting occurred outside Benito's restaurant on Mulberry Street at about 10:30 p.m. moments after Ianniello, the Genoveses' man in Midtown, escorted Briguglio outside. Informants later said Briguglio was slow from an evening of eating and drink. They also identified the shooter as a Genovese soldier.

Ianniello, who was never charged in the shooting, remained a target of federal agents. He finally fell to racketeering, tax evasion and fraud charges in 1985 that would keep him behind bars for years. Based on the work started by members of the ill-fated Operation Together nearly a decade before, the feds waged a legal assault on Ianniello that never stopped. While serving time on previous convictions, Ianniello was in and out of court on scores of additional racketeering, extortion, gambling and murder conspiracies dealing with his various Midtown activities. He would be sentenced to terms that would keep him in federal jail until well after his 80th birthday.

Ianniello's fate was comparatively lenient compared with that of Robert "DiBee" DiBernardo, the most notorious of the original

Sultans of Smut, whose end later figured in the downfall of the most vicious mob thug in recent history.

As a result of DiBernardo's Sultan profile, the feds finally targeted the smut network he and his cohorts had established in an anti-porn crusade begun in August 1977. The results of that investigation became public Feb. 15, 1980, in the Daily News under the headline: "Smash Porn Empire From Here to Hawaii." An army of more than 400 FBI agents and local law enforcement had raided 14 cities at noon the day before, arresting 45 players in a nationwide smut racket worth \$4 billion a year. The arrests, in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Fort Lauderdale, Cleveland, Chicago and San Francisco capped a two-and-a-half-year investigation in the largest-ever crack-down on porn. Called Mi-Porn, the investigation began when the feds received intelligence that New York organized crime figures were muscling in on Miami's sex and porn rackets. Their targets were the industry's major wholesalers, who shielded themselves in a maze of 17 corporations. FBI Director William Webster said the investigation would continue and could result in the arrest of up to 200 people.

DiBernardo was a key target of Mi-Porn. Also targeted in the February 1980 raid was Michael Zaffarano, owner of the Pussycat Cinema at 1607 Broadway. A capo working with the Bonanno crime family, Zaffarano had handled porn theaters and national porn film distribution for the family. With DiBernardo he was considered a senior Mafioso in the smut rackets. As agents closed in on Zaffarano's office above the Times Square theater, Zaffarano tried to flee down the hall. During the chase, Zaffarano suffered a heart attack and died. DiBernardo was convicted in 1981 in Miami on the Mi-Porn conspiracy and rackets charges, but he stayed out of jail while he appealed his case. He continued his work at Star and other porn operations, all the while staying involved in a variety of Gambino family affairs, which continued under FBI surveillance.

The crime family was in turmoil in the early 1980s under the leadership of Paul Castellano, who was being challenged by a thug from Queens named John Gotti. Gotti engineered the murder of Castellano in 1985 outside Sparks Steak House, between Second and Third avenues. The following year, DiBernardo disappeared and was never found again.

What happened became clear during Gotti's trial in 1992 on an 11-count federal racketeering prosecution, in which he was charged with five murder conspiracies and other crimes involving bribery, illegal gambling, loan shacking, extortion, tax fraud and obstruction of justice. Gotti's arrest took place at the Ravenite Social Club on Mulberry Street Dec. 12, 1990. Testifying for the federal prosecutors, Gotti's mob colleague Salvatore "Sammy the Bull" Gravano, said that less than 10 days after Gotti had ordered Castellano killed, Gotti became boss of the Gambino crime family and began to eliminate his rivals. The first to go was DiBernardo. Apparently, DiBernardo's offense was ignoring a summons to a sit-down with Gotti at the Ravenite Social Club when Gotti wanted to discuss business.

In testimony March 3, 1992, at the Gotti trial in Brooklyn Federal Court, Gravano told the jury that on June 5, 1986, DiBernardo was lured to the basement offices of Gravano's drywall company on Stillwell Avenue in Brooklyn. Acting as if this was just another regular business meeting, Gravano told a Gotti associate named Joe Paruta to get DiBernardo a cup of coffee. Paruta got up, but instead of getting the coffee, Paruta took a .38 with a silencer from a cabinet behind DiBernardo and shot him twice in the back of the head. Gravano said another gang member loaded DiBernardo's body into the trunk of a car and drove it away. The body was never seen again. On April Fools' Day 1992, the jury found Gotti guilty on all counts, including the murder charges dealing with Castellano and DiBernardo. Gotti was sentenced to life in a federal pen.

There was another unanticipated consequence growing out the Sultans' series—the derailment in 1992 of the careers of two pioneering politicians. DiBernardo's Star Distributors, the largest porn outfit in the nation, had been located in a Manhattan building owned by John Zaccaro, the husband of former Queens Assistant District Attorney Geraldine Ferraro, who had run unsuccessfully for vice president in 1984. When Ferraro sought the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1992, her primary opponent, City Controller Elizabeth Holtzman, the former Brooklyn congresswoman who had gone after the summer lunch program fraud, alleged that Ferraro had received

money from pornographers. Holtzman said that Star had paid Zaccaro \$350,000 in rent money that ended up paying Ferraro's campaign bills. This mudslinging led to other allegations between the two candidates, destroying the election chances of both.