

STORY ON RAPIST ANGERS SOME

By Art Nauman

THE OMBUDSMAN

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—A decade ago the so-called **East Area Rapist** held Sacramento in thrall, and recently *The Bee* reminded its readers of those traumatic years and the fact that the man never was caught. In a major Scene section feature, writer Bob Sylva reviewed the events, the mood of the city at the time, the terror the attacker evoked and how to this day the case remains open in the hands of a single sheriff's officer, the sergeant who headed the EAR task force from the beginning.

Since that March 17 story, though, a small but fervent number of readers have told me they objected to the story.

Their reasons were generally twofold: The feature opened old hurts; it might prompt copycat attacks.

For example, reader John Krabbenhoft said, "'The thing had died down. It should have remained a dead issue. Worse, I think it could plant the seed in the minds of warped people.'

A woman reader who didn't want her name revealed said, "'It disturbs me to see all the details the story went into; another potential rapist could get the idea. . . . If it (the attacks) happens again you can blame yourself. You should have allowed it to die out.'

I asked Sylva to react to the complaints and he said in a memo: "'It eludes me why writing a profile on Sheriff's Sgt. Jim Bevins and his steadfast efforts to capture the **East Area Rapist** could open old wounds or be insensitive.'

Sylva said he would think readers would be "'comforted, if not gratified, by the fact that Bevins remains on the trail of the city's most notorious and still-at-large culprit ever.

"'In point of fact, many victims of the EAR feel exactly that -- gratitude to Bevins and appreciation for his diligence. As reported in the story, victims continually call Bevins to inquire about the case.

"'They haven't forgotten about the EAR. Bevins hasn't forgotten about the EAR. Nor, given the dimensions of the case, should we, I believe.'

That's my feeling, too.

Two other points:

None of the details of the EAR's modus operandi appeared in print for the first time in Sylva's story. They all had been reported in *The Bee* and elsewhere at the time or immediately after the attacks ended in April 1978. Sgt. Bevins confirmed this for me.

Second, I'm not licensed to practice psychology, but I'd guess that the chances of a potential rapist going into action as a result of something he's read in the papers are fairly remote.

Sgt. Bevins agreed: "'Would-be rapists don't need *The Bee* to get them going. They get their motivation somewhere else, or they're born with it.'

He added, by the way, that several days after Sylva's story appeared, he got a call from an EAR victim who told him how much she liked the story.

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Last week I mentioned an error Parade Magazine had made in reference to an item about Patty Hearst, saying she had been pardoned from prison when in fact her sentence had only been commuted.

Parade was notified of the mistake but my column suggested the magazine didn't fix its errors with alacrity. However, Lloyd Shearer, Parade's editor-at-large, telephoned a couple of days ago to say the magazine's fact-checking process inexplicably hadn't caught the mistake, but that it would be corrected in the next available issue.

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Also last week, I scolded The Bee's travel section for having published a feature story critical of a certain cruise liner in the Caribbean but then failing to mention the ship's name.

My column didn't state the vessel's name either, and that ticked off a number of readers, including a Bee newsroom staffer who said he thought I'd "wimped out." He said, "'C'mon, your job is to set things straight, not repeat the infraction." And a reader named Ralph Robinson, who didn't give an address or phone number, described the ombudsman as a "'master of the alibi."

He took the occasion to say a number of unkind things about The Bee's travel section, but his principal complaint was that it was "'pint sized" compared to those of papers such as the San Francisco Examiner and the Los Angeles Times.

Well, call it an alibi if you like, but the plain truth of the matter is that the size of The Bee's travel section is determined by the amount of advertising it attracts. Los Angeles and San Francisco -- unlike Sacramento -- are major gateways for both domestic and foreign travel, to say nothing of their population sizes compared to the capital's. It follows that their newspapers will be stronger magnets for travel-based advertising than The Bee and, hence, can support bigger travel news sections.

(P.S.: I debated with myself several days whether to reveal the name of the miscreant ship. I finally concluded that basically my job is to critique! The Bee's performance after the fact, not to play the role of substitute reporter or editor. If that's wimpism, so be it.)

(The Ombudsman represents Bee readers. His conclusions and opinions are his own. He can be reached at 442-8050.)