

LAPD is far from the only police department using prostitutes and madams as informants.

Sunday September 30, 1990, San Diego Union reported then Police Chief Bob Burgreen as saying “dealing with prostitutes - especially on an informant basis- is a very large part of our business and that perhaps citizens in a largely conservative community like San Diego may have a hard time understanding that..”

“Alleged links between cops, prostitutes raise many deeply troubling questions”

Staff writers Jim Okerblom, Joe Cantlupe, J/ Stryker Meyer and Dayna Lynn Fried

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Alleged links between cops, prostitutes raise many deeply troubling questions

This report was prepared by Staff Writers Jim Okerblom, Joe Cantlupe, J. Stryker Meyer and Dayna Lynn Fried.

Continuing allegations of relationships between San Diego police officers and prostitutes have raised troubling questions about how the department polices itself against such improper ties.

The San Diego Union has learned from sources close to the 1989-90 grand jury that a police captain had a relationship with a prostitute who worked for Karen Wilkening, the notorious Rolodex 500 madam who now is serving a 44-month prison sentence for pimping and pandering.

But when a vice lieutenant recommended that the relationship be investigated, he was told by his supervisor to forget it, according to grand jury testimony.

Two obvious questions emanate from this disclosure and others that reportedly surfaced during the grand jury proceedings:

Did police officials turn a blind eye toward such suspected relationships between its officers and prostitutes? And did that atmosphere result in the mess the department now finds itself in, with officers being investigated for relationships with prostitutes, usually informants, and some officers even being eyed as suspects in a series of prostitute murders?

Police officers getting involved and having sex with prostitutes is hardly a new problem. Police departments regard it as a firing offense, however, because of the potential danger it poses. Such relationships can compromise officers and subject them to intimidation and blackmail.

A multi-agency team, the Metropolitan Homicide Task Force, is trying to determine whether relationships between San Diego officers and prostitutes ended in murder.

Since June 1985 when the body of prostitute and police informant Donna Gentile was found, 42 women, most of them street prostitutes and drug addicts, have been found murdered, their bodies dumped around the county.

The task force is investigating “the possibility that one or more police officers may be involved in one or more of the murders,” chief deputy district attorney Brian Michaels said recently.

Investigators have said they believe the deaths may be the work of multiple killers. So far, investigators have linked one of the deaths and the disappearance of another prostitute, drug addict and police informant, Cynthia Lynn Maine, to possible involvement by police, but have not revealed any evidence that would tie officers to any of the other prostitute deaths.

Gentile was killed in June 1985, just months after she testified about her relationship with two officers. One, Larry Avrech, was fired and the other, Carl Black, was temporarily demoted from lieutenant to sergeant.

Gentile's body was found with gravel stuffed in her mouth, leading investigators to suspect she may have been killed because she talked too much.

Last week, details emerged about Maine, who has been missing since she was released from jail four years ago. Family members say she was a friend of Gentile, and had a sexual relationship with John Fung, a member of the Narcotics Task Force who used her as an informant.

Task force investigators recently searched the home of another officer, Sgt. Alfonso Salvatierra, looking for evidence about Maine, but have not revealed what, if anything, was seized. Detective Les Oberlies and former police officer Dennis Sesma also were identified as acquaintances of Maine by her family. Sources said last week that as many as 12 officers are being investigated as possibly having had contact with Maine.

Family members said Maine was fearful before she disappeared because she had informed on several officers. They believe she is dead, and that police officers are responsible.

Until recently, family members charge, police investigators had shown little interest in the case.

“I called police in 1987 because they had a body on the TV news,” said Lori Helle, Maine's sister. “I told them they had a missing-person report on her. They said it was closed, and my sister had been found in Las Vegas.”

“My sister had been missing then for a year and a half, and if they found her, why didn't they contact us?”

When she asked for details of her whereabouts, Helle said, “they said: ‘Drop it, you don't want to know.’”

In addition to the series of prostitute deaths, the task force recently announced that it had expanded in numbers and scope under the direction of state deputy attorney general Gary W. Schons to include an investigation of police corruption. Assistant district attorney Bonnie Dumanis, task force spokeswoman, said it is interested in any improper relationships between police officers and prostitutes.

Police Chief Bob Burgreen said last week that the department is reviewing its policies to determine whether it was careful enough in ensuring that officers do not become involved with the prostitutes they work with.

“We are asking ourselves the same questions,” Burgreen said. “When we learn what the facts are, we may be in a position to learn and keep things from happening.”

However, Burgreen said dealing with prostitutes — especially on an informant basis — is “a very large part of our business” and that perhaps citizens in a largely conservative community like San Diego may have a hard time understanding that.

In addition to the new task force unit, the current county grand jury has inherited the police-corruption investigation from the 1989-1990 panel. That panel, asked by District Attorney Ed Miller to determine whether Wilkening's Rolodex of client names had been tampered with while in police custody, suddenly found itself in the midst of a much broader investigation of possible widespread police corruption and misconduct.

The jurors heard a wide range of testimony regarding police involvement with prostitutes, including the possible association of then-Police Chief Bill Kolender and Wilkening, according to sources close to the panel. Both Kolender, now assistant to the publisher of Union-Tribune Publishing Co., and Wilkening deny having had any association.

The police captain who allegedly had a relationship with a Wilkening employee has not been linked in any way to the prostitute deaths.

During grand jury testimony, however, there were numerous questions about why his alleged ties to the Wilkening employee were not brought immediately to the police Internal Affairs unit, sources close to the grand jury said.

Burgreen — who was assistant chief at the time of the incident — said he himself, not Internal Affairs, conducted a brief investigation into the allegations and the matter was dropped.

The high-ranking officer was contacted through family members early last week at the request of The San Diego Union. He did not respond to The Union for comment on this story.

Janis B., the 41-year-old former Wilkening employee, lives in a San Diego condominium. She was referred to as “Deep Throat” during grand jury testimony, sources close to the jury said. The woman rejected several attempts to interview her at her home.

According to the sources close to the grand jury, Janis B. became known to detectives after they raided Wilkening's Linda Vista condominium in September 1987 and seized her now-notorious Rolodex. She was described as a some-time Wilkening prostitute who also was interested in starting her own call-girl network.

Police detective Robert Lobato testified that he discovered the woman worked for Wilkening, and he suspected she had a sexual relationship with the high-ranking member of the department, the grand jury sources said.

Lobato testified that he relayed his

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Donna Gentile was a police informant and one of over 40 San Diego street sex workers who were found murdered. The police had an unofficial name for prostitutes like Donna, when the prostitutes were found dead... they called the victims “NHI’s” which stands for “No Humans Involved...” which is the primary reason that the homicides of so many of the street workers went un-investigated for years, until the numbers of dead prostitutes reach nearly epidemic proportions. Donna was an informant for a number of cops during her years on the street, had sex with several, and was even invited to family outings with a few. She was killed in June, 1983, just months after she testified about her relationship with two of the officers. Her body was found with gravel shoved in her mouth... perhaps because she talked too much?

Police: San Diego department is enduring a painful time of trial