



CITY & COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Police Department

Chief Thomas J. Cahill: A Life In Review



In the San Francisco Police Academy yearbook for August, 1942, on a page entitled Honors, J.Von Nostitz was chosen Most likely to become Chief of Traffic, G.K. Hoover was Most likely to become Chief of Detectives, and J.C. Cook was given the somewhat dubious honor of being Most likely to serve 40 years, presumably in the Department. In retrospect, the person who compiled these predictions weren't much on target, with one exception.

Smack in the middle of the page filled with rather clever drawings of each of the officers, his name and prediction typed below, is a sketch of a curly-haired, oval-faced youth: T.J. Cahill, Most likely to become Chief of Police.

Thomas Joseph Cahill has the distinction of having the longest tenure as Chief of Police in San Francisco's history, serving under three mayors – George Christopher, John Shelley, and Joseph Alioto - through decades that saw tremendous social changes and upheavals.

In the Richmond district flat that the shares with Felipa, his second wife of 28 years, there's a large 1967 portrait of him hanging on the wall. You can still see the firmness, directness, and sense of humor evident in the portrait in his face. Now 88, he's alert and strong, his hair white but still wavy. With a touch of the brogue that's never left him, he reminisced over a career that spanned 30 years.

Tom was born on June 8, 1910 on Montana Street on the North Side of Chicago. Maybe because of his awareness while growing up that Dillinger had been killed only about ten blocks away from the house where he was born contributed something to his fascination with cops and police work. Not especially smitten with America, Thomas' father abruptly took his wife and young son back to Ireland, which he had left to try his hand at life in a new country, and where he had a 165-acre farm. The change of place, however, couldn't fade the young Tom's fascination with America, and in 1929, at age 19, he decided to come back on his own to live and work here.

Nineteen twenty-nine, you may know, wasn't a very good year for America, and Tom's initial attempts to make something of himself here weren't too successful. He first wound up working at a 4,000-acre cotton and grain ranch near Fresno, not the most picturesque area of the earth. Flat and hot, Tom neatly sums up the location up as the last place on earth God made.

Could it have been the proverbial luck of the Irish that Tom then had a bit of good future? When a man in a restaurant overheard Tom talking with another man about Tom's desire to go north to San Francisco, the man told Tom that he knew the head of the Department of Public Works there and gave him a little note of introduction that he hoped would lead a job.

It isn't hard to imagine Tom arriving for the first time in San Francisco, after the Santa Fe Railroad took him to Richmond, where he boarded a ferry across the bay to the Ferry Building. Barely twenty, moving across a body of water dense with boats and ships, approaching a fabled city whose buildings gracefully respected the contours of its famous hills, he must have felt he was beginning the adventure of a lifetime. In the newness of it all, he not surprisingly experienced some disorientation. He must have felt rather like being in a bad dream when he couldn't find his way out of the maze-like interior of the Ferry Building. Once out, he saw the many streetcars coming and going from the huge circular terminus. Out of a returning sense of adventure, or maybe just feeling the urge to take some action, he hopped on one (it must have been reassuring to discover that both the motorman and the conductor spoke in heavy brogues), and went out all the way to California and Presidio. Tom asked the motorman where he could find a hotel, and he wordlessly pointed to the Monte Cristo across the street on Presidio (it's still there). Next morning, in the hotel's coffee shop, he asked the waitress if she had any stirrabout. Now you only know what that is if you're Irish. Obviously, the waitress wasn't (stirrabout is the Irish word for a porridge made from oatmeal and cornmeal), and Tom had to settle for a substitute.

Luck seemed to be still with Tom, however, when he met a man active in the Irish community and was put on the scent of a construction job. This was the first of jobs that, if not requiring a lot of thinking, must have been the equivalent of a few thousand hours at today's Gold's gym. Call it preparation for the academy physical agility years later. He hauled hundred pound sacks of cement (\$5.00 a day) and delivered 300-lbs. block of ice. The ice-delivery route served him in good stead because he got to know the city well. Working along Turk street, he knew about the bootlegging joints and the women on the second floors.

When he started noticing the electric icebox appearing, he knew that the days of ice delivery were numbered. It was time to find a career. Maybe those Chicago memories of cops and G-men came back to him suddenly, along with the more recent memory of the bootleggers he saw in town. In any case, police work seemed like a real option, and he needed a good job to help support his wife, Margaret Smythe, whom he'd married in San Francisco in 1938. In July, 1942, Tom took the police test at City Hall and passed. He was 32 years old.

His first assignment at the old Potrero Station was a lonely one: a foot beat on the midnight watch on a beat extending from 3rd and Bayshore to the county line. In 1943, he was transferred to the Accident Investigation Bureau and, three years later to the Night Investigations Bureau. It's now that legendary names and some good SFPD stories begin to appear. For starters,

there's Francis (Frank) Ahern. Ahern, who would one day become Chief, worked on Homicide, and Tom and he worked together on a case. Tom can still see him at that time, always dressed in a topcoat, fedora and muffler, with a big cigar protruding from his mouth. Ahern had been investigating illegal abortion clinics. There was one notorious clinic, run by top-notch doctors, located near Fillmore and Haight. The head of this operation was one Inez Burns, and Ahern confronted her in a raid at the clinic. In a piano, he found a stash of cash, a big stash. It all becomes very film noir now, so image this scene unreeling. Ahern looks at the money. Inez looks at him looking at the money. There's a pause. Ahern tells Inez to sit down on the couch, and then says, 'I'm going to count this now and you watch very carefully. Inez says, 'Don't be a fool. Put it in your pocket and get the hell out of here. You've got the wrong guy,' Ahern answers, and counts out each bill in her presence, 350,000 big ones. Next, it's Inez booked at the Hall and a conviction. Word got around on that once, and Honest Frank became his nickname for years.

THE BEST POLICE
IN THE ENT

Now things start to move for Tom. Ahern approached the head of Homicide, John Dullea, to talk about Tom as a partner. How well do you know Cahill? Dullea asked. Ahern replied, 'I don't know him at all. All I know is I like the way he operates and I want him as a partner. The transfer was arranged, but the Captain of Inspectors, Barney McDonald, wasn't pleased. For one thing, Ahern had gone to Dullea rather than to him. For another thing, Tom had only been in the business for four years. As Tom tells it, McDonald was ready to throw his chair through the window when he found out about Tom going to Homicide. McDonald, knowing that Ahern was leaving in his car, rushed down to the garage. 'Ahern, you went over my head!' Tom recalls, chuckling, as he repeats what he found out what McDonald shouted at Ahern just as his car was pulling away: 'You got Cahill and now you're stuck with him!' They'd be stuck together for ten years, from 1946 to 1956. Almost right away, in 1947, a case came up, the Dejohn case, that would both trigger Tom's memory about those earlier Chicago days of gangsters and G-men, and launch his police career.



ADMINISTRATOR
LET'S



Chief Cahill, lower right, on a historic 90-minute edition of Meet the Press, February 19, 1967. The live telecast focussed on President Johnson's Crime Commission.

Nick Dejohn and two of his cohorts had absconded out of Chicago with some mafia money. Already this doesn't sound good for Nick and his friends. On the lam, Dejohn went to live in Santa Rosa, where he told neighbors he came to retire after selling property in the Midwest. To show that the mob was not pleased with having some of their dough skimmed off, let's just say that one of Dejohn's pals was later found in Chicago stuffed in a sewer pipe and the other frozen in the trunk of a car. The attraction of North Beach, however, eventually became too much for Dejohn and one night he drove from the dull security of Santa Rosa to dine in town at La Rocca's. Big mistake. The next morning, his quite large body was found in the trunk of a black Chrysler Town and Country parked at Laguna and Greenwich. He'd been strangled with heavy braided fishing line.

Tom remembers interrogating a man who admitted he knew who had done the killing, but kept ramming his head against the walls to keep himself from spilling (images of yourself in a sewer or car trunk will make you do that). In spite of intense investigation, this case was never solved, but both Tom and Frank had gotten a reputation for understanding how organized crime operated and began traveling about the country – Chicago, New York, Dallas – putting mob pieces together. When the Kefauver Committee came to San Francisco, in 1950, the committee members asked Tom and Frank about what they knew about the mob and were impressed with the answers. They got permission from the Chief (at that time Mike Mitchell) to have the pair loaned to them in Washington to evaluate what information the committee had (they would work with the committee until April 1951 before returning to their home in Homicide). Tom quotes one of the members saying after hearing Tom and Frank's information, 'These two know more about the mafia than any [police] department in the country.'

Dealing with organized crime had been something new for the San Francisco Police Department; the mob wasn't confined to the east coast anymore. Other problems were on the horizon, though. After Frank Ahern, who had become Chief in 1956, died suddenly, on September 1, 1958 (he collapsed at a baseball game at the now long demolished Seals Stadium), Tom Cahill on September 5 became the city's 25th Chief of Police. As Chief, every respect of Tom's expertise would be put to the test, from dealing with security for visiting dignitaries to the effects of the hippie phenomenon, from activity stemming from the civil rights movement to civil disturbances in reaction to the Vietnam War. No police chief in San Francisco's history ever had to deal with such a gamut of policing issues.



Chief Cahill with F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, 1968, just before the Chief is to address F.B.I. Academy graduates. Cahill was a top contender to succeed Hoover.

There are a lot of qualities that went into making Tom especially able to deal with the different crises in policing or with a particular mission. First of all, he was his own man, and made his own decisions. When the premier of the now-former Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, visited San Francisco, in 1959, his security chief insisted that every residence and hotel along the premier's motorcade route from the airport into the city be

searched. Tom politely pointed out to the security chief that, in so many words, something called the American constitution prevents doing this.

So that idea was nixed, only to bring up another Cahill quality: innovation. He organized a special squad (the precursor to the Tactical Squad, the first in the country), consisting of six men, all about six foot three, to escort Khrushchev with Cahill's order that they were never to break rank. Tom explicitly recalls his orders. Their orders were wherever Khrushchev was in the city, on the street, they were to be around him, he remembered saying. And I said, if there's nothing happening, kind of spread out a little bit, don't look too conspicuous, because they were all big guys, you know. And I said if something does start to happen, if somebody tries to break ranks to get in, just fold them up like an accordion and toss them over your head and let a policeman in uniform go pick them up, but don't break ranks. Khrushchev probably never gave out too many compliments, but when he got out of his limousine on Twin Peaks to pose for a picture with a probably quite surprised mother and her baby, he had been so impressed with the squad he was heard to comment, translated from the Russian of course, This is what I call security!

Different situations call for different approaches. Tom knew that a situation like the Khrushchev visit called for a particular approach, even if it meant a squad member taking rather drastic physical action on someone who might want to make a lunge at the premier. But a different situation would bring out another side to him, where he could mix control with an understanding of and a sympathy for the people he was dealing with. He could appeal to common sense, to reason, to pride, in an effort to stem an event from turning ugly. He understood the psychological effect of uniformed police on people, especially a crowd. All of these qualities would be needed during the civil rights unrest that began the early sixties.

Shortly after the bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama church, in 1964, in which four girls were killed, 23,000 persons marched up Market Street for a planned demonstration at Civic Center, the first of its kind in San Francisco, and Tom was on the podium to address the crowd. He knew they didn't care much for the police, and that's why he was careful to make sure his officers made for a low-key presence on the periphery of the crowd. His words to them were simple – We'll all get along well here – and his positive gesture, dropping some money into a container marked for the victims of the bombing, had a tremendous effect on everyone. When the crowd dispersed after the last speaker, there was absolute order.

The story was different when, in 1966, the Hunters Point community erupted in violence after an officer shot and killed a teenage car theft suspect. The mayor, John Shelly, couldn't calm the crowds at a meeting in the old Opera House off Third Street, and Tom knew he had to get help. He contacted then-Governor Pat Brown, requesting 2,000 National Guard troops. Still, Tom knew the way he wanted everything to run. For one thing, he knew that the Guardsmen laced training, so he didn't want them making any arrests. He also knew that the presence of so many Guardsmen on the streets would probably incite an already revved up community, so he never let them patrol the streets. Half were camped inside the Kezar Stadium, where they remained, and half at Hunters Point, where they were dispatched only to maintain security at sites where guns and ammunition were being stored. Thirty-six hours later, all the troops were released because they weren't needed.

If organized crime, a first-time Khrushchev visit, and civil rights unrest weren't enough, two more trying and testing events were to take place under Tom: the hippie movement, beginning in 1967, and the demonstrations, a year later, at San Francisco State University over the Vietnam War.

Whether the hippie movement was a sudden, dramatic, and colorful shift in a generation's way of viewing the meaning of existence, or whether it was a free-for-all, flower-in-the-hair, endless costume party for suburban kids from all over the nation who never felt an obligation to phone home to mom and dad, is probably still up to the sociologists to decide. Whatever the case (and the movement was probably something in between those two extremes), it was a real headache for the police department. Still, Tom could understand the anguish of parents who wondered if their children were even still alive. Besides all the deployment and policy problems the movement necessitated on the part of the Department, Tom could take the extra steps necessary to help ease some of that anguish.

In one case, the parents of a girl who had come to the city from the Midwest implored Tom's aid. Through sheer intelligence work, he was able to locate the girl, who had since moved on to Portland. Years later, in 1993, Tom happened to be at a dinner. One of the guests, a woman, asked Tom if he remembered her and her husband. Tom confessed that he couldn't place her. She was the mother of the girl who had moved to San Francisco and who had been located in Portland. She praised Tom for all his help in finding her. The girl? She's fine, the mother reported, married, with three children. All of which makes Tom reflect, If you're going to be a policeman, you'll need a very, very human side. You have to be human to understand people in a turbulent society.

Tom's order to the demonstrators at SF State was direct and simple: Leave peacefully or get locked up. It was a typical no-nonsense approach. Take each problem and find out what is the resolution was the guiding rule, and the resolution here was a combination of an unambiguous command to the demonstrators and a sense of responsibility: he was prepared to take the heat if anything went wrong.

Probably no police chief has been so well known nationally. He was the only police chief to be selected by then-President Lyndon Johnson to serve on the President's Commission on Law Enforcement, in 1965. He so impressed FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (Hoover called him the best public administrator in the entire U.S.) that Tom was one of the two finalists (along with Clarence Kelly) for the FBI Director post. He was the only police chief in the country to be on the acclaimed television program, Meet the Press; his discernment and articulateness struck everyone when he appeared as a panelist on February 19, 1967. Combine all that with the sheer volume of the diversity of his achievements as Chief – establishing the first tactical unit, the first community relations office, a tactical crime prevention unit, an underwater rescue squad, and active PAL, civilian clerical personnel, an intensive police recruiting policy – and you have an extraordinary body of achievement.

And to cap it all was his unwavering love and support for his troops. As Tom put it on behalf of one of his officers who once was under charges, I'd put one foot in the gates of Hell to support you when you're right; if you're wrong, don't expect me to stick my neck out. There it is, unambiguous and fair, two of the characteristics that ruled his administration.



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