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TASTE

Dad Ran the Hippie Squad

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So what did you do in the 1960s, Daddy?

For more than a few boomer men, such a question would ruin an otherwise pleasant Father's Day, calling up memories of antiwar anger, countercultural folly and bad hair. But in my house it was always the start of an enjoyable generational exchange. My late father, a Navy vet who retired in 1972 as a detective captain after 25 years in the New York Police Department, always had a striking answer when one of his eight children (or their children) asked him about those days. "I ran the Hippie Squad," he would say.

During his long NYPD career, my father guarded Fidel Castro, held down the fort in "Fort Apache" and taught Telly Savalas how to answer the phone for "Kojak." But leading the 20 or so young undercover detectives in this real-life "Mod Squad" was his favorite assignment.

Flashback, October 1967: As the Summer of Love fades into autumn in New York's East Village, runaway teenage socialite Linda Fitzpatrick is found bludgeoned to death with her hippie boyfriend, "Groovy" Hutchinson. Just a few months before, Fitzpatrick had graduated from prestigious Oldfields School in Maryland. By the time of her death she had become a "meth monster," last seen panhandling before she was lured into the basement of a tenement by promises of an LSD party.

Fitzpatrick's murder -- the basis of a Pulitzer Prize-winning account by J. Anthony Lukas -- left parents and public officials desperate to understand, as Mr. Lukas put it, the "forces at work on young people" who were "leaving middle-class homes throughout the country for the 'mind-expanding' drug scene." Sociologists invoked "the generation gap." Pastors, parents and psychologists scrambled for a way to bridge it. My father, then a detective lieutenant, did his bit too, leading a unit whose mission was to infiltrate the hippie scene, locate underage runaways, reunite them with their parents and put predators -- drug dealers, racial hucksters, Hells Angels types -- behind bars.

According to former Hippie Squad detective Greg O'Connell, "parents of runaways were on their own" before the squad was formed. Midwestern

mothers and fathers would come to the city and walk the streets, carrying pictures of their kids. Light poles were plastered with fliers, à la 9/11, describing the age, appearance, nicknames and "last seen" whereabouts of the missing.

Many runaways came to roost in the rundown or abandoned buildings of the far East Village, spreading dirty mattresses on the floor of makeshift crashpads. Free love, along with heroin and methamphetamine, triggered an epidemic of VD, hepatitis and drug addiction. Bad relations between white middle-class hippies and impoverished local blacks and Puerto Ricans resulted in beatings, robberies and worse. "Rape was the norm for runaway girls," says former Hippie Squad detective Robert Marshall. News reports told of a father identifying a 13-year-old girl from Ohio who had been raped and thrown down an airshaft and of a drug-addicted 17-year-old girl from New Jersey who was found dead in a steamer trunk. "It was a very intense era, a sad era," recalls retired East Village detective Edmund Murphy. "A lot of kids got hurt."

The members of the Hippie Squad came from all over the city, many from police narcotics units familiar with undercover work. The chief of detectives promised that there would be no deadweight, and he delivered. The unit was diverse -- Irish, Italians, blacks, Jews and Latinos. They forged a family-like bond, dining together before their 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. shift.

To pass, some squad members grew beards or long hair and wore ratty clothes, their guns holstered under bell-bottomed pants. Others donned leopard-print vests or put studs in their noses. "Born actors," my father would say. "Shoulda been on Broadway." For his part, my father, then 45 years old and the boss, dressed in an older "Dragnet" style: good suit, sharp tie and fedora hat.

The detectives worked in groups of two or three and traveled in unmarked cars. In the cases referred by Missing Persons, they used "stoolies" for help. They picked up other runaways randomly on the street, tipped off by tender ages and nervous demeanors. The bulk of the squad's action involved minors apprehended in "no knock" raids on crashpads or parties. In the late 1960s, when the legality of warrantless searches was unsettled, "it was easier to take a door off its hinges," former Detective O'Connell says.

The squad arrested the predators it found, but it tried as much as possible to return the runaways to their parents. "Ours was more a social mission than a law enforcement mission," Mr. O'Connell explains. Indeed, a lot of the kids had hit bottom by the time the Hippie Squad found them. They wanted to go home and just needed a little help or coaxing.

During the long hot summer of 1968, reports of "no knock" raids would occasionally hit the grapevine, inspiring angry hippies to lay siege to the East Village's Ninth Precinct, waving banners that said "Don't Bust Our Crash Pads" and "Join the Revolution." It was not uncommon to see mounted cops, a couple of busloads of riot police and dozens of uniformed

officers ringing the precinct house itself. The members of the Hippie Squad were also there, infiltrating the crowd and leading them off to other destinations in what the squad called "cattle runs," until the mob's energy had faded.

Dad often escorted VIPs who wanted to see the "hippie scene" up close. And sometimes the top department brass or City Hall officials would arrange favors -- really just immediate police attention -- for politicians, celebrities and friends whose children had become runaways. One of the more interesting such cases involved the daughter of Maxie Levine, a former mob enforcer.

Maxie's teenage daughter, a meth addict, had run away to the East Village and then to Miami, taking her cat with her. A Hippie Squad detective accompanied Maxie to Miami, where they quickly located the girl. But they didn't pick her up right away. Maxie, you see, wanted to party, which they proceeded to do for three days, at one point drinking with Jackie Gleason. Finally he gave the signal and the girl was brought in. She was whisked by jet to a private sanitarium in New York, the cat in a hatbox.

A few instances of rule-bending aside, the squad was on the straight and narrow. The relative youth of the men, their excitement for the mission and their loyalty to my father kept temptation at bay. The squad enjoyed so much autonomy that my father, in the old department style, sometimes ran the show from uptown places like Toots Shors, where the banter was warm, the cocktails were chilled and Sinatra's "You Make Me Feel So Young" always seemed to be on the jukebox.

By late 1968, hippiedom was ebbing in the city and the number of runaways declining. One night, my Dad told his men that the squad was to be disbanded. In a little more than a year, it had found and returned 350 runaways.

For my father, the job's greatest satisfaction was the gratitude of the parents -- and some of the runaways. He kept their letters until he died. "The lieutenant was most kind and understanding," one parent wrote. The detectives who had helped to find her daughter did "excellent work."

Mr. McGowan is completing a book about the New York Times.

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