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Sun Media Columnist: Michael Harris

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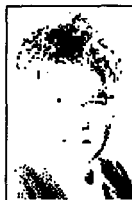


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OPP defend pedophile inquiry

Project Truth cops deny coverup allegations

By MICHAEL HARRIS
Ottawa Bureau



CORNWALL -- It didn't look much like Salem by the St. Lawrence. Just another dusty Canadian city buffeted by the last winds of winter.

I pulled into Tim Horton's on Brookdale Ave. and parked my truck a few spaces from the gray, unmarked police-car and headed inside. Det.-Insp. Tim Smith, retired, and Det.-Supt. Larry Edgar were sitting in the far corner, tall men in natty business suits. They were already getting up as I approached them.

I follow the ghost-car through the streets of Cornwall to the parking lot of the provincial department of energy and environment. As we climb the stairs to the headquarters of Project Truth -- two dingy rooms with a few scarred desks, some metal filing cabinets and an old photo-copier -- Smith explains that the team wanted to work away from the OPP's Cornwall detachment.

"Don't know how smart that was though," the tall policeman said with a smile. "Someone broke in and stole all of our computers."

Even though the crack OPP investigator and his team have been delving into the infamous Cornwall pedophile scandal for the past five years, this is the first interview granted in their squad room.

For half of that time, Smith has been the leader of Project Truth, a collection of detectives put together by the major cases section of the OPP's criminal investigation bureau. The team was assembled in 1996-1997 in response to information collected by crusading Cornwall police officer Perry Dunlop.

After standing up to what he saw as a corrupt system that tried to sweep the sex scandal under the rug, Dunlop was contacted by scores of victims who alleged that several prominent Cornwall residents had been molesting boys between the ages of 8 and 18 over a 30-year period. It was Dunlop's work that led to the creation of Project Truth.

You would never know it from their press, but Smith and his detectives have had a measure of success in cracking the so-called pedophile "ring" for so long. Since 1996, Project Truth has resulted in 84 charges against 12 people, including three Catholic priests, one Catholic brother, a former Crown attorney, and a retired coroner. Ten of these charges are "historic," dealing directly with complainants who told their story to



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Dunlop. Two deal with a bus driver and a lawyer who were charged last month.

Nevertheless, Project Truth has had more than its share of detractors. Dunlop is on record as saying that a pedophile ring could still be active in Cornwall. Ordinary citizens believe there is a pedophile under every uniform or vestment.

Criticism of the investigation reached its peak last month when Ottawa Tory MPP Garry Guzzo asked for a public inquiry into the Cornwall scandal, after his confidential letters to Premier Mike Harris on that subject were leaked to the press.

Given the arrests and the continuing investigation, why all the vegetable bouquets for the OPP?

Leaning forward over the desk as if to reinforce his point, Smith's answer is freighted more with resignation than despair.

"It's very scary. It's McCarthyism, plain and simple. Rumours spread in this town about new suicides every day. I know a guy who gets up and goes to work in the morning who's supposed to have killed himself five times so far."

(According to police, there have, in fact, been three suicides and two attempted suicides associated with this case, all of them involving alleged perpetrators.)

I hand Smith a list of written concerns about the conduct of the investigation, many of them raised by Guzzo in his letters to the premier.

Topping the list is the allegation that critical evidence from complainants was sent to Julian Fantino, currently chief of York Region Police but then London's chief of police, rather than to Project Truth. Did that happen, and if so, did his investigators ever receive the material? Smith looks over the top of his glasses and arches his eyebrows as he speaks.

"The fact is, the person who gave that original information to Chief Fantino was Perry Dunlop. He did that in December of 1996. The OPP got the complaints by February 1997, and they formed the basis for the investigation that led to the charges we have to date."

Sitting to my right, Edgar chimes in: "To tell you the truth, we have wondered why Dunlop didn't give those complaints to us rather than Chief Fantino."

While it's true that a second round of documents that Dunlop shared with two provincial government departments on April 8, 1997 didn't reach Project Truth investigators for over a year, the OPP says that they contained virtually the same material as the earlier brief.

"This second round of documents was really just the first batch split into several files, along with Police Service Act material relevant to Dunlop's civil action, but not to our investigation," Det. Sgt. Pat Hall said. "It's true that there were three new affidavits included in that second batch of information. But we had already interviewed all three complainants by the time the material came to us,"

Another key allegation made by Guzzo in his letter to the premier is that a complainant who made an inculpatory statement about his part in the alleged pedophile clan, (the man claims to have been both a victim and an abuser) has never been questioned.

According to Smith, the OPP has questioned the man twice, once on Feb. 7, 1997, in Orillia, and again in South Paris, Maine in November of the same year. The man is

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currently viewed by police as a potential victim, suspect, and witness.

Didn't seek receipts

Smith, who retired from the OPP last Wednesday after 32 years service, admitted that Project Truth investigators have not travelled to Ft. Lauderdale to retrieve receipts that could back up allegations that senior clergyman and police officials from the Cornwall area took boys to the Saltaire Hotel for sex parties or engaged male prostitutes.

"I can tell you that we don't have any hotel receipts on file," Smith said. "But if someone goes to Ft. Lauderdale and hires a male prostitute, that's a matter for U.S. authorities. And remember, only one complainant out of 83 says boys were taken from Cornwall to Florida. So we have concentrated our efforts in Canada. Where we have come across crimes in other Canadian jurisdictions, we have shared the information. We have, for example, passed on evidence of offences in Quebec to authorities in that province."

So far, Project Truth has identified 66 suspects from the 83 complainant statements on file. Of those, 35 have been interviewed. Of the remaining 31 suspects, 18 are deceased, leaving 13 yet to be interrogated.

Smith bristles at the suggestion that his investigators are dragging their feet because some of the people yet to be interviewed hold, or held, influential positions in the community.

"I am probably responsible for putting more clergymen behind bars than any policeman in Canada," he says. "I am not in awe of men in collars. And I take strong exception to anyone who says that I am being soft on pedophiles. We are just doing a professional investigation."

One person not yet interviewed by Project Truth is former Cornwall police chief Claude Shaver. When the scandal broke, Ottawa police were brought in to investigate whether there had been a coverup of the alleged sex crimes by the Cornwall force, allegedly because senior police officials were themselves implicated. Shaver assigned an officer to investigate the matter, but didn't approve either a vehicle or travel expenses for him.

(Shaver has been living in the United States since 1995, when he was replaced with an interim chief, and is not obligated to talk to police. Another senior retired Cornwall police official has refused to be interviewed "half a dozen times." Project Truth also intends to pursue questioning him.)

On June 18, 1994, Chief Brian Ford of the Ottawa Police department reported that the Cornwall police investigation had been incompetent and recommended that an independent force be brought in to review allegations of an official coverup.

That marked the beginning of the OPP's involvement in the case that became Project Truth. They found no basis for the coverup allegation, but did charge a lawyer with obstruction of justice for an illegal deal he allegedly cut on behalf of the Catholic church with the first complainant in the case back in 1994.

(Ironically, both the lawyer, Malcolm MacDonald, and the lawyer who advised the diocese that the deal was the best way to proceed, Jacques Leduc, have now been charged with multiple counts of sex offences by Project Truth investigators.)

After investigating the case for five years, Smith is not convinced that there ever was a "pedophile clan" in Cornwall quite like the one Dunlop and other people have talked

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about -- deviants who manipulated the system to hide their crimes. But he is certain that if there ever was such a group, it is no longer active.

"There is no evidence of a group or clan of active pedophiles operating in Cornwall today. It is true that a number of the accused are Catholic. But there is no evidence of common victims. Only five of the accused to date know each other. But in a town like Cornwall, everybody sort of knows everybody, so people tend to think the worst."

With each fresh arrest, the city reverberates with its worst suspicions. Instead of closure, the work of Project Truth has strengthened apocryphal stories that are now quoted as gospel wherever you go.

Many people say that the reason for the paucity of charges in the case is that certain OPP officers were actually related to alleged perpetrators. In fact, Cornwall's current Crown prosecutor, Murray MacDonald, is related to OPP investigator Randy Miller. But not only was Miller never a member of Project Truth, he and his brother-in-law actually turned in their father/father-in-law, Milton MacDonald, who was charged with sex crimes by the OPP.

"Murray MacDonald has been crucified unfairly," Det.-Insp. Smith said. "When we didn't originally charge one of the people who is now accused because we had only one complainant, people in town said MacDonald was protecting pedophiles. Why would he protect a stranger and turn in his own father? He has been treated very unfairly by this vicious whisper campaign."

Another story making the rounds is that there was no inquest into the death of a young man who was shot and killed at the Summerston cottage belonging to probation officer, and suspected pedophile, Ron Seguin. The fact is that a man was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in the incident.

When the OPP found out that one of the men at the cottage was on probation, investigators wrote a letter to the probation office to register their disapproval of a probation officer drinking with one of his young charges.

Police say that Seguin, who committed suicide in 1994, killed himself in part because one of his alleged victims was threatening to sue him.

The most popular urban myth about the case is that police found, and then destroyed, smoking-gun, kiddy-porn tapes showing prominent citizens having sex with their victims. Det.-Insp. Smith says the truth is far less dramatic and of no use to police:

"Tapes were found when police executed a search warrant. They also found a gun. But the tapes were commercially produced pornography showing sex involving adult homosexuals.

"One of those commercial tapes showed sex between a man and a woman. The tapes were subsequently destroyed as irrelevant to the investigation. We had a signed return on them, and a quit-claim, and they were destroyed."

Project Truth investigators are philosophical about criticism they have received, much uninformed.

Their boss, Edgar, also understands the frustration of concerned citizens such as Guzzo. Even though Edgar is sensitive to Guzzo's stated desire not to interfere in a police investigation, he would still like to have any information the MPP has about new victims in the case.

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"I just wish he had found some way to get us what he knows, the same way I wish Perry Dunlop would have provided us with the affidavits he gave to Chief Fantino and the provincial government. Make no mistake about it, we want to work with any victim out there. We will respect their privacy. All we are after is the truth."

Even though he won't be around when the investigation wraps up this August, Smith echoes that sentiment.

"It is very difficult to interview victims who will not report these crimes. The frustrating part is that we know that they're out there. We also know that victims lead to victims. That's why we'll speak to them anywhere, anytime, and on a confidential basis.

"What I don't like is going out with a cloud over us. Let me say it again. I don't care who the subject of an investigation is. If the evidence is there to lay a charge, I lay the charge.

"After all these years, I still believe that being a policeman is an honourable profession."

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