

# special report

## The Unknown Policeman

By Karen Evans

It was a hot Friday evening on September 21, 1979, when Strode Wilder was reborn in the mind of John Hoffmann. Ten years earlier Hoffmann had used the Wilder pen name on articles he wrote for a high school newspaper and as an air name while he was a disc jockey on several local FM radio stations. Now Hoffmann was a policeman who had recently left the Rock Hill Police Department as a detective sergeant and joined the Manchester Police force as a patrolman. At Rock Hill, Hoffmann wasn't making much money and was putting in 60 to 70 hours a week on the job. He thought Manchester would offer a good change where he would have less job related pressure, more money and three days a week off. But Hoffmann had trouble adjusting to these changes because Manchester's crime rate was almost non-existent. With little to do and extra days off, Hoffmann found he now had a lot of time on his hands.

That Friday evening with nothing to do Hoffmann thought about writing a critical but also amusing article to be entitled "A Guide Through the Municipal Police Maze: A Policeman's View" using the pen name of Strode Wilder. Hoffmann's motives were apparently threefold. He wanted to inform the public of the differences in the quality of police protection in the St. Louis area and to point out the difficulty officers at some departments have in simply doing their jobs.



Now you see him, now you don't: former Manchester policeman John Hoffmann.

Besides, winter was coming and Hoffmann needed some money for new snow tires. At about 8 o'clock that night the plan was already in trouble. While waiting at a checkout line at the Sears store in Crestwood, with two reams of typing paper, typewriter ribbon and a box of Ko-Rec-Type in his arms, Hoffmann ran into his chief of police, Danny R. Rowden. Rowden asked him what he was doing at the store and Hoffmann replied that he needed some stationary supplies to write a letter to his sister in Ann Arbor who had just had her first baby.

Ten days later the article was completed and Hoffmann submitted it to *St. Louis Magazine*. On Monday, October 1, magazine editor-in-chief John Heidenry telephoned Hoffmann and offered to purchase the piece for the January cover story. Hoffmann quickly agreed to the price suggested by Heidenry, which was more than enough for a pair of snow tires.

On Christmas Eve the January issue of *St. Louis* was delivered to the homes of subscribers. The cover of the

magazine featured a man in clown-face dressed as a policeman. Late that afternoon Creve Coeur mayor Harold Dielman became both angered and alarmed after reading the article's review of the Creve Coeur PD. Dielman called the police station and had a car sent to his house. He gave the officer instructions to make a copy of the article and then

department dropped the officer's pay incentive program. Kleinknecht's second objective was to determine who had written the story. The cover of the magazine was sent to the department's photo lab to see if it was possible to unmask the clown-faced policeman. Major Thomas Moonier began to apply pressure on some command officers to assist in the in-

vestigation. At the Kirkwood Police Department Chief Daniel Linza, still enraged over the story, questioned Detective Cappy Ricks, who had been favorably mentioned in the article, as to his knowledge of the author. Ricks had no idea as to who the author was and Linza began his own investigation to find out the identity of Strode Wilder. City and police officials also met in the towns of Webster Groves, Ballwin, Olivette and Edmundson to prepare rebuttals to the article.

December 26 was a busy day at several other departments. In Clayton, superintendent of St. Louis County Police Col. Gilbert H. Kleinknecht called a morning staff meeting. The only item on the agenda was the *St. Louis Magazine* story. Several of the points in the review of the St. Louis County PD were that narcotic detectives weren't doing much to stop the flow of hard drugs into north county and the officer's pay incentive program encouraged cops to write motorists minor traffic tickets to help keep up their quota. Kleinknecht's objective at the meeting was twofold. First he wanted to quietly refute some of the allegations in the article. This was done by having the Drug Abuse Unit dig out all their old cases from the north county area and to apply for warrants. Also, in January the

vestigation.

The preface to the article was an editor's note which began: "For reasons that will become obvious below, the author of the following article cannot be identified." Things would soon show why Hoffmann used a pen name.

On January 10, Hoffmann's sense of security was shaken by two telephone calls. The first came at 4:10 p.m. from a friend of Hoffmann, who was told that various police officials were on to him as the author of the article. Apparently a relative of Hoffmann had mentioned to a friend that he had "an article

coming out in *St. Louis Magazine*" and Chief Linza had disseminated the information to other chiefs with the speed of an AP wire. Earlier in the day, Harris from Creve Coeur passed out the news at the weekly meeting of the Mid-County Detective Exchange Association, an organization whose past president was Hoffmann. At the St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, investigator Robert Gates took great pride in relating how Hoffmann was uncovered. Gates told everyone that he could find that it was a case of "super sleuthing."

The second call came at 5 p.m. from Hoffmann's sergeant, Emory Albritton. Albritton told Hoffmann that Chief Rowden wanted to see him the next day concerning the *St. Louis Magazine* story. Hoffmann tried to plea that it was his day off, but Albritton told him that Rowden and Manchester city administrator Earl Clifford had been receiving a flood of telephone calls

from various city and police officials telling them that Hoffmann had written the story and demanding his head. The meeting had to be the next day.

Next day Hoffmann was ushered into Rowden's office where Sgt. Albritton was already seated. Rowden started the meeting by saying, "The mayor was at a meeting of mayors Wednesday night and several mayors told him that one of his officers wrote the *St. Louis* police article and they wanted to know why one of his officers would do something like that. The mayor then asked Mr. Clifford to look into it and Mr. Clifford told me to find out about it." Hoffmann then stated that he didn't understand what difference it made who wrote the story as the author should be protected under the First Amendment. Rowden stated, "A lot of departments had their face pushed in the mud and held in the mud by that article. A few things were true but a lot of it

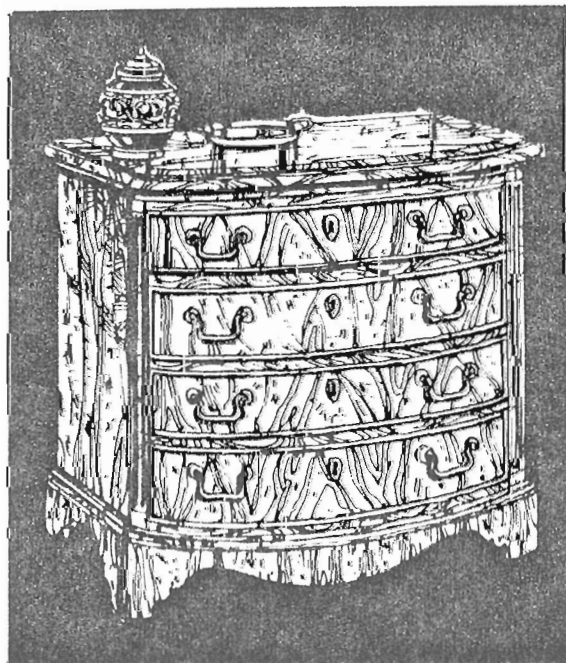
was lies and we have a right to find out who wrote it. The article didn't go over us too bad but a lot of other departments have a good reason to be upset. I thought it was trash." Hoffmann countered, "I assume there are a lot of investigations being done by a lot of departments and I doubt that I'm the first cop in the county to be called into the office over it." Rowden responded, "I know there have been a lot of investigations and the departments have a right to do them. Nobody wants a person working for them they can't trust and that includes me. Now John, I want an answer. Did you write the article or not?" Hoffmann answered, "I know who wrote the article and I'm not going to say who it is." Rowden then added some pressure and said, "Now let's realize that you are still on probation and I'll be honest—if enough pressure is brought on me over this you'll be dismissed." Hoffmann then bought some time by requesting to

have the weekend to think it over but reminded Rowden that his answer might still be the same. Rowden ended the meeting by saying if that was the case chances were "99 and 9/10 sure" an internal investigation would begin.

On Sunday, January 13, Hoffmann reported to duty at 11 p.m. and discovered that the news of his meeting with Rowden had leaked to the rest of the department. Two officers from the 3 to 11 shift told him that his "S. Wilder" nameplate had been ordered and should be in by the end of the week. Another cop complimented him on his writing style. Hoffmann then stood up and in an emotional voice told the seven policemen that he had been called into Rowden's office and ordered to come up with the name of the author of the *St. Louis* story. He told the group that he knew who wrote the story and that he wasn't about to come in on a brother policeman. Little did his au-

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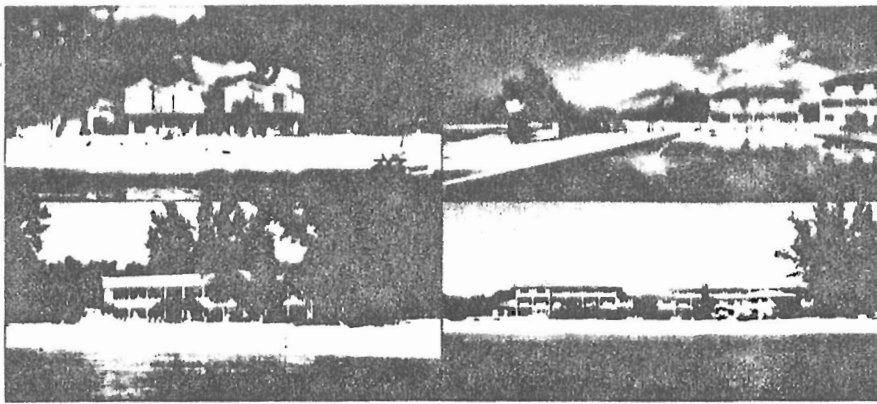
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## UNKNOWN POLICEMAN

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dience know that the brother cop Hoffmann had mentioned was himself.

On Monday January 14, Hoffmann brought a surprise to the 4 o'clock meeting with Rowden--his attorney, James R. Hartenbach. The meeting was brief. Hartenbach told Rowden that his client's position on revealing the author of the article was the same and asked if Rowden was now planning an internal investigation. Rowden stated he was. The meeting lasted less than three minutes and after Hoffmann and Hartenbach had left, Rowden summoned Detective Sergeant Russell Schnarr to his office and asked him to begin an investigation. Schnarr balked at the assignment, stating that he felt it was a waste of time and money to investigate someone exercising his constitutional right to free speech. Rowden then asked Albritton to handle the investigation and Albritton refused and Rowden was forced to order Schnarr to do the investigation.

During all this two other things were happening in Manchester. Hoffmann's probationary period was coming to an end and over half the police force was working on off-duty security assignment for Laclede Gas during the gas workers strike.

On January 8, Sgt. Albritton had sent Rowden the following memo:

Because of Officer John Hoffmann's devotion to duty and personal performance I hereby recommend that he be lifted from probationary status. Officer Hoffmann's performance is indicated as such and recognized in the evaluation which was just recently completed.

Officer Hoffmann has just recently completed six (6) months employment with this agency and has shown his being worthy of being relieved of probationary status.

Your attention to the above will be greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,  
Sgt. Emory C. Albritton #5221

On January 25, Rowden replied to Albritton's request with a memo.

As you may or may not be aware, an ordinance change took place shortly before Officer Hoffmann was officially hired by the Manchester Police Department, which required all city employees to serve a one (1) year probationary period. Therefore, I am unable to remove Officer Hoffmann from a probationary status at this time.

I trust that Officer Hoffmann's performance and actions will continue to merit your positive endorsement.

Officer Hoffmann shall remain on probationary status, and his status shall be reviewed at the end of his one (1) year probationary period to determine if he should be retained with the police department in a full status.

Sincerely,  
Danny R. Rowden

This reply dismayed Hoffmann as he felt that Rowden was now acting in bad faith, since he had been told by Rowden

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when he was interviewed for the job in June of 1979, and again in September of 1979, that probation was for six months. Rowden also upset Hoffmann when he contacted a young Manchester patrolman who had been friendly with Hoffmann over the last four years and offered him a transfer into the detective bureau if he could help prove that Hoffmann had written the police story.

On January 31, Hoffmann began to feel the full wrath of Rowden when he discovered that his paycheck was short \$54. The shortage had not been explained and Hoffmann inquired with the department's secretary. She told him that after she had completed the payroll records, Rowden instructed her to dock Hoffmann's pay for January 18 when he missed a day's work because of the flu.

On February 2, Hoffmann and Albritton met with Rowden, and Hoffmann told the chief that he felt the rules were suddenly being changed in the middle of the game. Hoffmann explained that he was told twice in 1979 that the probationary period was six months and that it was now suddenly one year. He contended that any new ordinance referred to by Rowden did not change Ord. 2-89 and probation was still six months. Rowden replied, "I feel otherwise but if it were the case I wouldn't take you off probation because you are under investigation." With a mock expression of shock covering his face Hoffmann asked, "An investigation? I was never formally informed of any investigation. What am I being investigated for?" Rowden then exploded, "You know what for. You come in here with your attorney and he asks me if I told you that if you had nothing else to say I would begin an investigation. I tell him, 'that's right' and then he says he has nothing else to say and that you stand on your earlier statement. So don't tell me you don't know of any investigation." Albritton then told Rowden that he was under the impression that the investigation had been completed by the detectives and turned in. Rowden answered that Sgt. Schnarr had turned in his report but that the investigation continued and he is now handling it.

Rowden by now was convinced that Hoffmann was in gross violation of Ord. 22-50, a questionable and bizarre municipal law which reads:

Police officers making any public address or writing articles for public reading, affecting the local police department in any way, shall first take up the matter with the chief of police before giving out the same. The purpose of this section is to assure the proper construction of departmental policies.

Meanwhile, since December 31 Manchester officers had been working a security detail, guarding a Laclede Gas installation at Manchester Road and Highway 141. The officers were paid \$6 an hour and received weekly paychecks

that were mailed to the police station every Monday from Laclede. By the third week in January several officers discovered that Chief Rowden, who is required by ordinance not to accept any outside monies, was accepting \$32 a week from Laclede without city permission to allow his officers to work the detail. The payments were listed by Laclede for "Administrative Duties" but in reality all Rowden did for the money was to open the envelope it arrived in, as Sgt. Albritton handled all the scheduling for the detail.

Soon word had raced through the department that Rowden was accepting the payments from Laclede. Ordinance 22-72 provides:

The chief of police shall devote his full time and effort to the performance of his duties as chief of police and shall not engage in any outside employment without prior approval of the mayor (if such activity doesn't involve additional compensation to the chief of police) or the prior approval of the board of aldermen (if such employment does involve the payment of additional compensation to the chief of police).

Faced with daily subtle reminders of the weekly \$32 checks, Rowden on February 18 ordered a mandatory departmental meeting for the next day. At the meeting Rowden admitted accepting money from Laclede but claimed he had done nothing illegal and had the permission of his supervisors. He promised that if anyone tried to "stab him in the back" he would "take care of them."

With the Laclede Gas strike over and Rowden's payments a dead issue, Hoffmann waited for the next salvo in his battle. It wasn't long in coming. On February 20, Rowden changed his position on the probation issue and sent Hoffmann the following memo:

Please be advised that pursuant to Section 2-89 of the Codified Ordinance of the City of Manchester, your probationary period is hereby extended for a period of sixty days from February 20, 1980.

I will advise you within that time period of the results of my probationary reports.

Respectfully,  
Danny R. Rowden

On February 22, while working the day watch, Hoffmann was summoned to the city hall where he was met by Manchester City Attorney Patrick Gunn. Gunn explained the city's position on sick leave and probation. Hoffmann then told Gunn that he wanted to be a good employee and if the city would point out the reasons for the extension of his probation he would attempt to improve in those areas. Gunn responded by saying, "According to the ordinance we are not required to give you any reasons." Gunn then got to the point and stated the city was concerned about Hoffmann's ability to follow orders. According to Gunn the public's and fellow officers' welfare were in doubt and the ci-

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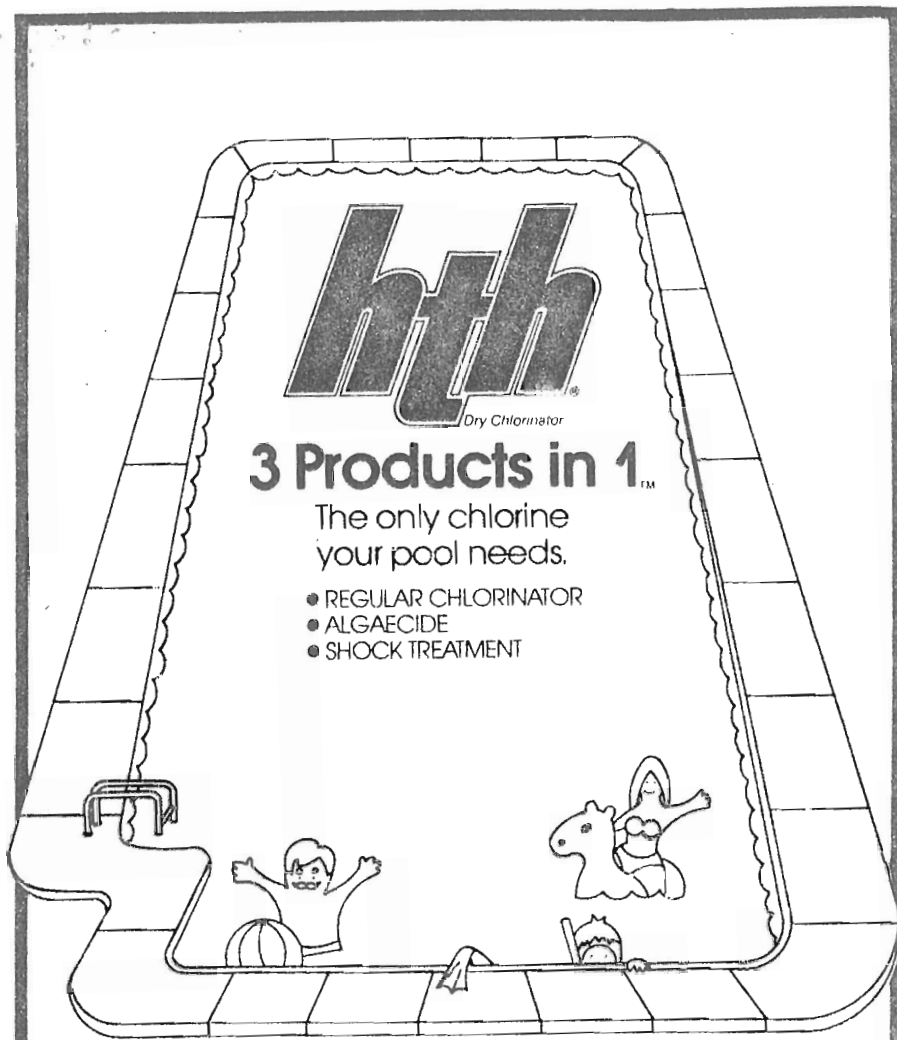
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ty intended to test Hoffmann by ordering him to answer certain questions pertaining to the authorship of the *St. Louis* Magazine story. Hoffmann then interrupted Gunn and called his attorney who spoke with Gunn and agreed to arrange an interview at a later date.

Most other police departments ended their own investigations into the authorship of the *St. Louis* article in January believing that Hoffmann was the culprit. An aid to Col. Kleinknecht of the county police told *St. Louis* Magazine's senior writer Joe Popper that Kleinknecht was not familiar with the article, but that if Popper would like to send Kleinknecht a copy he would be happy to respond to it. Daniel Linza, the chief of Kirkwood, was a different case entirely. He continued clue searching. In the middle of March, Linza had uncovered a 10-year-old piece of physical evidence that linked Hoffmann to the pen name of Strode Wilder. Linza forwarded the evidence to Rowden.

On March 20 Hoffmann arrived at work and was greeted by the following memo:

You are to report to the City Hall, 63 Nationalway at 1400 hrs. on April 2, 1980. At this time I will be interviewing you for further information concerning the present internal investigation involving you.

Chief D. Rowden

April 2 fell on Hoffmann's day off. At the 2 p.m. meeting Rowden conducted a 40-minute interview. Hoffmann was amazed that Rowden asked three questions before getting to the heart of the issue, when he asked, "Did you write any or all the articles appearing in the January and March issues of *St. Louis* Magazine entitled, 'How Safe Are You? Rating Your Local Police Departments.'" Hoffmann replied, "Yes, I wrote the whole thing down to the last period." Hoffmann then got some real insight into the thinking of the city at the end of the interview when the following exchange took place:

Rowden: How did you learn of the reduction of the Manchester Police Dept. from 21 to 19 men?

Hoffmann: I thought that was pretty much common knowledge. You know, you work at a place day after day you tend to notice how many you are working with. Besides that, wasn't it mentioned in the suburban newspapers?

Rowden: No. Just the cut back of the cars. Nothing was ever mentioned concerning the manpower.

Hoffmann: All I know is that we were at an authorized strength of 21 when you were appointed as Chief Petri's replacement, and when another officer quit and nobody was hired we were told we would be staying at 19 men. If that was supposed to be kept a secret somebody did a pretty bad job of it.

Hoffmann's probation extension expired on Sunday, April 20. The city waited until the last possible minute before acting. On Friday, April 18, city attorney Gunn called Hoffmann's lawyer

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with a deal. Hoffmann could resign and expect a good recommendation from Rowden or he could take a 15-day suspension. If neither of these was acceptable he could expect the worst. After being urged by several friends to take the suspension, Hoffmann on Saturday, April 19, decided that he wasn't going to dictate departmental discipline and had his attorney advise the city that it was their decision to make. Gunn then informed Rowden of the decision and Rowden had his wife type the termination letter. The letter, in a sealed envelope, was given to Sgt. Albritton by Rowden on Saturday evening with instructions to wait for the word and then deliver it to Hoffmann at his house.

On Sunday at 7 o'clock the word came and Albritton left the letter at Hoffmann's home. At about 9:20 p.m. Hoffmann arrived home from a date and discovered the letter taped to his front door. According to Manchester ordinance a terminated employee must be given seven days' notice. Hoffmann's last official day would be April 26, 1980. The letter gave the following causes for termination:

- #1. Violation of ordinances dealing with outside employment without approval of the chief of police.
- #2 Violation of ordinance dealing with Police Officers making a public address or writing articles for public reading without approval of the chief of police.
- #3 Conduct unbecoming of a police officer.
- #4 Violation of ordinance dealing with communicating or giving out information concerning the affairs of the department without approval.
- #5 General poor attitude.
- #6 Unwillingness to accept constructive criticism.
- #7 General disrespect for the Manchester Police Dept.

On Monday, April 21, Hoffmann reported to work on the day watch and went on the street at 7 a.m. At about 11 o'clock after picking up his lunch at McDonald's, Hoffmann was dispatched to go to the station. There Lt. Martin Faulkner informed him that for the next six days he would be on vacation time and that he was relieved of duty. After six straight years as a cop, over 1,000 arrests and 11 commendations, Hoffmann's last official act was to get a sack of hamburgers at half price.

Late that same afternoon, Hoffmann's lawyer mailed letters to Rowden, Clifford, the mayor and each member of the board of aldermen in Manchester requesting a hearing be given to Hoffmann over his dismissal. On Saturday, April 26, his last day on the payroll, Hoffmann went to the Manchester Police Department where he turned in his badge and ID card to Sgt. Albritton and then cleaned out his locker. On Monday, April 28, word came from the city that the hearing request would be brought before the board of aldermen on Monday, May 5.

On Tuesday morning, April 29, Steve

Trenkman, a reporter with KMOX-TV, had gotten wind of the story and called Hoffmann at his house asking for an interview. Besides Trenkman, reporters from the *Post-Dispatch*, *Globe-Democrat* and the *Lafayette Press Journal* were already aware of the story and had been asked to hold off on it. Hoffmann decided after Trenkman's phone call to go ahead and release the story. Trenkman reported on the firing that night and on the next evening's 6 p.m. newscast.

On May 1 the story appeared in the *Post-Dispatch*. The next day while Hoffmann was being interviewed by Ron Morgan on KSD, officials at the Manchester City Hall were taping the program. The tape was sent to the Manchester PD where secretary Jackie Hankins spent the next day and a half transcribing it.

On the morning of May 5 Hoffmann awoke to a long-distance phone call from Connecticut placed by Donald F. Petri, former chief of police of Manchester. Petri told Hoffmann that he supported him and offered to fly to St. Louis to testify in his behalf at any hearing or trial.

The night of the board meeting Hoffmann kept a low profile by going to a baseball game. At about the same time the game started the board meeting in Manchester was called to order. The hearing request was first on the agenda. The aldermen left the meeting room and went into executive session to decide on the request. They returned a short time later and announced they had voted 4 to 2 against giving Hoffmann a hearing and let stand the dismissal. A reporter was told after the meeting that Hoffman would have probably gotten the hearing if there hadn't been any press coverage.

On Thursday, May 8, another noteworthy event happened. St. Louis County Police Superintendent Kleinknecht appeared on Ron Morgan's talk show at KSD radio. During the hour-long interview, Morgan brought up the accusation that several departments including the county police conducted investigations to determine the author of the *St. Louis Magazine* article. Kleinknecht denied that there was any investigation by the County PD but admitted that there was a strong curiosity among police administrators including himself, as to who had authored the story. Kleinknecht again denied that there was an investigation but said in the same breath that the brass of the St. Louis County Police Department had spent some time in researching the article and had compiled a stereotype of a person who would have written the story. Kleinknecht said that the stereotype revealed a white male detective who worked in the west St. Louis County area. For a man whose aide had told a reporter earlier in the year that he wasn't even aware of the police article, Kleinknecht certainly had made an about-face.



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