

# Silurian News

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MARCH 2020



Jackie Presser

## Memories of Covering the Teamsters and the Mob

BY ALLAN DODDS FRANK

The murder was fresh from the front pages in New York in 1972 as I deplaned from Juneau, where I was Bureau Chief of the Anchorage Daily News, for my annual visit to The Lower 48. Nearly 50 years later, I still remember how I terrified Peter Francis, a roommate from Columbia Journalism School, by dragging him and a girlfriend to dine, gawk and ask questions at Umberto's Clam House, the Little Italy restaurant where mobster Joey Gallo had just been whacked.

The memory was one of many about covering organized crime and the Teamsters that bubbled up watching "The Irishman," Martin Scorsese's movie about Teamsters hit man Frank Sheeran. Scorsese, with fidelity to detail, reproduced Umberto's and the Gallo hit, a deed claimed by Sheeran, but which is often attributed to others.

Peter is black, and I had curly shoulder-length Afro hippy hair, so we stood out in the tomato & red sauce crowd at Mulberry & Hester. "You could still see the bullet holes," Peter remembers. "I thought they were going to kill us because we were asking questions. I think they didn't because they thought we were two dumb rookie detectives."

Back in Alaska, thanks to the flying fists of a Teamsters lobbyist and an Eskimo activist, I had just survived a cinematic late-night brawl at a disco called Dreamland. We were part of a rowdy, drunken bunch of legislators, Native Land Claim activists, oil, gas and labor lobbyists enjoying ourselves when a fight between two women that started on the dance floor engulfed the establishment.

After being tossed and somersaulting through the mob, I ended up in a defensive triangle with my back being protected by Teamsters tough guy lobby-

ist Lewis Dischner and Charlie Edwardsen Jr., an Eskimo from Barrow who spearheaded the Arctic Slope Native Association.

I knew them from covering Dischner's guidance of the Teamsters' campaign to gain jurisdiction over construction of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline and Edwardsen's firebrand civil rights leadership, which helped force passage of the Alaska Native Land Claims Act. (In 1989, Dischner and a colleague were convicted of defrauding the Eskimo government on the North Slope of more than \$70 million.)

By the late 1970s, when I was covering federal courts and the Justice Department for The Washington Star, I had become well-versed in the nation's organized crime families' grip on organized labor. So when in 1978 Silurian News Editor Michael Serrill was editing Police, a magazine about law enforcement funded by the Ford

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## Memories of Covering the Teamsters and the Mob

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Foundation, I was thrilled when he asked me to do a Teamsters story. Serrill, also a journalism school classmate, wanted an investigation of the Teamsters national drive to unionize police departments, so I visited Teamsters locals and police departments in suburban Virginia, St. Petersburg, Fla. and New Orleans.

In New Orleans, the Teamsters had routed the Service Employees International Union in taking over the New Orleans Police Association, representing 1,500 cops. I remember prowling around with Mitchel Ledet, the Teamster's organizer and secretary-treasurer of the 10,000 member New Orleans Teamsters Local 270. Watching Mitch in action was instructive. Mitch knew the side entrance and maître d's at all of New Orleans' best restaurants, including Antoine's, where it was almost impossible to get a table at the last minute, unless you were a guy whose union controlled garbage pickups and beer and food deliveries.

My conclusion: Teamsters National President Frank Fitzsimmons' wish to wrestle away big city police locals was possible, but unlikely. Nationally, there was too much political fear of infiltration by organized crime and lots of fierce opposition from the public service unions.

My biggest Teamsters assignment - in every sense - was ahead.

In 1984, I was in the Washington bureau of Forbes. The man who hired me, Jerry Flint, was a Detroit native and legendary chronicler of the auto industry and its unions. Flint was fascinated by Teamsters' President Jackie Presser and his decision to back Republican President Ronald Reagan. Presser decided to grant Forbes exclusive access to the union and Jerry turned me loose, urging me to make good use of my Forbes expense account.

During two months of reporting, I flew to Chattanooga, St. Louis, Detroit and Denver to interview Teamsters officials and dissidents. In Bloomfield Township, Michigan, I paused for a steak at the last place Jimmy Hoffa was seen before he disappeared, fantasizing about getting the clue that would solve his murder.

My big take-out was entitled: "The State of the Union" with the subhead: "The Teamsters' new president, Jackie Presser, is no angel, but at least he rec-

ognizes the pencil is mightier than the baseball bat."

In 1983, Presser had succeeded Jimmy Hoffa protégé Roy Williams after he was indicted for conspiring to bribe U.S. Senator Howard Cannon of Nevada to influence trucking legislation.

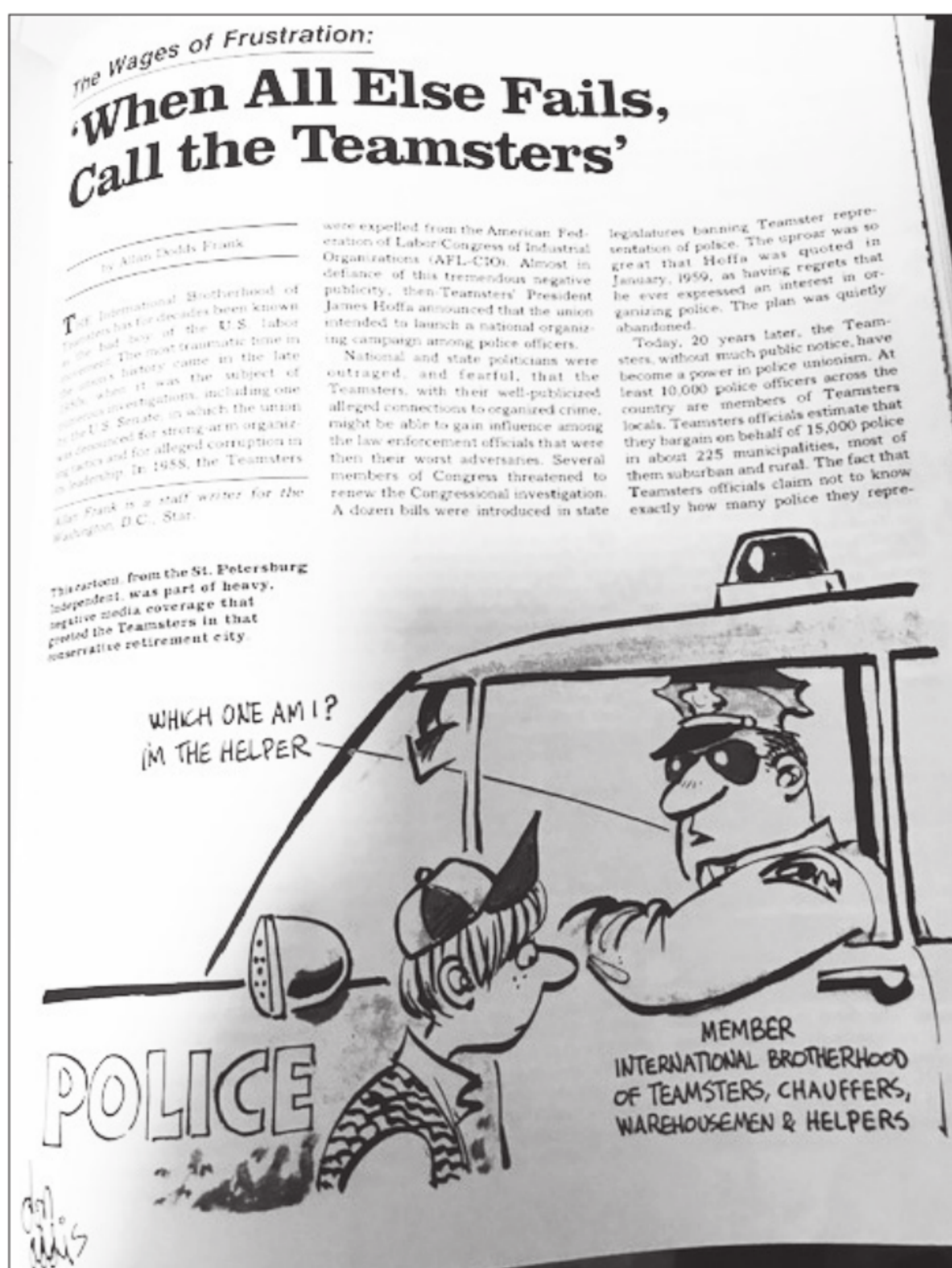
Presser hailed from Cleveland, where he built a reputation as a voluble, hard-as-nails, corrupt, loyal unionist. He draped his burly body with expensive suits and glad-handed everyone he met at Teamsters' headquarters, in the shadow of the Senate side of the U.S. Capitol.

The first time we met, we had lunch in the Teamsters cafeteria, which had an open alcove for his table so all his employees could approach him comfortably. It was a PR show put on by his communications director, a perpetually tanned Paul Newman look-alike named F.C. "Duke" Zeller. He and Jackie allowed me to attend a Teamsters national executive board meeting and the subsequent cocktail party with the union's most important leaders. I used the occasion to seek the answer to a delicate question: "How much does Jackie weigh?"

Most Teamsters I asked said something like "too much," but confessed they were not about to inquire. Then a senior, and allegedly mobbed up, trustee told me the board had passed a half-joking resolution that Jackie had to lose 60 pounds in 90 days.

To get a better fix on Jackie's regal style, I pressed him to schedule a meal in the private Teamster's Presidential Dining room. He said he hated the place, because it was one of the locales the FBI bugged to catch Roy Williams, but he finally relented.

Zeller assembled a diverse crew of Teamster leaders for the lunch, and I got to see the Teamsters President and his supplicants in action. No one, especially the chef, wanted to see Presser go hungry. The waiters came with steaming plates of spaghetti, the one in front of the Teamsters President nearly a foot tall, a tomato sauce volcano with meatballs cascading down the sides. I started laughing and said: "Jackie, how can you handle this without splattering that beautiful Brioni tie?" He laughed, unbuttoned his shirt and tucked his tie inside. Around the table, every Teamster unbuttoned his



The opening page of Frank's story in Police magazine on Teamsters organizing police

shirt, tucked his tie in and put the napkin on top. So did I.

Years later, while enjoying cheeseburgers with Forbes colleagues, I repeated the defensive move. John Merwin was reminded of "The Williams Shift"—the strategic baseball innovation which shifted six fielders to one side of the diamond in an attempt to stymie the great Boston Red Sox pull hitter Ted Williams. Merwin dubbed my action: "The Presser Shift."

My extensive story, including a sidebar about Presser's weight, was tough, but fair and accurate in a magazine that had President Reagan's attention. So, after the 1985 inauguration, I was invited to a fancy Teamsters board reception attended by Vice President George Bush. Presser was always cordial but liked to project that implicit fear the Teamsters made so famous.

The buffet was a lavish array of food

stations featuring the food of nations. Chatting with Presser, as he cruised the buffet like a Circle Liner going around Manhattan, Jackie said: "You know, I had a private eye following you around the country." To this day, I have no idea whether that was true.

During that lunch in the President's dining room, I had asked Presser whether he was a government informant, an annoying rumor he had denied. What was true, we all learned in a court filing in 1989, was that Jackie was pretending. Presser, while perhaps a onetime Mafia associate, became an FBI stool pigeon in the investigation that sent his predecessor to prison.

Allan Dodds Frank is a member of the Board of Governors of the Silurians Press Club and a former president.