

In Search of the

FINDERS

For one week last year a group called the Finders was the talk of the nation when Tallahassee police arrested two well-dressed members traveling with six dirty kids.

The secretive group has faded away again, but a few questions haven't. How did they become page-one news? Why did the state drag the case out for weeks? And who are the Finders, anyway?

BY JON COHEN

Until February of 1987, the Finders were invisible to all but a few friends, relatives, neighbors, police, and intelligence buffs. The Finders liked it like that. Even those familiar with the group of twenty adults and six children had different notions of what the members were up to. The Finders liked that, too. The more disparate the images, the more invisible the group became. It's camouflage theory: If your foe can't discern your edges, you make a poor target.

Friends of the Finders described them as Sixties throwbacks who lived communally, embraced Eastern philosophies, played elaborate games using the globe as their board, and reared their children creatively. Relatives branded them a cult and charged that they were pawns of their leader, Marion Pettie, a.k.a. the Game Caller, the Student, the Stroller. Police followed leads alleging that the group was satanic and used the children in rituals. Intelligence buffs believed the technology-savvy bunch was made up of spooks. Neighbors of Finders' homes in Washington, D.C. and rural Virginia tagged them as plain weird: How else to explain perpetually shuttered windows, a roof-top hot tub, and adults outfitted in dress clothes ambling outdoors with buck naked kids who didn't go to school? These images ran in concentric circles, like planets around the sun. Then on Wednesday, February 4, 1987, the planets began to collide.

Shortly before five o'clock that afternoon, a woman who lived next to Myers Park in Tallahassee called police to report an odd sight: a man dressed in a coat and tie playing in the park with six unkempt children. When two patrol cars arrived at the park, the officers found two well-dressed men and six kids alongside a foul-smelling, blue Dodge van with Virginia plates. The kids, between the ages of two and seven, were bug-bitten, had scratches on their legs, and were wearing dirty clothes.

One officer interviewed the men, Michael Holwell, 23, and Douglas Ammerman, 27. The other questioned the children. Had Holwell and Ammerman told the police they were from a Washington-based communal group, had they explained they were on a camping trip, had they reached into the glove compartment and handed over the letters of consent from the children's mothers, had they not acted so evasive and weird, they might well have been thanked for their time and left alone. But there are too many what-ifs in the Finders saga, too many chapters that could have been the last one.

Instead what happened is this: Holwell and Ammerman were arrested on misdemeanor child-abuse charges. Within a day, the national news rocket took off, fueled with the worst kind of off-the-record innuendo, misleading court documents, and wide-eyed pronouncements from officials working the case. If you believed the reports, Holwell and Ammerman were satanic cultists who swiped children from their parents, sexually abused them, and peddled kiddie porn around the globe.

The *Miami Herald* and *Washington Post* ran page-one stories three days in a row; one

article in the *Herald* quoted the parents of Finders wondering if the group was going to commit mass suicide, à la Jonestown. The staid *New York Times* reported that "some have described [the Finders] as a bizarre cult of devil worshippers." Everyone got in on the act. There were stories broadcast by Connie Chung, Larry King, CNN, even the BBC.

The Law pulled out all stops, too. The Tallahassee police hooked up with the FBI, the U.S. Customs Service, Interpol, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and police in Washington, Virginia, San Francisco, and New York.

Holwell and Ammerman sat in Tallahassee's Leon County Jail and the state held the children in protective custody. Meanwhile, police raided Finders' homes in Washington and Virginia, investigating everything from the men's sexual habits to their finances. The only trouble was, they hadn't broken any laws. After six weeks in jail, the charges against the men were dropped. And though the state kept some of the children from their mothers for months, eventually all of them were returned.

Nearly two years later, the Finders have quietly gone back to their own business. But some questions have yet to fade. How did the case get so whacked out of proportion? Why did it continue, week after week? And who are the Finders, anyway?

The Tallahassee Police Department responded to my Freedom of Information Act request by turning over most of their Finders files. Their cooperation was remarkable. The Washington Metropolitan Police Department, on the other hand, which searched two Finders' dwellings there, refused to answer any questions for this article. "We were not the lead agency," explained spokesman Sgt. Joe Gentile. Washington police also denied my Freedom of Information Act request and appeals, claiming that this case was a juvenile matter and therefore off limits.

Officer Judy Suchocki, one of the arresting officers, guides her patrol car between stands of oaks to a patch of dirt at Tallahassee's Myers Park. As her headlights illuminate webs of Spanish moss hanging from the trees, she tells the story of the arrest. Suchocki had responded to a Code 13P, suspicious persons, and arrived as the back-up to the first officer on the scene, Tony Mashburn. Mashburn questioned Holwell and Ammerman; Suchocki interviewed the four boys and two girls in the Dodge van.

"They were scared of us, which is not unusual for kids," recalls Suchocki. "My first impression was that they were dirty, but I would not say that they were unusually dirty for kids," she says. "The van smelled like urine and there were blankets all over the back. They definitely were sleeping in the van. I asked the kids where they were from, why they were here, where they were going. Mary was the one who was talking. She was real talkative."

Seven-year-old Mary said they were from Washington and she recited their phone

did a fake faint," says Suchocki. "I've seen it several times. Women are real good at doing it. Usually when a person really faints, you don't bend the knees. This guy did a Scarlett O'Hara thing. I checked him. I looked at his eyes to make sure he wasn't diabetic or something. I said, 'Get up. I know you're faking this mess.' And he wouldn't get up.... It was like a child playing, like when you go in to check if they're asleep at night."

A few teenagers hanging out in the park noticed the commotion and fetched their home video camera to tape the arrest. Holwell was hoisted by his limbs, put in a patrol car with Ammerman, and driven to the station. Suchocki drove the kids over in the van.

Ammerman, who had a valid driver's license, was booked under his name and also under an alias, Kenny Rogers. Holwell had no ID and was booked as John Doe, with the aliases Michael James Houlihan and James Michael Holwell.

"The children were extremely hungry when they got to the police department," officer Mashburn wrote in his three-page report. "The children appeared as if they hadn't bathed in several days and most of them didn't have on any underwear.... The children's clothing were extremely filthy and they had on mismatched socks."

Investigator Cheryl Weigand, of the sex crimes and juvenile unit, read Holwell and Ammerman their rights in a holding cell and attempted to interview them. Instead of answering Weigand's questions, Ammerman asked about the charges while Holwell lay on the cell's floor with his eyes shut tight, jerking his body. "Holwell was doing the frog," remembers Weigand, who was appointed the case's lead investigator. "If they had said who they were, given us a number where we could have contacted the mothers, I'm not saying the situation wouldn't have concerned us — it might still have been a little hard for us to understand — but it would have lifted a large cloud. We had six children, and we didn't know who their mothers were."

Weigand ushered the kids through the second of the many interviews they would endure. Mary said the Game Caller's name was Marion Pettie. She said he forbade the children from entering the Washington, D.C. house and that he lived on the roof. While on the road, she explained, they wrote to Pettie on a modem-equipped computer — a TRS-80 laptop — and then he would tell them what to do.

I don't understand, Investigator Weigand said.

Mary told her they were "different."

continued on page 8

FINDERS

continued from page 7

Different indeed. One of the boys peed on the rug in Weigand's office. Other kids soiled their pants. Six-year-old Max Livingston, she noted, had a poor understanding of time. He didn't seem to recognize a stapler, a typewriter, and other common office objects. Weigand led the kids back to the van to get some food, and one of the two-year-olds ate eight bananas and a carrot. "These children were not properly taken care of," says Weigand, who hails from New York. "Being a police officer is very much a learned behavior. You see one incident and say, 'What if?' We see hundreds and hundreds and we learn what is reasonable for a parent to do and what is not reasonable."

Weigand spoke with one of the girls about sexual abuse. "She became very evasive," Weigand wrote in her report. "She denied any 'bad touches,' or any inappropriate behavior by the adults. [She] became very fidgety, and wanted to end the interview."

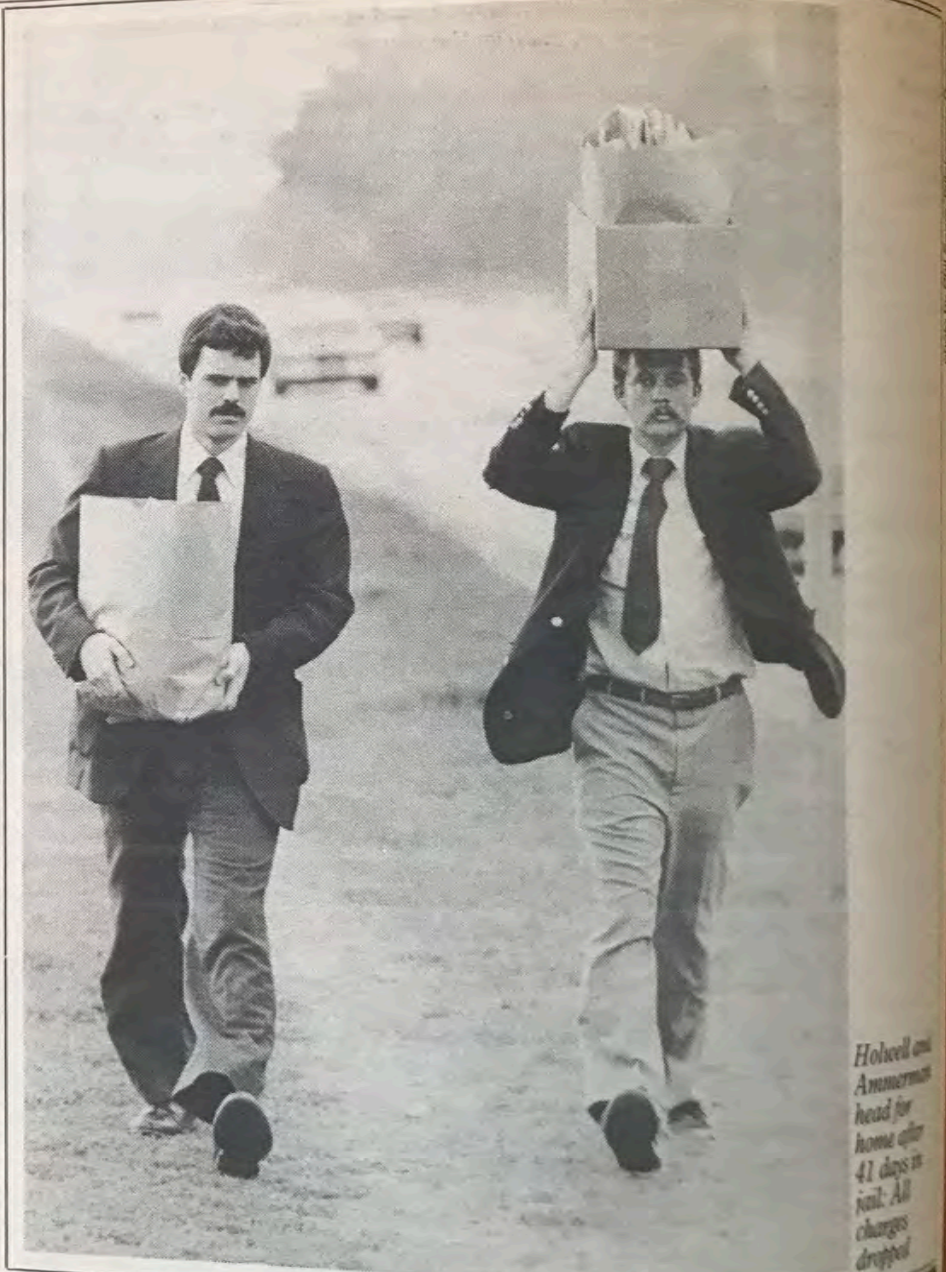
Later two of the kids described a game in which they ripped off an adult's clothes. Apparently the kids only tore off a man's jacket and then rummaged through his pockets for change. They told Weigand about another game in which women walked around naked. "Both children felt that this was very funny," wrote Weigand, "and went along with the concept of it being a game."

The police fingerprinted the children and took their mug shots after agents from the department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) arrived to place the kids in protective custody. Investigator Weigand phoned the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department and explained the situation, giving them the phone number and address Mary had memorized. Washington police reported back to Weigand, saying they had reached an answering machine with a "weird" message on it, some kind of biblical passage. Washington said it was going to send a cruiser by the house. Tallahassee didn't hear back until the next day.

As Finders travel the country and the world, they communicate with fellow members via electronic mailboxes, such as MCI Mail. No matter where they are they can receive or transmit a message with a Touch Tone phone, a computer, a modem, and the mailbox password.

The day after Tallahassee police arrested Ammerman and Holwell, a Finder named SS (Stuart Silverstone — they typically use their initials when corresponding) sent a "priority" report to BM (Bob Meyer). "The sequence of events started here when I returned to W St [the Washington home] last night around 10pm to a waiting Metropolitan Police Officer Smith of the 2nd District HQ," SS's report reads. Officer Smith told SS that three kids were found in Tallahassee living in a van and that police thought one of the mothers lived at this address. "The ofcr asked my name, which I gave, + whether this was a school, No, and that was about it," wrote SS. "I offered to make some calls to try + locate the mother."

SS checked the answering machine and listened to a message left by the Washington police. A few minutes later the phone rang. It was an official from Florida's HRS explaining that they had six kids and that the juvenile court would be holding a custody hearing the next morning. "He asked me if I knew where the mothers were, + I said I



Holwell and Ammerman head for home after 41 days in jail. All charges dropped

SALE

SUPER

would try to find out. He asked if this was a school, + I said No, it was a private residence. He would not tell me more, such as the names of the men being held + charges."

On Thursday, the day after the arrest, the juvenile court granted HRS temporary custody of the children. The criminal court set bond of \$100,000 each for the misdemeanor child-abuse charges leveled against Ammerman and Holwell. SS called Investigator Weigand, using the name Steve Learner, and told her he was trying to help put the mothers in touch with her. Weigand explained the particulars of the case. Would the mothers get their kids if they showed up? he asked. Not necessarily, Weigand said.

"It was a very routine sort of investigation," says Officer Scott Hunt, who was the Tallahassee Police Department spokesman at the time. Hunt phoned the press Wednesday night and briefed them, but on Thursday the only mention of the arrest was

Police followed leads alleging that the group was satanic and used the children in rituals. Intelligence buffs believed the technology-savvy bunch was made up of spooks. Neighbors tagged them as plain weird.

in a small story in the local paper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*. "Child-abuse cases were not that unusual," says Hunt.

That changed before the close of Thursday, when Washington police realized Ammerman and Holwell were members of the Finders. "Their [Washington police] response was, 'Holy shit! We've been looking at these freaks,'" says Hunt.

Tallahassee investigator Cheryl Weigand spoke to Det. Jim Bradley of the Washington Metropolitan Police intelligence unit that day. In her report she wrote, "He asked this investigator if I thought there was a possibility there may be more children at either of the locations [the house near Georgetown the women and children resided in or a warehouse that the men called home]. This investigator stated that may be true, but I did not have any specific child that I knew of there. He stated that he was going to get search warrants on both locations, and try to serve them later this date."

Detective Bradley filed an affidavit for the search warrants at the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on Thursday afternoon, explaining that he was looking for evidence of kidnapping, a federal crime, or any related offenses described in the affidavit. "Prior to February 5th, 1987 your affiant, Detective James E. Bradley, Jr. received information from a confidential source of information," wrote Bradley. "This source stated that a group of subjects calling themselves the Finders, a cult, were conducting 'brainwashing' techniques at the above described two locations in Dist of Columbia. The source stated that members of the 'cult' attempted on numerous occasions [sic] to introduce it into the 'cult' by promising financial rewards and sexual gratification. The source stated that children are used in 'rituals' by the members of the 'cult'. The source stated that it never personally observed the children being abused but that it had had conversations with grandparents of the children who feared for the safety of the children. The source further stated that during the latter part of December 1986 it personally had

conversations with one of the 'cult' members, identified as Allen Schoen, wanted it to 'explore' Satanism with members of the 'cult.'" Judge Jean Dwyer approved the warrants shortly after 4:00 p.m.

Bradley's affidavit became the fount of much of the sensational reporting that followed. Ex-Finder Paula Arico, mother of Mary and John Paul Pope and formerly Holwell's wife, says Bradley's "confidential source" is a woman who had a brief affair with a group member. Two independent sources confirmed this. In the affidavit, Bradley summarized what he had learned from Tallahassee police and wrote, "Lastly, the source in this investigation told your affiant that the information concerning this 'cult' is kept in computers stored at the addresses listed in this affidavit."

In what appears to be an addendum, Bradley added this zinger in slightly larger type. "On December 15, 1986 Detective Bradley responded to the area...in the rear of the 3900 Block of W Street, N.W. Det. Bradley observed a clearing approximately seventy yards behind the house and several stumps surrounding the open area. Several round stones had been gathered near the circle, this practice is sometimes used in Satanic rituals, and evidence that several persons had gathered in the clearing recently. The rear of the residence is covered from the alley by heavy bamboo growth, save a small entrance to the rear yard. In the rear yard [sic] was a small very ornate gravestone propped up against the support pillar for the porch." (Like other members of Washington's Metropolitan Police, Detective Bradley did not return phone calls and did not reply to a written request for an interview.)

To a school of journalists circling a story, an affidavit like this one — packed with sex, child abuse, the occult, and cultism — is fresh blood. Affidavits are court documents, and journalists can quote from them without fearing a libel suit. Whether the police have their facts straight doesn't matter. An affidavit tells a journalist what the police think they know.

If that wasn't enough to chum the waters, sexual abuse got tossed in. An HRS caseworker told Investigator Weigand and at least one other Tallahassee officer that two of the children were "confirmed cases of sexual abuse," even though the physician who conducted sexual exams on the children for HRS had *not* confirmed sexual abuse. The doctor's dictation, transcribed the day after the exam, cautiously describes possible sexual abuse of one boy and one girl. "This is a distinctly abnormal hymenal pattern compatible with either digital or attempted penile penetration," he said of the girl. "The absence of superficial [sic] abrasions revealed by toluidine [sic] blue would argue against any recent trauma (in the last 3-5 days)." Of the boy, he stated, "This degree of anal sphincter laxity should prompt questioning in the area of anal digital penetration or sodomy, although it is not diagnostic of either."

On Friday Weigand, another Tallahassee investigator, and an FBI agent tried to interview the men at Leon County Jail, where they were kept in isolation. To the investigators' surprise, when they arrived at the jail they bumped into Doug Ammerman's brother, David, who told the officers Doug had visited their parents in Gainesville a few weeks before the arrest with a boy he claimed was his. Doug Ammerman had told his parents he was heading for Miami.

Though David said he hadn't seen his brother in three or four years, he had written

continued on page 10

FINDERS

continued from page 9

Doug a letter the year before. David showed the investigators the reply. It wasn't from Doug. It was from Stuart Silverstone — SS — and printed on the letterhead of Gung-Ho Traders, with the address of the Finders' warehouse in Washington. Silverstone's letter said Doug had left for China with a Dr. Gung-Ho just before the postman delivered David's letter. David Ammerman also showed investigators a letter addressed to their mother signed by "The Three Wives of Gung Ho." The letter reads, "This is to testify that your son Douglas, aka Earnest Angel, I Betterson, Danny Proper, Kenny Rogers is a true master of the art of fucking. The shape of his cock is unique and he is truly an artist at using it to give us the most pleasure. The depth! The width! The heights! No other man touches us in this way.

"His hands have magic as they stroke our slender limbs and moist pussies. Words cannot describe the tender passion that Douglas brings to our orgiastic pleasures....

"Oh Mrs. Ammerman, we cannot thank you enough for having raised such a great stud. Just think, if he had never left home, we'd never have known the ecstasy of his throbbing passion."

Doug Ammerman refused to speak with the investigators or his visiting brother. Holwell, however, offered some "basic information" and asked about the children. Had

The Miami Herald and Washington Post ran page-one stories three days in a row; the staid New York Times reported that "some have described [the Finders] as a bizarre cult of devil worshipers." Everyone got in on the act: Connie Chung, Larry King, CNN, even the BBC.

they been seen by a doctor? Was anything found? Where were they? The investigators told him the kids were in protective custody and not in need of immediate medical attention.

Friday was also the day that two other events took place: reporters in Washington got their hands on the affidavit, just in time to photograph and videotape the raid of the Finders' warehouse; and at a press conference in Tallahassee, Scott Hunt revealed that "physical examinations showed sexual abuse to one of the children."

In the searches of the Finders' two Washington addresses, police recovered computers, data disks, software, diaries, and other personal papers. Police also seized photos they said showed children taking part in animal bloodletting ceremonies. One photo supposedly showed a child in chains.

If you missed it on TV, there it was on page one of the Saturday *Herald*, above the fold. The Tallahassee police mug shots of the children were on the jump page. "Children's plight linked to D.C. Cult," the story was headlined. "Customs officials said they were looking into whether a child pornography operation was being conducted," the article



Tallahassee cops Jo Ann Van Meter and Scott Hunt: Up to their badges in media

said. Adding to the intrigue, the article stated that photos of naked children were "found through a bag as it was carried from the warehouse" during the raid. "It is our belief these kids were not kidnapped but that their parents gave them away," Officer Scott Hunt told the *Herald*, "because one of the rites of passage into this satanic organization is that you have to give up your rights to your children, and that the leaders of this organization can do what they want to with your children."

In the *Tallahassee Democrat's* page-one story, Hunt was quoted as saying, "As far as we're concerned, this goes from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico...."

This
Location
Only

MATTRESS CITY
DISCOUNT SLEEP SHOPS

This
Location

no doubt in our mind that this will have at least national, if not international, repercussions."

The FBI had joined the case to look into the "transportation of children across state lines for immoral purposes or kidnapping." U.S. Customs was contributing its satanism and pornography expertise. Interpol was investigating a tip about Holwell.

The Tallahassee Police Department was awash in the media flood. "I had 75 reporters waiting for me in the lobby," Hunt recalls. "We logged 450 telephone calls to me in two days. They were bringing in overtime people to help take messages." Hundreds of calls were from parents claiming the children. Canvassing the nation for the kids' parents were the National Center for Exploited Children, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Child Find, Children's Clearing House, the National Child Safety Council, and the National Association of Missing Children. Aside from a bomb threat phoned to the house holding the kids, they were physically safe as could be.

Saturday night, three days after the arrest, the Finders went public with their story. R. Gardner Terrell, a CPA formerly with the Internal Revenue Service, sent a memo to Tallahassee and Washington police, the FBI, HRS, the juvenile court judge, Dan Rather, and the *Washington Post*. With a stab at wit and humor, the Finders' trademark, Terrell headed the memo, *SUBJECT: Investigative Leads*. "This memo is respectfully offered in the hope that it will clear up some misunderstanding concerning the current 'missing children' case receiving so much media coverage," he wrote. Terrell explained that in early January, Ammerman, a landscape gardener, and Stanley Berns, an architect, had taken the seven children to Berea, Kentucky, to help the Rev. Jim Wyker build a retirement community called New Hope. Terrell gave the name and phone number of a Berea couple who helped care for the kids during their visit, and said the plan

To a school of journalists circling a story, an affidavit like this one — packed with sex, child abuse, the occult, and cultism — is fresh blood. Whether the police have their facts straight doesn't matter.

had been to enroll them in the couple's Montessori school while the community was being built.

Because the Reverend Wyker was not ready to break ground for New Hope, wrote Terrell, "the men took the children on a vacation/camping trip to the warmer climate of Florida with the full applause and approval of the children's mothers." Terrell wrote that he drove to Florida with Holwell, computer programmers Christian Herbst and Thomas R. Van Deusen, and Robert M. Meyer. (Herbst, noted Terrell, has a Harvard M.A., while Meyer "is a Princeton and Oxford M.A.") "When we were satisfied that the six children [were] safely in the hands of five capable adults, Mr. Meyer and I left Florida." On the day of the arrest, Holwell and Ammerman took the kids to the park while the three other men looked for "accommodations."

"The mothers had fully authorized these men, in writing, to care for their children and expressed full confidence in them," wrote Terrell, referring to the authorization letters in

the van's glove compartment. "All of the mothers are now in San Francisco working in business offices, earning money to help pay for 'New Hope.'"

Terrell, who claimed he owned the raided home and warehouse in Washington, closed by saying he considered the arrests and raids "mistakes." Not violations of civil liberties. Not a humiliating pain in the ass. Not a wholly unnecessary bureaucratic fuck-up. Mistakes, that's all. His memo included his phone number and an offer to help in any way he could.

Reporters and police never poked a hole in Terrell's even-toned and cordial letter. From Berea, Kentucky, the Rev. Jim Wyker confirmed that the men and children had stayed with him for a week in January. The 86-year-old retired nondenominational minister was a rock-solid source. He told the *Louisville Courier-Journal* he met the Finders at a "meeting of commune proponents" a few years before. That past November, he told them about his New Hope plans, and January 9 they popped in to help. "The only thing we discussed was the land and the building and children's center," he said. "I'm not trying to uphold the folks from Washington. I don't know them. All I know is what I saw." Wyker also spoke with the *Miami Herald*, saying, "The kids had lots of clothes and lots of food and they were wonderful, healthy and vigorous. They weren't dominated. They weren't reticent, but they weren't aggressive, either."

The report of three other men jibed with tips police had gotten about a white van traveling with the blue van. Several state police had even been put on the lookout for the white van.

On Sunday, a college student and part-time Tallahassee Police Department employee brought to police a TRS-80 computer he had found. (One police source told me the student brought the computer in on Thursday, but that the police wanted to explore its files for a few days.) Files on the computer included a report from the three men Terrell mentioned in his memo: Herbst, Van Deusen, and Meyer. This trio had left Holwell and Ammerman at ten Wednesday morning. "They were dressed in suits and ties, the van had been cleaned up, and the kids had been dressed in clean clothes, they had a large amount of produce with them, and the kids had a breakfast buffet before they left," the confiscated report reads. Holwell and Ammerman were supposed to link up with the men via their electronic mailbox. Until they read SS's report the next morning, the three men had no idea where Holwell and Ammerman had gone. SS's report didn't send them into a panic, though. One spent the day earning a few dollars helping "a cripple," while the other two researched an article about desktop publishing at the FSU library.

Other files in the TRS-80 included a report from a member working in Hong Kong and a short note from MDP, Marion D. Pettie, to the "Kids Game." Dated five o'clock Tuesday morning, it reads, "If authoritarians approach again, say that you are on the way to Mexico to start a school and that you are authorized by the mothers to do this."

"It feels like a hostile act when kids are found not to be in school. If they ask tell about their degrees, plus a few that they don't have. Announce that you are going to call the school: 'Harvard University for Bright Kids.'"

The Sunday *Miami Herald* ran two Finders stories on page one: "Cult children receive threats" and "Parents of two members fear group will repeat Jonestown tragedy." There was yet another story inside: "Farmhouses in Virginia yield few clues about the group."

continued on page 12



CLEAN UP ON A

FINDERS

continued from page 11

"Residents of this small farming town said their memories of the Finders commune included crying children and men dressed in dark clothing," reported the *Herald* from Etlan, Virginia.

Sunday's *Washington Post* also ran two page-one stories on the Finders, one headlined "Cult Member Defends 2 Men in Child Abuse Case." "We are all in a state right now where we are afraid. We've been made almost dysfunctional by the reports," Terrell told the *Post* in what the paper called a lengthy telephone interview. (The *Herald* reprinted portions of this interview the next day.) Terrell described the "bloodletting ritual" as the slaughter of two goats kept on a farm in Virginia. The goats had been killed for food, he said, and the kids had watched the slaughter as an educational experience.

The conversation with Terrell came shortly after police raided five Finders' properties in Etlan and Nethers, Virginia. Again, the *Post* and the *Herald* satisfied their readers' longing to peer behind the curtain — no matter what might be there. "The door of one cabin was open yesterday, revealing large amounts of food, clothing, sleeping bags, books and pamphlets from groups such as the World Future Society," the *Post* revealed. "A plastic bag containing hundreds of neckties and several pairs of panty hose were on the floor, along with boxes of diapers." The *Herald* story breathlessly reported, "While the wooden cabin was bare, the cinder-block cabin was littered with maps, clothing and books, mostly on history and philosophy."

The *Post* coverage included juicy tidbits in one of its stories. According to a U.S.

The Tallahassee Police Department was awash in the media flood. "I had 75 reporters waiting for me in the lobby," Hunt recalls. "We logged 450 telephone calls to me in two days. They were bringing in overtime people to help take messages."

Customs spokesman, agents who saw photos seized in the raids said some of them appeared to involve sex between adults and kids. This appeared balanced with a Washington police source calling the pictures "no more pornographic than what you find in your average home." Later in the story, a police source confided that the raids didn't turn up "anything anywhere."

"We had two separate investigations going on — ours and the media's," recalls Tallahassee police Lt. Jo Ann Van Meter, who supervised the beginning of the investigation.

"I never expected the media attention I got," says Tallahassee police spokesman Hunt. "Never. That's the problem you have with multiple jurisdictions. The media was playing off all of us and making it a bigger story."

On Monday, Day 6 of the Finders Crisis, Washington Metropolitan Police began to



Finders mother Paula Arico in Florida with Mary, John Paul, and a dilemma

slink away from the case. The day before, Washington detectives Jim Bradley and Eric Witzig had interrogated the kids in Tallahassee. Bradley, who had requested the search warrants in Washington, said his visit to Tallahassee was prompted by accounts of the Georgetown-area house's basement. Exactly what he was looking for in Tallahassee there may have been a hole dug in the walls or the floor of the basement, for unknown reasons." Judging from the Tallahassee reports, the detectives' trip to Florida was a waste. They didn't learn much more than that Mary could count to ten in Chinese.

"The chief in D.C. sent up a hue and a cry in the beginning," says Tallahassee's Lieutenant Van Meter, "and then when his guys didn't come up with anything, he backed away. By Monday, Washington's out of this, they're shutting down. We're getting calls from the chief in D.C. telling our chief, 'We don't have anything. Bye.'" Monday was also the day Tallahassee got first wind of Marion Pettie's whereabouts.

Lt. Lee Hart of the Culpeper (Virginia) Police Department informed Tallahassee that he had a contact with the Finders. Hart said this contact told him Pettie put out the word

for members to flee and hide, and Pettie would probably go to Andrews Air Force Base and catch a military plane flight to China. This was plausible: Pettie, a retired Air Force master sergeant, had the right to free, stand-by military transport.

Monday also saw a visit to the Washington field office of the FBI by one of the Finders mothers and the three men from the white van. An FBI report of the interviews gives the impression that Christian Herbst, Thomas Van Deusen, and Robert Meyer had remained calm until they read the newspaper accounts on Friday morning, February 6. "They realized they were being portrayed as child abusers and satanists. Frightened, the three decided to return to WDC and figure out what to do."

Another Finders mother called the Tallahassee police Monday and asked whether the mothers would be arrested if they came to claim their kids. "We couldn't give the mothers the guarantee that they wouldn't be arrested," says Lieutenant Van Meter. The mother agreed to call back the next day.

Two more mothers visited the FBI in Washington on Tuesday. "Everyone interviewed states child abuse and child sexual exploitation is not a part of their beliefs and sex with children is morally reprehensible," the FBI report states. "All have complete confidence in the ability of any of their group to care for the children.... They do not in any way, shape or form practice 'satanism,' and all are eager for the return of their children. Everyone interviewed agreed to be polygraphed by the FBI should the need arise." Two more mothers were to be interviewed the next day, the report explains, and after that the mothers were planning to head to Tallahassee. "[We] have not uncovered any

indication of violation of a federal statute," the report concludes.

"We had pretty much tied up the case," Investigator Weigand says.

By Tuesday the Finders story wasn't holding well. The *Herald's* article, pushed back to page twelve of the first section, was headlined, "State can't prove sex abuse of kids, agency head says." The *Washington Post* also buried its coverage deeper into the paper, with a story titled, "D.C. Police: Finders Odd, Not Criminal."

That night Terrell invited reporters into the Finders' warehouse for an interview. Sitting with his back to the cameras, a Ronald Reagan mask covering the hind part of his head, he explained that the mothers hadn't come forward because they were waiting out the storm. Terrell also told reporters that he was "playing the role of Ghingiz K. Plato."

Tallahassee police spokesman Hunt was flabbergasted. "Why are we doing this jousting in the media? I believe Mr. Terrell could go a long way in clearing this case if he produces the mothers of these children as he says he can," he told the *Tallahassee Democrat* on Tuesday.

"Up till that point, people said the ol' police department did some pretty dumb things," recalls Investigator Rick Huffman, who inherited the case from Weigand when she left for vacation. "Then there's this clown on TV saying all these stupid things. People started saying that's too stupid to be any kind of a cult. In Tallahassee, it turned out that this whole thing was being perceived as a joke."

Though Weigand believed the case was wrapped up Tuesday, she still wondered why
continued on page 14

Law Offices of **ALBERT Z. LEVIN**

- Criminal - State-Federal
- Personal Injury
- DUI - Traffic

No Consultation Fee

446-3880
24 Hours

**Do You Want
To Save Money
On Your Long
Distance Bill?**

Then Turn The Page...



easy sailing

WE MAKE SAILING A BREEZE.

- Boat Charters 19-127 ft.
(Power or Sail)
- Private & Group Lessons
- Moonlight Sails
- Scuba Divina & Certification

FINDERS

continued from page 13

the mothers had not hightailed it down to Tallahassee the day they learned of the arrest. "Seems to me that people who have never done anything wrong have nothing to fear," says Weigand. "What were they hiding? If it were me, I'd blindly go get my child." Sex, confusion, small-mindedness, fear, the press, and the enigmatic Finders kept jolting the Finders case back to life. HRS recruited Chicago psychologist Nahman Greenberg to tackle the question of sexual abuse. Known for his sex-abuse work in the Manhattan Beach, California preschool case, Greenberg held a series of interviews with the kids. His conclusion: the evidence was inconclusive.

The tangle of law-enforcement outfits working the case continued to confuse everyone. "A couple of officers in D.C. used our arrest [in Florida] as an excuse to go into the warehouse," says a Tallahassee officer who asked for anonymity. "They were obsessed with this group and wanted access."

Investigator Huffman is the only Tallahassee officer who squarely discussed with me problems in his own department. He says the arresting officers did right. "You really have to commend them. It's easier to cut someone loose than to get involved." But he says, "If you get down to the bottom line, people have the right to remain silent." A sociology major in college, Huffman says he compared the Finders to the Amish — different, not bad. Yet he cautions, "They do have their immaturities."

"Our chief of police wasn't here," Huffman recalls. "He's very progressive and has the ability to think in new ways. But I had to deal with the deputy chief. He had already written the group off. There was a meeting with the FBI, HRS, state's attorney, guardian ad litem [a legal advocate for the kids] — everybody. I had only said one thing: 'Let's be objective.'"

"He let out a sigh I can still remember. He said, directed at me, something to the effect of, 'If it swims like a duck, quacks like a duck, and looks like a duck, what the hell more do you need?' Obviously, these men should be sent down the river." Huffman says the deputy chief meant well, "but he had a very narrow view."

Separate Florida agencies were battling over what to do with the case, too. "It became a political ball that bounced from one agency to the next," says Lieutenant Van Meter. "HRS and the state's attorney didn't want to let go of it. They kept insisting there was more to it. We got really embarrassed. It got to be a real circus."

Willie Meggs, the state attorney, handled both the adult and juvenile cases. "Willie gets up every morning and takes his righteous-indignation pill," says Van Meter. "He's very religious, very conservative. To him these people were heretics. He's the kind of guy who has 'mom' tattooed on one arm and 'apple pie' on the other. To him they were living wrong and living bad. The HRS caseworker came off like that, too."

Sherry Walker, the assistant state's attorney first assigned to the juvenile case, stepped down because she believed her office was "projecting our own morals on this group." Walker, who has since been elected to the state senate, doesn't badmouth Willie Meggs. She thinks he was doing his job as an elected official. "Tallahassee is very conservative. Anything not Southern Baptist is fearful to people. In this conservative environment, it looked like the mothers were unfit. We believe that kids should get three meals, clean clothes, and be put to bed at a decent hour. In this area, women are the primary caretakers. Mr. Meggs was elected by this same conservative group," Walker says. Meggs did have "very deep feelings" about this case, Walker allows. "When you have such deep feelings about what you think is right and wrong, it does slow things up. A legal decision is not the same as a moral decision."

Willie Meggs, who displays a Holy Bible in his office, says he thinks the case went on so long because Holwell and Ammerman refused to cooperate. "The defendants acted like horse's tails," he says. "They were all secretive. If blame has to be placed anywhere, it ought to be placed on these people." Meggs says his office wanted to be "absolutely sure" of the kids' safety. "We weren't just willing to let them go to these women who claimed to be their mothers."

Meggs's office repeatedly offered plea bargains in the Holwell and Ammerman cases. "We didn't have anything," Meggs says, pointblank. "When it all boiled down, when you get down to the final analysis, I just wanted them to get out of Dodge." Even so, Meggs stands by his office's actions. "We all have a soft spot for kids," he says. "I certainly hope that the citizenry would want us to get to the bottom of a case like this. The only thing I wish is that we could have done our investigation without the press."

Nearly everyone who tangoed with the Finders affair slagged the media — including the media — and blamed them for protracting the cases. Some attacks were, of course, "kill the messenger." Others whipped reporters for all the right reasons. Some were more introspective complaints. Others lamented the constraints of late-twentieth-century journalism, where it's the McMedium, not the message. "This became a big story because the press made it a big deal," Scott Hunt says. Hunt, who took flak for announcing sexual abuse and satanism in the case, is red in the face now. "How do you think I got this information? By osmosis? Somebody told me."

Rick Huffman doesn't let Hunt or others in his department off so easily. Part of the problem, he says, is that the Tallahassee Police Department wasn't accustomed to national attention. "We had Connie Chung call us up," he remembers. "Our old PIO [public information officer — Hunt] is flapping his gills all over the department." According to Huffman, Hunt said, "This is it, folks! This is my day! Connie Chung is going to interview me."

Huffman, who didn't give any interviews once he took over the case, says publicity meant power-money-promotion to some on the staff. Others, he says, like Hunt, had purer motives. "They were like, 'Wow, we may be the impetus to bring down pedophilia all over the world. We're the snowball at the top of the mountain. Maybe we can do some good.'" But Huffman didn't believe this was a credible case. "They had no experience dealing with a case of this sensitivity," Huffman says. "They were passing along circumstantial evidence to the media."

Tallahassee Democrat reporter Jan Pudlow, who did some of the best reporting on the group and stuck with it long after the pack had gone home, says the Finders have to shoulder some of the blame for the media's goofs. "If you're looking at the media's responsibility to capture the truth about these people, I've got to admit I've got a little bit of bitterness lingering, because these people did not make it easy for reporters to tell the truth about them," says Pudlow. "You know what they [the Finders] call wit and humor? It was part of their wit and humor. The wit is being deceitful and downright lying, and what they call humor isn't real funny."

"I've been in the business about ten years and I realize that when you interview

somebody, everybody uses a little manipulation. We all know that. But I have never been so blatantly manipulated as by this group."

Pudlow, the first reporter to interview the mothers when they came to Tallahassee, says, "If the Finders told me today that they were coordinating the Second Coming of Christ and there was Jesus at their right hand, I still wouldn't want to get a quote from them."

RTGIAD: Ready to go in any direction. It's a salutation or a closing found on most every Finders report, and it's the essence of the group. If you aren't RTGIAD, you can't play the game calls. And with the Finders, everything is a game call. Dress, diet, work, play, travel, marriage, divorce, pregnancy, child rearing, pranks, investigations — even calling games can be a game call. Many people have suggested that the entire arrest was a game call. The point of all this fun and games? Every game call yields knowledge, which members bring to the Student, Marion Pettie, so he can call better and better games. It's hard to lead a game-playing life — in this society, at least — without raising eyebrows.

While the Florida fracas exposed the Finders to the highest degree of scrutiny, it was not the first time outsiders had tried to understand the group and its motives.

After Marion Pettie retired from the Air Force as a master sergeant in 1956, he returned to the Culpeper, Virginia area, his hometown. One of Pettie's sons told the *Washington Post* that during the Sixties his father spent his days at the library near Pettie Farm, the family's 90-acre property, and became "a student of the world." In the late Sixties and early Seventies, Pettie Farm was known for its free organic meals and philosophical pow-wows on the front porch. Pettie's son told the *Post* that his father began a new life around 1971, when he started a commune with his followers in the house near Georgetown.

Today members look much more yuppie than hippie, a turnaround that began in the early Eighties. Though they have changed with the times, they still don't blend in. They've turned heads in rural Culpeper, where they often show up at town meetings in business suits. John Davies, a Culpeper attorney who represented a former group member in a divorce proceeding five years ago, says they never say anything but always take notes. "From my perspective, they can have a significant impact on a community like

"Our old PIO [public information officer] is flapping his gills all over the department: This is it, folks! This is my day! Connie Chung is going to interview me."

Culpeper," says Davies. "I think part of their goal is taking control of the local government." As evidence, Davies says he knows of a stockbroker running for local office with whom they tried to invest \$25,000. And they're always researching townspeople.

The Finders have combed real estate titles to see who owns what and how much they owe, says Davies. He's also noticed Finders men walking down the street in coats and ties and making notes on every house they pass. Davies says he thinks there's an old-fashioned motivation behind their game playing: dollars. "Basically they're doing collectively what an individual investor would do," he says.

Several people have posited that the Finders gather information because they are spies. Daniel Brandt, who has put together a databank of intelligence citations he sells as spyBASE, says he first met two group members, Steve Usdin and Jeff Ubois, in the summer of 1984. "They approached me because they saw I was doing this database," says Brandt, who lives in Washington, D.C. "I had posted a note about it in an extremely obscure journal called *Reset*."

Usdin and Ubois claimed they represented an outfit called Information Bank, and they gave Brandt software in exchange for information. "They were very well informed about counterspying," says Brandt. He met with them several times over the next year, visiting their warehouse twice. "They kept pumping me for information and I got suspicious," Brandt recalls.

Brandt grew more suspicious when his friends told him odd tales about their dealings with the Information Bank. Realizing the depth of the Information Bank's knowledge of the political left, he sent out a three-page memo to progressive groups around Washington. Dated November 10, 1986, the memo is headed, "A Summary of What is Known About Some Very Strange People Who Use Computers and Seek Out Progressives so That They can ask a lot of Suspicious Questions." In addition to Information Bank, Brandt wrote, members said they were from Global Press Review, Hong Kong Business Today, and The Seekers. Members also approached Lou Wolf, a co-editor of *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, and he helped Brandt check them out. "There are several characteristics that lend themselves to the interpretation that this is an information-gathering front for a cult of some sort," Brandt wrote in his summary, noting that members may not be told the purpose behind their missions. "The guise of computer consulting is an ideal method of spying on the Left," he concluded. "It would take about twenty seconds to copy an entire mailing list from a hard disk onto a floppy."

"If it's a game, it's pretty bizarre," says Brandt, who hasn't heard from the group in a few years. "It seems like there must be some sort of impetus behind it." More than a year before the Tallahassee case, Rep. Robert Kastenmeier (D-Wisconsin) looked into the group at the behest of a constituent whose son had joined. Kastenmeier says he had a hunch that they were intelligence linked, but when he took it to the House Intelligence Committee, he couldn't get verification. Kastenmeier's office did learn that Pettie had a background in military intelligence.

According to FBI documents, Pettie worked in Air Force intelligence and sometimes bragged about his intelligence connections in later years. When the Finders story broke, one broadcast report noted that a police source claimed Pettie's deceased wife worked for the CIA. Larry Kahaner, a journalist and author of the book *Cults That Kill*, spoke with some of his many police and FBI sources about the Finders while researching his book. (The Finders are not mentioned in his book, nor does he classify them as a cult that kills.) He says he was told the Finders once did database training for the CIA. "I don't think you have to read anything deep and dark into this," says Kahaner. "The interesting part about the Finders is that they like to play games with law enforcement agencies. That's their shtick. As you'll notice in Tallahassee, they did indeed embarrass them. It may have been one of their games."

None of the Tallahassee police I spoke with knew anything about the Finders working for an intelligence operation. But they all had a similar response to Investigator Cheryl Weigand's: "Nothing they are involved with would surprise me."

continued on page 16

FINDERS

continued from page 15

Paula Arico nearly spits up her food laughing when I tell her people suggest the Finders may be spooks. Arico and I are eating at a restaurant in Tallahassee. She resettled here after the juvenile court finally deemed her fit to raise Mary and John Paul. "That's their model, to pretend they're CIA," says Arico, who was in the group for eight years and now works as a bookkeeper for a construction company. "Wouldn't it be an exciting life?"

This is one of the few times in our many talks that Arico has referred to the group as "they." Though she left the Finders more than a year ago, it's still "we this" and "we that." She also still speaks lovingly — no, adoringly — of Pettie. "The rest of us are just dead between the ears compared to him," she says.

Arico has a theory for why the Finders gather megabytes of information. "We want to be the best at everything, and you can't be the best in anything if you don't have information about what the best is," she says. "So getting your information-gathering skills together is the first thing you have to do."

"But why compile a giant Who's Who?" I ask.

"It's a mystery why things are of interest to Pettie, but he's not able to call complete games if he doesn't have complete information. You don't know what game Pettie has in mind to call tomorrow. He already has it in mind. He's got next year's game in mind, based on the information you're bringing him right now."

Talk like this sounds like slavish devotion, brainwashing, cult. But ultimately the labels are stupid. If any group defies a label, it's the Finders. They're constantly changing, reinventing themselves, drafting new "constitutions," setting new rules — RTGIAD.

A taste of Finders cosmology can be found in John Fowles's novel *The Magus*, in which Maurice Conchis (conscious — get it?) bedazzles the protagonist with a troupe of actors/consciousness-seekers playing the "godgame." As one of *The Magus*'s characters says, "In the godgame we start from the premise that in reality all is fiction, yet no single fiction is necessary."

Paula Arico has lived the godgame. "The best thing about it for me is that I lived and worked with my best friends for eight years," Arico says. "It's hard to have that, and in a situation where everyone was committed to working it out. If you've ever had that one-on-one relationship with another person where there's that long-term level of commitment, I had that with twenty people."

"You really trusted twenty people?" I ask.

"For the time that I did," she replies. "I got my eyes opened pretty quickly in about three weeks of February in 1987. But up until then, yeah, I had implicit trust, because we were all committed to Pettie's dream. His dream was our dream."

On the day of the Tallahassee arrest, Paula Arico was working temp jobs in San Francisco, sharing an apartment with a single mother not in the group. It was part of a "women's game" that had been underway since December of 1986, and Arico was having a blast. For a long time the women had wanted the men to do more child rearing, and it was finally happening. She was sure Mary and John Paul were in good hands. "I can't describe the feeling for those kids," says Arico. "They were the future of the tribe. We

are all fucked up. No amount of game playing has managed to straighten us out. Some people have been in the group for twenty years and are still fucked up. It's the new generation that's going to bring the new age in." She notes that she doesn't think people in the group are any more fucked up than non-Finders.

Arico didn't get wind something was wrong until Friday morning. "I was getting ready to go to work, and I got a phone call from somebody who was telling me that if Stuart [SS] had already called me and told me to go to Tallahassee, that those orders were reversed." The person didn't have any other information.

Carolyn Said, mother of B.B., was the only women's game player who had a computer, and she kept Arico and the others plugged into the group. Arico called her and learned zilch. Then the mothers — Said, Arico, Knauth, Judy Evans, and Pat Livingston — began hearing news reports. "By Friday afternoon we were all in a tizzy," Arico recalls. They finally contacted Pettie, who was in Southern California, and planned a group meeting in San Francisco for Saturday night.

I ask why they didn't call the Tallahassee Police in the interim. "We had to make a group decision," she says.

Pettie arrived at dusk and, as is their custom, the women massaged him to help him think. They carried out a traditional Finders meeting, all of them speaking their minds, going round and round in a circle. Since the police had seized the computers from their Washington homes, one of the group's concerns was how to stay in touch. But the kids were Topic A. "This wasn't the first time that things had not gone right with the kids' game, and we were all just really upset about that, that nobody had learned their lessons any other times," she says.

Pettie's advice: Your home is in Washington, D.C., not Tallahassee. Go back to Washington and let your presence be known. They took his advice. Back in Washington Sunday night, the women — the alleged satan-worshipping-kidnapping-brainwashed pornographers — were greeted by reporters camped on their porches.

Pettie's game call was to let the FBI call the game. The possibility of kidnapping, the bureau said, took precedence over the misdemeanor child-abuse charges. One agent advised they immediately head to Florida and hire a good attorney.

When the mothers called Scott Hunt at the Tallahassee Police Department on Monday evening, they couldn't get through. "Carolyn's on the phone saying she's B.B.'s mother and she's met by snorts and giggles," recalls Arico. "She's the 200th caller claiming these beautiful children." They finally spoke to Tallahassee police, but Hunt still told the media they had yet to hear from the mothers. "I'll never forgive him for that," says Arico.

After finishing their last FBI interview on Wednesday, the women hit the road for Tallahassee. By Friday, they were sitting in their lawyer's office. "You haven't lived until you've been employed by the Finders," says the attorney hired to represent them, Paul Walborsky. "They elect a new leader each day. I could be hired or fired two or three times in 24 hours. But I really got sucked in. I loved it. There were great, sexy constitutional issues."

Constitutional issues didn't come into play for weeks, though. It took until the next Thursday, in fact, for Walborsky to set up a court-sanctioned, one-hour meeting between the mother and kids. The mother-and-child reunion took place at a park, and a dozen HRS officials showed up to watch. "We would not leave," says Arico. "We told them that

The most progressive
clothing store in Miami!

CRIMINAL DEFENSE
LEGAL SERVICES

they would have to physically take the children away from us. We were not going to get up and walk away from our children.

"John Paul is in my arms and he's saying, 'But I want to go home with you.' And I'm saying, 'Well, I want you to go home with me, too.' I just sat there with him, crying my eyeballs out, and he's crying his eyeballs out, and they came and took him away from me."

During the next few weeks, the Finders settled into the media saddle and displayed what may be their finest wit and humor of the affair. But it ultimately drove Arico and two other mothers from the group. A memo attributed to "M.D. Pettie" delivered to the *Tallahassee Democrat* said he was resigning as leader of the Finders — a position he said he didn't know he held. "I thought I was just a consultant on Wit and Humor," the memo said. "If I ever was the leader, I hereby resign to devote myself full-time to Zen Walking."

The Finders also started publishing a newsletter, *The Daily Finder*, in which they announced that they were all moving to Tallahassee. "The Finders are always looking for signs and symbols," they wrote. "Since February 4, Florida has been sending signals that they want to keep some Finders members, so now the rest are coming."

Another issue of *The Daily Finder*, "Come to Tallahassee," invited friends to come join the drama, and featured the song, "Old Tallahassee":

*Well I came to Tallahassee
In a van so full of glee
They put me in the jailhouse
With a chain upon my knee
You get the idea.*

Before the trial, Ammerman and Holwell spoke freely with attorney Walborsky, who was assisted by several Finders men. "They all had handlebar mustaches and dressed alike," Walborsky says. "I sent them to FSU library to get me books for the case to explain their philosophy. They came back with books on psychology, India, American Indians, Samoan tribes, Chinese philosophy."

Juvenile court was packed with on-lookers and media on the first day of the custody battle. Witnesses Holwell and Ammerman showed up in prison garb and shackles. "Talk about a circus," says Walborsky. "We could have sold tickets."

Right before the hearing, Walborsky learned that the Finders men she had been working with had left town and were replaced by group member Steve Usdin. She also got the news that Pettie had put a gag order on Ammerman and Holwell and that she was going to be fired. "I said oooh-kay. The First Amendment issues haven't even been argued and they stand up and fire me," she recalls.

In court Steve Usdin delivered a proclamation from Pettie. Our interests and the state's interests are the same, he said, so we don't need counsel. Walborsky jokes, "Some people practice law 20 or 30 years and never get fired on television."

Pettie's strategy of nonresistance split the mothers. Knauth and Livingston gave Walborsky the boot, as instructed, while Arico, Evans, and Said retained her. Arico describes the behind-the-scenes drama of that morning: Livingston had called Pettie. "She begged him to tell her what to do," says Arico. "He said, 'Fire your attorney.' If you called him and begged him and he told you to do it, you can't say no. She was in agony. She really loves her son and she knew what would happen the way I knew what would

happen if I fired my attorney — it wouldn't be in the best interest of the children."

Arico understood Pettie's logic. If you're in a confrontational situation, in some ways, you're creating it. Do what Gandhi and Ammerman and Holwell and others have done when attacked: Don't fight. On another level, there were the teachings of Lao Tzu. Planning. Strategy. Tactics. Loyalty. "Those ideas are really the crux of the group," says Arico, "and they are what keep the group functioning at the high level that it does." Pettie wanted them to go before the judge and tell him in unison that he could end all this right now, he could be the game caller. "Think if you were a judge, and there were five women in your courtroom, and in all of your experiences with them you knew that they really loved their kids and were trying to do the right things," says Arico. "That's the position Pettie wanted the judge put in."

Arico couldn't accept Pettie's advice. "The group told me to choose between Pettie and my kids. I chose my kids."

The hearing lasted until Wednesday. Walborsky hammered on the constitutional issues and appealed to the judge's experience. "This is a judge who has seen thousands of juvenile cases," Walborsky says. "I told him if the walls could talk, they would cry. This

"The Finders like to play games with law enforcement agencies. In Tallahassee, they did embarrass them."

wasn't the real thing. Essentially that's what he said in the end. He praised the efforts to raise the kids correctly. He was only concerned about their educations."

John Paul, B.B., and Honeybee, the three youngest children, were returned to their mothers — Arico, Said, and Evans. The judge didn't free the older three because he wanted their mothers to demonstrate that they would adequately educate them. Arico agreed to cross every *t* and dot every *i*, and after two months of state supervision, she was given full custody of Mary. Livingston and Knauth's children were put in foster homes, but the state finally relinquished custody to the mothers that August.

Hours after the March 18 juvenile case ended, the Finders announced to the press that they had disbanded. It wasn't true, of course. But it did signal the end of Arico, Said, and Evans's membership in the group. Arico cites many personal reasons for leaving that have little to do with the Florida incident. A few years before, she says, "I saw the writing on the wall, but I didn't read it."

She spoke with attorneys about suing the authorities and decided there were too many obstacles. "I would have had to put my children into therapy immediately to prove that they had been traumatized. As far as I'm concerned, whatever trauma there was, they've basically gotten over it now." Another hurdle would be proving wrongful intent. "Everything they did was within the limits of the law," she says.

Arico's final analysis of what went wrong: "You just can't have a highly disciplined lifestyle and have kids. You just can't. It just doesn't work."

Make no mistake, though. She loved being a Finder. "It's a very magnetic situation," she says. "But the mystery's gone now, the whole mystique that nobody knew what we really did." □

*Research for this article was aided by a grant from the
Fund for Investigative Journalism*



the Ultimate in Comfort,
Design and Affordability