John Jacob Towery [...] infiltrated the [U.S. cities] Tacoma and Olympia anarchist and anti-war scene from the spring of 2007 until being outed in the summer of 2009. The following is a rough narrative of the experiences of a few Tacoma anarchists who were acquainted with [him].

Towery

Story of an Informant

No Trace Project / No trace, no case. A collection of tools to help anarchists and other rebels **understand** the capabilities of their enemies, **undermine** surveillance efforts, and ultimately **act** without getting caught.

Depending on your context, possession of certain documents may be criminalized or attract unwanted attention. Be careful about what zines you print and where you store them.

Towery: Story of an Informant

Original text in English

2009

archive.org/details/informant-series-no-1-towery

Layout

No Trace Project

notrace.how/resources/#towery

> would chill in the living with all of us and chat and have a good time. I spent hours one on one over the dining room table talking about our families—his problems with his wife, the hardships of being a parent to teenagers, my relationship with my mom, my childhood, and so on."

There were a lot of people who afterwards admitted that they had weird feelings about John, or had indications that something wasn't quite right, but it was rarely talked about at the time. Since that summer, people have made a point to communicate with others within our circles about people who make us uncomfortable in any way, while at the same time consciously trying to avoid snitchjacketing. Tacoma is a very small town, ranging from five to fifteen anarchists at a given time, so sharing information and expressing concerns is easier than in most places. We find that for us, here, the important thing is to simply talk amongst friends, and to remember that just because someone seems weird or makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean that they are a snitch and that just because someone who you are uneasy about doesn't appear to be a snitch, doesn't mean they are safe. It has become normal to express concerns and to vouch for folks informally, to ask around about new people, to get names and phone numbers, and to ask people to leave if it feels necessary.

There are many more lessons still to learn. Recovering from State repression is an ongoing process, as much as State repression is ongoing. There is no use assuming that either will end soon, or ever. But this hasn't stopped activity in the Northwest, nor caused everyone to retreat. The northwest anarchist scene is strong as ever—after all, "that which doesn't kill us only makes us stronger."

shooting.) No one trusted him with especially important information, or included him in affinity groups. Much of the information that he obtained was through eavesdropping on conversations, bragging (he commented specifically in his notes on information gathered this way), and simply watching people within their homes and community spaces.

This situation does offer a different perspective on security culture. There was the sense that people did security culture right—no one did any direct action with him, or talked to him about legally questionable activity, there was no huge mass arrest followed by felony trials that was caused directly by him (that we know of), and he was outed rather than being found out in an affidavit. Yet John was around for a substantial amount of time and did gather a lot of intelligence. People have reacted, and redefined security culture, in very different ways. Some are less open, less upfront with new people, less likely to make friends with someone new. After all, John relied on people's excitement toward newcomers. And the feeling of betrayal is a hard one to recover from. For others, this has given them the ability to let loose and be more up-front with newcomers. Many of the facts that John gave the State were shoddy and contrived, and there is a level of liberation in remembering that infiltrators and the State they work for are not all-knowing and all-powerful. And, in the end, there is no use hiding certain facts—legal name, home address, family, etc—when the State already has them.

> "Much of my experiences with him were not political. We would keep in contact via text fairly often—he would tell me about trips he was taking on his motorcycle. Occasionally he would come hang out at the house. He taught us how to make mulled wine and brought over fancy bread to our house warming,

John Jacob Towery, under the alias John Jacobs, infiltrated the Tacoma and Olympia anarchist and anti-war scene from the spring of 2007 until being outed in the summer of 2009.[1] The following is a rough narrative of the experiences of a few Tacoma anarchists who were acquainted with "John Jacobs."

[1] *No Trace Project (N.T.P.) note:* Tacoma and Olympia are two cities in Puget Sound, a geographical area located in Washington, a state in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Tacoma is in Pierce County.

Contents

A Bit About John 4
Memories, Gut Feelings, and Hindsight 5
Outing 11
Aftermath and Lessons Learned 12

website. The same day, people attended an Olympia City Council meeting, and confronted the council with the allegations.

When asked about these claims, his answers were intentionally vague and, rather than answering directly and clearly, he asked to have a meeting the following day with two specific individuals. At a coffee shop the following morning he admitted that he was indeed passing information to the authorities. He gave a story about how he was a double agent of sorts, protecting activists and anarchists from raids and arrests by giving false information to his handlers and giving them only information that could not be used against anyone. John claimed to play this grey area role because he supported our movement, our causes, and our ideas—though it was always unclear what these meant to him, or what he thought those meant to us. His story was half-assed and full of holes. That meeting ended with him tearing up as if he were walking away from two of his closest friends.

Aftermath and Lessons Learned

After he was outed there were many conversations, some more formal than others, about John. There were several FOIA requests before and after he was exposed; many of these contain files, memos, and handwritten notes that give some idea of the information that John was collecting. When these files were released, people who were mentioned got together and discussed what we can learn from the files. (While many documents have been handed over, it seems to be only a small portion of what they have.) And the lessons aren't always easy to pinpoint and articulate. Much of the information that has been released contains fairly mundane intelligence: who is dating whom, who lives with whom, who is more "hardcore," who owns what type of guns. (John talked a lot about guns, showed off his own gun, and took people

He acted particularly strange that day. His eyes were watery, sometimes to the point of tears, and he spent much of his time in an adjacent room, in the dark, texting (Whenever he was around, he texted a lot. Taking notes, it can be assumed. But he usually went about it more casually than he did that night.) He reassured everyone that he was only reacting to allergies, a story that was taken at face value—there was little reason not to believe him—even if it didn't seem quite right at the time.

In the months before he was outed, John talked often about how he was planning on moving to Texas or Germany, claiming that the decision was dependent upon his marital situation. He was gone for a few weeks, saying that he was visiting family in Oklahoma and checking out where he was thinking of moving to in Texas. Like all other stories from him, there is no way of knowing how much is true, but it isn't really relevant. Whether his story was truthful or not, he was on his way out, even before he was outed.

Outing

There were a lot of things that went into the outing of Towery. It started with a few public records containing emails from him, using a military email, containing "Force Protection Intelligence Updates." An address belonging to John Towery was surveilled, confirming that John Towery, did in fact, live there. The car in the driveway was recognized as the same make and model as the one driven by "John Jacobs." The next time that people saw "John Jacobs," he was not driving that car, but his motorcyle. The license plate frame connected that bike to the Iron Butt Motorcycle Rider's Association. On the website John Towery was listed as a member who rode the same make and model of motorcycle.

An article containing the above connections between "John Jacobs" and John J. Towery was posted on the local Indymedia

A Bit About John

John was a large man, with a round face, a friendly smile, and a bit of a speech impediment. Dark, short but untrimmed hair, usually in blue jeans and a hoody. He was a normal middle-class guy, newish car, a nice motorcycle, lived in the suburbs (he lied to us about which one, though) with a wife and two kids—one boy, one girl. His presence didn't come off as intimidating; in fact his mannerisms were almost child-like, and he had the air of a quiet nerd who was picked on as a kid and never stood up for himself. He didn't like to talk about himself much, but would at times talk about his family. He did explain—very briefly—how he started to identify as a socialist when he was younger and in the military and that he maintained a very strong distrust of government. He said that it wasn't until he met anarchists that he started to see that "his ideas" (whatever those were—he never really explained) were, at root, anarchist.

According to the story promoted by the State, John was coerced into working with the Pierce County Sheriffs Department to gather information on "criminal anarchists," after he had been seen affiliating himself with radicals, which jeopardized his job. However, files that have been released to us under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), tell us another story. Information that he collected went straight to the Joint Terrorism Task Force, Tacoma Police Department, Pierce County Sheriffs Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Fort Lewis Army Base,[2] and the Department of Defense (specifically Force Protection), and more. It seems highly likely that John J. Towery worked in Force Protection on the Fort Lewis Army Base.

We knew that John worked on the Fort Lewis Army base. His story was that he worked as a civilian in the IT depart-

[2] *N.T.P. note:* Fort Lewis is a U.S. Army base near Tacoma.

ment. He was fairly open about being ex-military: he would occasionally share stories about missions to Panama, being stationed in Germany; he used his knowledge of guns as a point of conversation, even taking people shooting with him on occasion; he used his knowledge of how and when the army moved shipments of strykers[3] through to ports to "aid" the Port Militarization Resistance protest.

Tacoma is home to one of the largest army bases on the west coast as well as an Air Force base and is surrounded by Naval stations. Several anarchists in the Puget Sound area are ex- or current military. There is even a GI coffeehouse[4] just a block or two outside the gates of Fort Lewis, that was started and originally run by anarchists who were once stationed there. So, his stories of being in the military and still connected to the army, via his "civilian" job, weren't particularly alarming.

Memories, Gut Feelings, and Hindsight

In June 2007 there was a protest outside the Tacoma Convention Center where the SpecOps Weapons Symposium was taking place. During this, John came out of the building. He was wearing a maroon beret with several pins attached displaying the logos of the IWW,[5] Vets Against the War, and other semi-radical groups. He carried samples of different items being promoted at the symposium—rubber bullets, catalogs of weapons, etc. John had little to no experience with the anarchists in Tacoma at this point, but he approached several well-known anarchists and activists from Olympia, and they appeared to know each other and have a good

[3] *N.T.P. note:* Strykers are a type of armored vehicles used by the U.S. military.

[4] *N.T.P. note:* "G.I." is an informal term which refers to members of the U.S. Armed Forces. GI coffeehouses were coffeehouses set up by antiwar actvists near military bases during the Vietnam War era.

[5] *N.T.P. note:* The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) is a labor union founded in 1905 in the United States.

11th hijackers. Aside from the piece being written poorly, the editor was pretty uncomfortable handling the pages of this bizarre text without gloves, but on the spot he told John that he would see what he could do with it. It is unclear what the intent of that article was. Maybe he thought that anarchists would genuinely support the content, or maybe this was his attempt to push anarchists into more violent action. Who knows. There was never a second issue of The Rebel and John's article was never published.

John was involved in an Olympia group called the Northwest Anti-Imperialist Direct Action Committee (NWAIDAC). At one of the meetings John taught a workshop of strategy and military organization. Afterward he came to Tacoma to have dinner with a few folks. When asked about the workshop he handed out packets printed straight from a military operations manual, and explained to us why it would behoove anarchists to adopt military action plans. Both the workshop and the subsequent conversation appear to be John's attempts to indirectly steer anarchists in more clandestine or violent directions. However, both of these instances were unusual for him. He was usually content playing the friend, rather than the comrade, with people in Tacoma—although his relationships in other towns were different.

In 2009, John contacted us about a security culture workshop that was happening in Olympia. He said that he would be able to get off of work early, and therefore would be willing to drive people there. (This happened often, him having an unusually flexible work schedule and a willingness to drive people to events.) The focus of the event was computer security, something that he was very comfortable with. He would interject occasionally about what weapons and information-gathering devices the military/State had and used (and that he had personally used). The workshop went well and was quite good, so people requested another one. John helped to set up the same workshop a few weeks later, this time at Pitchpipe.

This was enough to get him an invitation to the meeting. He attended and took notes.

John did not attend the RNC itself, citing conflicts with his work schedule and other excuses.

However, John was around for the PMR protests in Seattle in August 2008. He was at meetings, and very briefly at the action itself. Hours after, people texted with him and he volunteered to pick people up from the rally and take them home. The only point worth mentioning about this is that John had left the protest at least an hour before, if not more, yet once contacted was there in only a few minutes. At the time it was acknowledged that that was odd, but it was then quickly glossed over and not discussed again.

Sometimes John would be absent for weeks. When he returned, he would jump back into hanging with folks as if he had never been gone. He claimed that his marriage had become increasingly rocky, and alluded to vague disagreements about his "political beliefs." She accused him of cheating on her with someone at Pitchpipe, so he had to lay low and appease her for a while. In an attempt to smooth things over, it was suggested that he invite a few anarchists over for dinner, so his wife could get acquainted with his new friends. He cited the cheating accusations and claimed that any women coming over would exacerbate problems, but never gave a clear excuse for everyone else. This wasn't the only time that people asked to come over, but no one was ever able to. People simply weren't allowed at his house.

In early 2009 John went to coffee with the editor of a new anarchist publication, called The Rebel. In his car on the way there, John handed this editor an article to be published in the next issue. It was presented as a contemporary twist on a piece by Bruno Fillipi (an Italian individualist anarchist whose writing the editor was fond of). The twist: this piece was written from the perspective of one of the September

relationship. This broke the ice, and several anarchists from Tacoma introduced themselves.

After that, John began showing up at the Pitchpipe, an infoshop run out of the living room of a collective anarchist house. He would come during open hours and hang out, chat with people one on one occasionally. The conversations were general—what projects people were working on, the latest hip idea to hit the anarchist scene, etc. Occasionally he would bring in a pamphlet that he found online (the usual, Berkman,[6] etc.) Conversations about himself were limited, rarely more than an expression of insecurity about the newness of his ideas, and his discomfort about feeling old in a culture of young punks.

Port Militarization Resistance (PMR) protests went on between 2007 and 2009. There were several meetings, consisting primarily of radicals from Tacoma and Olympia, that took place over the course of those actions. During these meetings Towery would make a point to sit with the Tacoma folks. People don't remember him talking much, but he was around PMR regularly and provided quite a bit of information on the time and place of military shipments, as well as on how the army operated when it moved strykers through the port.

In 2007 folks went out to Aberdeen[7] to protest at the Port of Grays Harbor. On the way there a car full of anarchists was pulled over and the driver was cited with driving under the influence, despite him passing every sobriety test he took. Once in the back of the cop car he noticed a photo of his car and his parent's car, suggesting that this was no routine traffic stop; they were looking for him specifically. After Towery was outed as an informant, the driver sued to gain more information. The state chose to settle out of court, rather than

[6] *N.T.P. note:* Alexander Berkman (1870–1936) was a Russian-American anarchist and author.

[7] *N.T.P. note:* Aberdeen is a city in Grays Harbor County, in the U.S. state of Washington.

risk a trial that would expose Towery's connection to that arrest, or to PMR as a whole.

That December there was a chili cook-off benefit at Pitchpipe. John showed up with his 13 year-old son, and his younger daughter. This was the first of a handful of times that he brought his children around. He introduced his son around to some of the younger folks and encouraged conversation about school while he chatted with a few of the older attendees. The kid was not excited to be there, and it was clear. He spoke very little and all but hid behind his father. At the time, it was assumed that he was simply shy and awkward. Looking back, it is no wonder the kid was so uncomfortable, he had some pretty big secrets to keep. It seems out of place for an infiltrator to bring their family to their job, and even now, there seems no clear reason for him to have taken that risk.

In February 2008, while exploring an empty condo building in Tacoma with friends, two people were arrested, and another was pursued by the police but able to get away. In FOIA files that were released years later, there was a memo associating the two arrested with the local "criminal anarchists." In that same document there were hand-written notes by Towery naming the person who evaded arrest, and giving information on another person who was present but had been undetected by police at the time. People don't remember talking to Towery about this, but recall that this situation was talked about quite openly in the living room of Pitchpipe, where Towery probably just overheard these conversations. In fact, when reviewing the files, it is clear that much of the information that Towery collected was from simply being a wallflower.

In July 2008, the day before a large, open-invitation NoRNC[8] consulta was to take place at Pitchpipe, John asked one of the local anarchists to go on a walk with him. He pointed out a

[8] *N.T.P. note:* NoRNC was a movement in opposition to the Republican National Convention (RNC) that took place in September 2008.

grey box mounted to a telephone pole just across the street, and speculated that it was a camera. He told the person he was talking to that they could, and should, tell others, but that it could not be disclosed that John had been the one to reveal it. A post was made on the local Indymedia site, with pictures of the box, and a few notes on what people thought it was. Despite concerns, the consulta went on as planned. In fact, the event took place on the porch where the camera was alleged to have been pointed. Within days of the Internet posting, the camera was removed and a post detailing the specifics of the removed camera and pictures of it were posted anonymously on that same site. John had been correct; it was a camera. The details have since been lost. What is remembered is that it was a very expensive and high quality piece of surveillance technology, equipped with night vision and zoom capabilities and it was connected via the cable wires of the telephone pole. The camera was pointed at the front porch and windows of the infoshop.

Around that same time, there was a meeting held in another town for those planning on attending the RNC protests. It was assembly style and folks had to be vouched for. An email was received from an "AgentOrange," asking to attend the meeting. The message was cryptic and a bit silly sounding. It was signed A_O, and left a phone number to call to vouch for him. People recognized the number as the one for Pitchpipe and that A_O was John's identification on the Myspace[9] he used to keep contact with folks from radical scenes. (In one of the FOIA files there are notes about people's Myspaces and photos that were taken from Facebook[10] and Myspace and used in official memos to identify people.) The organizer checked with a few folks, who also recognized the phone number and the A_O.

[9] *N.T.P. note:* Myspace was the largest social media in the world from 2005 to 2009.

[10] *N.T.P. note:* Facebook is a social media.