

Thomas Cahill
Interviewed by Scott Bishop
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Transcribed: Nicole Weinstein

Scott Bishop: For the purpose of conducting an interview for a graduate studies project in oral history at San Francisco State University. Ultimately this tape will become part of the oral history collection held by the Bancroft library on the campus of the University at California at Berkeley. "Chief where were you born?"

Thomas Cahill: I was born in Chicago on the Northwest side on Montana street. The exact...

SB: What brought you to San Francisco?

TC: Well, when I was two years old my parents who were both Irish returned to Ireland and my sister who was two years older than I was and I naturally went with them and uh I went all through school in Ireland. I was studying to be a school teacher. And I reached age 19 I left Ireland and I returned to the United States with a cousin of my fathers. I uh remained in Alhambra for only a couple of weeks, down in Southern California, and then went up to a 4,000 acre cotton and grain ranch, which was owned by this cousin of my fathers. And I did not like the looks of the uh land and terrain of that area having coming out of the green hillside of Ireland. And uh, another gentleman and I left the ranch at the same time and went into Fresno flipped a nickel, he drew South and I came North, that was the depth of the depression, 1930 I came into San Francisco in the month of April, gave myself two weeks to get a job. I'm still here.

SB: Were you ever active in politics in San Francisco?

TC: Never in politics, no.

SB: When did you join the San Francisco police department?

TC: I joined the San Francisco police department July 13th 1942. I walked a beat rode radio car spent in the districts spent 3 years in an accident investigation went from that into the night division in the bureau of inspectors and then uh I went into homicide and I served in homicide in the gangster division from 1946 to 1956 and I came either a member of homicide or running homicide and during that time '50 and '51 I was assigned to the Kefauver Senator Estes Kefauver crime commission which was investigating major syndicated crime in the United States I traveled all over the country with them, particularly in connection with the uh mafia and their operations because we had a mafia killing here a gentleman by the name of Nick deJohn out of Chicago he had been in charge of the books on the north side in Chicago, he was murdered here and our investigations carried us all over the country so the Kefauver committee asked the chief at the time Chief Mitchell that we be allowed to travel with them to evaluate their

information that they were gathering and had gathered. I was appointed deputy Chief in February of 1956 Chief after Frank Ahern's death I became Chief in 1958 and served until I retired in 1970. I served under Mayor George Christopher, Mayor Jack Shelley and Mayor Alioto.

SB: Thank you. Were you active in the police officers association?

TC: I was a member of the police officers association but uh, never on the board or anything of that type, never involved in the negotiations, other than when they came to my office when I was chief.

SB: Could you briefly characterize the SFPD during the 1950's and the 1960's? In the mid 1950's the San Francisco Chronicle referred to the SFPD as the "Blue Gang". Can you comment on that? What did they mean by the "Blue Gang"?

TC: There was a writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, name was Charles _____. Charles was _____ I think in Sonoma County. And uh Charles did a great deal of writing on the San Francisco police department in fact Chief Ahern who was the chief prior to me had been assigned to a task force to uh bring an end to, or attempt to bring an end to uh prostitution particularly gambling and any other major crimes in the city he was assigned a special group prior to his being appointed chief of police. And Charles ____ branded some of the police who were uh alleged to have been involved in illegal activity and either being involved or winking at whatever was going on in the city in those days that was prior to Frank Ahern and my administration. And he called them the "Blue Gang" <sigh> the police department who were involved in, or were alleged to have been involved in illegal activities.

SB: Were charges made and were any officers prosecuted successfully?

TC: Uh-hh... I don't think there were any prosecuted in the criminal courts, I wish I had... I have to remember that there was the Atherton investigation in 1936 where there were charges before the grand jury and where a number of uh particularly Captains, Lieutenants and Sergeants as well as patrolman who were either suspended or taken out of the department completely, removed from the department. He was an ex-FBI man and there was a great deal of uh supposedly involvement of the police with the criminal element of those days.

SB: As police chief, what pressures, if you can remember, did you experience regarding the homosexual population of San Francisco and specifically I'm thinking of individuals coming to you or writing to you or organizations saying that the gay population was increasing, something had to be done about it. Were you subjected to this kind of pressure and if so where did it come from?

TC: Not at all, the gay issue was uh really uh not in the picture in my time.

SB: During the 1950's chief and the 1960's the San Francisco police department on a rather consistent basis raided gay business establishments and other business establishments that supposedly "catered" to a gay population. Why was this?

TC: There were not many gay establishments to my recollection in my time in San Francisco. And as far as I can tell you now, if they were raided, they were raided the same as any place else that might have a uh criminal element involved but as far as the gay issue itself uh it was a not a problem in my time.

SB: During the 1950's and the 1960's the California State Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission investigated on a very regular and continuing basis gay establishments and attempted to close down bars that catered to homosexuals. Did you cooperate or were you asked to cooperate with there efforts and if so what did this involve?

TC: Well the police did cooperate with the Alcohol Beverage Control in connection with any type of illegal activity that was uh involved and uh looking back now I remember one of my officers having been approached by uhhhh a person, dressed as a woman, who he... who was invited, who invited him, to uh her quote her apt and when he uh arrived there, he no sooner got inside the door than the person became very amorous and backed him up toward a wall. The wall turned out to be a closet that opened and a person with a blunt instrument was in the closet and was going to strike him on the head but he was on the alert. Those were the type of activities that we were looking for and preventing because the ordinary person would not have been alert, as the officer was. And uh that's the only reason he didn't get hurt. Now I know that my officers who were on those assignments were

SB: vice assignments

TC: vice assignments of that type resented <laughing> it very much they wanted no part of it they'd rather get out and do regular police work and to be working undercover to trap people like those. I saw one person show up one morning, I have no idea what the person was arrested for, dressed as a woman, and uh uh was very shapely but had big feet.

SB: <laughing>

TC: couldn't get away with the big feet, slim ankles and everything, but uh one of my commissioners was very upset because we had this person in the ____ he said you told me women were never brought into the, Do you have any idea what the ____ is?

SB: No

TC: Each morning the inspectors of police went to a special auditorium and those who were picked up the night before arrested appeared on stage for major crime uh criminal stuff not drunks you know but for crime specific crimes and the detectives looked them over to see if they would recognize them as having been involved in any of their cases as

suspects and we never did put women in the _____. The _____ was discontinued in my time. But uh this person was there all dressed up as a woman and I remember the commissioner raising a cane with me for putting a woman in there and I said that's not a woman that's a man. And he wouldn't believe me until his name was. his first name was Leon and the Lieutenant who was reading the reasons why he was appearing there said that Leon had lured this undercover officer to a room and attempted to strong arm him. and that's the reason why it was not a woman it was a man. and we had those types of problems with gays but the gay issue as it is today uhhhh is quite in focus it was not that situation in my time.

SB: Were you aware or did the vice squad pursue policies of entrapment or enticement?

TC: What kind uh what are you talking about?

SB: Entrapment or enticement that is where an individual or a vice cop will attempt to instigate a contact on his own which otherwise might not have occurred for the purpose of completing an arrest. In other words setting up a situation that would attract a response and accordingly an arrest would take place that's entrapment and enticement.

TC: Well even in my time you had to be very very careful that you didn't get involved in anything that would be brought up in court as entrapment that's something that we uh always had to be very careful. Never happened. there's no point in making an arrest based on entrapment and then have it thrown out of court that's a waste of man power and a waste of time and stupid to start with.

SB: Thank you chief. During the 1950's and the 1960's the FBI gathered information on homosexuals in San Francisco as chief of police were you ever contacted by the FBI and if so for what purpose?

TC: We cooperated with the FBI, we cooperated with all agencies of government on criminal matters uh if it was their case. they were the persons who uhh initiated the action and who took responsibility for the uh conduct of the investigation whatever it might be.

SB: As police Chief, Mr. Cahil were you aware that police intelligence was gathering information on homosexuals in San Francisco?

TC: Uhh intelligence was not gathering information on homosexuals as homosexuals or as a group. we were gathering information on individuals in connection with criminal activity.

SB: Were you ever as police chief contacted by the local military in San Francisco regarding the homosexual population?

TC: Mmm... I don't think I had anything to do with the military as far as homosexuals were concerned course we worked with the military where persons were AWO'ing and so on but not from that stand point.

SB: As police chief were you ever contacted or approached by gay individuals or gay organizations and if so for what purpose?

TC: Well our dealings with the individual gay people because as I indicated to you I was in homicide for a number of years and we had a number of uh murders that involved gay people.

SB: Can you elaborate on that?

TC: Well where uh either two gay women but particularly two gay men were living together and then one decided to leave and the other got upset and uh an argument ensued, turned to violence and one of them got killed. We had a number of those in San Francisco during my time and naturally I would uh have to interview persons other than the actual suspect in the case to uh establish a case against the individual who had perpetrated the crime.

SB: Were you ever approached by gay organizations or gay individuals where they were complaining about the treatment that homosexuals received from the police department?

TC: I don't recall a single instance where uh a gay organization ever came to my office or came to me personally to complain or to even discuss the gay situation.

SB: During the early 60's, 1960 to 1962 there was a so called, Gayola scandal, it involved a certain number of police officers I believe who were charged with accepting bribes from several owners of gay bars. Can you comment on this?

TC: Well I'm trying to think '60 to '62?

SB: 1960 to 1962.

TC: That was my time as chief but I don't recall uh bribes being received from gay bars.

SB: Chief...

TC: Gay bars in particular...

SB: The San Francisco Chronicle May 18th 1960 reported and I quote police Chief Thomas Cahil angrily suspended four more police men yesterday in the continuing investigation of payoffs by owners of bars frequented by homosexuals the number now stands at seven Chief Cahil stated I'm a little sad but I'm more angry that a few men can cast reflections on the many good men in the department who are daily doing an outstanding job.

TC: Well <laughs> I don't remember it specifically but I remember bringing individuals that brought a number of people before the commission because there's one thing I would

not stand for and uhh anybody you speak to who remember uhh me as chief would tell you that it didn't make any difference where they either demanded bribes or accepted bribes I don't care where it was if I had information on them I would uhh bring charges against them bring them before the commission have them uhh punished by the commission whatever it might be either suspension, or suspension and fines or termination but gay bars specifically I don't even recall it now and as I pointed out to you I've been out of the business for twenty years.

SB: In the late 1950's and early 1960's the issue of obscenity and censorship was emerging. On Friday June 2nd 1961 the San Francisco Chronicle reported, DA police drop lewd film charge against the movie quote DA Thomas C Lynch said that police Chief Thomas Cahil had looked at the film "Fireworks" and agreed that it might be offensive to some people but it was not obscene in a legal definition. "Fireworks" deals with a young homosexual and won film critics awards in Brussels and Came it... Can you comment on what role the police department played in trying to police perhaps the morals of the city or at least what role it played in monitoring obscene material or what was believed to be obscene material.

TC: Well I can tell you that uhh we had so many problems in the city at that time that were very serious in the stand point of demonstrations and violence and so on that uhh we did not have time to uhh put man power on matters unless it was very obvious that something should be done about it in fact I was criticized at times for not uhh spending more man power or deploying more man power into the area where oh uhh shows of various kinds were supposed to be obscene and if they were obscene, came to our attention and uhh we sent people in to determine how they felt about it from a legal standpoint and from a police standpoint we took action where it was necessary uhh in many instances uhh uhh we made arrests while they were involved in actions other than that which they could even themselves claim were legal. But we certainly didn't go out of our way to get into dictating the morals of the people other than from a standpoint of preventing uhh very uhh obvious violations of law in that regard we had a group I remember coming in from. I think they came from some place in Africa and they were putting on some type of show where the breasts were shown and uhh I know the news media made a great deal about that to know if I was going to make arrests because of the fact that uhh the upper torso of the ladies were shown. And I explained to them that it was not something that was supposed to be vulgar it was supposed to be artistic it was part of the culture of those people in their country and I had many other things to do and we had no problem.

SB: OK. In their book San Francisco 1865 to 1932, "Politics, Power and Urban Development: Dr. Robert Cherney and William Issel have concluded in the post script, "the population movements of WWII and after brought new ethnic and social groups into a city that had experienced nearly half a century of ethnic stability. Former lines of political polarity weakened or disappeared and many new lines of political cleavage appeared along lines of class, neighborhoods, race and ethnicity and sexual preference. Chief could you just generally comment on your awareness of this change going on and what impact did this have on a police department assuming that as a population change

takes place the problems and sensitivities of a police organization will also experience at least some degree of change.

TC: Uhhh...Sunset District, the Richmond District uhh remained generally very stable great changes took place in the South East section of the city particularly ehh in the Hunters Point area where during the war uhh many people came from different parts of the country and there was a great increase in the black population. Uhh that took place not only in Hunters Point but also in the Fillmore District, which prior to that time had been very heavily populated by the Jewish population. They ran the stores they lived in the area and uhh then they gradually move out and the black population moved in. The Japanese of course who had uhhh a very very stronghold in the Western Addition they lost that for a while and the black people moved into that particular area too uhh then the Japanese returned to that area but not uhh in as large a number as had been there before. South of Market changed. South of Market used to be generally uhh very heavily populated by Irish as was the Mission and both the uhh South of Market and the Mission District began to change and uh great any people from South America various other countries Mexico uhh became dominant in an area that had been generally looked upon as Irish in the years gone by, that's a very rough estimate. Now the Chinese who had been confined not <laughs> by force but by habit to the China town area they were not spread out throughout the city there were very few, they'd be individual cases almost then they began to spread out of the Chinatown area and as you know right now the Richmond District here is very heavily populated by Chinese which was not so in my time.

SB: Chief as the population changes took place and the police department is hiring new individuals in the hiring practices did the police department reflect the changes in population?

TC: Not...

SB: In other words was the police department hiring new groups?

TC: Well we consciously, we were very conscious of it and in fact and both the Fire Dept. the Fire Chief and I setup a coaching school for individuals from the minorities and that time it was particularly the blacks out at the fire house on South Van Ness or one of those streets out there where they had a training area for very young recruits and we set up a coaching school to entice those who felt that they did not know how to go about preparing for the entrance examination and it was a sad experience for both the Chief and I, Bill Murray and I that only as far as we and the police dept. was concerned we only got 26 people, blacks who were interested and some of those were uhh so far down the line that there was no way they could pass the examination and the standards set for the department. And I, in my time would not lower the standards to the point where I would get inferior type officers because they'd only get hurt themselves and the person who would be forced to work with them would be likely to become a victim of uhh an injury because of the inability of the person to assist them.

SB: Very good. This concludes our interview today on February 8th 1990 with former police Chief Thomas Cabil. Uhh one thing that I should do MR. Cabil should be given the opportunity just to make some closing remarks that he may wish to make.

TC: Well...when Mayor Christopher was elected Mayor one of the things that he did very early in his time was to call the entire San Francisco police dept. uhh into assembly in Commerce High School. Hayes and Van Ness and there he spelled out very clearly what his policy was going to be and that he would not stand for any corruption or any bribery or any uhh illegal activities on the part of any of the police. Uhh some police resented that they felt that he was casting a reflection on them others uhh were upset because it was very clear that it was going to be straight down the line and it was going to be a very very properly run police dept. He appointed three commissioners. Commissioner Tom Mellon, Commissioner Bissinger and Commissioner McKinnon who were three of the finest police commissioners that this city has ever had and they were all strictly business strictly honesty and integrity beyond question and that's the way they wanted the police dept. run and it was a pleasure for me to serve under them both as deputy Chief and we only had one Deputy Chief in those days I don't know how many they have now but in my time I just had one assistant and then the next highest ranks was the head of the traffic division and the head of the inspectors division and the head of administration. But uhh then Jack Shelley became Mayor and about the time he became mayor we had all of the great changes that took place in the social order. And instead of concentrating strictly on the traditional type of problems that we were confronted with uhh all long and everyday we now had new problems. problems we thought would never exist because we felt San Francisco was a cosmopolitan city. we felt it was a seaport central of the bay counties and we thought we'd never have the problems that they would experience in the South and the East and various other places where they had ethnic problems. We felt that we were fairly secure however changes took place in that regard and our view point and we had demonstrations everyday at times we always had them on weekends either the pro Castros and the anti Castros the uhh the black population were asserting themselves in fact we had 20,000 march up Market St. one time protesting what was happening in Birmingham Alabama and this was all strange to us all new to us but knowing that they were very resentful of. that is the black population is very resentful of what was happening in the South between the blacks and the police I had no policemen in view and yet I had 20,000 in the Civic Center Plaza and I myself got on the platform and talked. And we had no problems whatever I had man power on the perimeter in case something should arise but uhh we had many, many instances we had about 60,00 march up Market St. one time and assemble out on Golden Gate Park or in Kezar stadium to be exact and uhh we had uhh very little problems in that regard. However. we had many demonstrations that went far beyond being peaceful and naturally we had to uhh we had to uhh take action. you say, you speak about San Francisco State one of the last big confrontations we had at San Francisco State was where President ? decreed that there would be no more assemblies in the ? .

SB: I was a student there at the time.

TC: and it was agreed by the students who were in action shall I say at that time that they were going to prove to him that they could not stop them. They did have a large assembly and they brought in who's who on campus demonstrations from all over the country and they were going to prove to President _____ that he couldn't stop them. And they uhh had these who's who from the other colleges on a platform and they were going to protect them and let a number of arrests be made and then funnel those out and then take off and prove that they came from everywhere but unfortunately it didn't work out that way for the students because the tactical my tactical squad swept in around them arrested the who's who identified them and showed that they came from other colleges to be involved in this confrontation I think we arrested something like 467 or 470 people there was 92% conviction and no complaints of excessive use of force in fact one newspaper man said that he saw two instances during the entire episode and he says you might say that the police were pretty rough but I cant say that they weren't provoked and I cant say that they were not just trying to do their job. But he said, I can't believe so many arrests were made without complaints.

SB: While you were police chief, was police brutality ever an issue?

TC: Oh you always have cases arising in which uhh the excess of use of force is claimed. But uh when you spelled out policy, and I spelled out policy very clearly that there was not to be brutality and I wouldn't stand for, I was never involved in brutality myself I never struck a prisoner, if I didn't have the brains to get the information I wanted without the use of brutality, that was it I didn't get it. Out on the street where it becomes a confrontation between yourself and an individual and you have to make an arrest well, it can become pretty rough but uhh having spent as much time in homicide as I did, I was very conscious of what can happen uhh when you're dealing out force the person you're dealing with may have just come from a hospital they may have just been stitched up they may have come back from the war in Vietnam or some place and they may have a plate in their head, so you have to have all of those things in mind and I spell that out to officers in every recruit class, I spend two hours with each recruit class and spelled out what my policy was and I told them don't ever come in before the police commission and say you were not told, I'll spell out policy crystal clear and that's one thing you have to do. And when you promote individuals in the department from patrolman to sergeant, sergeant to lieutenant or captain you have to do the same thing and you have to spell it out in language that they can never say they didn't understand. And I could spell it out believe me.

SB: Thank you Chief Cahit. This concludes our interview.

TC: Right sir, I don't know if you got anything you want or...