

Sunday,  
March 26, 1989

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

perspect

# RELUCTANT HERO

*Bill Sipple saved President Ford's life in 1975. The subsequent media attention helped ruin Sipple's life*

By Deni Elliott

**B**ill Sipple died alone in a rundown San Francisco apartment earlier this year.

Friends found his body two weeks after he died of "natural causes." Sipple's despondency didn't cause his death. It could only have contributed to his excessive weight and drinking, to his inability to care for his bout of pneumonia.

Amid the clutter in the apartment where his body was found, a 13-year-old framed letter hung on a wall. The letter of thanks from President Gerald Ford serves as a poignant reminder of the event that made Oliver "Bill" Sipple a reluctant hero, and of the media coverage that he said ruined his life.

Not so many years ago, Bill Sipple was a robust member of San Francisco's gay community rather than a recluse. He campaigned for Harvey Milk's bid to become an openly gay city supervisor, marched on behalf of gay rights and worked selflessly on behalf of social concerns in San Francisco's Tenderloin District.

All of that changed on Sept. 22, 1975. That day, Sipple attended a campaign rally for President Ford's re-election. He saw a woman aim a gun at the president and knocked it from her hands. In interviews with Secret Service agents and with news reporters immediately after he foiled the assassination attempt, Sipple said that he acted out of "instinct" and "reflex." He said that he had done what anyone would have done. Sipple made it clear that he

didn't want publicity. He wanted to be left alone.

Unfortunately for Sipple, he was "newsworthy;" he no longer had control over what was printed or broadcast about him.

The initial stories that appeared in newspapers across the country gave the little information that Sipple volunteered: He was a 34-year-old ex-Marine who grew up in Detroit; he served in Vietnam and was wounded; now he supported himself on a disability pension.

Reporters suspected that Sipple was homosexual, but, at first, that was not part of the story. As Kurt Luedtke, then executive editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, said in a 1982 interview, "I don't think the hero's sexuality is any of our business. When we go out to find out how old he is, where he came from, what he has to say, I don't think that inquiry legitimately includes, 'And what is your sexual preference?'"

The morning of Sept. 24, however, Herb Caen, a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, published a note that Sipple had been celebrating the night before with friends at a local gay bar.

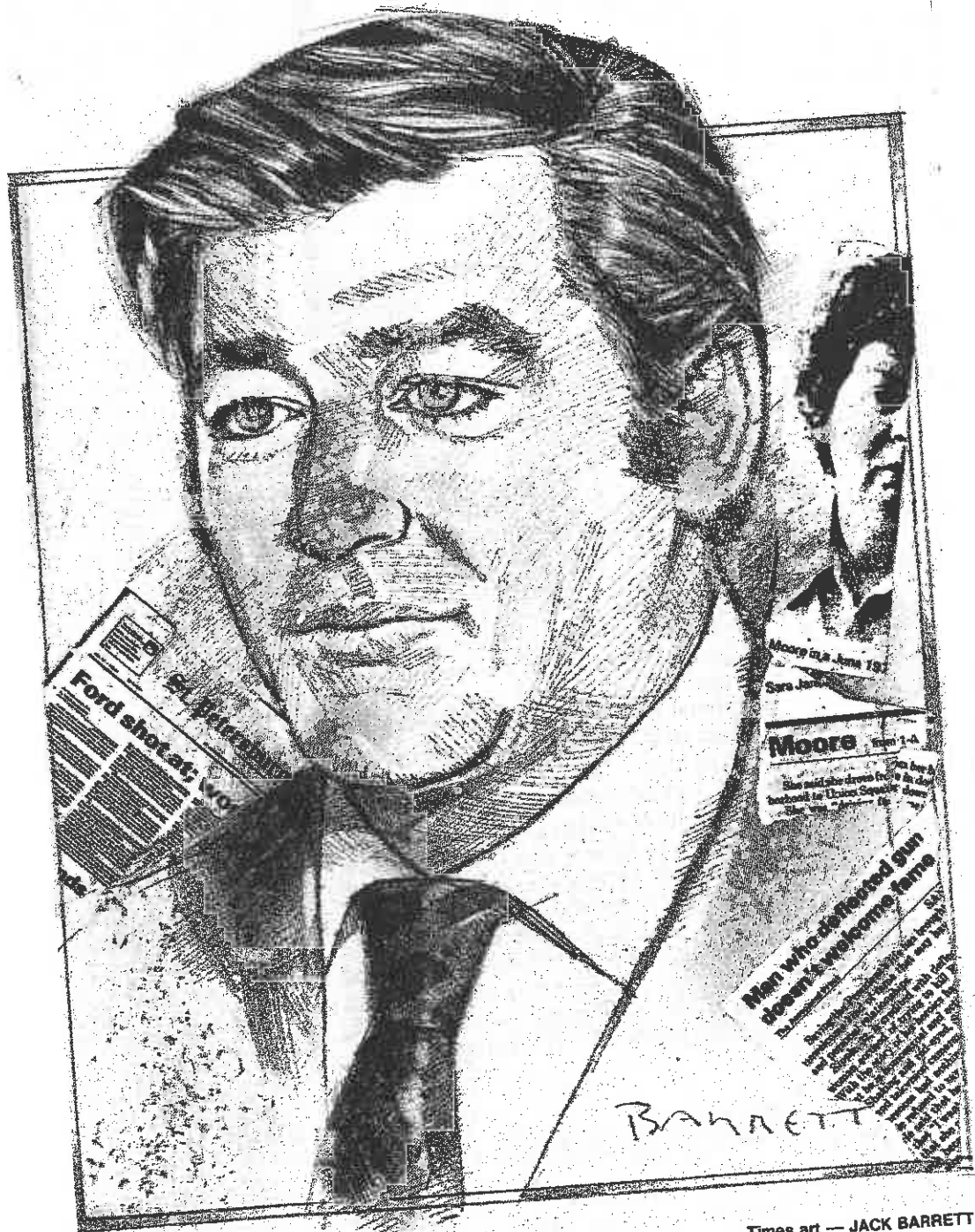
This publication increased the relevancy of Sipple's sexuality for local journalists. Now the story was out. But when they tracked Sipple down they found him still unwilling to discuss his sexual preference. Sipple said that he was concerned that the publication of this information would ruin his relationship with his family and that it would upset the Marines.

The reporters had a dilemma. Sipple refused to acknowledge that he was homosexual or to discuss his activities in the gay community. But he was indeed "out of the closet," at least as far as the San

■ Deni Elliott is executive director of the Ethics Institute at Dartmouth College, consulting editor of "FineLine," a journalism ethics newsletter, and visiting faculty member at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg. ■

Please see **SIPPLE 8-D**

tive



Times art — JACK BARRETT

Bill Sipple didn't want the media attention that came his way after saving Ford's life. He especially didn't want any publicity about his homosexuality.

FOR A BETTER FLORIDA

Supple from 12

Francisco gay community was concerned. The information was public, in some sense, thanks to Caen's column.

Sipple didn't want to be identified as homosexual in the news columns, but local gay-rights activists claimed that stories about a homosexual hero would help break the stereotype, and would, in the end, benefit Sipple.

The fact that tipped the balance in favor of publishing Sipple's sexual preference was the suspicion some gay activists and San Francisco journalists had that the White House delayed thanking Sipple because of his homosexuality. Sipple had no such concern. "The president is a very busy man," he said.

Ron Nessen was Ford's press secretary at the time. When asked to reflect on the White House perspective seven years after the incident, he said, "Sipple was the only sensible one in that whole situation."

Nessen said there was no delay. In fact, he was amazed how quickly the process worked. It took only three days to decide how Sipple should be thanked, to get the letter written and signed by the president and to send it off to Sipple. Nessen doesn't remember anyone at the White House knowing or caring about Sipple's sexual preference.

In the meantime, the *Los Angeles Times* and *San Francisco Examiner* both ran stories that discussed Sipple's activities in the local gay community. The *Los Angeles Times* story, circulated to news organizations throughout the country via its wire service, ran under the headline, "Hero in Ford Shooting Active Among S.F. Gays." Despite the reporter's justification that his "interest was in why the president was so tardy in offering thanks," only four paragraphs of the 19-paragraph story dealt with the White House's response.

The *Detroit News*, Sipple's hometown newspaper, was among those that ran the wire service story. Reporters from that paper followed up with the local angle by including Sipple's mother's comment on his sexual preference: "No wonder the president didn't send him a note," said Mrs. Ethyl Sipple after reading that her son was a prominent figure in San Francisco's gay community.

Sipple claimed that his sexual preference had nothing more to do with his public actions than had his eye color or race. He saw no connection between a purported "delay" in a White House thank you and his sexuality. He filed a lawsuit against the *Los Angeles Times* and other news organizations, claiming that his privacy had been invaded, but he ultimately lost that suit.

The importance of the Sipple news coverage is not what was decided by the courts, but by the ethics questions raised. The struggle between Sipple's claim that he had a right to



Police grapple with Sarah Jane Moore after she tried to shoot President Ford. A is Bill Sipple.

keep his sexual preference private and the reporters' claim that the public had a right to know this information has been used to fuel newsroom discussions and to help sensitize journalism students for 13 years.

As it turned out, the journalists were wrong that publishing Sipple's sexuality was in his best interest. His family didn't know he was homosexual until they were informed by reporters. His mother died four years later without ever again speaking to her son. Sipple remained estranged from his family until his death.

The argument that publishing the information was in the best interest of the homosexual community seems flawed as well. While claiming that the publication would contribute to a positive perception of homosexual people, the news media actually contributed to the idea that there was something bizarre about a man who is both heroic and homosexual. Sexual preference, religion, race, gender make their way into the news columns only if they contain an element of surprise.

For example, an individual's religious preference is not newsworthy unless there is some irony. We wouldn't expect to see a news article that begins, "John Doe, a Methodist, confessed yesterday to shooting his wife in the head. . . ." However if John Doe were, instead, an avowed pacifist and active member of the local Quaker community, Doe's religious affiliation may well make the headline. The irony of a pacifist caught in some violent act makes the religion newsworthy.

When the news media used Sipple's sexual

preference, they were contributing to a stereotype that homosexual men are not to be heroes in the same way that such would contribute to racial or sexual stereotypes by talking about the "woman doctor" or "black lawyer." There is nothing ironic about a woman being a doctor, a black person being a lawyer or a homosexual person being

In the end, the news media publication about Sipple's sexuality becomes a free to publish what they wish. It doesn't follow that they should publish only what they can. The fact that from the point of view the news coverage contributed to the destruction of his life should raise questions for reporters and editors who are publishing information against the wishes of an otherwise private individual who is the subject of a story. Does the public need this information badly enough to sacrifice the individual involved? Clearly, the times that an individual should be sacrificed on the altar of information are few.

Bill Sipple's life counted. He saved President's life and his story has forced a generation of journalists to face the personal truth that can happen as a result of their work.

Although one reporter involved in publishing Sipple's sexual preference to the *Angeles Times* recently that he would not publish the information if he had it to himself, journalists still don't agree when sexual preference is relevant in a news story. But if we care about it more carefully, thanks to B