

I GOT THE SHERIFF

How a small-town reporter found a big story.

BY ALEX KOTLOWITZ

Things change slowly in Princeton, Illinois, a town of Victorian houses and cobblestoned streets. Over the past hundred years, the population has grown from five thousand to seventy-two hundred. The parking meters on Main Street still take dimes, nickels, and pennies; violations carry a fifty-cent fine. And for thirty-three years David Silverberg has been a reporter here, a correspondent for the *La Salle News Tribune*, a daily with roughly twenty thousand readers in three counties. He works out of a second-floor office on Main Street, above an insurance agency and across the street from the China Buffet, which he has never frequented because he goes home for lunch every day.

Silverberg is, in the fullest sense of the word, a newspaperman. In the few days I spent with him, he snapped photos of three Chamber of Commerce Honor Roll inductees (a fourth had died that morning), took an ad from a local businessman, and wrote an article on a ninety-one-year-old former village superintendent and another on a couple who were hosting two foreign exchange students. If a reader calls him at home in the evening to complain of a missed newspaper—he's had the same listed phone number for thirty-three years—Silverberg will personally deliver a copy. He is often awakened late at night to cover a house fire or a car wreck; the paper has a policy of running a story about any automobile accident in which someone has been ticketed, injured, or killed—or has hit a deer. He halfheartedly complains about the long hours (usually fifty to sixty hours a week) and the low pay (thirty-three thousand eight hundred dollars), but he loves both his work and the community he writes for.

"Let's just say I know a lot of people," he told me. "That's one of the advantages of staying in the same place. The people of Bureau County have always been wonderful to me. They helped my wife

and me through a tragedy we had." In 1974, his six-year-old son was run over by a school bus and killed. "I can't say enough about the people of Bureau County."

In dress and in manner, Silverberg, who is fifty-six, resembles the children's television personality Mr. Rogers. He wears cardigans, which are always buttoned, and open-at-the-neck oxford shirts. His slender build and hunched shoulders make him appear physically vulnerable. He speaks without inflection, almost in a deadpan tone, as if there were a punch line waiting at the end of every thought. (There never is.) When you ask him how he's doing, he answers, "All righty." He's also a deeply religious man, a Christian (though his father was Jewish), in whom people often confide. "Everybody knows Dave," one local businessman said. "And everybody trusts him."

There will probably always be a place for small-town reporters, who record school-board meetings, tout local sports victories, and keep tabs on the comings and goings at the county courthouse. Of the nation's fifteen hundred daily newspapers, two-thirds have a circulation of less than twenty-five thousand. But reporting on neighbors and friends may be among the toughest of journalistic assignments—one that requires both backbone and at least a pinch of humility. You frequently run into the subjects of your stories, at the supermarket or on Main Street, and if your readers are looking for you they certainly know where to find you. "People around here will let you know how they feel," Silverberg said.

For his part, Silverberg has covered some murder and drug trials, including one involving two local businessmen, which took him to Chicago for three weeks. But the stories he's proudest of concern the consolidation of four county high schools, a process that spanned six years. "I get to see something from start to finish, from the first meeting to the referendum to the building of a new



The articles—about a missing Harley, a dead reporter, and a mistress in Texas—shocked people. “This isn’t Chicago,” they said.

school,” he told me. “It’s just been a really neat experience.” The story Silverberg has become best known for among friends and neighbors, however, is one he stumbled on by accident. Silverberg’s biggest scoop—which, all things considered, he’d rather not talk about—involves Bureau County Sheriff Greg Johnson, a questionable raffle, and a dead reporter.

Greg Johnson, a broad-shouldered man with a receding hairline and a bushy mustache, was a popular sheriff. In 1994, he had run against his boss, who’d been sheriff for a decade, and won, mostly because of the admiration he’d earned during his years working undercover as a Bureau County deputy. In the

fall of 1998, Sheriff Johnson held a twenty-dollar-a-ticket raffle to raise money for his reelection. First prize was a brand-new Harley-Davidson.

The raffle came and went, and the townspeople began to wonder who’d won the bike. A new Harley in a town the size of Princeton, after all, would be noticed. Finally, after weeks of speculation in the local cafés, one ticket buyer decided he’d been bamboozled and consulted a lawyer. Nothing ever came of that, but a local reporter named Thetis Sims started nosing around. Sims, a part-time correspondent for the Kewanee *Star Courier*, a small paper based in the county just west of Bureau, heard that maybe Johnson had pocketed the money. She also heard that Johnson, who was mar-

ried and had a teen-age daughter, had fathered a child with a woman in Lubbock, Texas, and had used a county car to make visits there. Sims found the birth announcement on-line in the Lubbock *Avalanche-Journal*. She tried, over several weeks, to get an interview with the Sheriff, who refused to speak with her.

Thetis Sims in many ways was the antithesis of Silverberg. She fancied herself a big-city reporter. Her friends nicknamed her Scoop. The mother of six grown children, she was a rather large woman, who had a heart condition. She had to stop covering the Princeton City Council because of the long, steep walk from the parking lot. The bright floral dresses she favored reflected her good cheer, and she was generally well liked,

though her bluntness irritated some people. It was pretty well known around Princeton that Sims didn't like Johnson and that she had supported his opponent in the recent election.

Sims's pursuit of the Sheriff unnerved her editor, Dave Clarke, because his newspaper rarely ran investigative pieces. At one point, he told Sims he'd prefer "to report on someone else's investigation rather than take the lead," and so put off running a story. It also, apparently, discomfited Johnson, because last year, on the morning of Thursday, February 11th, he decided to pay Sims a visit. What happened next is unclear—Johnson refuses to say much and some of what he does say conflicts with other evidence—but this much is certain: shortly after his arrival at Sims's home, Sims slumped over in her recliner. Around her lay her reporter's notebook, a pamphlet on the Freedom of Information Act, and four pages faxed from the State Board of Elections relating to the raffle. Johnson called for an ambulance and later told Sims's family and friends that he hadn't performed C.P.R. because the latex gloves he carried for such an occasion kept breaking. An autopsy determined that Sims, who was fifty-five, died of a heart attack.

In a farewell to Sims, Clarke wrote in his column that she "fittingly died with

her boots on." But he dropped the inquiry into the Sheriff's conduct; his paper didn't have the resources, he told me.

Silverberg had had his own run-in with Sheriff Johnson several years earlier. During Johnson's first term in office, two young boys on a school bus spotted a car overturned in a small stream along a country road. When they got home, they told their mother, who called the sheriff's department. A deputy searched the location and found nothing. The next day, deputies continued the search and eventually found the car, half hidden under a bridge. The driver had apparently died shortly after impact. But Sheriff Johnson, presumably embarrassed by the time it took to find the wreck, publicly implied that the woman had given them inaccurate information. Silverberg had known the woman since she was a child in 4-H, and believed her story. It was a seemingly small matter, but Silverberg chafed at a public official's twisting the facts. So he filed his first ever Freedom of Information Act request, for the 911 tape. It turned out that the woman had given the dispatcher the right location, which Silverberg reported in a follow-up story.

After Sims's death, Silverberg heard the buzz about the raffle and about the Sheriff's alleged trips to see his mistress. This was big stuff in Princeton, where towns-



"As you can see, we've transferred your husband from intensive to casual care."

people are so attentive to propriety that the county circuit clerk was interrogated about \$26.36 paid to an employee for a day that the clerk's office had been closed. But Silverberg was ambivalent about pursuing the story, because the rumors seemed so invasive of the Sheriff's private life, and because, as he told me later, he wasn't certain it "was my place to make news."

And then, one evening, Silverberg ran into Thetis Sims's husband, Cletus, at Wal-Mart. Cletus confirmed that his wife had been investigating the raffle and the matter of the missing Harley. He also told Silverberg that, at the hospital where the paramedics had taken his wife, the Sheriff mentioned that he had been showing Thetis something before she died. Cletus believed that the Sheriff had presented Thetis with an anonymous letter that had been mailed to neighbors earlier that same day, accusing Cletus of sex crimes. It was signed, "A Concerned Father and a saddened Husband." (The accusations were completely unfounded.) To Cletus, it seemed clear that the Sheriff was trying to intimidate his wife into backing off her investigation. Silverberg was horrified. "Oh, my God!" he exclaimed to Cletus. "What a way to die!" Silverberg remembered, too, that during Sheriff Johnson's reelection campaign another anonymous letter had been circulated, which accused Johnson's opponent of heinous crimes, including beating his wife. The incident blew over, and was never reported in the local papers, but there were townspeople who attributed the Sheriff's victory to those charges—which were entirely unsubstantiated.

Silverberg made an appointment to see the Sheriff at his office, in a small, squat edifice across the street from the courthouse. Silverberg asked an editor, Lori Cinotte, to accompany him so that he would have a witness to whatever the Sheriff had to say. "From my dealings with Mr. Johnson, I knew what he was capable of doing," he told me, referring to the incident of the overturned car. At the meeting, the Sheriff appeared bored by Silverberg's questions. He explained impatiently that the state police were investigating Sims's death, and that someone from Chicago whose name he didn't remember had won the Harley. He also told Silverberg that he couldn't provide financial details about the raffle because his campaign records had been subpoenaed

by his wife, who had filed for divorce. Silverberg did not ask about the anonymous letter. The meeting lasted ten minutes; afterward Silverberg told Cinotte he wasn't sure there was anything to write. "Dave knew how it might be perceived—that Dave Silverberg and the *News Tribune* were on a witch-hunt," Cinotte later told me.

That same day, Silverberg called Princeton's police chief, who had been Johnson's campaign-committee chairman. Of the raffle, the chief admitted to Silverberg, "I understand a guy won, but I can't find out who." It was the reporter's first indication that people close to Johnson also had questions about the raffle, and so Silverberg wrote a front-page story about it, which appeared on April 28th. It mentioned that the winner of the bike was a Chicagoan, and that Sims had been working on a story about the raffle when she died. It also contained a passage that, even in Silverberg's straight-ahead prose, let his readers know that he, too, had questions. The paragraph—variations of which appeared like a refrain in the numerous articles that Silverberg wrote on the Sheriff in the coming months—read, "Thetis Sims, 55, of 100 First St., Tiskilwa suffered a heart attack while talking with Bureau County Sheriff Greg Johnson in her home around 12:30 P.M. on Feb. 11. Sims and Johnson were the only ones in Sims' house at the time."

Silverberg's story immediately caused a stir. The next morning, the Sheriff's wife called and told the reporter that she and Johnson were only separated, and that she had no documents relating to the raffle. She also told him that Johnson had told her someone from Michigan had won the motorcycle. Silverberg promptly wrote another front-page article. It had been two and a half months since Sims's death.

When Silverberg published his two articles, people were shocked: no one in Princeton could recall having heard such allegations levelled at a local politician before. ("This isn't Chicago," many people I encountered remarked.) Indeed, the only reason townspeople took the charges against the Sheriff seriously, one businessman told me, was that "Dave is who he is." It was clear, said another resident, that "Dave wasn't satisfied." Sims's daughter Melissa said to me, "You meet him, he's meek and mild, a nervous fellow. But nobody had the

balls to do it first. And then Dave did it."

The Sheriff was incensed. He issued a prepared statement—a rare occurrence in Princeton, where if anyone has something to say publicly he usually just calls the paper or walks over to Silverberg's office. In the statement, the Sheriff declared that a Lyle Rawson, of Chicago, had won the raffle, and that he had chosen to take twelve thousand dollars in cash rather than the bike. "Thetis Sims, as a reporter for the Kewanee *Star Courier*, asked to talk with me at her home," he continued. "Soon after my arrival while exchanging initial pleasantries, Thetis had a heart attack. . . . An autopsy found that Thetis died from natural causes. . . . It is shameful to use Thetis Sims' death as a springboard to launch a malicious smear campaign against me." He concluded, "This is a big case of political sour grapes."

Silverberg's stories galvanized his competitors across the street at the Bureau County *Republican*, a thrice-weekly paper. "Dave big-time surprised us," said Lori Hamer, thirty-four, who was one of eight reporters at the *Republican*. During her twelve years at the paper, her "biggest story"—by which she means the one that got the most response—was about a squirrel that scurried up to a local mini-mart every morning and received a doughnut from the cashier. Hamer, along with a colleague and her editor, Tom Martin, reported a story in which the Sheriff asserted that one of his supporters had personally handed the money to Rawson. But, the article went on, the supporter said he had done no such thing, and calls to directory assistance, an Internet search, and an inquiry to the secretary of state had all failed to turn up anyone in Chicago named Lyle Rawson. The byline read "B.C.R. Staff," in part because Hamer was pregnant with her second child, and her editor worried about reprisals from the Sheriff. Then the Peoria *JournalStar* weighed in, reporting on trips taken by Johnson, partly at the county's expense, to the Texas town where his mistress and newborn daughter lived. The local prosecutor asked the state's attorney general to investigate the allegations.

Over the next few months, a series of newspaper stories continued to poke holes in the Sheriff's statements. The Peoria paper, for example, debunked the notion that Johnson and Sims were

“exchanging pleasantries” when she died. The paper established that the Sheriff had been on the line to Princeton’s assistant postmaster inquiring about the legality of sending defamatory mail when Sims had her heart attack. He ended that call to phone for an ambulance. Silverberg reported that Johnson’s campaign treasurer had refused to sign an amended report on the raffle that the Sheriff tried to file with the elections board. Meanwhile, the phantom Lyle Rawson had become a joke around town. The Bureau County *Republican* ran a cartoon, a take-off on the “Where’s Waldo?” series, that showed the Sheriff holding a microscope to a map of Illinois, above the caption “Where’s Lyle?” At one point, things looked so bleak for Johnson that he was rumored to have committed suicide, until the local radio station announced that he was very much alive.

Nevertheless, when I arrived in Princeton last January—almost a year after Sims’s death—Sheriff Johnson was feeling cocksure and Silverberg looked sheepish. Silverberg and his colleagues had begun to fear that the attorney general’s investigation, then six months old, had fizzled. And earlier that month Johnson had claimed a victory of sorts when he was acquitted of assaulting his nineteen-year-old daughter. She had filed charges after a summer incident in which her father, furious because she’d had her tongue pierced, flipped her upside down inside his squad car. When the case came to trial, however, she proved to be a reluctant witness, and the prosecution lost. Silverberg was standing outside the courtroom, notebook in hand, with other reporters, and Johnson singled him out. “David, you know I have nothing to say to you,” he said. The next day, Johnson delivered another written statement to the *News Tribune* and the Bureau County *Republican*, which both papers printed in full. The Sheriff again suggested that the allegations against him were “political attempts to smear me,” and went on to name his political enemies, among them a local judge, the prosecutor, the coroner, and the editor Tom Martin, of the Bureau County *Republican*. But he saved his harshest remarks for Silverberg.

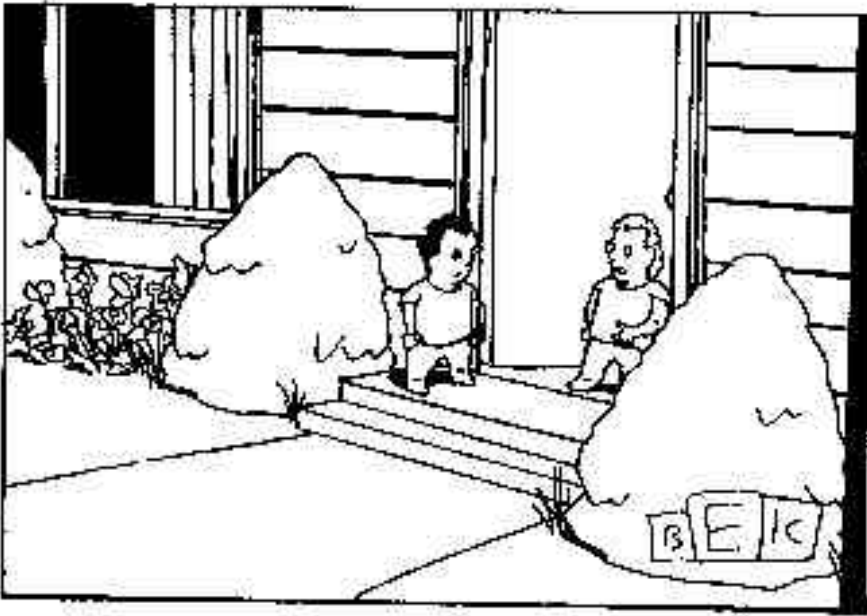
“One of the most journalistically shoddy tactics taken by David Silverberg,” the Sheriff wrote, “is that after any article, even about my personal life

only, he has reminded readers of the full litany of every allegation ever made about me. I sometimes wonder if the *News Tribune* is a newspaper or a history paper. Most shameful is that he keeps repeating that Thetis Sims died in my presence. Even Coroner Janice Wamhoff, a democrat political fanatic in my opinion, found that Thetis died from natural causes. . . . David Silverberg has been on a crusade to bring me down.” Johnson concluded by saying he would not have “any further comments on these matters.” When I stopped by to request an interview, his chief deputy and loyalist, Bob Britt, gruffly explained, “We’ve got too much bad stuff from the press. We’re not going to talk to anyone.”

Silverberg was made uncomfortable by the Sheriff’s words, and, at least initially, begged off talking with me. “I don’t want to be the center of attention,” he told me. “I realize I’m in the middle of it, and I guess there’s nothing I can do.”

On July 28th, a grand jury indicted Johnson on four felony counts, charging him with falsely reporting in campaign-finance documents that he had paid someone named Lyle Rawson twelve thousand dollars and with destroying documents relating to the raffle. If convicted, Johnson, who has pleaded not guilty to all charges, could face up to five years in prison. He had been asked in advance by the assistant attorney general handling the case to surrender himself on the Friday the indictment was issued, but he chose, instead, to leave town and visit his family in Washington State. On a tip from a Peoria *Journal Star* reporter who’d spoken with one of Johnson’s relatives, the Sheriff was arrested in Portland, Oregon, and spent the night in jail before posting a ten-thousand-dollar bond. (The same relative, who asked for anonymity, told the *Journal Star* that Johnson was headed for Mexico.) Even those who didn’t believe that the Sheriff was planning to skip the country felt that his behavior reeked of arrogance. “People here rolled their eyes,” a local radio reporter told me.

Johnson is now back in Princeton, still serving as sheriff—a position he will lose if convicted. No trial date has been set. The attorney general is investigating further allegations, and Johnson also faces a civil suit filed by Thetis Sims’s daughter



"Your priorities change once you get a new toy."

Melissa, which contends that he caused her mother's death. The suit asserts that the Sheriff distributed the defamatory letter, alleging that a young man told a police officer that he stuffed the missive into envelopes at the request of the Sheriff. The suit also contends that Johnson failed to perform C.P.R., which was part of his duty as a law-enforcement officer.

All of this has brought an unaccustomed amount of attention to Princeton, most of it unwelcome. "Everyone's ashamed," one businessman told me. "But we feel good someone's exposed him." Undeniably, the scandal has energized local journalists. A few months ago, as the story was still unfolding, I visited Hamer at her office, where she took a phone call from a source at the courthouse who'd heard more scuttlebutt about Johnson. She spoke softly because, as she later explained, the sports editor's wife is the county clerk. As she was about to hang up, I heard her tell her source, "Thanks, Deep," as if she were a Bob Woodward protégée. Hamer put off leaving the *Republican* for a higher-paying job, because she wanted to see the story through to the end. "It was a personal thing for reporters here to finish what Thetis started," Hamer told me.

Hamer has since left the paper, but Silverberg is still in his office across the street. The young reporters at the La

Salle *News Tribune* have looked to the veteran for advice and inspiration. And his stories about the Sheriff—along with the stories from the Bureau County *Republican*—have already formed the beginning of a collection at the local historical society. Silverberg, though, seems unfazed by his brief fling as crusading investigative reporter, and he seems well aware that for all the accolades tossed his way by neighbors and friends he really didn't expose all that much. That was left to the other papers and to the attorney general's investigators. But Silverberg was the first to write about the suspicions raised by Sims, and in journalism being first means a lot. Silverberg says that people now come to him with alleged dirt on one politician or another, expecting him to dig. "I think because they've seen what I can do, they think I'm capable of things I'm not capable of," he said. "I do the best I can to keep up with the news in Bureau County."

"Dave probably reached as far as he wanted to reach," his editor, Linda Kleczewski, told me. "It was a strange road for Dave to follow." Indeed, Silverberg seems relieved to have the story behind him. The last time I spoke with him, he was off to a county board meeting. "I don't think I ever talked with you much about county board redistricting," he said. "That's one of my favorites." ♦