

This Cult From the 80s Was Patient Zero for Epstein and Pizzagate Conspiracies

The FBI just released new documents about 'The Finders', which conspiracy theorists think was a CIA-linked child abuse cult. But were The Finders just misunderstood?

By Lauren Theisen

11 November 2019, 4:03pm

ShareTweetSnap

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

This article originally appeared on VICE US.

On February 4, 1987, a woman in Tallahassee, Florida called the cops on a man playing in a park with six “unkempt” children. In doing so, she unwittingly sparked a long-lasting conspiracy theory about the government’s involvement in child sex abuse that—thanks in part to recent theories surrounding Comet Ping Pong or the Jeffery Epstein’s death—still enjoys life to this day, centered around a mysterious group called The Finders.

Late last month, after years of demand from conspiracy theorists, **the FBI released** over 300 pages of documents related to The Finders—a D.C.-based organization whose origins date back before WWII but didn’t become known to the general public until that phone call in Tallahassee swept them up in the Satanic Panic of the late 80s. The police reports, memos, and archival press clippings—particularly related to the arrest of two members in 1987 on misdemeanor child-abuse charges that were dropped a few weeks later—have recaptured the attention of conspiracy theorists around the Internet.

The release of the Finders documents, after years of requests, is as good a time as any to look back at an incident that set the stage for several modern child trafficking conspiracy theories. These were among the most heavily requested documents from the FBI due to the lingering, decades-old allegation that the group was some kind of front for the CIA, which led to a coverup of the Finders’ most heinous and abusive activities. Anyone looking for a smoking gun in the docs will come away disappointed. But even just the agreed-upon facts around The Finders, and the mysteries those facts create, make for a compelling yarn in their own right.

By their own account, The Finders were a kind of alternative lifestyle commune based in the Washington, D.C. area, made up of 20 adults and 7 children around the time of the 1987 arrest. Whether they’re more Manson Family or Merry Pranksters—abusive Satanists or whimsical followers of a charismatic leader named Marion Pettie—depends on how much you’d like to read between the lines on the official reports, and which side of the conspiracy theory you fall. Whether they were evil or harmless, the existence of The Finders seemed to revolve entirely around Pettie, a high-school dropout who said later in life that the group began in the 1930s, when **he rented two apartments in D.C. and** “opened them up for anybody that wanted to come in, and the idea in my head was that they were going to teach me something about power, money, or sex.”

Pettie, who died in 2004, eventually evolved his group so that he was giving orders, and the Finders who obeyed would be forced to experiment with their lives in unconventional ways. To **Washington City Paper in 1996**, Pettie described his life's work as a "topsy-turvy university" where he learns from the "fools" who come and follow him. **Here's the Finders experience** as described by former member Robert Terrell, who met Pettie in 1971:

"Pettie used the term 'pressure cooker,'" he says. "The idea was to explore your own person and discover your own true nature. You can't do that just sitting at a desk or on a couch in a routine way. You have to have some experiences, so Pettie was good at structuring experiences from which you could learn. He called himself the 'game caller,' and what that meant was that he'd call a game for you to do something where you'd gain experience."

For Terrell, game playing ranged from working a temp accounting job in a downtown D.C. law firm to catching a flight to Japan on two hours' notice to gather information on Japanese companies and report back to Pettie. It was a subculture built on whimsy and intrigue, undergirded by a sense of tribal affiliation.

The Finders eschewed private property, taught their kids through "hands-on" experience, and were essentially invisible to the outside world until Feb. 4, 1987. When police responded to the aforementioned 911 call, they found two men in their 20s with six kids aged two to seven, all six of whom were dirty, bug-bitten, underfed, and living in a smelly van, according to police reports. The men were identified as Michael Holwell and Douglas Ammerman, and their conduct when questioned, as described in a handwritten report, was certainly suspicious:

"This writer spoke to Suspect #1, who stated that he and Suspect #2 were teachers from Washington D.C., and they were enroute to Mexico with the children. Suspect #1 stated that they were going to Mexico to set up a school for brilliant children. When asked about the parents of the children, Suspect #1 became very evasive and stated that the children's parents were in Washington D.C. Suspect #2 refused to give this writer any information, and he pretended to faint when told he was under arrest for child abuse. Suspect #2 fell face down on the ground and refused to stand up. He was carried by this writer and two other law enforcement officers and placed into a patrol vehicle."

When an officer talked to the oldest of the children, named Mary, the answers weren't any more reassuring:

SHE SAID THAT THEY ALL LIVE TOGETHER AT [REDACTED]
WASHINGTON D.C. PHONE NUMBER [REDACTED] I ASKED WHERE THEIR
MOTHERS WERE AND THEY SAID IN WASHINGTON D.C.. I ASKED THEM
WHERE WERE THEY GOING. THEY SAID THEY DIDN'T KNOW THEY
WERE JUST "GOING DIFFERENT PLACES". I ASKED WHERE THEY
WERE STAYING. THEY SAID AT CAMP GROUNDS. THEY HAVE
BEEN SLEEPING IN THE VAN AND IN A TENT. I ASKED WHEN
WAS THE LAST TIME THEY SAW THEIR MOTHERS. THEY SAID
BEFORE CHRISTMAS. THEY SAID THEY HAVE NO CHRISTMAS.
THEY ALSO STATED THEY DO NOT SEE THEIR MOTHERS MUCH
THAT THEY ARE BEING "WEANED" FROM THEIR MOTHERS, THEY
SAID THEY DON'T GO TO SCHOOL. THEY SAID THAT THE TWO
MEN TEACH THEM. I ASKED THEM WHAT THEY TEACH THEM,
THEY SAID GAMES AND HOW TO READ. THEY SAID THEY DID
THINGS FOR REWARDS. I ASKED WHAT TYPE OF THINGS THEY
GOT REWARDS FOR AND THEY SAID WORKING, THEY SAID THEY
GOT FOOD AS REWARDS. THEY SAID THE ADULTS HAD TO
DO WHAT THE "GAME CALLER" SAID AND THE ADULTS
TOLD THE CHILDREN WHAT TO DO. THEY SAID THEY WERE
NOT ALLOWED INSIDE THE HOUSE. THEY SAID THEY WERE
HUNGRY AND HAD NOT EATEN SINCE THIS MORNING. I ASKED
WHAT THEY ATE THEY SAID RAW VEGETABLES AND FRUITS.

b3
b6
b7C

The strange reference to "the game-caller"—Pettie—was incomprehensible to investigators, and made them believe the children may have been brainwashed. The report adds that the investigator asked Mary about sexual abuse, and "she became very evasive. She denied any 'bad touches' or any inappropriate behavior by the adults, became very fidgety, and wanted to end the interview."

When Tallahassee police contacted D.C. police, the story got weirder. When D.C. police found out the Florida cops had arrested Finders, "Their response was, 'Holy shit! We've been looking at these freaks!'" according to Tallahassee officer Scott Hunt in a 1988 *Washington City Paper* article reprinted in the document dump. D.C. Police believed at the time that The Finders were satanists and/or survivalists, though not necessarily criminals. Just a few months earlier in December 1986, as noted in the February search warrant, a D.C. detective found the following in the rear of the house whose address Mary had given investigators:

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 was a small very ornate gravestone propped up against the support pillar for the porch.

The timing was perfect for the national media to descend on the case. The country was in the midst of a moral panic over satanic rituals, stoked by books like the **discredited bestseller Michelle Remembers**, media-circus trials like **the McMartin Preschool case**, and completely **unfounded worries that heavy bands pledged allegiance to the devil**. (If you're interested in this ridiculous chapter of American conservatism, I **highly recommend this 1988 Geraldo Rivera NBC special**, "Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground.")

Further developments in the Finders investigation only increased the hysteria. Along with personal documents and then-uncommon computers, which featured esoteric communication between members over an early version of email, a search warrant on the Finders house in D.C. found photos of children with slaughtered goats. And in Florida, a doctor's examination of the children did not rule out sexual abuse in two of them, but didn't confirm it either.

Somehow, this led Officer Hunt to say in a press conference that "physical examinations showed sexual abuse to one of the children." As *City Paper* describes in a retrospective article from 1988, the media coverage only got nuttier:

Mike Buchanan (of D.C.'s CBS affiliate), citing police sources, reported that the Finders had "worldwide connections," used "sex and children to obtain power and money," and had two bank accounts with over \$100,000 in each one. The Glover Park residence was "a breeding house where women exercise great control." The children in custody were "like shells, zombie-like."

Officer Hunt of the Tallahassee PD didn't calm anyone down. He told the *Miami Herald*, "It is our belief these kids were not kidnapped but that their parents gave them away, because one of the rites of passage into this satanic organization is that you have to give up your rights to you children, and that the leaders of this organization can do what they want to with your children."

And he told the *Tallahassee Democrat*, "As far as we're concerned, this goes from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico ... There is no doubt in our mind that this will have at least national, if not international, repercussions."

But quickly, The Finders—specifically the biological mothers of the children found in Florida, who traveled to speak with investigators—gave explanations that apparently satisfied law enforcement. According to police reports, the mothers said that in late December the men in the group took the children to Kentucky, where they would work a construction job, while the women went to California for temporary work. When the men arrived for the project, however, they found that it was at a standstill, and instead told the women that they would take the children on an "adventure" to Florida.

According to the documents, the mothers understood why the police would be asking questions, and agreed that the men had handled the situation poorly by lying about Mexico. But they also insisted they had nothing to hide. They denied being Satanists—the photo of the slaughtered goat, they said, was similar to a biology class, and was part of a lesson for the children on where meat comes from. They insisted that they children were well fed, and they completely disbelieved any allegations that the men with their children could have committed sexual abuse.

These interviews seemingly convinced investigators that The Finders were abnormal, but not criminal. “Probably the two men-caretakers could have provided a better atmosphere for the children and been more open during interviewing by police at the scene,” the Tallahassee report allowed, before closing the case on a note of relative open-mindedness:

REGARDING THE OVERALL LIFESTYLE OF THE GROUP IT IS DIFFICULT TO
COMPILE COMPLETE INFORMATION. THE GROUP APPEARS TO BE "ONE FAMILY"
WITH ALL MEMBERS HAVING ROLES WHICH INCLUDE WORKING, MAKING DECISIONS,
AND HAVING OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES. AS TO WHETHER THIS LIFESTYLE IS
APPROPRIATE AND ACCEPTABLE IS A SUBJECTIVE MATTER. THIS INVESTIGATOR
HAS LEARNED OF NO GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS THAT APPEAR ABUSIVE OR
NEGLECTFUL.
END OF REPORT

This hoopla would have all been forgotten, and certainly these documents would not have been so heavily requested from the FBI, if not for a report written by a junior Customs Service agent in 1987 that became public in 1993 and noted that the D.C. Police’s investigation of The Finders was dropped because it became “a CIA internal matter” and classified as secret. That revelation prompted a Department of Justice investigation to discover if there was some sort of cover-up at work, which found no evidence and was closed in 1994.

The CIA itself, of course, has maintained that this is a non-story, and says that there are only two connections between the organization and The Finders: Isabelle Pettie, Marion’s wife who died in 1984, was employed by the agency from 1952-1961; and in the 80s, the CIA used a company for its officers’ computer training that happened to employ members of The Finders. In the released documents, the belief that there’s some connection between the CIA and The Finders is most prominent in some April 1987 speculation from a D.C. police officer, written up in a bizarre official report:

Summary:

It is the writers belief that the Finders organization is and has been utilized by the Central Intelligence Agency as a disinformation service spreading non essential, non-critical information to various organizations throughout the United States and overseas. This group to the most part is made up of over-educated non-achievers who lacked the inborn initiative to succeed on thier own. Therefore they fell in with a charismatic leader who gave them direction and self importance. To the most part this organization individually is harmless, However when directed and monitored by a controlling factor they are capable of destructive and illegal activities. As in any cult structure the main drive is for the group and individual values and ideaology is lost, Therefore when a member is asked to perform a task that hereto fore may have been objectionable, He or She performs this mission for the good of the group.

As to the abuse of the children; I do not think that child abuse was a planned tactic of this group, but as in any cross section of society, sick and demented subjects belong to a cult as well. I do believe that the shaping of the children is a planned experiment of this group as in the case of the Nazi's they strove for a perfect society, thereby in thier own way tried to form a group of children and ultimately adults that did not suffer from the ill's of normal society, but took only the benefits that afforded them perfection.

Lastly I do not feel that the Finders have disbanded as reported by thier leaders be instead, as reported in thier master plan, have appeared to disband to prevent further detection by law enforcement or social service officials. I firmly believe that this group should be monitored in a general sense and if further developments occur they should be noted.

Because of the assumption that there must be something bigger behind Marion Pettie's band of weirdos, rumors about The Finders have outlived the group itself, which is believed to have died out with Pettie. But the most damning point against the CIA conspiracy comes from a 1993 FBI memo from their reopened investigation into the handling of the Finders case, which revealed no CIA interference in Florida when the child-abuse investigation would have been taking place.

On 11/16/93, contact with Tallahassee Police Chief MEL TUCKER revealed that there was never any outside agency either in or outside the United States intelligence community who contacted anyone in his department with an attempt to influence in any way their investigation of the FINDERS GROUP. All evidence in the case that was obtained was either returned to its owners or otherwise destroyed.

The lingering doubt about the truth behind The Finders can maybe best be explained by the question, "Why the hell else would two men in their 20s take a bunch of kids who aren't theirs down to Florida just to hang out and explore?" In the search for an answer, and in light of the many other conspiracies theories that implicate high government figures in sexual abuse—i.e. Pizzagate or Jeffery Epstein's so-called suicide—The Finders become a sort of Patient Zero. If these documents had provided some kind of proof that U.S. Intelligence was covering up sexual abuse in the '80s, the thinking in some corners of the internet goes, it wouldn't have just shed light on an injustice from decades ago. It also would have provided much-needed support for the FBI/CIA conspiracies of today.

Of course, that the FBI's documents don't include a smoking gun for a CIA coverup probably isn't going to change the minds of many conspiracy theorists. Motherboard has found many tweets and blog posts saying as much, and a page about the Finders on a conspiracy theory

website notes that there is “clear evidence of suppression of an investigation into a child trafficking ring with blatantly obvious ties to US military and intelligence organizations.”

But in the absence of anything but old allegations, the theory that The Finders were somehow a part of the CIA looks more like an effort to impose some sense onto a mostly nonsensical group. Providing support for that logic is Wendell Minnick, an author and researcher of the group who said this to *City Paper* in 1996, **as the group was disintegrating**:

“The Finders would love you to think they’re a CIA front, but I would say they’re really nothing,” says Minnick. “You’re going to hear a lot of bullshit on the Finders, because they lie. These are dysfunctional adults, but they’re all working their asses off. They’re constantly working on some project. If you have a cult, the best way to control people is to keep them busy, to keep their minds occupied—if you have people standing around doing nothing, then they start thinking.”

You can poke holes in either side of this conspiracy theory if you set your mind to it, and maybe that’s just how Marion Pettie would have liked it. With its key figure long since passed, and the FBI's dossier now available for public consumption, it's unlikely that anyone searching for a satisfying conclusion to the saga of this strange cult will ever find it.

TAGGED:

FBI

PIZZAGATE

FOIA

THE FINDERS