

The Zebra Murders: A Season of Killing, Racial Madness, and Civil Rights

By Beta Upsilon Boulé
Archon Prentice Earl Sanders and Bennett Cohen
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The fall of 1973 was a turbulent time in the Bay Area. As more black people entered the professional ranks in both the private sector and civil service, the quest for racial justice in the workplace was gaining momentum, and San Francisco's police and fire departments were not excluded. (I was concluding my first year as a young corporate lawyer in the city and had just started to become active in the Civil Rights Movement.) At the same time, the social fabric of the Bay Area was being tested by a number of radical groups, including the Weathermen, the Black Liberation Army, the Black Panthers and the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA).

This was the setting for a series of racially motivated murders that are the subject of a new book, *The Zebra Murders*, by Prentice Earl Sanders and Bennett Cohen (now an Archon in Beta Upsilon Boulé, San Francisco), who ultimately became San Francisco's first African American chief of police. The book provides a chilling historical account of a city terrorized by random shootings of whites by blacks even as its police force perpetuated a racist status quo that bred resistance and radical dissent.

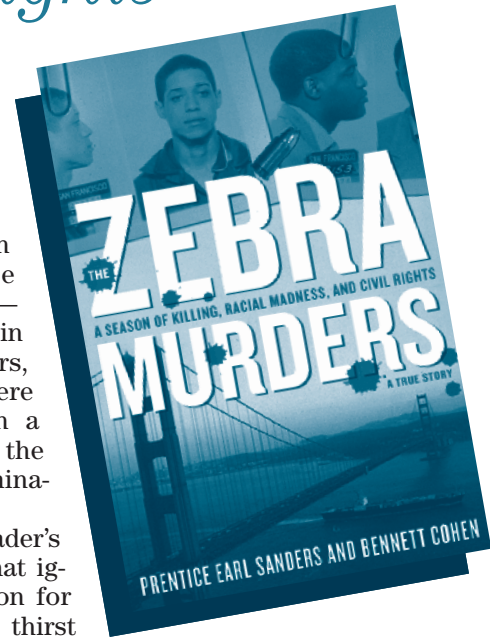
Sanders, a young homicide detective at the time, and his veteran partner, the late Rotea Gilford—the first black

inspector in the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD)—became key players in solving these murders, even though they were also the plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging the department's discrimination against blacks.

To enhance the reader's comprehension of what ignited Sanders's passion for police work and his thirst for racial justice, the book revisits his early childhood in Nacogdoches, Texas. Growing up in the segregated South undoubtedly gave Sanders a perspective that prepared him to transform obstacles into opportunities. At age ten, he migrated from Texas to Los Angeles with his mother and stepfather, but they experienced "the same peripatetic pattern of living they had had in Texas," with his mother's continuing her work as a domestic, and his stepfather's continuing his irresponsible and violent behavior. Several years later, his mother, lying on her deathbed at age thirty-three, made thirteen-year-old Sanders promise that he would finish high school, get a college degree, and never go to jail.

With virtually no resources, he journeyed to San Francisco to live with an uncle, who turned out to be rather wild. As a result, Sanders soon found himself living alone and fending for himself, doing odd jobs as he pursued his high-school diploma. He recalls that—unlike racism down South, which was open and overt—in San Francisco, "racism came at you with a smile." Enduring against all odds, Sanders finished high school, enlisted in the military, and later obtained his degree from Golden Gate University. He had fulfilled his promise.

Sanders joined the SFPD in 1964, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. He and his partner became active in the Officers for Justice (OFJ), an association of SFPD black police officers that sued the department in federal court in 1973. The black-on-white shootings in the city began in November of that same year, creating an atmosphere of fear and panic. (Ultimately, fifteen people would be murdered and eight wounded before the spree ended in April 1974.) Because of the two officers' activities with the OFJ, the police department's white power elite were reluctant to include them in the investigation of the shootings, code-





Bennett Cohen

named “Zebra.” But the SFPD also knew that it could ill afford to exclude two outstanding officers who had deep roots in the black community.

The police were having little luck in their search for the culprit, or culprits, behind the black-on-white attacks. Sanders was starting to suspect, however, that members of the Nation of Islam’s Temple 26 might be involved. But even with camera surveillance of the temple, there wasn’t enough evidence for a search warrant. Moreover, because of the limited number of black police officers in the department, there was little chance of gaining enough undercover intelligence to determine whether members of the temple might be involved. As Sanders explains, “The same thing that sparked the killing was getting in the way of solving it. As hateful as the killers were, it was racism that lit the fire that burned inside them. And it was racism that kept the department so white that we didn’t have enough black officers to infiltrate a group like the one we were after.”

Frustrated by the inability to crack the case, San Francisco mayor Joe Alioto and the SFPD instituted what Sanders describes as one of the “biggest dragnets in U.S. history.” The plan, which was conceived without the knowledge of the department’s black officers, required that every black male out after dark anywhere in San Francisco be stopped, questioned and searched. Afterward, the subject would be given a “Zebra card,” meaning that he had been cleared and no further search was needed if the police stopped him again.

In the eyes of the black community, it was South African apartheid imported to San Francisco—and, says Sanders, “it was crazy” and “illegal.” Leading the chorus of protest was Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett (an Archon at Alpha Gamma Boulé), publisher of the *Sun-Reporter*. He used his newspaper to assail the mayor and police department, while Joseph B. Williams, a veteran San Francisco NAACP lawyer (who later became a member of Beta Upsilon Boulé), filed papers in federal court contesting the legality of the sweeps. The two



Archon Prentice Earl Sanders

men were joined by the feisty Reverend Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Church, who contended that San Francisco had placed the black community under what amounted to a police state, thereby creating “the possibility of a racial war.”

On the one hand, the white community feared the Zebra killers; on the other, the black community felt humiliated by the police tactics. Similar tensions existed between white and black police officers. The situation was volatile. Thanks, however, to the legal skills of attorney Williams, who was assisted by a young lawyer, William Hastie, Jr. (later an Archon of Beta Upsilon Boulé), the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California quickly ruled that the searches were unconstitutional.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the SFPD received a telephone call shortly before the court’s ruling that gave it a badly needed break. That call, which came from someone who was very familiar with Temple 26, led to the arrest of several suspects who were eventually convicted in the Zebra killings.

Reflecting on this frightening period in San Francisco’s history, one could surmise that the Zebra murders were just about serial killing, but in fact they were driven by alienation, hate and a deep-rooted belief that blacks were at war with an unjust power structure designed to oppress and destroy them. Regardless of the motive behind the attacks, Sanders’s conclusion that “the relationship over the years between our police and the black community is so illustrative of the problem” resonates. He is also correct when he says of the break in the case, “When people start to feel like they’ve got something worth protecting . . . they’ll do all they can to help a police force, because they feel like they have a piece of the pie, too.”

Archons and Archousai will find themselves immersed in this fascinating account of true crime, history and politics that will soon be made into a movie. Ω