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TODAY

THE  SUN



Shedding light: Lynne Sachs used the equipment in her office, including her 16 mm Bolex camera, to make "Investigation of a Flame." CHIAKI KAWAJIRI: SUN STAFF

IGNITING A MOVEMENT

By CARL SCHOETTLER
SUN STAFF

The Catonsville Nine have become legendary in the three decades since the group's May 1968 "action" against the war in Vietnam, perhaps the most famous protest during an epoch of dissent and discord in the United States.

Filmmaker Lynne Sachs takes a fresh look at the seven men and two women who made up the Catonsville Nine, their friends and their detractors in her impressionistic documentary, "Investigation of a Flame," which opens the Baltimore Film Festival tonight.

Sachs, who has been making films since 1989, moved to Catonsville about three years ago when her husband, Mark, also a filmmaker, took a teaching post at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

She began hearing Catonsville Nine stories. She heard people once arrived at UMBC believing Catonsville was a hotbed

Lynne Sachs' new documentary on the Catonsville Nine shows us an era of protest beginning with soul-searching and civility.

of radicalism because of the Nine. She started reading about their protest, and she was hooked. She began looking up the people caught up in the action, and her project began taking shape.

Howard Zinn, the historian who wrote "A People's History of the United States," told her that the Catonsville Nine "became

a kind of model for all the others. There was the Milwaukee Fourteen and the Camden 28 and the Boston Five."

All the "Number People," as they were then called, mostly disparagingly, and all the others who protested against the war, went to jail and helped bring about peace.

As a reminder for people for whom the war in Vietnam seems as remote as the Peloponnesian War, the Nine entered a Catonsville draft board, took records and burned them in a trash container in the parking lot.

The Catonsville Nine may have been models for the dissent that followed, but their protest was the most civil of disobedience.

"The myth of the '60s is that anybody who cared had long hair and was on psychedelic drugs," says Sachs, 39. "They were living an alternative lifestyle, so they had these alternative ideas."

But in archival footage she unearthed, mostly unseen for three decades, the action unfolds almost as a religious rite, purification by fire, perhaps. The [See *Nine*, 5E]

Fanning a 'Flame'

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Nine clasp hands and recite the Lord's Prayer. They apologize for jostling a couple of clerks. They finally file quietly into a paddy wagon as a cop counts them off, "... seven, eight, nine."

The whole action takes perhaps 10 minutes.

"I was kind of intrigued by it as a kind of performance piece," Sachs says.

She's not a political documentarian. Her style is impressionistic, her images lyrical, as Jed Dietz, the director of the Baltimore Film Festival suggests, even poetic. She found her closest rapport with Daniel Berrigan, for example, when they talked about his poetry.

"To me it was like they were in their costumes, their clerical collars and the women in their skirts," she says, of the action. "I think it was very well thought out. It was saying that they were people from Middle America, citizens of the United States who were passionately against the war."

"And they were older, too," Sachs adds.

Daniel Berrigan was the oldest at 47, Philip was next at 44, all the rest except Tom Lewis, 28, and David Darst, 26, were in their 30s. They were not counterculture hippies, rebelling against their parents.

Darst died in an automobile crash in October 1969. Mary Moylan, who was in her late 30s in May 1968, went underground for nearly 10 years after the trial. She died alone and infirm in April 1995.

The tone in the archival footage is quiet, almost somber. The Nine seem a bit uneasy. They were uneasy, even Daniel Berrigan.

He recalls for Sachs that his brother was awaiting sentencing in the 1967 Baltimore Four protest, where he helped pour blood over draft files at the Custom House. Daniel was a professor at Cornell University when Philip came up in the spring of 1968.

"He said some of us are going to do it again, and you're invited," Daniel Berrigan says. "Whereupon I started quaking in my boots."

Berrigan's face in close-up in Sachs' film is a glowing landscape of the furrows and planes earned in a lifetime of activism and poetry. He will be 80 next Wednesday.

"It had never really occurred to me that I would ever take part in something that serious as far as consequences went," he says. "The idea of putting myself in the furnace of the king ... was pretty shocking and new."

"So I told Philip give me a few days to think this over and pray for it, and I'll let you know. So I did. I went through some pretty se-

completed her thesis film for a masters of fine arts degree from the San Francisco Art Institute. (She received her undergraduate degree in history at Brown University.)

She'd grown up in Memphis, Tenn., and her first film was "Sermons and Sacred Pictures: The Life and Work of Rev. L. O. Taylor." He was a fiery African-American minister from Memphis who made his own films of black life in the south in the 1930s and 1940s.

She's made a half-dozen movies since then, notably "Which Way Is East." Her sister, Dana, lived in Hanoi for about five years, fell in love with Vietnam and produced her own book: "The House on Dream Street: Memoirs of an American Woman in Vietnam."

Sachs visited her for a month or so in 1992. They traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, and Sachs came back with the makings of a film about her relationship with her sister and Vietnamese culture. Her trip to Hanoi also gave her a certain cachet with the Catonsville Nine.

For the Catonsville film, she often had to catch her subjects more or less on the run. She interviewed Philip Berrigan in her car.

"Which isn't the most visually alluring thing," she says. "He was only out of prison for about a year in this whole project, and he had warned me there was going to be another action and either I was going to talk to him or he was going to be out of commission."

Philip Berrigan is in jail today. He's serving out a sentence for banging on some military airplanes at the National Guard base at Middle River in an anti-nuclear "action" aimed at highlighting U.S. use of depleted uranium weapons.

"I called him one day," Sachs says, "and I said can I interview you sometime in the next week, and it was raining. And he said you have to do it today, right now, because I paint houses for a living. If you want to do it we have to do it now because I can't paint the house I was going to paint."

"I had none of my equipment. Nobody to help me. I had to pick him up in my car and go to the Knights of Columbus building."

The building housed the Catonsville draft board office in 1968.

"He wouldn't go inside. So we had to do it in the car," she says. "This was the closest he wanted to get to that building and to those memories and to that time."

"I can't achieve identity with the poor except when I'm in jail," Berrigan says. "When I start feeling sorry with myself, I always tend to think about what it would mean if I stopped. That's a terrible prospect, and I've never been able to



Still at it: Phillip Berrigan (center) protests at the Federal Probation Office in 1999.

says in the letter. "I think if we're serious about changing this society, that's how we have to see ourselves. We're all out on bail, and let's all stay out."

Sachs caught Tom Lewis, the artist who was at both the Catonsville Nine and Baltimore Four protests with Berrigan, coming out of prison.

"He was walking out the door," she says, when she showed up to interview him. His wife, Andrea, and daughter, Nora, then 6, were there, too. Nora, a lovely child, blonde and blue-eyed, nestles in his arms during the film interview and walks with her father in the woods as he answers questions.

Lewis was in Allenwood for an anti-nuclear "action" at the Bath Iron Works in Maine, where he and Philip Berrigan and Susan Crane from Jonah House and three others poured blood on an Aegis destroyer, hammered on the components of missile launchers and unfurled their Prince of Peace Plowshares banner.

The Catonsville Nine survivors all remain social and political activists. And for that matter Mary Murphy, a clerk at the draft board now in her middle 90s, still believes she was doing the right thing.

"I was sold on the idea we were trying to fight communism in that part of the world," she told Sachs.

Steve Sachs (no relation to the filmmaker), who led the prosecution of the Nine, hasn't changed his position one whit in 33 years. He opposed the war, but his belief in the sanctity of the law seemed and seems immutable: The Nine erred when they took the law into their own hands at Catonsville. In the film, he reads from St. Thomas More, the great Catholic humanist lawyer beheaded by Henry VIII, to argue his case.

"I didn't feel any sense of guilt or regret at prosecuting what I regarded as excessive, arrogant attempts to inflict their views on others," says Steve Sachs. "That's not the way democracy is supposed to work."

Steve Sachs and Mary Murphy

"Jed Dietz said let's bring everybody in and see what happens," Sachs says. "Let's put all these live wires together and see what incendiary events we get."

"None of them have seen the movie," she says. "And they're all coming."