

Whistle blower tries to restore his reputation

By Judith Berne
staff writer

HE LOOKS OLDER than his 48 years. Arthur Suchodolski of West Bloomfield has spent the last six years attempting to restore his reputation as an internal auditor and prove the truth of his allegations against Michigan Consolidated Gas Co., from which he says he was fired.

He's considered a so-called "whistle-blower."

"It's kind of a lonely battle," the white-haired Suchodolski said. "I was just right in my prime. The thing that helped me the most is I have a strong wife."

A state law protecting "whistle blowers" came too late for him. It was effective March 1, 1981.

His is among a number of cases depicted in a recent book by Columbia University law professor Alan F. Westin, entitled "Whistle Blowing, Loyalty and Dissent in the Corporation."

He claimed evidence of mismanagement and possible fraud in Michigan Consolidated's credit division, which was ignored by top company officials.

"Instead of seeking to correct the problems I had uncovered, management first reassigned me to another position and later fired me," Suchodolski maintained.

"NONE OF Mr. Suchodolski's claims have been found to have any merit by any court or administrative agency," reported Sondra Byrnes, director of corporate communications for Michigan Consolidated, when asked about Suchodolski's claims.

"We at the time asked Arthur Anderson, an independent accounting firm, to conduct an independent review of our internal procedures. And they found the procedures to be proper."

"It's our position his case has no merit whatsoever," Ms. Byrnes said. Although he is an experienced ac-

countant, Suchodolski was unable to find a permanent job for a year after his dismissal in the spring of 1976. He had a wife, Joanne, and four sons — Tim, Mike, Gary and Allen — to support.

"My career as an internal auditor was effectively destroyed," he said. For the past four years, he has been controller of the Hack Shoe Co. in Birmingham.

"It's 30 percent under what I would be making for a large company," Suchodolski said. "But up to this point, it's been steady and that's something to be thankful for."

"He's the best we've ever had as controller," reported James Hack, company vice-president. "There's more interest and input than anyone who has ever been in that position."

SUCHODOLSKI PAINTED this scenario.

After a number of years as an internal auditor, first for a Detroit accounting firm and later a division of the General Motors Corp. in Flint, he accepted a position as senior internal auditor for Michigan Consolidated in September 1972.

A member of the Institute of Internal Auditors, he took the organization's code of ethics seriously: to reveal such material facts which if not revealed could either distort the report of the results of operations under review or conceal unlawful practice.

During an operational audit of the company's credit division, he discovered that little attempt was made to collect on delinquent welfare accounts since there was a state guarantee of payment.

"With its incentive to collect on delinquent accounts removed by the state's guarantee of payment, Michigan Consolidated took no action to clear up arrears from welfare customers," Suchodolski said.

"The losers in this arrangement were the taxpayers of the state of



photos by JOHN STANIS/staff photographer

"It's kind of a lonely battle," the white-haired Suchodolski says of his struggle to clear his reputation as an accountant. "I was just right in my prime. The thing that helped me the most is I have a strong wife. . . . Instead of seeking to correct the problems I had uncovered, management first reassigned me to another position and later fired me."

Michigan and Michigan Consolidated's paying customers."

Suchodolski said he was terminated as a result of his findings, which management did not correct. "You disturb the operations of this office," he reported he was told. His firing was effective the following day, with administrative leave paid for a month.

ALTHOUGH HE suffered a period of depression, he rebounded with a commitment to get the facts out. He considered the gas company's failure to take action on his discoveries a "breach of its public trust."

He further aimed to clear his professional reputation.

He notified state officials who asked to meet with him.

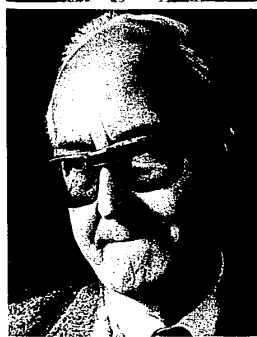
In late 1977, the Michigan Depart-

ment of Social Services acknowledged almost \$20 million in duplicate heating payments, as reported in a Detroit Free Press article. "The article detailed the abuses I had uncovered almost two years earlier," Suchodolski related.

He also testified under oath against a proposed \$110 million rate increase for Michigan Consolidated, citing that the uncollected money was partially responsible for the request.

The Michigan Public Service Commission limited the increase to \$19.7 million in action taken in September 1978.

HE HEADED for the Michigan Department of Civil Rights and the courts in an effort to re-enter his profession. But the Civil Rights Commission de-



Dean Babb and Don Melchert of the West Bloomfield assessing office review parcels that might receive an assessment hike in 1982.

nied charges of age discrimination against Michigan Consolidated.

He lost his initial Wayne County Circuit Court civil suit, charging the company's act of firing with only 24 hours' notice, had:

• Decreased his right to employment.

• Constituted age discrimination.

• Acted as a retaliatory discharge.

• Constituted unlawful state action, since the company is a public utility.

The court ruled he had no basis on which to sue. The judge said an employer can terminate an employer-employee relationship at any time for any reason, barring statutory protections or written agreements to the contrary. He appealed.

IN 1980, the Michigan Court of

Appeals ruled he had the basis of a law suit on the point of age discrimination. Suchodolski said, "They didn't want to rule on other points of the suit — a higher court should make that decision."

He is not so patiently waiting for a Michigan Supreme Court decision which will determine whether his case is an exception to the general rule that an employer can dismiss an employee at will.

The April 1981 appeal asks for an exception where the discharge contravenes public policy, such as when an accountant is terminated for his attempt to bring deficient and potentially fraudulent accounting practices to the attention of his superior.

A high court opinion is expected this spring or summer.

INSIDE ANGLES

A QUARTER CENTURY of driving a school bus deserves some reward; Farmington School District driver Barbara Mapley will be honored by colleagues today at the 10 Mile Community School. She will receive a gift, plaque and a cake. Congratulations, Barbara, we're proud of you.

YET ANOTHER skate-a-thon is on tap at the Bonaventure Skating Center in Farmington Hills. On Feb. 28 the rink will be working in cooperation with the American Cancer Society. Entry forms are available at Bonaventure. Bonaventure hopes to raise \$2,000. Prizes will be awarded to the skaters who turn in the most money in each county. These winners will receive either roller skates or ice skates, while first- and second-place trophies will go to the top money raisers at each participating rink. Any participant who turns in \$5 or more will receive an official skate-a-thon certificate of participation.

A KIND WORD goes out to Farmington School District bus drivers from Farmington resident Nancy Kuzma who recently dropped off a letter at the Farmington Observer office. She and her husband, Dick, believe the drivers should be given special recognition for the job done during the snow-ridden weather. "I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Farmington Public School bus drivers the care and concern that they have exhibited while getting our children to and from school during the treacherous weather. Their job is certainly not an easy one under the best of circumstances and they don't usually receive much recognition. We appreciate their expertise and thank them for the good job they are doing."

OAKWAY SYMPHONY of Farmington Hills' fourth-annual competition for young artists boasts several firsts. The competition, which grants awards of more than \$3,000 to talented musicians, is the first which produced ties for third and fourth prize, first in which husband and wife placed, and first in which two past winners placed. \$1,000 went to Jamal Rossi, a saxophonist who is in the graduate music program at the University of Michigan. D. Glenn Basham, a violinist, is the recipient of the \$750 second prize. A Rochester resident, Basham graduated from North Carolina's School of Arts and is a soloist with the Palm Beach Symphony. A third-place prize of \$750 is split between 19-year-old Curt Christensen, a Juilliard student and soloist with the Flint Chamber Orchestra and Leelo Basham, wife of Glenn Basham, the second-prize winner. Leelo, 15, graduated from the North Caroli-

na School of the Arts and is presently studying with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The second tie for the fourth prize of \$750 was split between Susan Reden, 23, a graduate of Indiana's School of Music and David Eversen, 22, of Livonia. A senior at the University of Michigan, he plays French horn with the Flint Symphony.

THE SMELL OF GREASEPAINT will be part of Farmington Hills resident Molly Sallen's life beginning this week. She has been cast in the part of Mrs. Rubin in the Will-O-Way Repertory production of "The Majority of One." Will-O-Way's production, under the direction of the theater's artistic director Celia Merrill Turner, is scheduled for Friday and Saturday evenings, Feb. 12 and March 6. Curtain time is 8:30 p.m. Will-O-Way is located at 775 West Long Lake, between Telegraph and Lahar, Bloomfield Hills. Tickets are \$5. For reservations and theater parties call 644-4418.

OPTIONS FOR WOMEN in the 80's — Credit, Finance, Employment — will be presented by the West Bloomfield-Farmington League of Women Voters from 10 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 27, at the Farmington Hills branch library, 32737 12 Mile. Speakers and topics will be Margaret Brown, certified financial planner, "Strategies for Financial Independence," Marilyn Gamber, credit counselor, "Give Yourself Credit," Joan Maloney, displaced-homemaker program counselor, "Marketing Your Skills." Registration is open to the public by calling 681-6264 or 851-3847.

MANY MICHIGAN RESIDENTS have had it with drunk drivers and the death they cause on the highways. MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers) is moving into the state and is garnering support in the area. On Feb. 16, Candy Lightner, founder and president, will be in Detroit to make an appearance on the Kelley and Company TV show. Persons interested in joining this group should write to PO Box 9145, Livonia 48151. Statistics from 1980 show that 287 of the 548 fatal auto crashes in the Wayne, Oakland and Macomb area were alcohol related.

CONGRATULATIONS TO the Farmington Historical Society which has set a historical landmark of its own. The group will celebrate its 20th anniversary Feb. 24 with a celebration at the historic Botsford Inn. Persons interested in attending a future historical society meeting should mark off March 24 on their calendar. The group will meet in the downtown library on Liberty to hear Weldon Petz talk about the big band era.



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