

## A Case of Coors

The brewery may have gone too far in trying to prevent sexual harassment.

By Juliet Wittman

When Coors Brewing Company worker [redacted] was summoned to a meeting with his supervisors in April 1996, he thought it was because he'd been called "nigger" by a co-worker. Instead, to his surprise, the topic was sexual harassment. Coors had been sued over the issue in 1994 and — like many major corporations — had held sensitization sessions and issued a steady stream of admonitory memos ever since.

[redacted] was asked if he had ever "touched anyone at work." He searched his memory. Several years earlier, he had stepped on a woman's foot, he said, then placed his hand on her shoulder in apology. Oh, and there was the incident with his friend Alexa Lee Carter. He'd touched Carter's breast some time ago — by accident, he said — and she'd been angry. But they'd settled the issue and been able to resume their friendship.

What about Yvonne Mannon?

He was puzzled. He and Mannon had done some friendly joshing. He may have occasionally put his arm around her shoulder. But Mannon was a pretty raunchy lady. He'd once asked if he could ride one of her horses sometime, and she'd responded that he'd have to ride her first. She made jokes about his sexual equipment. "She's got one of the nastiest mouths in the whole brewery," he told the interrogator.

Over the next couple of weeks, the interviews and questions continued. "Did you ever try to grope [Yvonne]...in her genital area?" James was asked. He said no.

On May 14, [redacted] was fired. Mannon had accused him of sexually harassing her 400 or 500 times. She said she was afraid of him — that he grabbed her almost every time he saw her, whether or not anyone else was present, called her "sugar-baby," bumped her from behind. She said he'd once almost raped her, fumbling inside her top, pulling her pants down to her steel-toed boots.

In the early months of 1996, the conditioning department, where Mannon worked, was in an uproar. A woman who had recently begun working there had set up a meeting with supervisor Tara Scherschligt to discuss various matters, sexual harassment primary among them; this woman had already told Scherschligt that Mannon was sometimes called a "bitch" and that one of her co-workers made cracks about a pervasive smell of tuna fish when Mannon was around. But there were other issues, too, involving other co-workers: theft, excessive drinking, time-card fraud. Worried about what Scherschligt would be told, workers in the department turned on one another. Mannon said later that her longtime work partner, Ralph Montanez, threatened to shoot her if she said too

much, and that two other men, Rich Paris and Mike Sponsel, locked her up one afternoon and threatened to kill both her and her daughter if she told on them.

In all, Coors fired eight workers, including Paris and Sponsel. Four were fired for sexual harassment, four for other kinds of misconduct.

Mannon left work in a panic. The next day she called to say she was unable to return. Later she brought up accusations of sexual harassment. Coors granted Mannon paid sick leave and began an investigation.

On April 4 the company received a letter addressed to the security department: "Mr. investigator: Nice try asswipe. You and your cop bud are deadmen...Kids are funner to kill. Or Tara."

Panic ensued. Several employees, including Mannon, were housed in a hotel over Easter weekend. Coors installed a security system in Mannon's home and paid for several months of guard services for her. The company said it spent around \$600,000 in all to protect her and investigate her allegations.

Mannon was interviewed several times. It was only on April 23, after three or four sessions and in front of Jefferson County detectives, that she mentioned [redacted]. She said she'd reported his attacks on her several times and to several supervisors. According to her, Ralph Montanez (who was himself being investigated at the time for theft and time-card fraud) had witnessed them. Alexa Lee Carter, too, had

the investigator "cut the questioning short, stood up and said I was free to leave."

Montanez corroborated Mannon's charges but admitted under questioning that he himself had never seen [redacted] put his hands on her.

A woman who had been quoted by Coors investigators as saying [redacted] had once touched her breast later clarified that this was untrue. She had been speaking of someone else entirely.

Alexa Lee Carter, who according to Mannon had witnessed the attempted rape, said she had seen nothing.

In accordance with company policy, [redacted] was allowed to contest his firing in front of an appeals board. The board met in June, and supervisor Scherschligt gave members an overview of the situation. She said she had been approached in March by employees concerned about "harassment, theft, time-card frauds, threats on their lives." [redacted] asked her quietly to clarify that he was not under suspicion of theft, fraud or threatening anyone's life, but she refused to do so. She went on to say that the names of some witnesses would be withheld because they were under police protection, that one of the victims "has gone to management, HR and Women at Coors [a women's-rights organization at Coors], and the situation was never resolved," and that the "main" victim was "afraid for her life." In fact, Mannon was waiting nearby, ready to come forward if she was needed.

The case against [redacted] was presented with the help of several broken-up and unattributed quotes, some supposedly from eyewitnesses to [redacted]'s assaults. The board asked about other instances of harassment and was told that the investigators "feel that at least one other woman has been subjected to this type of behavior by [redacted]."

The appeals board upheld [redacted]'s termination.

In addition, the company pressed the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department into pursuing a criminal investigation, and [redacted] was eventually charged with six counts of third-degree sexual assault. Thirteen months later, in June 1997, the Jefferson County District Attorney's Office dismissed the charges.

Over his 24 years with Coors, [redacted] had received good evaluations and had worked his way up to a salary of \$59,000 a year. At 57, he was three years away from a comfortable — and, most of his co-workers would say, well-earned — retirement. (Forty-two of them signed a letter of support for him.)

He filed suit against the company in May 1997, alleging, among other things, race and gender discrimination, breach of contract and defamation. The suit also named Tara Scherschligt and Yvonne Mannon.

In November of that same year, despite the investigation, paid sick leave, disability leave, workers' compensation and security system Coors had provided for her, Mannon also filed suit against the company for sexual harassment, presenting the press with a series of lurid accusations.

She told a *Denver Post* reporter that male co-workers had attempted to drown her in a beer tank, threatened to suffocate her in a granary bin and promised "a shotgun blast to the back of your head" if she reported their actions. For the most part, the media described the two lawsuits as proof of just how difficult things had become for employees. The *Rocky Mountain News* lamented

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Jagged little Pilsner: After he was fired from Coors, [redacted] sued his employer and the woman who accused him of harassment.

been a witness. Carter had stumbled on the near-rape, Mannon said, and told [redacted] to get his hands off Mannon. Carter had also threatened to tell his wife.

But despite its cost, the investigation was hardly thorough. Co-workers who [redacted] had said would exonerate him were not questioned. Nor were most of the supervisors Mannon claimed to have alerted (later they would say they knew nothing of any sexual-assault claims). The one supervisor who was approached by investigators said Mannon had indeed come to him with a couple of concerns, but none of them were about [redacted]. Rico Gallegos, a co-worker, commented that the investigator who questioned him was "more interested in changing my attitude than telling the truth." Gallegos had tried to give this man information about Mannon — who, Gallegos swore in an affidavit, often went out to breakfast on company time, spoke volubly and graphically about her preferences in anal and oral sex and had once grabbed a male co-worker's crotch — but