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## Ex-sheriff faces child porn charges

He is accused of downloading illegal pictures from the Internet

By JEFFREY M. BARKER, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER  
Published 10:00 p.m., Wednesday, August 27, 2003

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TACOMA -- Former Pierce County Sheriff [Mark French](#) was charged yesterday with seven counts of possession of child pornography downloaded from the Internet.

French was allegedly looking at child pornography the morning of April 24 when police served a search warrant at his Tacoma houseboat.

Just two days earlier, he had erased data stored on his personal computer, according to court documents. Yesterday's charges stem from the pictures police say French was looking at when they knocked on his door that April morning.

French's arrest stems from a years-long investigation into child pornography Internet sites that began with a federal investigation into a Russian-based site and that has spread to cities across Western Washington.

Tacoma police in April received information from investigators in Dallas and served search warrants at about a dozen locations in the city, Tacoma police spokesman [Mark Fulghum](#) said yesterday.

Statewide, the Seattle-based Internet Crimes Against Children task force has investigated nearly 1,000 cases.

French, 54, spent 30 years as a law enforcement officer, serving as sheriff in Pierce County from July 1997 to June 2000.

French -- as are the suspects in other Tacoma cases -- is only suspected of having accessed the illegal pictures; he is not charged with producing or distributing them.

Possession of child pornography is a Class C felony. French is scheduled for arraignment Sept. 10 in Pierce County Superior Court.

Attorney [Donald Winskill](#), who represented French when his computer was seized last spring, could not be reached after business hours yesterday for comment.

Calls to Pierce County Prosecutor [Gerald Horne](#)'s office yesterday were not returned.

Detectives who searched the computer French shared with his wife say they found 139 images of teenagers and preteens, many depicting them nude or engaged in sexual acts.

The images were downloaded from a site on which users can store photographs and invite others to look at them. Detectives say images from that site were downloaded onto French's computer as they walked onto his property to serve the search warrant that allowed them to confiscate the computer.

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But French had just two days earlier run a program called Evidence Eliminator, which deleted all Internet-related material prior to April 22, 2003, according to court documents. A similar program called Internet Washer Pro was also installed on the computer, detectives said.

Detectives also say they found on the computer a deleted e-mail French had sent in October 2002 to the administrator of a "lolitas" Web site called "incesttaboo" seeking help accessing that site and listing the member ID he'd been assigned.

The [News Tribune of Tacoma](#) previously reported on a search warrant served at French's residence that alleged that French's credit card was used 22 times between June and August 2001 to access three child pornography Internet sites. The credit card was denied each time, the warrant said.

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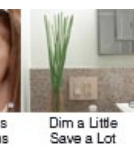
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