Getting rid of ‘garbage’

By Carol Pogash

The Intelligence Unit of the San Francisco Police Department keeps files on 50,000 persons, down from a high of 100,000 a year and a half ago.

Most of the people on file are San Franciscans and many of them have no arrest record.

The police are cleaning out intelligence files as well as pruning general criminal records. This will eliminate 50,000 names from the files.

“There's a lot of garbage in our files. They should be purged,” said Lt. Paul Lawler, commanding officer of the Intelligence Unit, who is in the process of a purge.

Records, he said, date back to the 1900s and include actors and actresses who were questioned during the McCarthy era, members of the Wobblies, civil rights demonstrators, anti-war activists, car thieves, protesters from San Francisco State, drug dealers, white collar criminals, known and suspected members of organized crime as well as the department's entire “red file.”

During the last year and a half Lawler's officers have been examining the department's files, discarding those they believe don't belong.

“It’s expected and it’s in-cumbent upon us to take a new posture. We are not looking under beds as was done in the Forties and Fifties.”

“Just because someone has a view that does not necessarily agree with the government we don’t consider him a dissident or a militant,” Lawler said.

Lawler's purging process requires that each “card and each resume” be gone over. The files on movie stars, Wobblies, S.F. State student activists and persons who died years ago are being thrown into the paper shredder.

By the time he is finished, Lawler expects the Intelligence cabinets to contain fewer than 25,000 names.

The Freedom of Information Act requires police to give a copy of intelligence records to those requesting their own files. To receive information, it is necessary to complete a form at the Police Department's Bureau of Identification on the fourth floor of the Hall of Justice.

The Intelligence Unit spends more than a quarter of a million dollars each year on salaries for its staff of 15. An additional $2,500 is used to pay for informants and surveillance posts such as apartments.

The information collected by the department is not generally used for what Lawler calls body snatching, that is, arrests.

Lawler explained, “Intelligence in the police department is much like intelligence in the military. It’s used to try and tell the chief what's going to happen before it happens...”

To do the job Lawler looks for men who have “persistance, common sense, tactiity, analytical qualities, per-