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Photograph by Charles Steck

James M. Felter's disturbing
new documentary . . .
Washington Post, Feb. 1998

. . . a dirty look at some of the most
feared and offensive creatures in
our nation's capital — and they are
not politicians.
Newsweek.com, March 12, 1999

. . . the rodent infestation plaguing the
District of Columbia . . . lovingly
captured in an 80-minute documentary.
Reuters Newsline, March 11, 1999

one shocking titillating, humanizing,
educating . . . tour de force.
Washington City Paper, July 17, 1998

. . . not for the faint of heart or weak
of stomach.
Empire Magazine (UK), March 11, 1999

NPR Interview:
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[http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/archives/
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Rats! Rats! Rats! Our Gnawing Problem

Film Takes On D.C.'s "Garbage Culture"

By Nicole Lewis

The glint of an eye, the twitching of a nose and there it is: the first bold rodent in a cast of thousands that star in James M. Felter's disturbing new documentary, "Rats."

Initially, it seems almost cute as it slithers through a wire fence and dives into a dumpster, followed by a flash of reddish tail. But by the end of the first scene, a stream of rats flow rhythmically in and out of the trash. They are repulsive.

When Felter started the project, he merely intended to document the District's rat problem. But the film he is now finishing is more about what he calls the city's "garbage culture." Felter blames the residents of Washington, not the city government, for the rats infestation. "I don't think it's the city's fault. This calls for responsibility," he says.

While working on "Rats," Felter discovered that the United States produces 6 pounds of trash per person per day, whereas Japan and Denmark produce only 2. After spending the past 18 months hanging around garbage and all its attendant rats, Felter concluded that his fellow citizens need to clean up the streets -- and keep them clean.

"This started as an artistic endeavor," he says, "and now it's a crusade."

"Rats" was mostly shot in one dank, dirty alleyway in Adams-Morgan behind (appropriately enough) Willard Street, only blocks away from where the 40-year-old Felter lives. After working days as a freelance film editor, he spent many of his nights from October to April filming his subjects at close range. "I had a schizophrenic relationship with the rats," he says. "I loved them when I was behind the camera. The second I stepped back, they scared...me." He recalls going home and imagining hearing rats scurrying around in his apartment. Now, he says he can spot rat holes wherever he goes.

The documentary intersperses footage of and facts

about rats with a variety of talking heads. Two long-time Willard Street residents say that the rat population in their neighborhood has risen in recent years. One of their neighbors demonstrates his sharpshooting skills as a method of extermination. Local garbage men advise that there is only one way to avoid rats: run. Felter also interviewed some specialists, including William Page, head of Vector Control and the D.C. government's self-proclaimed "Rat Man," and Leslie Hotaling, the city's administrator of solid waste management.

Felter devotes a good share of his 80-minute documentary to two homeless men he befriended while he was filming. Billy and Joseph -- no last names -- share what little warmth and food is available on the streets with the rats. Although Joseph depends on the trash for his survival, he looks at a fancy car and wonders aloud: "Now if I can afford that expensive car, why can I not clean up this little bit of trash?"

Felter calls himself a "major animal rights person" — full disclosure: He's a vegetarian -- but he swears nothing in the film is staged. He does admit, however, to illuminating the rats with warm light to render them more appealing. "We shot it like a nature documentary," he explained on a recent evening at Richfield Productions in Georgetown, where he is completing the sound and editing. "Rats" also includes an interview with Lisa Lange, public relations director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Can we hope for a rodent free city? Felter doesn't think so. An exterminator depicted in the film blows rat poison into the ground, but admits the rats keep coming back. The film's anonymous rat sniper is ultimately a poor — and illegal — 0 0 exterminator. An interview with Linda Grant, spokeswoman for the Public Works Department, offers the closest thing to a solution: trash clean-up and then containment.

"I think we've demonstrated very well that eradication doesn't work," Felter says. After all, as his film notes, a single pair of rats and their offspring can produce thousands of babies in just on year. ■

Washington Rats to Become International Film Stars

By Patricia Wilson

The nation's capital has a gnawing problem. Its rats may soon be international film stars.

All big American cities have rats. But with bluster typical of their political heritage, many Washington residents think their rats are especially audacious, unusually large and particularly abundant.

The rodent infestation plaguing the District of Columbia — the city has two rats for every resident — has been lovingly captured in an 80-minute documentary that premieres next week.

Local Film director James Felter, who has spent 18 months putting together the feature he calls — what else? — "RATS," plans to enter it in several film festivals, including Sydney and Berlin, key marketplaces for independent directors to hawk their wares for worldwide distribution.

This is not a Chamber of Commerce moment for Anthony Williams, who took office in January promising to polish Washington's image after decades of neglect and mismanagement. But the city officials are fighting back. They have declared war on the point-nosed, beady-eyed, scaly-tailed population which some estimates put at one million.

Williams, in his very first speech as mayor, announced the rats had to go. Vector control is on the job. The D.C. government office charged with taking back the streets is led by chief terminator Bill Page, who knows his quarry. "August is the peak month because it's warmer. People are cooking out, having picnics, there's more food about. The rats are rally lively," he said.

But the city government is on the verge of launching a preemptive strike. Under a scorched-earth policy, officials say rodents will be starved to death and have their homes razed. Rat patrols will raid city businesses for trash violations and unsanitary conditions. After warnings, fines will be levied.

The D.C. budget has money earmarked for rat-resistant garbage cans. A rat summit is scheduled for April at which local officials will hold high-level consultations with those from other U.S. cities on how to handle the rodent problem.

But many, including Felter, believe it is a war that cannot be won until the residents also come to terms with

the throw-away lifestyle they have so wholeheartedly embraced. In researching America's "garbage culture," Felter found that every American generates an average of 5 pounds of trash per day. In Japan, the figure is half a pound.

The result — portrayed in the film — is a system that cannot cope. The documentary is not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach. Nauseating footage of rats scuttling through dark, fetid alleys littered with trash and rotting garbage is relived by people discussing rats, trash and rotting garbage.

A self-proclaimed "rat-sniper," demonstrates his own solution — a BB gun and a steady aim. Two homeless men describe life on the street with the repugnant creatures. Marion Barry has a cameo role.

But Washington has upscale rats too. Late last year, several moved into the White House. The General Services Administration eliminated four from the press room and another from the area where President Clinton's spokesman briefs the media almost every day. A Hamburger box and half-eaten roll had been dragged into a hole supposed to carry telephone wires and computer cables. Washington rats are so brazen, they no longer need the cover of darkness. Almost everyone has had a rat sighting.

Even in fashionable Georgetown, it is not uncommon to see one scurrying over the cobblestones or racing across swaths of parkland in broad daylight. Felter said he was alarmed to learn that the rats had been "literally eating the insides out of Mercedes-Benz and BMWs parked in trendy neighborhoods." Rats share the path by the Potomac River with early morning joggers and forage among tourist scraps on the mall. They lurk around trash cans near restaurants, hotels and offices. Thanks to the easy pickings, city rats are considerably larger than their rural relatives, according to a long list of rat facts on Felter's website. How sickening it is to learn they can swim at least a half-a-mile, tread water for three days, transmit as many as 35 diseases, multiply in the blink of an eye, survive atomic testing and live in packs of more than 200?

See fact No. 20. Government guidelines allow "an average of two rodent hairs per one hundred grams of peanut butter." ■

Newsweek.com
March 12, 1999

Rat City

The 1971 horror film "Willard" may have some competition. "Rats," a new documentary by James M. Felter, takes a dirty look at some of the most feared and offensive creatures in our nation's capital — and they are not politicians. Much of the film centers around a dumpster in an alley — ironically, behind Willard Street — in the Adams-Morgan section of D.C. Garbage-picking homeless men narrate the story as they feed food scraps to their vermin friends. Felter, a native Washingtonian, says he became increasingly fascinated with the subject when he noticed a rat problem in the city. "There's this amazing culture around garbage in Washington," he says. "A prolific rat problem was literally underneath my nose." What he came to realize was that despite the affluence surrounding the nation's capital, the city was, in reality, filthy. "People completely disregard trash in this city," he says. Former D.C. mayor Marion Barry and Bill Clinton both make brief appearances. With people eating out of dumpsters right below the nation's monuments, "the political metaphors are abundant," says Felter. ■

Empire Magazine (UK)
March 11, 1999

Rats in Hollywood

Everybody knows that Hollywood is simply overflowing with rats, most of which walk the streets with two legs and wads of film-making cash flowing from their Armani suit pockets.

But it seems that the plague-carrying kind which scurries about on the floor is also set to take its share of the Hollywood limelight. The rodent infestation plaguing the District of Columbia — the city which has two rats for every resident — has been captured in an 80-minute documentary that premieres next week

Local director James Felter, who spent 18 months putting together the feature he imaginatively titled "RATS" plans to enter it in several film festivals, including Sydney and Berlin, key market places for independent directors to hawk their wares for world wide distribution.

The documentary is not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach. Nauseating footage of rats scuttling through dark, fetid alleys littered with trash and rotting garbage is relived by people discussing rats, trash and rotting garbage.

A self proclaimed "rat-sniper," demonstrates his own solution — a BB gun and a steady aim, while two homeless men describe life on the street with the repugnant creatures.

But before rat-killing wannabes infest the sewer, it's perhaps worth bearing in mind that the filthy little blighters can swim at least a half-a-mile, tread water for three days, transmit as many as 35 diseases, multiply in the blink of an eye, survive atomic testing and live in packs of more than 200? Scary. ■

On Willard's Tail

Filmmaker Jim Felter chases the rat, the devil's mascot, across D.C.

By Jake Tapper

The stagnant air reeks of garbage, feces, and death. Bad enough to burn your nose and throat and make you gag. In the alley behind the fast-food joints at Florida Avenue and 18th Street, NW, the vile smell mingles with the odor of food turned to vomit in the dumpsters. The putrid vapors hang between the buildings, enveloping the trash piles and telephone poles in an invisible but palpable haze.

D.C. filmmaker Jim Felter stalks the cobblestone with his movie camera. Behind his yellow eyeglasses, his face takes on a cast of maniacal curiosity. He's looking for man's mortal enemy. He knows Satan's beasts are gnawing, scratching, skittering furtively nearby. Finally, Felter finds what he's looking for: the festering corpses of two huge rats. "Those are alpha rats!" he gushes. "Look how big they are!"

Felter knows an alpha rat when he smells one. Since October, Felter and his film crew of three have spent countless days, \$10,000, and 50 hours' worth of footage on safari across the city, filming RATS, a documentary — and, at times, political rant — about the dominance of the repugnant rodents in the District. It will be his second indie project as a director. His first, a rambling camp farce called Run of the House, played at the 1992 Berlin Film Festival. He hopes to enter RATS in the next Sundance Film Festival.

After nine months in the field, Felter has become the Jane Goodall of D.C.'s rats, an expert at tracking and identifying them. He knows that where the rats go, the flies always follow to eat their leftovers — and leftover dead rats. He can spot their burrows in the dirt, their claw marks in the rotting wood of a restaurant's back porch. Felter has canvassed the city, from the nasty alleys of Florida Avenue to the Fort Totten dump — braving the stench and the risk of getting some awful rat-borne disease — to piece together the rat's crucial saprophytic role in the District's food chain.

"On the big screen," he predicts proudly, "this is going to make Godzilla look like shit."

It won't help the image of the District of Columbia, either. There are an estimated 1,000,000 rats living in almost every obscenity of D.C. — from the squalor of forgotten streets and alleys to the Bush White House swimming pool. The animals form an insidious majority that, if granted suffrage, would swiftly overtake the District government. In a sense, though, the rats have already staged their coup, grabbing power from a city administration that can't cope with the tons of trash it generates daily. Though his mission for the film is rather ambiguous, an apocalyptic metaphor lies at its heart: "D.C. is a thrown-away city," Felter says.

Nearly everybody in D.C. has a rat story — which has allowed Felter to assemble a cast of bizarre co-stars. There's a banker in town who spends his evenings looking over his alley, shooting rats with a BB gun for sport. There's a woman who belongs to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals who, during a location shoot, runs off to save a rat drowning in a trash can. There's another woman whose dog Mia hunts rats and has a special rat howl. And there's an Adams Morgan couple, Dave and Earl, whose backyard became so infested with rats, they had to pave it over entirely. Dave detests the rats intensely; Earl once had a pet rat and maintains they're at least as human as any of Dave's cats. Felter captures their conflict on film.

"I hate to see them put poison baits down," Earl laments, "I feel compassionate toward those little critters."

Felter too has developed sympathy for his title characters: "There are better ways to exterminate them than what we [currently] do." Popular poisons cause rats to ulcerate massively and bleed to death. Felter can't stand the thought of it. "I believe in animal spirits," he says. Yes, they've "killed more people than all of man's wars combined," Felter notes, and they are believed to be the only other animals besides human beings that commit genocide. But Felter, in a dawn of inspiration at a South Dakota sweat lodge last summer, decided that, cinematically speaking, the rat has not gotten its due.

On Willard's Tail (continued)

Nobody, for instance, had ever captured what rats really look like, Felter says. "In the National Geographic special I saw on rats, they're all groomed. Not anything like the ones we've seen." He finds rats that are popping with veins, some covered in tumors.

He likes to get tight shots of the rats whenever possible, to make them look more "human," he says. In the relatively posh surroundings of his borrowed editing room at Richfield Productions in Georgetown, he zeros in on a rat writhing toward death in the jaws of a trap. "Look at how nice his nails are!"

They've also got an instructive social order in their colonies. When a colony runs out of food, it becomes "stressed," and anarchy breaks out. Females — who are able to reproduce at 3 months and deliver up to 12 liters of up to 13 young a year — become infertile. Alpha males cannibalize the betas; sexual assaults are common.

"I don't know if National Geographic would necessarily talk about the rats' homosexual rape tendency," Felter says.

The district's rat scourge begins with its residents, Felter explains, the instant they throw scraps and wrappers into the kitchen trash. "We waste too much and dispose of our garbage lazily and haphazardly," he notes — unsealed, strewn in the streets. D.C.'s trash haulers are, he finds, overworked and poorly paid; the Fort Totten dump has become ground zero, the key feeding and breeding site, in the rodent ecosystem. It's a never-ending banquet served up by humans. Yet we blame the rats for their abundance.

As Felter has discovered the underlying problem and formed his thesis, he's had trouble keeping a lid on the

scope of the film's subject. He says he can't make a movie about rats in D.C. without accounting for the city's desperate garbage situation. With a digital video camera, the film crew followed a D.C. trash truck for two days, listening to trash collectors dis their inept department and remark on "maggot juice." To mount an indictment of the District's waste-handling system, they hung out with William T. Page of D.C. Vector Control — a general in the city's badly out-gunned army against vermin — who wears a rat pin on his lapel, and a host of perplexed District officials, environmentalists, and neighborhood busy-bodies. Together, the experts paint an alarming picture of the rat's rise to power in Washington.

None tell the tales as well as its narrators, two homeless D.C. men who dive into dumpsters along-side the rats for their dinner. Billy Harris, 44 tells of a friend from the streets whose corpse became a buffet for a rat colony. Thirty-two-year-old Juvenalis Joseph makes poetic observations on the rat race while standing on a dumpster. "They have a brilliant perspective on trash and rats," Felter observes.

Felter's perspective, however, is all over the place; his footage will be tough to pull into a cohesive film. His documentary is trying to mix nature movie, art film, horror flick, and polemic into one shocking titillating, humanizing, educating, profitable tour de force — only to tell us that trash attracts vermin?

"Editing is going to make or break this project," Felter acknowledges. For every rat you see, legend has it, there are nine you don't. The same concept applies to Felter's shifting concepts for the movie. For every idea that makes it to the screen, there will be dozens more you won't see — they'll wind up dead on the cutting-room floor. ■