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Open File

Open War at the Polls in 1934 When Factions Fell to Fighting

SEVEN BULLET HOLES were in the front windows of the Citizen-Fusion headquarters by mid-morning of election day, March 27, 1934. Workers point to the holes in the glass and stone of the office at 1012 Grand avenue. A speeding car passed the headquarters and the shots were fired.

ITS WINDOWS SHOT OUT AND TIRES FLATTENED by bullets, this Citizens-Fusion party car was one of many which were shot up or demolished on March 27, 1924, the day of the city election. This photograph was taken on the East Side.

This is another of a series of unsolved homicides in the past in Greater Kansas City based in part on the 'Open Files' of the police departments.

By James J. Fisher

(A Member of The Star's Staff)

IN the Kansas City professional political lexicon of 1934, "smoking up the precincts" was done as a matter of course.

"Smoking up the precincts" meant, simply, that on election day, traditionally, gangs of men would ride in high-powered black cars through the wards and precincts and if they thought you were a member of the opposition party or a reformer or they didn't like the way you looked at them or loitered around the polls, they would dismount from the car, say hello, and then beat you with brass knuckles, fists, baseball bats, gun butts or anything else which was handy.

That was for the voters. For election workers, there were other ways.

Police Were Complacent "I was working over on Indiana," said one opposition party challenger when he thought back to the March 27, 1934, city election. The other challenger was named Red and everybody took orders from him, even the police.

"Four voters who I knew were Republicans came in and Red held out four Democratic ballots which were marked already and said, "Sorry, friends, but you've already voted."

"I thought that was wrong and I went over to Red and said, 'Hey you can't do that!' and that's when Red hit me with the brass knucks. See, he busted my nose and blacked my eye."

There were other methods, ones which made Troost avenue and the Paseo sound more like the guerrilla-infested trails of Vietnam 32 years later. Cars were demolished, women beaten, trucks burned, ballot boxes stuffed, and, in the city election of March 27, 1934, four men were killed.

Machine Ran Town It was a curious era. Kansas City, then, was a city of 375,000 persons, a city of small neighborhoods and big-time crime, and an easy tolerance of the Pendergast machine which ran the town.

The machine was big and, although it was traditionally Democratic, its real loyalty was to itself. Yet the size of the machine was big only when viewed as a whole; it was like a pyramid—its footings went into the bedrock of the precincts. The precincts were its real strength.

And while the Hague and Crump machines hack East crumbled and fell, the Pendergast machine roared on through the 30s, falling eventually from boodling at the top. The precincts remained strong to the end.

Oh, there were some built-in safeguards—thousands and thousands of names, added onto the election rolls, names of persons who were dead or who had never existed. They were called

sleepers and pads. And, of course, there was the matter of “smoking out the precincts.”  
Fewer Voters Now

The padded roll books were common knowledge. With 375,000 residents, Kansas City managed to have 250,000 registered voters. And in 1934, the city was much smaller—the south city limits were Seventy-ninth street. Today, south of the river, there are only 180,000 registered voters and the south city limits go to Cass County.

Just before the election, the reformers came down to the precinct level and started their campaign. That left the machine precinct captain, known collectively in those days as Joe Doakes, scratching his head. Joe Doakes never could understand how the reform boys piddled away all the good days and tried to win in the last 12 hours. The easiest day of the year, Joe Doakes said was election day—if he has spent all the other days right.

There was an issue in the campaign—gangsterism in Kansas City. The previous summer, which its high point the Union Station massacre in June, had been the bloodiest in Kansas City’s history.

And only six months earlier, in September, Judge James R. Page had told the new grand jury that there was much to investigate in Kansas City, and concluded:

“Unfortunately, you will not have the assistance of the police department.”

The judge’s statement was unfair to some honest police officers. But it was the truth. Kansas City had “home rule” on the police department then. A state-appointed police board was restored later. But then this was 1934 and jobs were hard to come by and if some politician’s son needed a job, well, why not the police department?

Opposition to the machine was led by the Citizen-Fusion ticket and the National Youth movement, a Kansas City-founded organizations whose national purpose was to kick Pendergast out of office.

To Joe Doakes, the Citizens- Fusion and N. Y. M. ticket was “just a bunch of reformers.”  
All in Preparation

The reformers didn’t worry Joe Doakes if he’d spent his other days right.

One Joe Doakes had a good precinct on the East side, a solid little community with a few boarding houses, a little business section in its center, a tavern, a bakery, a pharmacy, and a butcher shop. Joe Doakes had 683 men and women voters living there. He knew them all.

Joe Doakes had a good precinct. Once the balance of power was on the other side, but by 1924, through his own persistence and hard work, he had shaved off 80 of the opposition’s vote. By 1926, without a pad or a sleeper, he could rally 418 votes for the machine.

He knew if that number ever dropped as much as 10 he was out as precinct captain.

Joe Doakes, with nine rooming houses and three apartment houses, had a fluctuating population of 150 to watch. When a new family moved in, Joe was waiting at the curb.  
Cynical At Door

“Never say,” explained Joe Doakes, “that you’re the Democratic precinct captain. Don’t give the opposition that much of a break. Just say you’re the precinct captain. Ask them what you can do. Don’t ask their politics. They’ll tell you soon enough.”

Joe Doakes was often helping right away. He was ready to call the water department, the gas company or the dog tax man. He would help establish credit down at the grocery store. He knew where the school was and the name of the president of the P. T. A.

If the family had come from another part of the city, Joe called another Joe Doakes—the

family's former precinct captain. He got a line on the man's credit rating. He found out how the family voted. He asked about the domestic relationship. That was important.

"That's where you had to do a lot of your work," Joe said. "Many's the time I was hauled out of bed to stop a fight. Hell, once I walked in and the old lady turned on me with a shotgun. Sometime being a precinct captain was dangerous business."

Knew His Role

Joe Doakes was certain the family forgot his name the minute he walked out the door. But he was certain they hadn't forgotten who he was— the precinct captain.

"Now suppose the man gets a registered letter asking him to pay his delinquent taxes," Joe Doakes said. "He turns to his old lady and he says, 'Say, what was the name of that precinct captain who offered to give us a hand?' She or one of the kids or one of the neighbors will tell him. He comes down and I go over to court and get the tax knocked down or off. Now you've got him. You've given him a hand and when election day comes, you can talk business.

"Never tell him you want him to vote for the whole organization slate. If he's on the other side, politically, you just tell him the names of three or four men you personally would like to see him vote for. You've done a job for him. Now it's his turn to return the favor."

But even to ask was rare for Joe Doakes. If he'd spent his other days right, he knew that the three-quarters of the votes he drummed out were not for the candidates or for the platform. The votes were for Joe Doakes. He got the family in the next block on relief. He took the old pensioner to the free legal aid department. He got the old woman with the tumor into the General hospital.

The machine didn't have to worry about Joe Doakes's precinct in 1934. It was solid—541 votes out of 683.

In fact, the machine didn't have a thing to worry about in the 1934 city election — it swept in by 59,000 votes, enhancing the state-wide Pendergast image.

But some wards and precincts, especially in the Negro and Southwest and Southeast areas were shaky. This bothered the ward leaders. If Joe Doakes couldn't afford 10 votes, they couldn't afford to lose one precinct.

Looked to Jobs

And precincts in 1934 were important. In those days elections weren't for an airport or expressways or for modern governmental methods. They were, for many, the \$125-a-month job which kept food on the table. With the city as the biggest single make-work employer in those days, being the wrong side in an election could mean economic disaster.

For four men, that year, it meant death.

Election day broke cloudy and cool, the temperatures in the 30s. The roving gangs were out early. By mid-morning several cars had been demolished and burned. One man was in critical condition after being beaten with a wrench.

At 1901 East Twenty-fourth street a carload of hoodlums piled out, rushed into the polling place, and grabbed a Democratic election judge. The Republican judge fled out the back door.

William Findley, the Democratic precinct captain, saw the hoodlums beating the judge. He rushed in. "Let loose of that man," he said.

The intruders turned on Findley. They had pistols but so did Findley. In the exchange of shots, Findley, 56, was killed.

That was one.

## Beat an Officer

During the forenoon and afternoon, the assaults and beatings went on. At 4301 Woodland avenue the hoodlums came early, kidnaped an election judge, and then returned, during the afternoon, and beat several election workers and one police officer who were in the polling place.

A. S. Williams, a challenger for the Citizens-Fusion ticket, was one of several kidnaped from polling places. Williams was threatened and returned to the polls. He called police, saw the hoodlums who had kidnaped him drive past at a leisurely pace, pointed them out to officers. The officers followed. Williams estimated the speed of the police vehicle at 10 miles an hour.

By mid-afternoon, the casualty lists of dead, wounded and beaten were in the newspapers. But at the feed store at 5820 Swope parkway, the polling place for a small precinct in the Sixteenth ward, all was quiet.

Underneath the surface calm, there was trouble in the sixteenth. Oh, nobody was worried about the reformers who spent the last 12 hours trying to win. This was a split in the Shannon wing of the Democratic machine.

## Deputy at Polls

Shortly before 5:30 Lee Flacy, a deputy sheriff and a member of the L. C. (Doc) Johnson faction of the Shannon wing, went over to a nearby cafe for coffee. He was electioneering at the polling booth, a common practice.

A few minutes later three cars pulled up in front of the polls. Twelve men got out. They entered the polls.

"Where's Flacy?" one asked. The man was told.

The visitors were led by a tall, spare man who was later identified as John Gadwood, a lieutenant of the Pete Kelly faction of the Shannon wing. There had been rumors that Flacy was "knifing," or canceling, a Kelly candidate in favor of a Johnson man on the Democratic ballot.

The 12 men entered the cafe. Gadwood asked for Flacy, Flacy was in the back room. Gadwood went in to talk to him. Suddenly, there was a pistol shot and Gadwood ran out the door, nearly running over the men who had followed him.

By the time everybody was out of the cafe, Flacy, wounded in the stomach, reeled out of the back room. He said. "They can't do that to me." He went to the door, walked outside, and started firing.

One of the men who had been in the cafe fired out of the side window of one of the cars at Flacy. Flacy returned the fire, hitting the man, Larry Cappo, a former boxer turned hoodlum, in the head. Several other men were firing.

One of the 12 men pulled a shotgun from beneath his coat and fired at Flacy, knocking him down and wounding him fatally.

Watching all this was P. W. Oldham, 78, a hardware dealer who had just locked his store. A stray bullet hit him in the head.

Two of the cars roared off once Flacy was down. The third, driven by a lawyer and accompanied by a fellow political club worker, turned over in its attempt to leave. Both men told police they didn't know how on earth Larry Cappo had gotten in the back seat of their car.

Nine hours later, in side-by-side hospital beds at the General hospital, Cappo and Oldham died, the third and fourth victims of election day, March 27, 1934.

Later, Gadwood was tried for the murder of Flacy and convicted. He served three years. No

one was ever charged for the murder of Findley or Oldham. The cases are still open.

Two reform candidates won in the south wards. But still the machine rolled in to victory. The mayor said he was sorry anyone had been hurt; the police director said he didn't have anything to say about the killings but he wanted everybody to know that the previous June he hadn't played golf with Verne Miller, the man who planned and helped execute the Union Station massacre, and Mrs. Fred Hines, a niece of Oldham, said:

"I shall never vote again. Who can we trust? What can we believe in after this? This was not an election. It was war."

And, in an editorial, the Philadelphia Bulletin said:

"In Kansas City elections, you are not entitled to score a point in killing unless you get the victim before he has a chance to vote."

KANSAS CITY, ON ELECTION DAY, 1934, was a good place to wear a bullet-proof vest and old World War I German Helmet if you were a poll-watcher. Incongruously, this man carried a bow and arrow.