

Time, February 22, 1937 15 National Affairs—(Continued)

MISSOURI

Machine Busting

“Defendants do not believe the Judge should have manifested in his charge the detestation of this particular type of crime. He should have denounced piracy in the South Seas but not election thievery in Missouri. He should have exhibited indifference. He should have been lukewarm in his charge. He should have softpedaled the matter. He should have said:

“ ‘Gentlemen of the grand jury: everybody’s doing it; let it pass.’ ”

So said Federal Judge Merrill E. Otis last week in Kansas City. He also overruled demurrers to a set of indictments and prepared the way for the beginning this week of a trial that has already shaken the concrete foundations of Kansas City politics.

Dripping Fingers* One day last autumn some 20 Kansas City lawyers paid a call on Federal Judge Albert L. Reeves. They asked for a Federal investigation of Kansas City elections. Judge Reeves, tall, bony, with sagging cheeks, stone grey hair and 14 years on the Federal bench, told them to get evidence of fraud at the election on Nov. 3, promised to investigate fully after election.

The election was a great triumph for Kansas City’s Democratic machine. Its endorsees swept all offices: Lloyd Crow Stark was elected Governor, 12 Democrats were elected to Missouri’s 13 seats in the House of Representatives. Kansas City with only 10% of Missouri’s population gave Roosevelt 30% of his majority in the State.

Boss Tom Pendergast, having been ill for more than five months, announced that he was turning over control of his organization to his nephew James who had done so well during the campaign as boss protem (Time, Dec. 14). A banquet was given for Fred Bellemere, chairman of Kansas City’s election board and he was mentioned as a sure-fire future prospect for Governor. Then suddenly in mid- December Judge Reeves impaneled a grand jury of 20 men. Instead of saying, “Everybody is doing it, let it pass,” he said to them:

“I can’t sit quietly in my district here . . . and allow my fellow countrymen who stand for the law ... to witness a man going with dripping fingers to the ballot box. The registration and voting of people who are not naturalized citizens is a crime. ... I am informed the names of such persons will be presented to you. ... If a man casts a dishonest ballot he cocks and fires a gun at the heart of America. Whether a bribe is given or taken in a Congressional election, it is a violation of the laws of the U. S. I am informed violations of this nature took place.

“We can’t surrender the ballot boxes to thugs, gangsters and plug-uglies who patrol the streets with machine guns. We can’t stand for that any longer. Reach for all—even if you find them in high authority. Move on them. My information is that the population of Kansas City is less than 400,000. The last registration was something like 270,000. ... A registration like that would call for a population something like 600,000.”

The grand jury subpoenaed all the election records of all 416 precincts of all 16 wards in Kansas City. Month ago a first batch of 36 men and women were indicted. All save one were election judges, precinct captains. More than a dozen were Republicans, for they had helped to certify the election returns. By last week the number indicted had reached 75, the jury was still at work and the first 20 defendants were ready to go on trial. One of the oldest, most successful, most powerful political machines in the U. S. was on the spot.

Acme Nephew Pendergast, Clark & Shannon Piracy in the South Seas?

Teamster's Sons. The story of that political machine began in the 1890s when James Pendergast, son of a dry goods teamster in St. Joseph, Mo., went to Kansas City, opened a saloon on the waterfront in the tough First Ward and soon branched into politics. When James's brother, young Tom, arrived fresh from St. Mary's College, Kans., he had a favorable introduction to Kansas City politics. Tom was the ablest member of the family. James A. Reed, when Mayor of Kansas City, made him Street Commissioner.

The big boss of Kansas City in those days was Joseph B. Shannon. There was another boss, Casimir John Joseph Michael Welch, whose headquarters were in the Second Ward with its redlight district. The municipal primaries became battles between Shannon's "Rabbits" and Pendergast's "Goats." Gradually a sort of limitation of armaments agreement was worked out, a 3-2-1 ratio on patronage for Pendergast, Shannon and Welch, with Pendergast on the big end of the stick.

Month ago at Jefferson City, the State capital, the inheritance tax was published on the estate of Welch, who died last year. It showed what the small end of the stick had meant to him. He left a net estate of \$91,924, mostly cash. Shannon holding the middle of the stick was elected to Congress seven years ago and is still drawing his \$10,000 a year in Washington. Tom Pendergast undoubtedly held the big end of the stick with a profitable pre-and-post-Prohibition wholesale liquor business and a beautiful business in ready-mixed concrete which any builder in Kansas City would be a fool not to use because it is not only good concrete but compounded with the very shrewdest politics.

A big milestone in Tom Pendergast's political career came in 1932 when in the reapportionment following the 1930 census, Missouri's representation in Congress was cut from 16 to 13 Representatives. The Legislature failed to redistrict the State, so all 13 had to be elected at large. The devil was bound to take the three hindmost and candidates without statewide connections rushed to see Boss Pendergast who could deliver some 100,000 votes. He picked 13 candidates and elected 12 of them. His only failure that year was that old Champ Clark's boy, rosy-cheeked Bennett Champ Clark, won the Democratic nomination for the Senate over the Pendergast man, and was elected.

East & West. In 1934 Pendergast made this omission good, by nominating and electing a county judge, Harry S. Truman, to the U. S. Senate. Last summer after the Pendergast slate was announced, Bennett Clark endorsed it too, and after election Clark went to Kansas City where he and Pendergast are supposed to have cemented an alliance dividing the patronage between the eastern (Clark) half and the western (Pendergast) half of Missouri.

Cog work. Thus it was a fine organization which Tom Pendergast handed over to his nephew James.* The various indictments charged local election officials with fraudulent vote counts, erasing and changing ballots; a precinct captain was indicted for intimidating a grand jury witness. The grand jury recounted the ballots and got quite different results from those reported by the officials. Typical contrast in one of the many precincts:

	Roosevelt	Landon
Official count	686	61
Grand Jury count	570	170

All those indicted were mere cogs in the political machine. Only one big shot has been subpoenaed—Representative Joe Shannon. He ran one of his own candidates against a

Pendergast candidate in the primary as he sometimes does. He complained afterward of “rough stuff, kidnapping, beating of my workers and the worst padding and fraudulent voting I have seen in my long political career.” He departed for Washington before a subpoena could be served upon him. Said he: “Sure, I’ll return to Kansas City if they want me.” But a month went by. Last week he was finally in Kansas City, ready to appear but unable to do so because he had a fever of 102°.

Retired Boss Pendergast, his nephew or other big shots of the organization may possibly be subpoenaed, but there is little chance of their being indicted. Those wise in the ways of Kansas City politics feel sure that the Pendergasts have taken no direct part in irregularities, have never even hinted that votes be stolen or lists padded; that they merely told their subordinates to get all voters to register and vote Democratic, ward patronage to be apportioned according to results. Hope that this week’s trial might break up the Pendergast Machine rested not so much on getting its drivers, but chiefly on getting so many cogs that the machine could not function.

*The Pendergast family tree - of politics included three brothers: 1) “Big Tom,” 2) James, boss of the First Ward, who died in 1911, 3) Michael, boss of the Tenth Ward, who died in 1929. Nephew James is a son of the late Michael, was successor to his father as ward boss before succeeding his Uncle Tom as boss of the Works.