

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

68 Pages (1)

MONDAY, MAY 23, 1988

W

Rooted In Corruption

E. St. Louis' Troubles Have Been Accumulating Since Its Beginnings

By Patrick E. Gauen
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Is that bang in the distance the sound of the breeze blowing a loose board against a worn house near 10th Street and College Avenue? Or might it be the faint echo of the gunshot that killed the first mayor of East St. Louis 103 years ago?

Can the clang of metal along Missouri Avenue at the Alorton municipal limits be a loose support somewhere in the rusted skeleton of what once was the largest aluminum-processing plant in the world? Or could it be a lingering reminder of the final closing of the plant gates?

Would the din at Bond Avenue and 10th Street be the sound of kids playing hide-and-seek among the trees across from Blackmon's Package Liquor? Or is it the everlasting racket of the 1917 crowd that killed two police officers at that intersection, touching off one of the bloodiest riots in U.S. history?

The history of East St. Louis pops into the imagination with uncertain sounds in the wind.

It is a sordid history — rife with greed and lust and bigotry — unworthy of the many fine people reared there.

EAST ST. LOUIS

CITY ON THE

EDGE

PART 2

A casual inquiry about how East St. Louis got into its desperate economic and social condition may be answered accurately, if flippantly, that the town has been in a mess from the start.

From the first mayor, who was murdered once out of office, to the present mayor, so fearful of the same

INSIDE

Tension over use of blacks for cheap labor boiled into a riot in 1917, leaving 47 people dead and causing thousands of blacks to flee East St. Louis. . . **PAGE 8A**

fate that he keeps gun-toting bodyguards at his side, East St. Louis has been a rough-edged community of violence and vice.

Founded before 1800 as Illinois Town on the flood-prone east bank of the Mississippi River, the community was a frontier trading and ferry center.

Not until 1861 was it incorporated as a city, and then with a name chosen in a stolen election that was prophetic of the decades of corruption to come.

The popular choice for a name appeared to be "Illinois Town." But determined supporters of the name "East St. Louis" were said to have plied out-of-town laborers with enough cash and liquor at the last minute to get them to vote fraudulently and as told.

The election's result set the tone for a community that by virtue of its very name was to be forever subservient to the growing city on the west bank called St. Louis.

Mayor John B. Bowman, a teacher and a refugee from social upheaval in Germany, was credited as a progressive first leader for newly incorporated East

See TROUBLES, Page 8

Troubles

From page one

St. Louis. But it is telling of the paranoia of the time that his wife would die one night while undressing, when she apparently mishandled the pistol she hid in the bosom of her dress.

The city was patrolled in its early days by two competing police forces — one chartered by the state and the other by the city. Two city officers died in a gunfight with the rivals in 1878 over control of the police station. The State Supreme Court later nullified the state-chartered force.

Bowman lived to retire from official life. But he kept a high profile as a vocal critic of the wide-open gambling and other corruption that flourished in the 1880s, after his term ended.

In memoirs, a railroad special agent described the blatant lawlessness with a telling anecdote about the time he sent detectives to East St. Louis to end rampant thefts from boxcars. Investigating why his people never returned, the agent found that they had nabbed the burglars and turned them over to police, who set the burglars free and put the railroad officers on a chain gang fixing streets.

Located at the eastern end of the Eads Bridge, which replaced the need for ferry boats, East St. Louis quickly became the second-largest rail center in the United States.

It was progressive in some areas, beating St. Louis to installation of electric street lights, for instance.

It was regressive in other areas, such as thefts from City Hall.

In 1881, the City Hall was burned down in what an investigation showed was an attempt to hide looting of the treasury by insiders. After the structure was rebuilt, its safe was blown open in an apparent burglary. It turned out that \$60,000 was missing before the blast, in an inside job that eventually sent an alderman and the night chief of police to prison.

On Nov. 20, 1885, Bowman — a man of many enemies — was gunned down outside his home. Witnesses identified two city police officers as the killers. But the witnesses disappeared before the trial. No one was convicted.

□

Shock over the killing helped fuel the election of a reformer, Melbern M. Stephens, who recognized that high water ranked with high crime as a threat to his city.

Stephens' answer to the devastating, recurrent floods was an improbable and colossally expensive plan to raise the level of downtown East St. Louis above the high-water line, using trusses and fill dirt.

But improbable or not — and in the face of a lynching threatened by agitated opponents — Stephens moved ahead with the task of raising the streets first by 14 to 20 feet. The bond issue for raising the city — \$725,000 — was then a fortune.

The last of the flooding was eliminated by dikes constructed in the early 20th century by the East Side Levee and Sanitary District, whose own name eventually became so synonymous with corruption that it was changed.

Once the rough river town was out of the river water, it became a logical and willing site for big industry. Rail lines through the East and West converged at the Eads Bridge. Coal was plentiful at the cheapest prices in the United States, an especially important point to consider in days when factories had to generate their own electricity.

As with many cities, big industry was a mixed blessing, sparking a population and employment boom but also making East St. Louis synonymous with grimy life in the shadows of the smokestacks.

More ominous than the smoke was that many of these industries were built outside the edges of the city, avoiding the property taxes to support the city services on which many of the workers depended.

Instead, some companies incorporated plant campuses as their own towns: The Aluminum Ore Co. formed Alorton (for Aluminum Ore town); the St. Louis National Stockyards made National City; the Monsanto Co. had Monsanto (later renamed Sauget). Still other industries were built elsewhere on the periphery of East St. Louis, in Washington Park and Fairmont City.

Virtually all these industries were owned by out-of-towners whose only stake in East St. Louis was the profit to be made there. This meant emphasis on cheap labor, a goal that collided — first abrasively and later explosively — with the fledgling union movement.

As the century changed, the city's revenue base was built on vices as much as anything. Gambling was pervasive. More than 375 saloons were in operation. Prostitution was rampant and, more or less, would continue to flourish for another three generations.

Including the so-called "tax havens" on the outskirts, East St. Louis eventually led the nation in the sales of horses, mules and hogs and in the manufacture of aluminum. It was big in steel, glass and beer. And it was a leader in meatpacking, baking powder, paint pigments and building materials. It also was a leader in public corruption.

In 1913, the city council voted to destroy municipal financial records as an unnecessary clutter in city hall. A public clamor forestalled the disposal, but the records disappeared anyway.

One exasperated gent quoted in news clippings of the day said about an election contest between two candidates: "I can't vote, because I know both of them. If I only knew one of them, I could vote for the other."

□

Burgeoning industry gave East St. Louis seemingly unlimited employment, leading to its sort of motto: "If you can find a job anywhere, you can find one in East St. Louis."

The message went all directions, including the South, where large numbers of blacks took up the challenge. They arrived by the thousands, often on boxcars.

The jobs were real enough, but the pay usually had been overstated on the grapevine, and many blacks found themselves at hard factory labor for the same wages earned in less strenuous roles as domestics for the rich back home.

Concurrently, companies such as Aluminum Ore were resisting unionization of workers and the better wages and conditions that organized labor was seeking. Blacks were far less union-minded and, the companies found, made excellent strike-breakers.

The dual load of the ordinary white racial prejudice of the times and resentment over job replacements became too much to bear by 1917, when the town erupted in a riot that left at least 47 people dead and a significant part of town in flames.

See TROUBLES, Page 9

Troubles

From page eight

Word of the horror spread nationally, and the taint was spread anew in 1918 by the release of a congressional investigating report that observed, "In the history of corrupt politics in this country, there never has been a more shameless debauchery of the electorate nor a more vicious alliance between the agencies and beneficiaries of crime than for years existed in East St. Louis."

And the viciousness was not restricted to matters of race. After a white baker complained about a brothel beside his home, his 3-year-old son disappeared and was found decapitated. A prostitute who confessed a role in the crime was slain or committed suicide before she could testify against others.

□

Voters, attempting to regain the city's dignity, turned to Melbern Stephens to be mayor again in 1919.

But already, fundamental change had taken place in the city government. Also in 1919, the city switched from a strong-mayor government, with aldermen elected by wards, to a commission form that featured five citywide commissioners with essentially equal powers.

Lacking veto power or broad control over all city operations, Stephens was unable to repeat the strong leadership of his previous tenure.

The city suffered recurring money problems, with revenue sometimes insufficient to cover legitimate expenses as well as graft. A survey in 1920 showed that among the 131 U.S. cities of 50,000 or more population, East St. Louis was 130th in municipal taxes collected and in public property owned.

The Great Depression hit East St. Louis as hard as anywhere in the United States, said observers at the time.

Factories, growing obsolete, closed for good.

New manufacturing methods from the growth of technology played a part. So did widespread availability of electricity in commercial quantities.

Aluminum Ore Co., for example, no longer needed proximity to cheap Southern Illinois coal to make its electricity. So it was logical to rebuild its new plant in the South, to be closer to bauxite, the raw material of aluminum.

Other factors played a role in the decline:

- East St. Louis acquired a reputation as an impossible place to get around, because the trains of more than a score of busy rail companies caused seemingly endless waits at grade crossings.

- Livestock trading was becoming decentralized. Mechanical tractors were replacing horses and mules on farms.

- Good rail service was no longer unique. And more goods were moving by truck or air.

□

The city's industrial slide lurched to a stop at World War II, when East St. Louis' abundant factory space helped fill the nation's voracious appetite for production of military machinery. But once the war was won, the slide resumed, delivering the city to its place among minor-league industrial players whose largest employers are their school districts.

The war claimed one of the city's most enduring enterprise sites: "The Valley," an especially tawdry red-light district where prostitution had flourished for decades. Municipal officials finally clamped down after the Army Air Corps at Scott Field near Belleville, recording an ample rate of venereal disease, threatened to make the whole city off-limits to the armed forces.

It also was in the 1940s when Frank "Buster" Wortman, a former associate of Chicago mobster Al Capone, set up a regional headquarters for organized crime in East St. Louis. Police would attribute the operation of illegal gambling casinos and other rackets to Wortman for the next 20 years.

Although population peaked at about 83,000 in 1945 and began to fall, East St. Louis continued its role as a major employer and commercial center in the 1950s and '60s. Early-century predictions of a population that might reach 500,000 by 1950 were, of course, never even approached.

The 100th anniversary in 1961 was a gala event chronicled with glowing optimism in the centennial edition of the East St. Louis Journal. But soon even the supportive daily would change its name to the Metro East Journal, shedding some East St. Louis identity in an attempt to broaden its appeal.

East St. Louis remained for decades under tight "machine" political control; cash payments in exchange for votes were legend.

By the mid-1960s, the city, like some others around the country, again became a hotbed of racial discontent. Snipings and firebombings by black militants scared off white shoppers and scared out homeowners. Some residents lost their life savings to flee fine houses that suddenly were — or at least seemed — worthless.

In 1968, there were 28 consecutive days of snipings.

The city, which was one-third black in 1950, became more than 70 percent black by 1970. Completion of Mayor Alvin G. Fields' 20-year tenure in 1971 marked the end of white leadership.

One hundred ten years of troubles had piled up, and East St. Louis was in bad shape physically and economically.

□

While visionaries were seeing a better day for East St. Louis, some of them were looking in abstract directions. For example, internationally known architect R. Buckminster Fuller proposed construction of a free-standing clear dome, one mile in diameter and 900 feet high, with an environmentally sheltered community beneath.

In the 1970s, widespread investigations and prosecutions were conducted for corruption in the city and school operations, further shaking public confidence. A consultant's study of the police department concluded that it ought to be disbanded and started from scratch.

In 1974, the commission government was returned to strong mayor-aldermanic.

Upon becoming mayor in 1979, Carl E. Officer saw fit to offer amnesty to thieves — presumably municipal employees — if they would return purloined public property. The booty had included cars and bulldozers.

The period was one of heavy federal assistance and a raft of studies looking for the elusive antidote to the city's decay. Most plans died on the drawing boards or after snappy watercolor renderings got published in the papers. But nothing of substance was built.

Officer presided over a major reduction in payroll, which coincided more or less with the phase-out of federal subsidies. In the 1970s, the city's work force numbered nearly 1,400 — many paid by federal programs. By this year, it was fewer than 300. And the city was left scrambling for money for just the basics.

Carl Baldwin, a former East St. Louisan and retired journalist who has written much about the city, has fond memories of good, honest people there who voted for corrupt politicians largely to protect relatives' political-patronage jobs. "The gangsters and corrupt officials can control a small city more easily than a large one," he said.

But Baldwin said it was apparent that the trail of corruption and mistakes would inevitably lead to disaster.

One should remember, Baldwin said in a recent interview, that the East St. Louis of 1988 is the product of more than a century of events.

TUESDAY: A day in the life of Mayor Carl Officer.

FEB. 20

DSW 135553

STLCOPCB4035532