

W-S Four Fight Fallout From 'Mushroom Cloud'

"Racketeering trial begins" - *Winston-Salem Chronicle*, March 19, 1992

"Local Racketeering Trial to Begin" - *Winston-Salem Journal*, March 22, 1992

Those two headlines are an indication of the anticipated, sensationalized media coverage of a trial that will give four prominent personalities in Winston-Salem's Black community their day in court. "Racketeering" - organized, illegal activity; a dishonest scheme or trick is the *allegation* to be proved or



Rodney J. Sumler
Lobbyist, *Phoenix* Publisher

disproved over the next several weeks. So far, it is not a fact, however often it may be presented as such.

Dubbed the Winston-Salem Four, political consultant and newspaper publisher Rodney J. Sumler, alderman Larry W. Womble, former alderman Patrick T. Hairston, and community activist minister the Reverend Lee Faye Mack have been the targets of an extensive, intensive investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Internal Revenue Service spanning 1987-1991. In question during the four-year-long probe are the activities of the Four from November 1985 through June 1986. Investigators are purported to have amassed hours of witness testimony, scores of videotapes, and reams of financial records and other documents obtained through subpoenas issued during the probe.

Accused of perpetrating an elaborate conspiracy to extort money from businessmen in exchange for preferential treatment

before the Winston-Salem Board of Aldermen, the Winston-Salem Four were indicted by a federal grand jury on June 19, 1991 and face a total of 28 counts that include political corruption, perjury, extortion, income tax evasion, and money laundering. The trial, which began Monday, March 23, was originally scheduled to be held in Winston-Salem but was changed to U.S. District Court in Greensboro.

Sumler, who is also the publisher of the *A.C. Phoenix*, bears the heaviest weight of the four, having been charged with the full 28 counts of the 81-page indictment returned by the federal grand jury. Hairston faces 21 counts which include conspiracy with Sumler to extort bribes from businesses that had matters pending with the city's Board of Aldermen. Womble, charged with six counts, is accused of similar conspiracy and extortion activities. The four-count indictment against Reverend Mack charges her with falsifying records of the charities she ran during the period of time investigated and perjury before the federal grand jury.

Jury selection for the trial, which is expected to last for four to six weeks, was completed on the opening day. Jurors consist of six Blacks, five whites, and one Hispanic. Sumler said he is pleased with the selection because the number of Blacks exceeds his



Patrick T. Hairston
Former Alderman, PHC Cleaners, Inc.

expectations. "My attorney [John A. Dusenbury Jr.] and I would have been grateful for two or three Blacks on the jury. Six is more than we had hoped for," he said. Although jury selection is always

crucial for the defense, Sumler stressed that it is particularly vital since he firmly believes the Winston-Salem Four have been singled out as part of a federal government nationwide conspiratorial effort to target and discredit Black political officials and community activists.

Steadfastly contending that the entire investigation "is racially and politically motivated," Sumler insists, "This whole thing started in 1987 with a racist, disgruntled white businessman who, himself, was engaged in bid rigging." He adds that the investigation, as far as he is concerned, consists of "gross exaggerations and distorted



Larry W. Womble
Alderman/W-S/FC School
Administrator

information." Sumler suggests that the community should question the enormous cost to the taxpayers for the lengthy investigation and subsequent trial, considering the sum of \$200,000 alleged to have been involved during the span of time investigated.

Sumler believes that the activities he conducted through his business firm, Associate Consultants, were no different from those of other corporate lobbyists. He says that people, particularly Black people, do not understand the nature of lobbying which requires the establishment and maintenance of a relationship between a businessperson and political officials to provide avenues of favorable interaction. While there is only one Black lobbyist registered with the North Carolina General Assembly, according to Sumler, there are hundreds of white lobbyists in the



The Rev. Lee Faye Mack
Director-Back To Life Center

state and thousands more in Washington, D.C., including the extremely powerful gun and tobacco lobbies. "My company simply did, on a smaller scale, what larger corporations do," he maintains.

The single failing Sumler admits is of mismanaging his own business. "Admittedly, I have not managed my business according to the standards set forth by the Babcock School of Management or the Harvard School of Business because I've been denied access to the same types of loans that other, white businesses can get," he explains. "Borrowing from Peter to pay Paul may not be the best way to do business. At most, I would be called a poor business manager. But, I take pride that I'm a cum laude biology major, not a business major."

Since the media broke the news about the investigation in October, 1991, and the nine months that have followed the federal grand jury indictments, the Winston-Salem Four have felt tremendous impact on their lives - both personal and business. The scales of justice and prejudice have tilted both ways with some in the community believing in "innocent until proven guilty" and others condemning before the Four have been heard. Sumler sums it up when he says, "This is taking a toll on me and my family. Since it began, I've lost most of my business, and things have gotten very tough. I'm appreciative of the fact that the Winston-Salem Four are finally getting a chance to tell our story in court."

COVER STORY by Patricia Smith-Deering, *Phoenix* Managing Editor