

THE PHENIX CITY STORY, 10 YEARS AFTER:

Can A City Stay Clean Of Crime?

By ROBERT W. BROWN
Pulitzer Prize Winner for Articles on Phenix City

Phenix City, Ala

Ten years ago the name of this little east-central Alabama town, nudging the border of Georgia, was synonymous with civic corruption. Worse, it was related to crime, organized and open, from murder through gambling, prostitution, dope peddling and even baby-selling.

Many readers will recall this. A motion picture based on the "Sin City" is still being shown about the country. A newspaper in Columbus, Ga., just across the Chattahoochee River, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for its revelations on the outrageous conditions that had existed here. And just a decade ago PARADE magazine published a report on Phenix City which posed the question: "Can it happen in YOUR City?"

What had happened here was that citizenry literally had become enslaved by a political-criminal combine which, in the inescapable analysis, it had largely encouraged through inaction. What had started off in the 1930's as an eye-winking expedient by a "liberal" government to permit revenue-producing shady goings-on had become the classic monster. Illegal drinking, small-time gambling and other relatively petty activities had become major ones. By official sanction and general acceptance, crime had become institutionalized.

Among those accepting these appalling conditions were "good citizens" who profited by a low tax system which revenue from fines and forfeitures and licenses permitted. There were reform groups, but until near the end of an inglorious era, they were ineffective. The gossip mills and ridicule — not to mention physical assaults, and in one case, the dynamiting of a leader's home — were designed to keep the "do-gooders" quiet.

But few could have known the full extent of the enslavement until after June 18, 1954. On that night in an alley at his office building, Alabama Attorney General-nominee Albert L. Patterson was assassinated. He had just been nominated (in Alabama then, tantamount to election) in the Democratic primary a few weeks before, after campaigning on a state-wide basis on the sole pledge that he would clean up Phenix City. Two days before he was shot to death from close range as he sat in his car, Mr. Patterson had predicted that he would never live to take office and carry out his promise.

Alabama limited martial law was declared, and the succeeding disclosures of villainy and corruption, of stolen elections and literally "blind" justice shocked even tough and hardened Maj. Gen. Walter J. Hanna, the adjutant general sent in from Montgomery for the cleanup. "You name it (crime)," he commented, "they've got it here."

And indeed they had, as one sensational development after another disclosed. All local law enforcement was ousted or superseded. So was the judiciary. The Russell County Jury Commission was dismissed and a new one appointed. The recent municipal elections were voided. A new grand jury within weeks had called 3,000 witnesses and returned more than 550 indictments of persons ranging from gambling hall hangers-on to elected officials. One of them was Chief Deputy Sheriff Albert L. Fuller, who for a week was in charge of investigating the assassination. He still is in Kilby State Prison, convicted of slaying Mr. Patterson.

So much for history. The question is, what is Phenix City like today? The record of reformed cities has not been too good. More often than not they slip back into the old ways after a few broad sweeps by new brooms. Has Phenix City slipped back, or is it in danger of retrogression? PARADE wanted to know, and here, a decade after its first report, is Phenix City Revisited. Now, as then, an evaluation could be meaningful for your town.

FIVE POINTS TO WATCH

In examining factors that had gone into making of a "Sin City" a decade ago, PARADE found five sensitive points in government which constantly must be guarded against erosion. A breakdown at any one could have disastrous results, with a chainlike effect. These points are:

THE VOTER LIST. It must be purged regularly according to law to prevent vote padding or "tombstone voting." (Phenix City had out-of-state residents on its lists, as well as deceased, yet their names were voted at election time.)

THE JURY LIST. Grand jurors are watchdogs for counties and communities, and the lists from which they are drawn should be current and varied. (In Russell County, grand jury after grand jury not only could see no evil, but couldn't hear the clinking of gambling machinery within a stone's throw of the courthouse.)

THE ELECTION MACHINERY. Controlled or dominated by the wrong persons, it works against the voters, subverts their will. (Phenix City poll workers had included known gamblers and strong-arm men ready to set upon voters opposing gangsterism.)

TENURE OF OFFICIALS. There should be a healthy turnover in office, although officials should be rewarded at the polls for public service. (In Phenix City, the same old hand-picked candidates were elected time after time, without regard to record or ability.)

CITIZEN ATTITUDE. Since an active minority can overwhelm a passive majority, a healthy and forceful attitude of citizen participation in government and civic affairs is paramount. (In Phenix City, few persons bothered to vote; cultural opportunities were lacking, civic spirit almost nonexistent.)

Clearly the last is the key point. A weakness at one of the others can be overcome without fatal damage to the entire civic structure. But if rot has set in at the citizen attitude, deterioration not only is likely at other points, it is inevitable. It was in such a state 10 years ago that there was little civic care left. Students going out of town and out of state to school often gave their home address as Columbus, Ga., across the river. There was no library, and little culture could exist in the Saharan void. Recreation was almost entirely of the for-hire or for-pay kind, often culminating in a slugging with the victim tossed into the river. As pointed out in 1954, there was not even a Confederate monument, for whatever that's worth, on the courthouse square in the Deep South county seat.

What is the attitude today? One might stop a few citizens to inquire in front of the new 15,000-volume library across the street from the courthouse, which Phenix citizens acquired at a cost of \$70,000. Or it might be in front of the new civic center, which, with 2 new firehouses, cost more than \$500,000, a sizable part of which came from citizens taxpayers. Or it might be in the vicinity of the city's hospital, to which 35 beds recently were added, along with 37 nursing home beds, with local participating funds. Or it could be anywhere up and down the miles of new paved streets or along the routes of a vast sewer-water system expansion.

BEATEN AT THE POLLS

Hugh Britton, in the carpet business now and one of the founders of the Reform Russell Betterment Association, could tell of tremendous changes. He, along with Hugh Bentley, Columbus sporting goods retailer who then lived in Phenix City, once were beaten at the polls. They both pointed out that whereas as few as 20 per cent of the voters bothered to go to the polls in the old days, about 60 per cent turned out last May.

Jack Gunther, lively Jaycegroup reformer in the old days, could — and does — become enthusiastic about citizen participation today. And Lamar Murphy, the cleanup sheriff, will assure you on the law-abiding attitude the city enjoys now. "In fact, we have very little crime of any kind today." Across the river, Maynard Ashworth, publisher of the newspapers which so vigorously attacked and exposed the old regime, comments on "the solid, sound, progressive spirit" of today's former Sin City. He has backed his confidence in the city and its citizens by opening an office here. Earlier, it was a risk to send delivery trucks across the river, and reporters parking their cars in Phenix City might return to them to find tires or seat covers slashed.

You might talk to Melvin Chadwick, the proprietor of Chad's Rose Room, where youngfolk gather these nights to do the Frug and the Watusi, without fear of untoward incident. The philosophic Chad, whose place was not always so decorous, remembers that he made more money in the old days.

But now? "I am more tranquil," answers the soft-spoken proprietor, whose strippers and other performers have been replaced by a lone "exotic" dancer whose gyrations on a recent weekend hardly compared to the young, unrehearsed contortionists on the dance floor 10 years ago. Chad likes the new Phenix City.

Others evidently like it, too, as measured by that infallible yardstick of hard-headed economics. Two shopping centers have opened in a Phenix City which formerly traded mostly across the river in Georgia. Eight new or expanded industries have been added to the measuring stick in recent years. Construction permits have been averaging \$5 million or more per year for several years, which is sizable for a city now grown to an estimated 30,000. A new paper mill employing 400 has opened downriver, and Phenix City confidently awaits a spurt in manufacturing, service and distribution industries when the new \$200,000 state dock and warehouse is in full swing on the down-

to-be-navigable Chattahoochee. Citizens collectively and individually like it to the tune of around \$1.2 million in city taxes per year, which they pay willingly enough.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Will it last? Some observers in other parts of the state think it will as long as John Patterson is on the political scene. John, the former governor, is the son of the late Albert L. Patterson, and before becoming governor he was state attorney general with a keen eye always trained on his home town. He is expected to run for governor again, to succeed Gov. George Wallace. Closer to the scene, the realistic view is taken that constant wariness is necessary, and the responsibility rests with the citizens.

"Sure," says Sheriff Murphy, "they (the old-timers of the crime heyday) have tried and they will try to come back — crime never quits trying." And Hugh Bentley, the reformer whose close friends say spent \$50,000 out-of-pocket in his years of fighting for good government, is cautious. He now lives across the river in Georgia, but speaking softly across his desk he assures you he has an abiding interest in Phenix City. "They will try again," he asserts, matter-of-factly.

Still, Phenix City's new image seems secure. A new spirit pervades the community. A Columbus businessman long pessimistic over the outlook said recently: "I think they'll make it; in fact, they've made it." A United Givers official in the joint Columbus-Fort Benning-Phenix City effort was jubilant that the community's exceeding its campaign goal well ahead of time and said, "They are marvelous." And a member of the Phenix City Commission until recently commented of his town that progress can be "as contagious as corruption." Under this analogy, most of the citizens are infected.

And now there remains the question for you: What is the citizen attitude in YOUR town?

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SCHEDULE — DIAL: 1400 DAILY W.M.M.H. PROGRAM

Table with 3 columns: Time, Program Name, and Notes. Includes programs like Sign on the Air, Service Show, Breakfast Time, News, and various musical and religious programs.

Hot Springs News

R. C. KIRBY, Correspondent

At long last, all the red tape proceedings pertaining to our Public Housing Project have been eliminated. Contracts have been signed and returned by the successful bidders and approved by the Housing Authority. Ground will be broken for the new project in the near future.

Mr. and Mrs. R. C. Kirby have returned after a 10-weeks stay in Florida. Mrs. Kirby is much improved in health.

The home demonstration club meeting was held in the basement of the Methodist Church Monday. Mrs. Velma Reeves was hostess. Mrs. Marvel Feldtmose has received word that her sister in Tampa, Fla., is dangerously ill. She had suffered a stroke Thursday.

Mr. Paul McFall underwent minor surgery in St. Joseph's Hospital last week. He has returned home, much improved.

Mrs. E. J. Barnwell was hospitalized last week for several days.

A family dinner was given at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hoke Reeves Sunday. The occasion was the birthday of her daughter, Mrs. Bettie Woody, and her daughter, Teresa Woody of Morristown, Tenn., and grandson, Dwain Reeves.

Rev. and Mrs. Harry Sellers left Wednesday for a visit with Harry's grandparents in Stark, Fla.

Mrs. Matilda Dockery was painfully injured Thursday in her livingroom. Reaching for a key, she lost her balance, and fell backwards, injuring her back. X-Ray show a cracked vertebrae.

Mr. T. A. Russell is on the sick list this week.

Dr. Mahy occupied the pulpit at the Presbyterian Church Sunday. Received into the church were Wesley Lankford, Everett Shelton and Mr. and Mrs. Blue and children; Johnny Roberts was ordained a deacon, and John Van Nest ordained as an elder.

Mrs. Vera Sumerel and sons, Kenneth and Jimmy visited her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Buckner, in Mars Hill.

Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Burgin and Mrs. Maud Long attended the funeral Thursday of Mr. Roscoe Lankford in Middlesboro, Ky. He formerly resided in Hot Springs. Mrs. Vic Cantrell is in a John City hospital. Reports are she is recovering rapidly and will be home soon.

Mars Hill High

WILDCATS

BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

Feb. 12—Hot Springs—away

ITCHING LIKE MAD? Get this doctor's formula! Zemo speedily stops torment of externally caused itching... eczema, minor skin irritations, nettle rash, insect bites, sunburn, nerve endings. Kills millions of skin face germs. "De-itch" skin with Zemo—Liquid or Ointment.

Mr. Pat Gentry went to St. Joseph's Hospital Tuesday for a tooth extraction. Mr. and Mrs. John Van Nest have as their guest their daughter, Mrs. Glenn Engleman, of St. Louis, Mo. Henry Sisk, a highly respected colored man of our town, had the misfortune of losing his house and contents by fire two weeks ago. His many friends of both races have come to his rescue, and are busy building him a cottage to replace the one destroyed.

Something New Raincoats Waterproofed. We have just received a new type water repellent. This treatment gives Grade "A" results and can be applied to LONDON FOG or most any raincoat at a small additional price above the cleaning. Save time and water by using our Laundrymat. Do here in just one hour what would take all day at home. Edwards Cleaners MARSHALL, N. C. FOR COMPLETE PICK-UP & DELIVERY SERVICE CALL 649-3651

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