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The long checkered career of one Pershing Gervais

City Hall Report

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of The States-Item Staff

"A thief, grafter and ruffian."

—Criminal District Court Judge J. Bernard Cocks, January, 1963.

"You never know what he thinks about you. He's more than self-confident. He's arrogant."

—Aaron Kohn, managing director of the Metropolitan Crime Commission of New Orleans, July 1, 1971.

"One of the finest men I have ever known."

—District Atty. Jim Garrison, September, 1965.

Those three descriptions of Pershing O. Gervais came at three milestones in the controversial former investigator's life.

Ironically, praise came from Jim Garrison, the man who today stands accused of accepting bribes primarily because Gervais helped federal agents gather evidence against him.

Paradoxes and contradictions are nothing new to Gervais. They've followed him through one of the zaniest careers of any local public official in decades. And it was usually Gervais who stood accused of corrupt acts, although he was never convicted of wrongdoing.

Arrested at 21

At the age of 21, in 1940, Gervais was arrested on a charge of carrying concealed weapons — a blackjack and brass knuckles, according to Civil Service files. There was apparently no local court action taken against him. He was held for federal authorities and later released.

While serving with the Louisiana National Guard in the 1940s, Gervais and Garrison were at one time sergeants in the same battery of the Washington Artillery.

Shortly after World War II Gervais got a job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a few months and then became a patrolman on the New Orleans police force.

In 1952, while a detective, he traveled to

New York City and shared a hotel room with a girl friend, which got him fired from the force by then Police Supt. Joseph L. Scheuering. The police chief said Gervais was violating police regulations by associating with persons known to be "police characters," and by operating a jewelry business without authorization from his superiors.

However, Gervais had provided the Orleans Parish Grand Jury with considerable information against Scheuering during the celebrated police scandals of 1953.

He appealed his dismissal unsuccessfully before the Louisiana Supreme Court.

The Bucket of Blood

In May, 1955, while operating the Bucket of Blood Bar on the waterfront, Gervais was charged with allowing B-drinking and employing a convicted narcotics violator as a bartender. He claimed he did not own the bar, and was acquitted.

Gervais was for several years a part-time investigator for the Metropolitan Crime Commission. Kohn said this week he hired Gervais because of his "underworld connections" and praised his work as "reliable."

Shortly after Jim Garrison's election to district attorney in 1961, he announced that he was naming Gervais his chief investigator. Gervais, Garrison claimed, had been given a "complete clearance" by the MCC. Kohn later denied this.

In 1962, Garrison was charged with defaming the judges of the Criminal District Court. During Garrison's subsequent trial, Gervais was termed by Judge J. Bernard Cocks on the witness stand "a thief, grafter and ruffian."

Cleared by the grand jury

A few months later, in July, 1963, Gervais was cleared by the Orleans Parish Grand Jury of two allegations that he had beaten up criminal suspects. The grand jury had been presented the matter while Gervais' conduct was under investigation by Police Supt. Joseph I. Giarrusso's probers.

During that 1963 summer, Gervais' activities had also cropped up in the murder trial of William R. Livesay, charged in a

French Quarter barroom death. Livesay told the court he had spoken with Gervais prior to "setting up" one man for a crime-against-nature arrest and also prior to committing a burglary.

A year later, in August, 1964, Garrison's first assistant Frank J. Klein resigned his office, reportedly because of disagreements between Klein and Garrison over Gervais' activities.

In a bizarre follow-up to Klein's resignation, police received a report in October, 1964, that Gervais' wife had beaten a 17-year-old girl with a rock in front of the Gervais residence. Gervais said his wife had been receiving anonymous phone calls that he had been "keeping company" with the girl.

The Bielosh case

Further police efforts to harness Garrison and Gervais came in 1965's Bielosh case.

A bar owned by Clarence Bielosh had been burglarized in November, 1964. Taken in the act was a safe allegedly containing illegal football "pool" cards. Former Supt. Giarrusso said at the time that Bielosh stated he had paid \$600 to someone in Garrison's office to withhold or destroy the cards.

Gervais was questioned about the matter with Garrison's permission by the Police Bureau of Investigation and no charges against him were filed.

The Bielosh case erupted in an election year for Garrison, however. He defended Gervais strongly in a speech to the Young Men's Business Club on Sept. 8, 1965, terming him "one of the finest men I have ever known." Nevertheless, Gervais resigned from Garrison's office the next day.

Subpoenaed by federal jury

In September, 1967, Gervais was subpoenaed by a federal grand jury looking into allegations that "certain persons" had attempted to bribe Edward Grady Partin, a Baton Rouge official of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Subpoenaed with Gervais was Zachary "Red" Strate, a New Orleans builder who had been convicted of conspiracy and fraud along with Teamster Union President James R. Hoffa. Gervais and Strate, it was revealed, were business associates.

But Gervais was never charged with any crime by the grand jury.

Since his 1967 federal grand jury appearance, Gervais' name had not appeared in headlines — until this week.

Before being whisked to a secret foreign destination by Justice Department officials, Gervais, the feds' star witness against Garrison, had this observation on the goings-on in the Criminal District Courts Building at Tulane and S. Broad Avenues:

"I can't imagine a God existing who could resist the opportunity to get rid of so many bums with one bolt of lightning."