

Sonny Spica's Friends Recall

By Kevin Horrigan
and Richard H. Weiss

Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

He liked sharp clothes and Turkish baths and thought Ronald Reagan would be a terrific president. He didn't smoke, didn't drink, kept himself in shape and didn't mind working night and day.

He was a shrewd businessman, with a keen eye for quality in the goods he bought for his south St. Louis produce business. He also was in the vending machine business.

To his friends and family in north St. Louis County, he was "Sonny," a man who once made some serious mistakes but who, they hoped, had turned himself around.

But to police, John Paul Spica was a small-time hustler with ties to reputed underworld kingpin Anthony Giordano. He was a man who had served 10 years of a life sentence for arranging the murder of a St. Louis County real estate man, a man with tastes far too expensive for a produce stand to support.

John Paul "Sonny" Spica, 42, was killed at 8 a.m. Thursday when a dynamite bomb in his 1977 Cadillac exploded. Spica's legs were blown off. He died almost instantaneously.

Interviews with his friends, acquaintances, police and prison officials present a picture of a quiet and well-liked man who had been a big disappointment to his family. Spica was a man who kept his own counsel and played the game by his own rules.

His father, Paul J. Spica, is a beloved figure within the courthouse crowd in St. Louis County and within amateur boxing circles.

The elder Spica has been a court official for more than 20 years, first as a bailiff and later as court clerk for several magistrate judges. He is now clerk for Associate Circuit Judge George R. Gerhard.

He and his wife, Lucille, reared seven children in their residence in Normandy. The children went to Roman Catholic schools, were raised as Democrats. The elder Spica was Normandy Township Democratic committeeman for several years and ran a tavern in Pine Lawn that was a sort of unofficial North County Democratic headquarters.

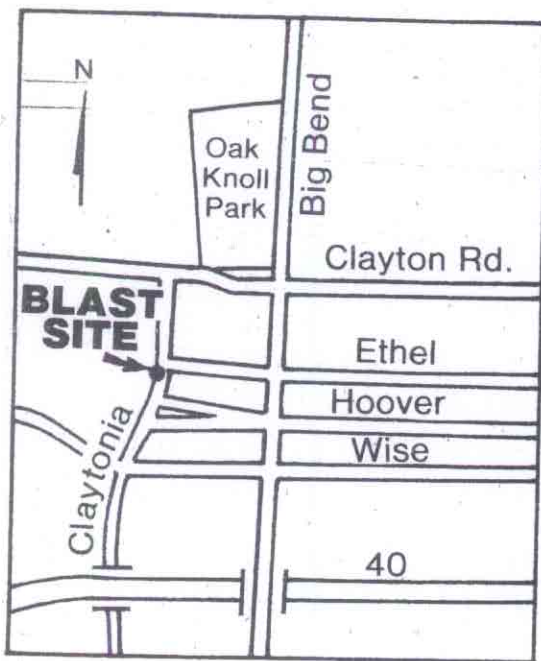
Florissant Police Chief Robert Lowery heads the North County Athletic and Social Club, in which the elder Spica is active. "Even at his age, he loves to be out working with kids," Lowery said.

The man who loves kids was sharply disappointed when his son John Paul got into trouble as a youth, friends say. When "Sonny" was convicted in 1963 of arranging the murder of real estate

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Quiet, Likable Man



John Paul Spica

man John J. Myszak, friends say his father was shattered.

James H.J. McNary, a former county supervisor, said, "Paul worked and sweated to get him out, and he finally did. Over and over, he'd say, 'I hope I can help my boy.' He never gave up on him."

Sonny did 10 years of a life sentence. While at the Missouri State Penitentiary, he was a model prisoner, Warden Donald R. Wyrick said.

Prison files indicate that Spica's schooling stopped after the eighth-grade. Spica listed former jobs as a truck driver, dockworker, bartender and cement finisher.

Spica worked in the prison maintenance shop. Wyrick, then associate warden, remembers him as a good worker.

"I took him out of the maintenance office and assigned him as a clerk in the shift captain's office," Wyrick said.

In that job, Wyrick said, "You had to be pretty intelligent."

Wyrick recalled Spica as "a likable fellow. He was quiet, but he had his friends here." Wyrick said Spica minded his own business. "He wasn't considered what inmates called a heavyweight," Wyrick said. "I knew him, and, quite frankly, I liked him."

So did a former prisoner, a cellmate who now lives in Kansas City. But he said Spica entered the prison as a blustery young 'con' who tried to muscle in on the prison's narcotics traffic. He was soon put in his place.

"John Paul settled down after that, got to running around with the St. Louis clique," the cellmate said Thursday in a telephone interview. "He was always trying to be a con man. He used to brag that he made \$25,000 a year hustling. He was considered a very good hustler."

The cellmate said Spica's closest friend was Carl Spero, now identified by federal authorities as a leader of a renegade faction within the Kansas City

organized crime family.

Spica's time in prison was of real interest last year to the House Assassinations Committee in Washington. One of Spica's sisters had married Rock Hill businessman Russell G. Byers. And an informer had told the Federal Bureau of Investigation that Byers knew who paid off James Earl Ray for assassinating Martin Luther King.

This led House investigators to speculate that Spica may have been the go-between who told Ray of a \$50,000 bounty on King by some racist businessmen from the St. Louis area. Spica admitted that he knew Ray but denied any part in an assassination plot.

Spica was paroled in October 1973 and opened up the Corner Produce

stand at Shaw Boulevard and Vandeventer Avenue. Those who dealt with Spica described him as a quiet, pleasant person.

One produce wholesaler said Spica knew quality. "He bought a good package," the wholesaler said. "If one package was \$7 and the other one was of higher quality at \$8, he'd buy the \$8 package every time. He drove his own truck down here. He loaded the produce on it himself. He was a healthy specimen of a man."

The produce wholesaler noted that many of his customers like to haggle. But Spica "usually had his mind made up. He was very much a gentleman."

Spica closed his produce business for the winter on Nov. 1. In his off-duty hours, he often frequented Kerpan's Sauna Spa, 1550 South Kingshighway.

Spa employee James Inman said Thursday that he had seen Spica only the day before. "If Paul thought he had someone after him, he was certainly cool about it," Inman said. "He was just as happy yesterday as anyone. He liked to tell us that he needed a prescription for sad pills, because he was always so happy."

Inman called Spica an avid reader, poring over business magazines like Fortune when he came into the Spa. "He thought Reagan would be an ideal president," Inman said.

Inman said Spica kept himself in good shape. "He didn't drink. He didn't smoke. He liked real good clothes. He looked sharp.

"Despite the fact he spent 10 years in prison he seemed to be a real nice A-1 citizen. He was as much or more of a gentleman than any of them."

Masseur Jimmy Howze said he had read reports about Spica's links to the King assassination; he dismissed them, telling Spica "that they went in one eye and out the other."

Spica was married and divorced before he went to prison. He has a son,

John, whom he was trying to introduce into the produce business, one vendor said.

Spica had been living with his girlfriend, Dina Bachelier, at her apartment in Richmond Heights. His car was outside that apartment when it blew up Thursday.

On Thursday, Spica's family politely but firmly refused requests for interviews. Many of his friends who talked asked that their names not be used. One said he wasn't surprised that Sonny Spica had died the way he did.

"He never could have made the money he wanted to make

legitimately," the friend said. "There are certain risks you just have to assume when you live the way he lived."

E.S. Evans and Jerri Stroud, both of the Post-Dispatch staff, contributed to this story.



Remnants

Renyold Ferguson/Post-Dispatch
An investigator examines a shoe and a bit of metal thrown from the bombed automobile in which John Paul Spica was killed Thursday.