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Jack Anderson's Washington Merry-go-round

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With Les Whitten

KANSAS CITY — Only John Connally would try to turn a bribery trial into a political asset. He is known on the political hustings as the fastest jaw in the west. With characteristic bluff, Big John has contended that his integrity has now been proven in court.

His supporters, picking up the line, have published a brochure declaring: "Certainly, no other presidential contender can boast an acquittal for such serious charges."

But the jury, which found Connally innocent of taking a bribe, did not exactly pronounce him pure as the driven snow. We have tried to find out what the jury really thought of Big John. It wasn't an easy story to crack. Judge George Hart sealed the names of the jurors to protect them, he told us, from being "bothered and heckled by the news media." The 12 jurors themselves made a pact never to discuss their deliberations.

We have managed, nevertheless, to locate most of the jurors. Because Connally has tried to make more of the acquittal than they intended, several of them spoke to us about what happened inside the jury room. All except foreman Dennis O'Toole asked us to withhold their names. In fact, the jurors referred to one another by numbers rather than names.

It took them more than five hours to agree upon Connally's innocence. They sat around a rectangular table in a blank, windowless room. One by one, the jurors expressed their views.

Then they took the first vote. Only one juror, a black man, felt Connally was guilty. A few had doubts. A slight majority voted for acquittal.

In the discussions that followed, several jurors wanted to review the financial testimony. They found it confusing. They also had trouble understanding the White House tapes. These contain a damning conversation between John Connally and Richard Nixon on milk prices.

Connally told Nixon that the dairymen were "amassing an enormous amount of

money that they're going to put into political activity, very frankly."

The blunt Texan, then Nixon's treasury secretary, advised Nixon to grant the dairymen a price increase. "If you don't," said Connally, "you've cost yourself some money."

Later he stressed again: "You're in this for everything you can get out of it."

But not all jurors got the conversation straight. As one recalled: "We could just hear these things like 'Yes, John . . . What's that . . . Okay . . . Blah . . . Blah . . . Blah . . .'"

One of the women on the jury complained that the sound hurt her ears. The jurors saw written transcripts of some, but not all, of the Nixon-Connally discussion.

Foreman O'Toole, summarizing his impression, told us he heard "a lot of Texas wheeling and dealing." Some of the undecided jurors also expressed concern about the cozy relationship between Connally and the milk producers. A couple of jurors feared this might hamper Connally if he should ever become president.

It was probably evangelist Billy Graham, according to jury sources, who helped Connally the most. The evangelist's testimony, as a character witness for Connally, impressed some of the jurors deeply.

One juror was influenced by the contrast between Connally and his accuser, Jake Jacobsen. She said that Connally always looked Jacobsen in the eye but that Jacobsen looked away.

She was impressed favorably by Connally's impassive, straightforward manner, unfavorably by Jacobsen's "shady" appearance.

At one point, she remembered, Connally's wife shook her head as if to say "No, No, No" while Jacobsen was testifying. The incident stuck in the juror's mind.

Other ballots were taken until all the undecided jurors voted for acquittal. But the lone black man refused to change his vote. The other jurors became annoyed with him and pressed him to explain his reservations. Defensively, he would ask to see the evidence. At one point, he had

a stack of testimony a foot high in front of him.

The holdout was shunted to a chair next to the foreman so they could go over the testimony together, page by page. Finally, the judge sent in word that it was dinner time and that the jurors could come back after dinner for another hour of deliberation.

The jurors asked for 20 minutes to make a last try before dinner. The holdout had a small suitcase, as if he expected to be sequestered. But he merely leafed through a few pages of testimony, shrugged submissively and said he would accept acquittal.

Afterward, O'Toole explained: "Our verdict meant not that we had found necessarily that John Connally was innocent, but, rather, not guilty based on the case presented to us."

Footnote: Last month we raised questions about two minutes that were missing from the Watergate tapes submitted to the House Impeachment Committee. The two minutes were contained in a private conversation between Connally and Nixon. We reported that committee members believed Connally had discussed the milk deal in confidence with the former President. Connally, blasting us by name, called the report "a total distortion of the facts." He had spoken to the President about revenue sharing, he said. We have now obtained a transcript of the mysterious two minutes. Part of it is garbled, and Connally seemed to talk in code after an unidentified intruder, apparently a White House steward, entered the Oval Office.

Connally said he would "make sure that there's a very substantial allocation of oil in Texas that will be at your discretion." But the previous conversation had been about milk, not oil. It appears that Connally, speaking in code in front of the intruder, was promising Nixon a "substantial" contribution from Texas dairymen.

Responded Nixon: "This is a, this is a cold political deal. They're very tough political operators." Whether the two men were talking about oil or milk, it certainly had nothing to do with revenue sharing.