

BILL LYNCH: LOUISIANA POLITICS

Agerton Blocks Probe; No Officials Suspended

Roadblock Thrown Up

BATON ROUGE—The legislative Mafia investigating committee has been temporarily stymied by the state Executive Department in the decision by Revenue Collector Lee Agerton not to cooperate until a law suit over revealing tax returns is settled. Agerton maintains that he cannot legally reveal such information, particularly that obtained from federal sources. However, the committee has made it clear that it is not interested in the state violating any federal agreement over tax information, but wants only that of Louisiana returns.

Agerton took his position a step further when he virtually refused to discuss the discovery of mysterious files found on a window sill in the department offices.

He was silent when asked if they pertained to Carlos Marcello, reputed underworld figure, whom Life magazine charged dominates Louisiana and was particularly influential in the state Department of Revenue.

It took persistent questioning to elicit from Agerton that he would not order his employes to refrain from answering questions about bribes or proffered bribes.

One line of questioning the probers are interested in pursuing is a tax settlement offer on the Larue 90 Corp., owned by Marcello, and made just as the Life magazine article about organized crime influence in Louisiana was published.

In the face of Agerton's position, the committee decided to hold off any further public questioning of Revenue Department employes except those involved in personal scandal until the court suite is settled.

Despite the temporary road block thrown up by the Revenue Department, the committee is moving ahead on many fronts in collecting information about corrupt practices first alleged in the Life article and is developing some not mentioned.

While concentrating on the Revenue Department thus far, the committee has brought out shortcomings among top officials of the department and favoritism to others.

One Revenue Department official was an officer in a company partly controlled by his wife and the firm failed to remit due taxes to the state and was generally shown favoritism.

The official, Wilson Choppin, declared he had informally resigned as an officer because of a conflict of interest, but documents filed by the committee showed he continued to act on behalf of the firm after his alleged resignation.

The things brought out thus far concerning the Revenue Department should have been enough to bring on wholesale suspensions—but the only action taken has been to swap the director, Ashton Mouton, with the Hospital Department head—Agerton.

Former chief counsel Emmett Batson quit—but the state thus far has made no move against anyone else connected.

The future of the Mafia investigating committee may be hanging in federal court where a suit by Life magazine attacking its constitutionality is scheduled to come up Monday.

A number of reporters have been subpoenaed to testify at the hearing, where Life is seeking to prevent the committee from requiring writer David Chandler from testifying.

THE SIMON CASE

Considerable consternation remains over the dropping of charges against Mrs. Irene Simon, sister of Mrs. Blanche Long, widow of Gov. Earl Long. Mrs. Simon had been charged in a grand jury indictment with felony theft of some \$7,000 in false expense account payments after an audit by the legislative auditor.

However, Dist. Atty. Sargent Pitcher of Baton Rouge—who has some statewide political ambitions—chose to drop the charges which he has allowed to lie dormant since they were filed last year.

Pitcher claimed he acted on the basis of a letter signed by 12 of 15 members of the state hospital board which employs Mrs. Simon as secretary.

Pitcher is the district attorney who has been under fire in the non-prosecution of labor-management cases in the Baton Rouge area.

Pitcher and Davis?

There has been backstairs political talk linking him with various gubernatorial candidates such as former Gov. Jimmie Davis as a prospective candidate for attorney general or lieutenant governor.

The position of district attorney in Baton Rouge, the seat of state government, is one of the most powerful in the state. Pitcher is in a position to seek prosecution against corruption in state government but has shown virtually no inclination to do so.

A state representative from north Louisiana has called for an investigation into the letter signed by the hospital board members, declaring they should resign.