

Ex-Aide of Gurney Admits Guilt in Fund-Raising Plot

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TAMPA, Fla., June 5—James L. Groot, former administrative assistant to former Senator Edward J. Gurney, admitted in court today that he had been part of a conspiracy to raise illegal campaign funds for Mr. Gurney from builders doing business with Federal agencies.

Under the plea arrangement, Mr. Groot will testify for the prosecution against Mr. Gurney and three other defendants if he is called. However, there is no immediate word as to whether he will be asked to testify.

Mr. Groot, through one of his lawyers, offered to turn over to the Government about \$5,000 he still has from the fund-raising operation, supposedly conducted for Mr. Gurney's 1974 re-election campaign. Mr. Gurney, a Florida Republican, eventually did not seek re-election.

Mr. Groot, 32 years old, abruptly changed his plea of not guilty to guilty of one felony count of conspiracy at his and Mr. Gurney's three-month-old trial in United States District Court. The jury was absent.

Mr. Groot's decision to cooperate with the prosecution appeared to cause consternation among defense lawyers, and could weaken their hopes for an acquittal for Mr. Gurney and three other defendants. At the end of the day, the trial was recessed until Monday, allowing the defense team time to reassess its position.

Judge Ben Krentzman accepted the guilty plea and said he would set a sentencing date later. Mr. Groot could be sentenced to a maximum of five years in prison and fined up to \$10,000.

Mr. Groot was the third of seven original defendants in the case to plead guilty. Similar pleas were entered earlier by Earl M. Crittenden, former chairman of the Florida Republican party, and George F. Anderson, former treasurer of the Florida Republican party, both of whom have testified at the trial.

The remaining defendants are

Mr. Gurney, Joseph Bastien, a former Gurney aide; Ralph N. Koontz, former assistant to the Florida director of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Jacksonville and K. Wayne Swiger, former Federal Housing Administration director in Tampa.

All are accused jointly of conspiracy to defraud the Federal Government by raising illegal campaign funds from builders. In addition, Mr. Gurney faces six additional charges of bribery, receiving unlawful compensation and making false statements to a grand jury. Mr. Bastien faces a second felony count.

Under terms of a plea arrangement, Judge Krentzman will dismiss three other felony charges against Mr. Groot at the time of sentencing. Federal prosecutors made no recommendation to the judge regarding the sentence.

Reading from portions of the indictment in the case, Judge Krentzman asked Mr. Groot, "Was there a conspiracy in that regard regarding some of those persons?"

"Yes, sir," Mr. Groot replied. His lawyers, Robert L. Floyd and James D. Little of Miami, stood with him in front of the judge's bench.

"Were you a member of that conspiracy?" the judge then asked.

"Yes, sir," was Mr. Groot's reply.

In his opening statement to the jury on March 12, Mr. Floyd said that Mr. Groot had not been involved in the fund raising and was being made a scapegoat "by people who got their fingers and hands caught in a large, large cookie jar."

Mr. Groot specifically admitted today, however, that on July 24, 1972, he accepted \$50,000 in cash at Mr. Gurney's Senate office in Washington.

Mr. Anderson has testified at the trial that he gave Mr. Groot the funds from money collected from builders by Larry E. Williams, a fund raiser from Orlando.