

LOUISIANA POLITICS

DA's Persistence Paid; Public Is Closer to Truth

By BILL LYNCH

(States-Item Bureau)

BATON ROUGE—It took an awful lot of persistence and insistence, but perseverance finally paid off for East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Sargent Pitcher in his quest for records of a telephone link between rackets figures and the state capitol.

When he first received a request from Gov. John J. McKeithen to conduct a probe of the alleged calls between a number in an office purportedly that of Carlos Marcello and a phone in the speaker of the House office Pitcher received virtually no cooperation from a number of agencies.

The most vital link in the calls was the actual records themselves and these were bottled up for nearly eight months.

Despite a series of subpoenas, the telephone company produced only a few records of no consequence and none involving the dates mentioned in the probe. It had destroyed them as part of a company policy not to keep them for more than six months. In fact, the company did not even know, it said, if anyone had obtained them.

Despite this, Pitcher persisted in trying to locate them. He resisted pressure from the governor's office to issue a final report on his probe at a time when the States-Item revealed that a simultaneous investigation being conducted by another state agency had been dropped.

INFORMATION THAT the Justice Department had the records and that the Queens County, New York, district attorney had been trying to get them failed to turn up the documents.

However, through his connections Pitcher discovered that the FBI had, indeed, subpoenaed the records and that the Senate investigating committee on wiretapping had also been after them. The FBI, it turned out, had turned the records over to the Justice Department. Pitcher had been trying to get them from the Justice agency by working through normal channels with lower echelon officials.

Then he decided to go directly to Attorney General Ramsey Clark and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. From the latter he learned the records had been obtained. Still, the Justice Department would not cooperate. It delayed answering requests and skirted the issue when Pitcher asked for help.

IT HAD SEEMED apparent from the outset that a clique in the Justice Department was determined not to turn the records loose. Then stories began appearing about the Justice Department's reluctance and tie-ins with the James Hoffa-Edward Grady Partin affair.

Pitcher refused to give up when the Justice Department said that the FBI had destroyed its copies of the toll records and only made a resume of its findings. For one thing, the district attorney did not believe it and he fired in a request to see the resume.

Then things began to fall into place. The governor, tired of all the adverse publicity on the telephone business, assigned an investigator from state police to initiate a new probe completely. The phone company then "found" records it did not think it had and the Justice Department produced a copy of the FBI resume.

The records are now being examined and their importance will be related in time, if any significance exists. No indictments may ever result. For one thing it will be difficult to prove any crime in a telephone conversation.

But one thing is clear, and the public ought to know it—because of the persistence of District Attorney Pitcher, the public is a little closer to the truth.



BILL LYNCH