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Hearings Trouble South Boston

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SOUTH BOSTON, Va.— Seated alone in the tree-shaded old frame building housing the Atkins Genealogical Service & Art Gallery ("Family on Premises Since 1857"), proprietor Martha Wilmouth confesses to losing sight of the genealogy of the Watergate scandal up in Washington.

"I can't keep the witness straight," she said laconically. "Actually, I'm sort of tired of the whole thing."

Weariness was the most obvious legacy of the Watergate hearing last week in this Southside Virginia city of 8,000, where Nixon loyalists are as prevalent as tobacco plants in the surrounding Halifax county countryside.

Here, a dozen miles from the North Carolina border and 200 from Washington, Watergate appears a distant and puzzling struggle of clouded significance to a citizenry more concerned with tobacco prices and the shrinking power of the dollar.

But the very persistence of the hearings, more than two months of them seeping into the high-ceilinged white frame homes of South Boston via television, have confused and troubled the President's followers.

This is conservative country ("maybe the most conservative in the world," says

a local lawyer), friendly in the past to Barry Goldwater and George Wallace. It was a stronghold for the old conservative Democratic organization headed by the late Sen. Harry F. Byrd Sr. and the President's rhetoric of self-reliance, patriotic fervor and traditional values have taken firm root here.

Last fall Mr. Nixon carried South Boston 1,865 votes 709 for George McGovern, and the average South Bostonian, when questioned, says he remains "loyal to the President."

But a few minutes into almost any conversation elicits a wide range of doubts and accusations and an almost universal wish that the nation be done with Watergate and the fearsome questions it raises.

"I can't see any advantage to bringing it out in the open," says South Boston Mayor Sam Patterson from beside the shelves of corn flakes and Jello-O in his grocery store. "The more they stir this stuff, the more it's going to stink."

Patterson, an amiable, paunchy man of 56, doesn't watch the hearings much and has plenty of company in that regard from those who say they retain "a lot of faith in Mr. Nixon."

Five miles to the north in the county seat of Halifax, State Sen. Howard P. Anderson, 58, says "every time I turn the television on to get

some news, all I get is Watergate. It makes me so damn mad I just turn the thing off."

Elsewhere in South Boston and Halifax County a visitor can hear housewives listening to the hearings at home and businessmen talking Watergate at the lunch counters.

"In that little bit of the average citizen's life spent thinking of national issues and politics," says state Del. Frank Slayton, a silver-haired, 40-year-old lawyer, "Watergate is paramount. It completely overshadows, for example, the Skylab launch. You hear people worry that the scandal and the hearings have paralyzed the operation of government."

Logan Young, 32, says he hasn't talked much about Watergate in South Boston except in the general small talk of a small town.

Such conversations, he says, tend to float on the surface of issues and explore their least controversial aspects ("the hearings have gone on too long" . . . "something like this has surely happened in politics before.")

But Young, a bespectacled young banker who voted for the President and considers himself a conservative, says he's become deeply troubled by Watergate and "as the hearings have dragged on

I've had less and less confidence in Mr. Nixon."

"His role (in withholding information from the Senate committee) has shaken my confidence," Young says, and "it has become a frightening thing that our government could produce the (break-in and espionage) tactics that have been alleged" in the hearings.

While others in the town report sentiments close to Young's, one of the hallmarks of South Boston's view of Watergate is diversity.

At the Electric Service Co., an appliance store just off Main Street, at least one of the color television sets on display is usually tuned to the Watergate hearings, and store manager W. M. Anderson says South Bostonians drop in daily to eye the testimony and kibbitz.

"Every one of them has a different opinion," he says. "Some think the whole bunch is crooked and ought to be put in jail, including the President. Some think the whole hearing business is a publicity stunt. And the majority is just tired of the whole thing."

Anderson, a balding man of 63, says "a good 90 per cent (of those who come into the store) think the President is involved in Watergate in some way. I do myself . . ."

"A good majority," he says, "think (former special

(Va.)

counsel to the President (John) Dean was telling a whole lot more of the truth than they like to admit."

But Anderson and others say interest in the hearings has waned sharply since Dean's testimony. By the time former presidential assistants John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman testified, they were looked on as just two more witnesses.

While Anderson says he believes the President for whom he voted is involved in watergate "up to his ears," he adds that he thinks Nixon may have the right to withhold from the committee his tapes of his meetings with John Dean.

"I don't know the law on the separation of powers," Anderson says.

Seated behind his desk at the Sherwood Forest Gun Shop he runs in his off hours, C. W. Trimble, a 27-year-old South Boston policeman, says he, too, is "sick of Watergate" and complains that "the average man can't understand it because they go into it in too much detail."

Trimble and Bob White, a 30-year-old sporting goods dealer, both identify themselves as supporters of Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace, who they say would never have gotten the country into anything like Watergate.

They wonder, too, if Watergate isn't a function generally of the "big government," and "too much federal control" that Wallace, they say, has been battling for years.

Both men think the Senate committee is "out to get Nixon" for no good reason they can understand.

"There are more important things around," says White. "We got a food shortage and an energy shortage. They should be working on those things instead of wasting all that time and money on television."

But the men also turn a critical eye on the administration witnesses.

Former presidential assistant Ehrlichman, White says, is "too mixed up" in his testimony. "It was like he was speaking somebody else's words and can't keep them straight," said White.

Mr. Nixon, Trimble says, should turn over to the committee the tapes of his meetings with Dean. He asks: "If they show he's honest, why not turn them over?"

And both men—like virtually everyone else questioned in South Boston, including the President's most ardent defenders—reject the notion that national security is justification for withholding any information on Watergate or was an excuse for any such tactics as the break-in at Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Observes Trimble:

"It looks like every time a politician doesn't want to tell you something he says national security is at stake."

South Boston Gazette publisher Lynn Shelton, one of the President's most persistent defenders, sounds a similar theme and goes on to echo both the fears and hopes of others in the city:

"Who knows what's national security and what isn't?" he says. "I don't know if Nixon isn't stalling a whole lot on that."

Shelton says the hearings are "a waste of time and money," thinks committee chairman Sam Ervin is "a clown," and thinks the people he's talked to are "up to their necks with the whole damn business."

"But I'll tell you the truth," he adds. "I don't see how in the world Nixon could sit up there and not know the cover-up was going on."

"But nobody has proven that, and until they do I'm going to stick up for him."