

Another Watergate Victim?

Winter Park, Fla.

His craggy face and wavy white hair are so marked with memory of Watergate that Edward J. Gurney now answers — not asks — questions with the familiar “at that point in time . . .”

In the summer of 1973, as America's worst political scandal unraveled on television, Gurney became instantly famous as a conservative Republican from Florida who was then-President Richard M. Nixon's strongest defender on the Senate investigating committee.

Today, Gurney is a somewhat forlorn figure — bitter, virtually broke, stripped of his power — after winning a costly three-year legal fight against the Department of Justice, which he disdainfully calls “the department of injustice.”

His troubles grew out of another scandal that ultimately forced him to convince two federal juries that he was innocent of unlawful involvement in a \$400,000 shakedown scheme aimed at funding his aborted 1974 re-election campaign.

“I'm probably the only politician in the history of the United States government,” he said this week, “who was in the middle of a corrupt action where people got a

heckuva lot of money and the government says, ‘Gurney didn't get any of it, but he may have known something about it.’”

Gurney, 62, was first found not guilty in Tampa last year of one count of bribery, one count of accepting illegal compensation and three counts of lying to a 1974 federal grand jury, which investigated the fund-raising case in Jacksonville. The Tampa jury could not agree on perjury and conspiracy charges.

Then he was acquitted six weeks ago in nearby Orlando of charges that he lied to the grand jury when he said that he did not know until mid-1973 that his top fund-raiser had pressured Florida homebuilders to make political contributions in exchange for promised favors by the Federal Housing Administration.

The scandal forced Gurney to abandon efforts to seek re-election in 1974. His indictment was the first of a sitting U.S. senator since the Teapot Dome scandals of the 1920s.

“This thing has cost me about a half a million dollars, counting lost time from work,” said Gurney, who once had a successful law practice.

For Gurney, life has been a succession of personal crises ever since the World War II injury that partially paralyzed his left leg. His wife, Natalie, was stricken 15 years ago with a rare circulatory ailment that disrupted her eye-hand coordination. Now she is confined to a Lakeland, Fla., nursing home.

Gurney's only son, John, his second of three children, committed suicide at age 22 in 1968, the year Gurney was first elected to the

Senate.

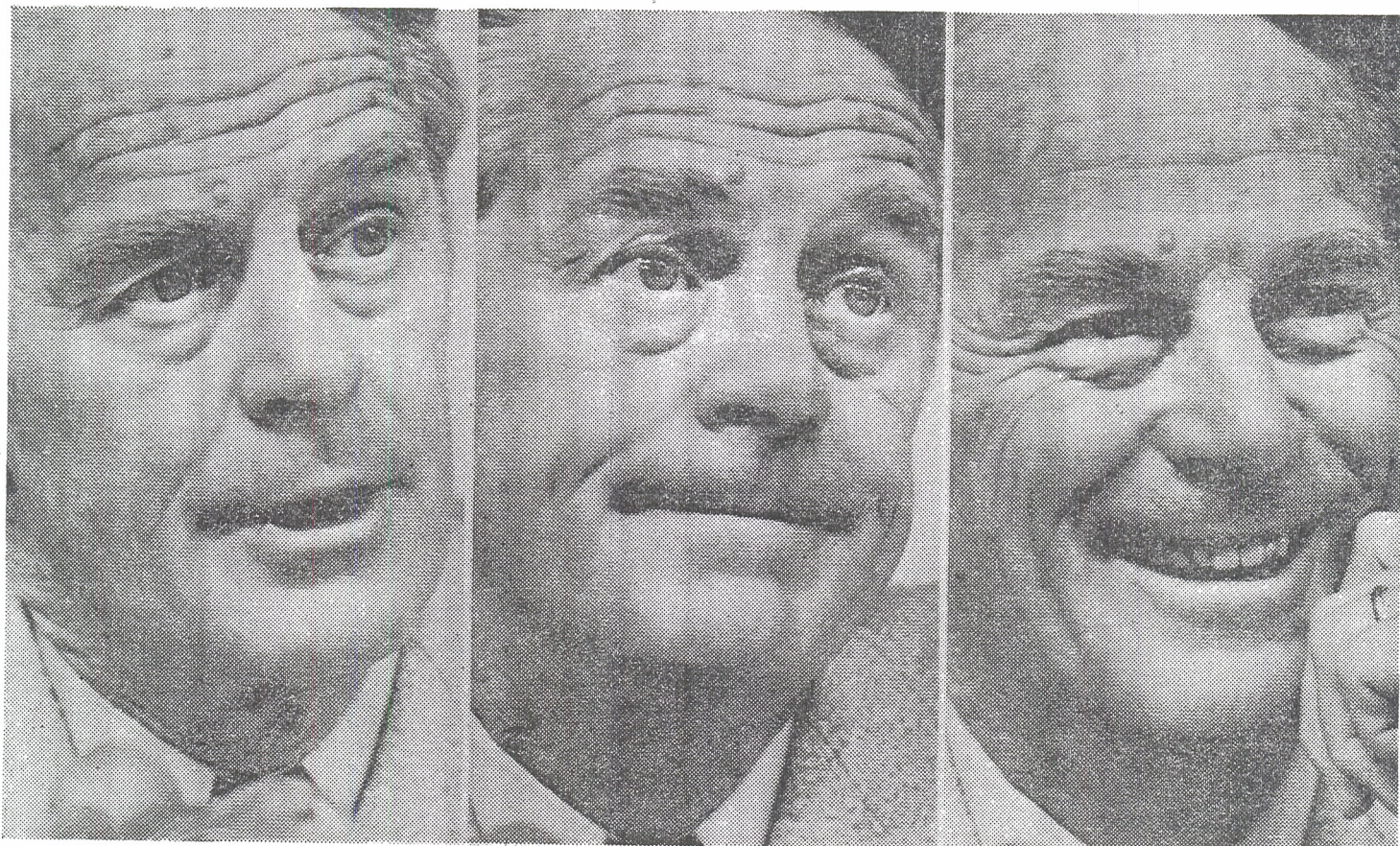
Professionally, Gurney said he is now only beginning to weigh his future. He talks of the possibility of joining a Washington law firm or of rebuilding his own law practice in Winter Park, but says he will not decide until early next year.

The \$25,000 response to his legal-fund drive prompts him to consider a return to politics. He mentioned two possibilities: the Senate again in 1980, and the Florida governorship in 1978. “The

problem I've got now is money,” he said. “In this state, you can't run a successful campaign without it.”

But Gurney tends to look back, not forward.

“You know, when this thing first came to light, there was no way to tell you how embarrassed . . . how devastated I was,” he said. “There was absolutely nothing in my life that's ever smacked of anything wrong . . . I had always been known as being clean as a whistle, with not a breath of



AP Wirephotos

Edward Gurney: "This thing has cost me half a million dollars"

scandal around me — which is more than a lot of people in public life can say. But it certainly was true of Ed Gurney."

Gurney also theorized that he was made a scapegoat by the Department of Justice, which was attacked for deficiencies in its Watergate investigation of the White House.

"They said, 'The White House had absolutely no connection,'" Gurney said, referring to Watergate. "So we know that the Justice Department totally fell down in their job. Then just about the time they're being discovered as having done an incredibly poor job... along comes the Gurney affair."

Why else does Gurney believe the government pressed its case so strenuously against him?

Again, he invoked Watergate.

"I was branded as a Nixon administration defender," he said. "In a way, I think, wrongfully branded because what I was doing — or trying to do — was to shed some objectivity on this business. Everybody else on the committee (was) harpooning the President and the administration. And doing it, in the cases of some, in an outrageous manner."

"I am bitter and I will continue to be bitter," he said.

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