

Guy Wright

The Hatchet Men

Last March the coroner of Los Angeles County, Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi, was fired on charges so bizarre they brought him national notoriety.

The Japanese-born pathologist was pictured as a morbidly unbalanced man who reveled in death for his own grisly aggrandizement.

After a lengthy hearing the Civil Service Commission has thrown out the charges and reinstated Dr. Noguchi to his post. Which leaves a lot of people wondering what gives in Lotusland. Let's continue our close-up look at that hearing.

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THE FINAL WITNESS against Dr. Noguchi was the man who first filed the charges against him — Lindon S. Hollinger, chief administrative officer of the county.

By the time Hollinger took the stand he had two good reasons for wanting Noguchi's scalp.

First, to save his own. County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn had testified earlier that if the charges against the coroner didn't stand up, "Hollinger will be in a difficult situation."

Second, to settle a grudge. Dr. Noguchi had gone over Hollinger's head in a bid for more personnel and had won his case before the supervisors despite Hollinger's objections.

Hollinger denied feeling any rancor toward the coroner. But when six members of Noguchi's staff had come to him with a wild tale about their boss' behavior, Hollinger ran "excitedly" to Supervisor Hahn (that's Hahn's word) to make the charges.

Hollinger told Hahn he had sworn statements from witnesses — or so Hahn testified.

On the stand himself, Hollinger admitted he had no sworn statements. He had talked to the disgruntled six but had taken no notes and when Noguchi's attorney, Godfrey Isaac, pressed him to relate what was said, he replied, "I don't remember."

He also conceded he didn't question any

of the other 125 members of the coroner's staff before running to Hahn with the charges.

The charges pictured Dr. Noguchi as a dope-addicted egomaniac who prayed for plane crashes and hoped Robert F. Kennedy would die.

But under cross-examination "hoped he would die" became "knew he would die." And the prayer for plane crashes was traced to a remark during budget talks to dramatize the possibility of catastrophe in a metropolis.

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DR. J. WALLACE GRAHAM, on the coroner's staff, helped supply the charge that Noguchi prayed for plane crashes. But on the witness stand he was so vague his testimony was stricken from the record.

Under cross-examination he admitted he let another pathologist take parts of cadavers from the morgue for outside experiments, but denied Noguchi had reprimanded him.

He also admitted he once forgot to take the finger prints of a homicide victim and burial was halted while this was done in the open grave.

After Noguchi's dismissal Dr. Graham received a promotion.

Dr. Noguchi's accusers also said he complained that too many deaths were being listed as "justifiable homicides," the implication being that he craved the publicity of murder trials.

But Dr. Donald A. Stuart, who reported that remark, admitted under cross-examination that Noguchi made it in connection with the killing of a black man by a policeman.

If this revelation touched the heart of Martin Weeks, the Negro assistant county attorney who presented the case against Noguchi, he never showed it.

He continued to picture the coroner as a mad Asiatic scientist enamored of death — although Noguchi once revived a man brought to the morgue as dead.