

BATMAN: That's right.

DR: . . . in early 1914.

BATMAN: And, of course, Donn Roberts had charge of the people who were instructing the people at the polls. If certain events take place at the polls which should have been under surveillance, people were instructed to stop it or should have been instructed to stop it. They didn't do so and they were more-or-less guilty by association.

DR: I know once I was talking with Governor Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia. This was four or five years back before he became governor. We were kidding him a little bit about how much money his grandfather made, which was (chuckles) apparently just an unbelievable amount. Jay chuckled and said, "Well, my granddad didn't break any laws at all. But he certainly was responsible for the writing of several."

BATMAN: (laughs heartily)

DR: Such as the cartel laws, and . . .

BATMAN: Yes. He caused the enactment of some statutes.

DR: Well, Howard, when that trial of the . . . a number of the 116 people pleaded guilty and were processed and so on. But during the same trial where Donn Roberts was convicted, there were 21 of the 116 people in that particular group that were convicted and received prison sentences. I have a record here. Mayor Roberts got the most sentences and the most fine, and the judge that you told us about fined him \$2,000 and sentenced him to six years on the first count. He was given two years on the second count, two years on the third count, five years on the fourth count, and these could all be served concurrently. So, he served a total of three and one-half years at the United States Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, and paid the \$2,000 fine. His sentences totaled 15 years, but since it was concurrent, he only served three and a half.

His attorney -- his defense attorney -- was A. O. Stukey (s-t-u-k-e-y), a former congressman.

DR: I wondered if you had remembered much about him or . . . I mean from your reading or talking with people.

BATMAN: I don't know much about Stukey. The stories that I have been able to put together was that he /was/ selected not only because he was a brilliant lawyer of his time and had defended some rather sensational cases in Indiana, but he was also known to be on very friendly terms with Judge Anderson. But the Judge's record was such that friendship would not mean very much. He was a pretty hard judge, and I doubt if the employment of Mr. Stukey had very much to do with it.

DR: Um hm.

BATMAN: He probably made as good a defense as he could and that was that.

DR: Well, I know this police chief Hollar apparently had given great amounts of evidence and was excused from prosecution, but he was kind of a right-hand man to the mayor in the planting of these guns on people and this sort of thing. He escaped.

Sheriff Dennis Shea and all of his people were convicted and went off to prison.

I notice that one of the witnesses was Governor Samuel Ralston, who took the stand and testified that just a short time after the election Mayor Roberts and one or two of the people from Terre Haute had come to him and asked that he issue a certificate of election for Judge Eli Redman. Governor Ralston indicated that he was a little bit hesitant to do that. And as I understand . . . as I remember now from reading this, he didn't do it. But Redman did get certified and was seated by the 10-vote margin.

It's interesting to note that Judge Redman and his son both were convicted, and both served time in Leavenworth. These 21 persons all served something between three years right down to six months and the fines, other than that of Mayor Roberts, ranged anywhere from \$1,000 down to \$100 fine, according to the

DR: thing. And, as you said, I'm sure that a number of these people probably were rightfully convicted, but just probably had no real idea that they were doing anything all that wrong.

Well, they went out to Leavenworth. Mayor Roberts served three and a half years beginning in late April of 1915. The train came through town, and I've heard that story there were something like 15,000 people that . . . well, there were crowds waving and . . . to greet the train at Brazil and at Greencastle and when it got to Terre Haute, it stopped for a while and there were some 15,000 people there. Mayor Roberts and Judge Redman, I think, and one or two of the others stepped out for a moment on the platform. I think they had handcuffs, or shackles; they'd been playing pinochle. And then after the train got water or whatever, they proceeded then on to Kansas, to Leavenworth.

Well, he got back to Terre Haute, I believe in the middle of 1919. And he lived about 16 years beyond that time. From what reading I've been able to do and checking I've been able to do, he engaged in numerous businesses, one of which he would buy old tanks and mount them on automobile bodies and place them on the right-of-way -- the public right-of-way -- at various places around town. At one time he had as many as 16 of those. He would buy a cheap type of gasoline in Illinois, and then he would sell the gasoline. His nephew, Bill Roberts that lives in West Terre Haute, told me that he used to watch Uncle Donn do that. I understand that some of the legitimate service station operators in town just absolutely didn't care for that at all. Some of his locations were at Wabash and 25th Street and some other places.

He also operated a laundry for a while. They had a gas explosion that killed the grocer that lived next door. And he dabbled some in politics as I've heard you say. I think he even tried to run for mayor once and even tried to run for governor one time.

BATMAN: Yeah.

DR: What . . . do you want to cut in there or just . . . something along that line? I've got some notes

DR: that tell me the last days of his life. I'd like to put those on.

BATMAN: Yeah. No, I think that probably covers it. He was a reasonably successful business man. And no one ever doubted that he wasn't a smart, bright fellow. And it's too bad he fell in evil ways politically. He might have gone a long way on his own.

DR: His nephew Bill said that Uncle Donn didn't smoke, didn't drink. He liked to drive the car fast. They had a 350-acre farm at Farmersburg, and after Uncle Donn came back from the penitentiary -- the federal penitentiary -- he spent some time improving the roads and the buildings on the farm and also dabbling with his service station business, the laundry business, and oh, some other smaller business ventures.

That'll kind of bring us up now to 1936 and here is another kind of a little bit of tragedy that wound up his life. He would not pay the state excise tax on his gasoline sales. And he was indicted and tried in the local courts for that and was sentenced to the Indiana State Penitentiary at Michigan City in the summer of 1936. He had been up there about a month, as I understand it, and on July 31, 1936, he suffered a terrible heart attack. He was put in an ambulance on Saturday, August 1, and driven back to Terre Haute, /and/ taken to his home which set at 305 South 7th Street. That's where the Shell Station now is . . .

BATMAN: That's right; on the corner.

DR: On the . . . up high there. I understand that house has been moved to someplace in the south end of town, and I've done a little bit of checking /but/ I can't find it. I'm going to try to find that house so I can take a picture of it. His nephew Bill told me he was just certain it had been moved along with a couple of other houses. But we'll see if we can find it to get a picture.

And then on Sunday, August the 2nd, he died of that heart attack. He was . . . the funeral service

DR: was a private funeral service held on Tuesday, August the 4th, 1936, at the Gillis Funeral Chapel. Now that building was in the old Hulman home that no longer exists. /In 1936 the Gillis Funeral Home was located on the northwest corner of 7th and Chestnut in a building that probably had been the William P. Ijams' home and never belonged to any of the Hulmans. Later this funeral operation was moved to the northeast corner of 8th and Chestnut into a home which had been occupied by the Anton Hulmans. That was up there near the campus of the university. They didn't have any singers. It was a Protestant minister, Reverend Myron Phillips from Centenary Methodist church. Of course, he was buried over in the St. Joseph section.

Now, Donn Roberts was not a Catholic but his wife, Mary Grace, and her family were. One report I had tells me that she was reared by some nuns in a convent. I talked to some other people -- and so far I've not had a chance to verify this -- but I understand her family was very comfortable financially and was in the pork business, and that she had owned some property. She also had some money so that when times got a little thin with Donn, why she had some funds. But here again, this kind of thing I'm going to have to check out by a lot more hard work, unless you know something for sure on that, Howard. I didn't know whether you'd done much digging around on her family or not.

Anyway, his wife Mary Grace Early Roberts died in 1960. She lived to be 91 years old. And Donn Roberts was buried then on August the 4th, 1936. He was 68 years 10 months and 4 days of age, or 56 days short of his 69th birthday. He was a big man, a handsome man. His nephew Bill tells me that he loved to eat and when he was a student at Rose Poly, he would carry a whole pie for his lunch. And Bill says he remembers when they would have family picnics at Farmersburg, Uncle Donn would eat 12 roasting ears at one time. He didn't drink, didn't smoke, never was really too . . . in his little later years, he was a little paunchy but never really a fat man at all but a big fellow.

That just about exhausts my notes on Donn Roberts, Howard.

BATMAN: Well, of course, there have been few more colorful characters in Terre Haute history than Donn Roberts. There are some deputies still living in Indianapolis who were in this group that came over.

DR: Is that right?

BATMAN: Four by the last count I had, and I have arranged to talk with them because I think they can give us some real information . . .

DR: Great!

BATMAN: . . . on, you know, what happened over here at the time, their activities and so forth.

DR: I know one thing. I want to see that door you have. I want to see that door. Is it 420?

BATMAN: Four twenty.

DR: Four twenty. I knew that's the room where they operated but for a time while Donn was waiting, Marshal Storen had him sit next door in Room 421.

BATMAN: Um hmm.

DR: But the main room where they were gathering up the indictees (laughs) was Room 420.

Well, let us for the oral history project that we're doing, let me ask . . . the historians would like . . . they'd like to have you comment on some other subjects. Let me do that.

BATMAN: All right.

DR: I'd just like to say, to what do you attribute the strength of the Democratic party in Terre Haute?

BATMAN: Well, that's rather difficult to answer I think. To a number of things. Basically, the Democratic party, I think we can all agree, is the more liberal of the two great political parties. Laboring people are generally thought to be Democrats; and people engaged in business, commerce and finance,

BATMAN: are thought to be Republicans. And, of course, that isn't necessarily true. They don't fit into a type.

Terre Haute in its early days was a city that had many coal miners. We had several breweries here and several distilleries here, and I've heard the statement made that there were some 60 saloons from the Wabash River bridge to 13th Street. Certainly there were a great many of them. And I think the great preponderance of working people were Irish and German, who made up the population at that time, normally turned into the Democratic party. And I think that was probably the backbone of the Democratic strength in this community.

The wealthier class of people, particularly at that time, were generally allied with the Republican party. It was the age of the high protective tariff and the William Jennings Bryan days of the great speech of "The Cross of Gold," the great argument as to the gold standard. And I think the entire community was such that you would normally expect it to be predominantly Democratic.

DR: I know that (I think) would be true for my home state, West Virginia. I think you could make Also, my thoughts are that usually when one party or the other gets a good early start, sometimes it just has better leaders.

BATMAN: Yes, that's true.

DR: I mean Gene Debs was quite the leader I would guess, from what I've read about Gene Debs. He had the dynamic . . . and he was a Democrat, wasn't he?

BATMAN: Yes, oh, yes. Well, Socialist but his original . . . when Debs served in the General Assembly in the State of Indiana, he served as a Democrat.

DR: That's right, and he later . . .

BATMAN: He was an employee at Hulman & Company. And it's interesting that these two real strong men, regardless of what you may think of them, they were strong men. They were leaders. And they had a dynamic personality. Debs, of course, was a Socialist, but you can't help but admire the man from the standpoint of his belief in the dignity of man. I mean,

BATMAN: most of us do not have any feeling at all for his political philosophy, but he was a man who believed that the poor man was downtrodden and oppressed. I don't think Debs was by any means a Communist. I have a feeling he believed in a capitalistic system, but he felt the working man was being put upon. He was a sort of a Charles Dickens of his era.

DR: He certainly wouldn't have approved of the Communist that we know the last 20 or 30 years, who are so brutal.

BATMAN: Oh, no!

DR: He would not have . . . certainly not have approved of that.

BATMAN: No. Debs really believed in freedom for everybody, to an excess I think. He one time said that we would never . . . he would never be happy as long as there was a man in prison (chuckles). Well, that pushes us pretty far.

DR: (laughs)

Let me go on to another topic that they'd like you to comment on.

During the time of the Ku Klux Klan, during the time that it was so active in Terre Haute in 1928, why was it connected in some way with the Republican party, if it was? Now, I'm not sure who wrote these questions, Howard. And I'm just sort of reading them as they're put down here so I don't know that that was true or not. But that's the way the question is written.

BATMAN: Well, it isn't probably exactly fair to say that the Republican party was connected with the Ku Klux Klan, but D. C. Stephenson came from southern Indiana. And it's interesting that D. C. Stephenson one time ran for Congress on the Democratic ticket. But later he found . . . he learned and found out that the Ku Klux Klan was a great racket for the promotion of a dogma philosophy which is as unAmerican as anything could be. He led his people, his organization, into a belief that a 100% American

BATMAN: would be white, and he would be Protestant, and he would be born in this country. And some of those characteristics -- or some of those qualifications that he had for his membership -- flew directly against the Democratic party.

For example, in Terre Haute I think it's perfectly safe to say that at that time the greater number of Irish and German Catholics were Democrats. I think the registration lists will no doubt show that. And many of the foreigners were Democrats. The Irish and the Germans who migrated here and the Italians were seized by the Democratic party here the same way that in Chicago the organizations there grabbed the immigrants. They grabbed the

DR: There were more of them!

BATMAN: There were more of them! And they made good, stalwart members of the Democratic party. The labor unions starting at that time were largely Democratic. And it was perfectly natural that that would come about.

But when the Klan started, it was also natural that those who were native-born, white, Protestant citizens could belong. It had a Republican flavor from the start. And to look at the election returns, you will see that in the Klan days there were periods of time in which the Democratic party did not fill one single office in Vigo County.

DR: Is that right?!

BATMAN: And to be elected, you almost had to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan. And lists of members were found which bore that out.

It's also very interesting that two very stalwart citizens of this community -- Vern McMillan, who was a close personal friend of mine, one of the finest men that ever lived -- was a very straight-laced and dedicated Republican. But McMillan absolutely refused to have any part of the Ku Klux Klan, and as a result his business suffered terribly. And that's one of the interesting things about it. There were business people in this community whose business was almost ruined by the fact that they would not join the Klan. And that applied to a number of Protestant people as

BATMAN: well as to a number of foreign-born people who refused to be swayed by this bigotry and insisted that they would not join the Klan and still adhered to the Republican party. Vern McMillan was a standout in that group.

DR: Um hm.

BATMAN: So, the history of the Klan in Terre Haute was one of the greatest tragedies that a community ever went through. It separated people who had been life-long friends. It destroyed business people and it was a terrible, terrible thing. Yet they masqueraded under the slogan that they were 100% American. Yet they denied the right of some people to practice their religion and to be loyal to their race whatever it may have been.

END OF TAPE