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Hamtramck: Michigan's Poorly Hidden Secret

By Ed Hertel (edhertel@hotmail.com)

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Description: Hamtramck, a suburb of Detroit, had its own world of vice. With mayors running their campaigns from behind bars, its no wonder the lawlessness was rampant in the small town. Read about how one small enclave had an enormous history.



by Ed Hertel

There are a few cities with names whose mere mention immediately brings to mind corruption and vice. Places like Newport, Hot Springs, Phenix City and Galveston are first and foremost remembered for their association with gambling and political corruption long before any pure civic activities. There is one city however that trumps them all, and for many, it is completely unknown. A small suburb of Detroit, Michigan, with the unusual name of Hamtramck not only has a colorful history of vice, but its very creation was a result of its propensity for corruption.

Wholly embedded inside of Detroit's north side, the tiny two square mile city of Hamtramck makes up for its size with its expansive history. Everything about the diminutive patch of land seems to have a story, including its origin. Incorporated as a township in 1798, it took its name from the Revolutionary War officer John Francis Hamtramck, who would later take residence in the area.

Captain John Hamtramck was not like most Revolutionary War soldiers fighting for freedom from English tyranny. He wasn't even from the American colonies. Hamtramck was a French-Canadian from

Montreal who decided to fight for the sole purpose of killing as many Redcoats as he could. With a seething hatred for what the British army did to his homeland during the French & Indian War, Hamtramck offered his murderous rage to the American army, who were more than happy to help focus that anger to their own ends.

After the war, John Hamtramck became the first commander of Fort Wayne in Detroit where he lived until his death in 1803. Unable to rest even in death, the angry man's body was buried and exhumed three times.

THE CITY OF HAMTRAMCK IS BORN

John Hamtramck lived long enough to see the young district named after him form, but he was fortunate not to see what would become of it.

Throughout the 1800s, little Hamtramck and its mostly German population grew slowly, always overshadowed by its immense neighbor Detroit who slowly but surely started cannibalizing the district by annexing it piece by piece.

Just when it seemed like Hamtramck might lose its identity altogether, the fledgling automobile industry would come to its rescue in the form of the Dodge brothers who, in 1910, chose Hamtramck



as the site for their new auto parts plant. Within a few years, the township grew from 3,500 residents to over 48,000, with the largest group being of Polish decent.

As the city was changing, so was the nation. Prohibition

was voted into law and the citizens of Hamtramck, with their German and Polish beer loving heritage, were having none of it. Liquor stills and bootlegging bars were common and as long as the right people were paid off, there was no trouble.

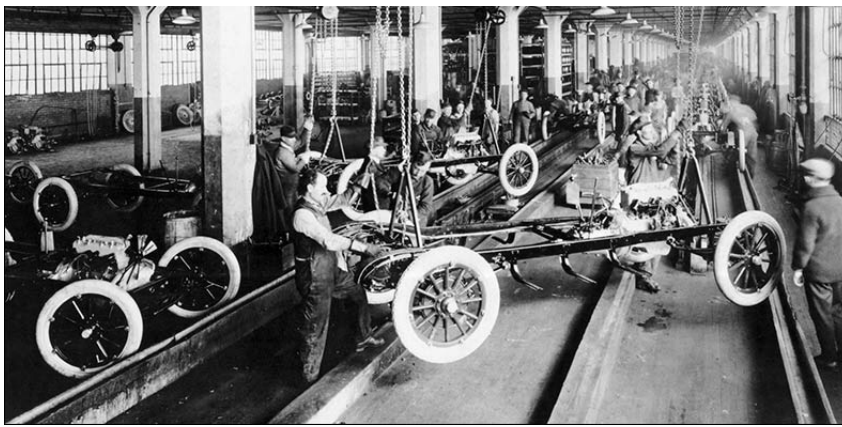
Unfortunately for the township commissioners, the final word was not theirs to give. The county called the shots on the unincorporated township, and they were not so easily bribed. So what is a town bent on controlling its own corruption supposed to do? Simple – draw in some boundaries, and vote themselves into an independent city, which they did in 1922.

Now with seemingly a free pass for vice, Hamtramck citizens voted in their first mayor, Peter Jezewski, who appointed his own men as both council members and police commissioners and celebrated with a Prohibition-time “beer festival”.

VICE TAKES OVER

The city soon became a den of vice and corruption with a booming liquor business and illegal gambling joints on every corner. The blemish on Michigan was wide open and publicity of the lawless town was soon grabbing the attention of the governor’s office. Orders were given to clean up the town, but Mayor Jezewski was either unable or unwilling to do it. The fight to reform Hamtramck would have to be accomplished from the outside.

The mayor would be one of the first victims of the state’s reform movement. He was convicted of bribery and protection of the illegal liquor trade, and while awaiting his sentence, still



managed to run for re-election. He lost... but not by much.

His successor ran on a platform to clean up the town, but found campaign promises hard to implement when he was the only

one determined to do so. The wheels turned slowly for the one man clean-up crew and his tenure came and went with very little progress.

When it came time for the next election, Jezewski gave his blessing from the confines of Leavenworth Federal Prison for Rudolph Tenerowicz to run for mayor. He won easily and it was business as usual in Hamtramck. During his term Hamtramck experienced the same corruption, and as a result, he too was indicted by the county, along with high ranking police officers, on charges. His term ended with a conviction, but of course, even this wasn’t enough to keep him down. He was to be re-elected later as Hamtramck mayor, then go on to serve as a U.S. Congressman.



GAMBLING

The end of Prohibition in 1933 did not deter the illegal activity of little Hamtramck as illegal stills continued to pump out strong untaxed liquor and gambling was at an all time high. Handbooks operated in plain sight and the roar of dice games could be heard on the streets. Even with this visibility, city commissioners insisted that the city was maintaining order. Regardless of the persistence, news of illegal activity was never long from the papers.

One particularly loud incident occurred in 1934 when a body of a local Hamtramck citizen was found in a ditch about a hundred miles north of town. The



condition of the body indicated he had been there a couple of weeks, and when finally identified, the trail led straight to the South End Club, one of Hamtramck's biggest illegal casinos.

The investigation and subsequent trial

did little to find the truth, but it was thought the victim had been killed as a result of an argument over a dice game in the back of the South End Club. The club's owner, not wanting the publicity or attention from the police, loaded the dead man's body in his car and drove to the next county where he dumped him in a ditch.

During the trial, stories were ever changing and neither the judge nor jury knew what was really the truth. In the end, the only people to serve time were four witnesses who the judge sentenced for perjury,

contempt and "introducing levity into a murder trial". It seemed that murder was just another item to add to the acceptable vices in Hamtramck.

In contrast to the size of the city, gambling in Hamtramck was no small time affair. They might not have been the elegant palaces of New York or Los Angeles, but what they lacked in sophistication, they made up for in numbers.

After the bad publicity of the murder trial, the South End Club moved to a location across the street to the Dodge Auto Plant on Joseph Campau Street where it was primed to exploit its thousands of hard working employees. One reporter visited the club and said there were 300 patrons crammed inside and the tables were so full that once a vacancy occurred, a man with a bullhorn would announce the opening.

Another large casino was located at 11360 Joseph Campau on the second floor above an automobile dealership. Gamblers would be met in a long hallway and searched for weapons by two guards while a third watched from a metal turret



above them. Once inside, they entered a 6,000 sq ft room which held two dice tables, four stuss (faro) tables, four blackjack and a chuck-a-luck game.

By 1940, the reputation of Hamtramck was impossible to ignore. It was obvious that if the city had no drive to clean it up, the state would have to step in. Indictments for dozens of city officials, including the sheriff, police chief and prosecutors, came raining in claiming conspiracy of protection of vice interests in Hamtramck. Some witness, like the Chief of Police, spilled all his dirty laundry, while others like the mayor gave elusive and contradictory testimony earning him time in jail for contempt. When it was all said and done, dozens were found

Hamtramck Police Chief Admits He Bought His Job With Vice Tribute

Due to Face Trial Board After Testifying at Hearing in McCrea, Wilcox Bribery Cases

guilty of protecting the policy games and handbooks and given multi-year sentences. It wasn't the end of gambling, but it was definitely a turning point.

After the sensational trial was concluded, the state stepped up their efforts to enforce the gambling laws. Raids became more frequent and gamblers were starting to feel the heat. In late December 1940, state officers descended on Hamtramck and implemented simultaneous raids on three handbooks across from the Dodge Plant. Being payday, the timing couldn't have been better as an estimated 800 bettors were crammed into the three clubs. With no other option, three different Justices of Peace were brought in and the gamblers were processed on the spot. Fines of \$5 were given out, and those gamblers who had been unlucky that day were forced to look to their more prosperous friends for loans.



Justice of the Peace (under arrow) holding hearings in the club on a blackjack table and handing out fines.

CHANGE IN ATTITUDE

Small Hamtramck felt the war before most of the rest of the country. Prior to Pearl Harbor, most Americans viewed World War II as Europe's problem. The mostly Polish citizens of Hamtramck however had close ties with family and friends in the homeland who were suffering a great deal. Suddenly, lawlessness and self-interest weren't so enticing and little by little the citizens were starting to move toward reform.

When Circuit Judge Homer Ferguson opened his one-man grand jury on corruption in Hamtramck, there was very little resistance from the citizens. He indicted twenty-three officials, including the Hamtramck mayor, on conspiracy to protect vice and gambling. Many would be found guilty and sentenced to prison.

For the good people of Hamtramck, it seemed that every day was a new scandal. There were the various trials for vice kickbacks, followed by a citywide scandal involving parking meters, followed by a scandal involving the selling of school board positions.

By the time the war was ending, the Hamtramckians had seen quite enough. The new Communist political party that was sweeping through Poland found its way into Hamtramck as well. They had little interest in gambling and vice and although not everyone was on board with the new ideology, there was enough of an upswelling to cause a diminish in power and influence.

It would be naive of course to think there was any one remedy that would cure the city of vice. Even with a renewed interest in law-and-order, there was still plenty of opportunity for a reveler to find a dice game or a drink after hours. No amount of legal action or philosophy can rid a town of all its problems. Hamtramck, born from the very vice it eventually would fight, would never be totally reformed. What would be the fun in that?

Grand Jury Indicts 23 In Hamtramck's Alleged Vice Ring

Detroit, Aug. 21, (AP)—Circuit Judge Homer Ferguson's one-man grand jury, entering the third year of its activity, today indicted 23 persons charged with conspiring to protect vice and gambling in suburban Hamtramck.

Sam "Smokey" Solomon

HAMTRAMCK'S BLIND GAMBLER

One of the more colorful characters to come out of Hamtramck was Sam "Smokey" Solomon. To be a gambler in the rough town, one needed tough skin, and Smokey was built for it.

He was a veteran of World War I who served in France, earning his release after being injured in an explosion at an ammunition dump. Upon returning, he took up business in Hamtramck by teaming up with fellow gambler Jack Rubin and opening a sportsbook operation called the Paddock Club at 3005 Caniff.



Solomon and Rubin must have thought the jig was up when State Prosecutor Duncan McCrea took office in 1935. He ran on a platform promising to clean up vice in

Hamtramck and all signs pointed to him being serious. Immediately, orders for raids were given and the Paddock Club was one of the first to be hit. Solomon was arrested, convicted and given a suspended sentence. It seemed as if the era of open gambling might come to a close. The new prosecutor however had other plans and did something unexpected. He sat back and did nothing.

As voters were left scratching their collective heads, gamblers like Smokey Solomon continued plying their trade with reckless abandonment. The Paddock Club enjoyed harassment free times throughout the end of the 1930s. The large handbook operation was always busy and it was reported that the blackjack games alone could bring in \$8,000 on a single Saturday night. But things were about to change.

The prosecutor's inactivity did not go unnoticed. Circuit Judge Ferguson took it upon himself to conduct a one-man investigation and found that McCrea and dozens of other officials were actively conspiring with gambling interests.

Knowing his Paddock Club was notorious, Solomon closed the doors during the grand jury, never to reopen. He was called in first as a witness, then as a defendant. Smokey Solomon, along with so many Hamtramck gamblers and politicians was tried and found guilty. He was sentenced to serve one to five years, later reduced to probation.

For most, getting probation and avoiding prison would be a blessing, for not for Smokey. The stress of the trials, combined with lingering injuries from his time in WWI, caused him to lose his eyesight and plunged him into total darkness.

Knowing there was little left for him in Hamtramck, Smokey moved into Detroit where he was granted a vending license in the federal building. It was 1942, and with wartime rations, Solomon's small vending table was earning a good living.

But just like the old gambling days, competition was not Solomon's friend. Outside of the federal building, another blind merchant named Joe Balsano had set up shop and Solomon sent orders for him to be removed.

The publicity was definitely not in Solomon's favor. Played up as Joe Balsano, the God-loving Christian, versus the ex-gambler Smokey Solomon, it seemed that the court of public opinion was strongly in Balsano's corner. For once, Smokey had the law on his side, but even that might not be enough. Just when it looked like Solomon might lose the fight, his competition died of (what seemed) natural causes.

Whether it was being reminded of his notorious past, or a real desire to change, Smokey Solomon used this opportunity to start his road to reform. He led efforts to support the troops with magazines and supplies and eventually became a champion for the rights of the blind.

Smokey operated his cigar stand for more than forty years until he passed away in 1976 at the age of 81.



Jimmy Hoffa, left, greets old friend Sam Solomon in Detroit Federal Building