

The Newspapers That Fought City Hall

By JACK RYAN

4 Indicted Police Officers Suspended; Out on Bail
County Charter Pushed Through
Illegal Race Wire Network Vanishes from Foster Bldg.
Pastor Says Utcians Must 'Clean House'
Council Blocks Newsmen From Study of Ordinances
Panel Sought To Modernize 'Government'
City Buys 6 Cars: \$16,550; State Cost Price: \$10,800
Phony Tire Racket Charged: 10 Others Indicted
Improved Moral Climate Goal of Citizen's Group

The risks were great—violence, loss of business, crushing defeat; the possible reward—a clean city; these men chose to take the risks

Editors' Note: This week the 75th anniversary of the American Newspaper Publishers Association comes to a climax as the group holds its annual convention in New York City. In tribute to the ANPA, Family Weekly presents this dramatic example of how newspapers and citizen action can bring about better government.

The story happened in Utica, N.Y., and though it is familiar to Utcians it is being retold to Family Weekly's 5½ million readers across the country.

NEAL BINTZ, managing editor of the Utica *Daily Press*, picked up a jangling telephone one damp spring day in 1958.

"This is just to tell you," a muffled voice said, "that you're going to get a working over if you keep printing those crime stories." The caller rang off before the startled editor could reply.

At almost the same moment, in another part of the city, the wife of Gil Smith, managing editor of the Utica *Observer-Dispatch*, opened an envelope without a return address. What she read left her aghast. The letter was an obscene tirade with threats directed against her husband. She forwarded it to the police—and wondered if they could be relied upon to protect her family.

A few nights later, Mason C. Taylor, executive editor of the morning and evening sister papers, heard an intruder jimmying the back door of his home. Armed with a No. 5 golf iron and mindful of violent threats against his staff, he crept into the darkened kitchen. The intruder, however, fled into the darkness. "Just a kid prowling," he told his wife—and hoped that he was right.

At an editorial meeting the next day, the newsmen agreed that the threats added up to one thing. "We've finally got them worried," Taylor said, grimly aware of the irony of his remark. "But who are 'they'?"

Utica, a peaceful city of 100,000, once known as a textile center, had gone through a "loom to boom" transition after World War II. Preoccupied with jobs in new industries, new homes, and raising families, its residents had become apathetic toward police laxity, political bossism, gambling, and growing corruption. Their newspapers had warned of these things, but no one seemed to be listening.

Then came the state police raid on the famous "summit meeting" of alleged Mafia leaders at Apalachin, N.Y., during which three Utcians were seized. Investigators speculated that Utica may have become upstate headquarters for a national crime syndicate.

The papers launched a no-holds-barred attack on prostitution, gambling, and the apathy of public officials. At first, city hall, vice lords, and the gamblers laughed it off. By May, 1958, the laughs had turned to threats.

"We weren't sure at first whether big-time hoods had moved in or we were dealing with local muscle," said Taylor. "Our best guess was that the syndicate had started to take over but the nationwide crackdown after Apalachin had sent them to cover. Apparently we guessed right."

The police chief retired, after admitting to a legislative committee he had never raided a disorderly house in his 20 years of service. His deputy resigned.

The bosses countered by hitting at the newspapers' life blood—advertising. They tried to organize a merchants' boycott. "They're giving Utica a bad name," the bosses told businessmen. The boycott failed. So did attempts to bring a Justice Department antitrust suit against the papers. Next came a proposed tax on advertising, so blatantly punitive it was howled down.

WHEN REPORTERS Jack Germond, Tony Vella, and William Lohden began probing municipal purchasing, officials cried, "You're disrupting office routine," and sought to bar them. They persisted, and found that while the city was buying truck tires in large volume at above retail prices, they weren't showing up on city vehicles. Private firms were being paid as much as \$10 a car space to clear snow from parking areas. Payrolls were loaded with drones, politicians' relatives, and cronies.

The hornets' nest stirred by the newspapers and a resulting grand-jury investigation convinced Averell Harriman, then governor, that Utica needed a special prosecutor to supplant the local district attorney. He appointed Robert E. Fischer; top investigator for Fischer was Sgt. Ed Crosswell, who had gained fame as the raider of the Apalachin mobster meeting.

Fischer's investigators blanketed Utica, and what they found in courtroom evidence vindicated the bitter fight of the two newspapers. The deputy chief of police, a captain, and three detectives were fingered by prostitutes (who also said they themselves had contributed handsomely to political fund raising) in conspiring to protect brothels—and were convicted. Fischer's men also swooped down on bookie joints, and operators were caught with receipts in hand.

Thwarted in all their reprisals, the political bosses banked on their machine winning the November election, as it had for 14 years.

But a group of "young Turks," moved to action by the

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