

Sirhan defense team / appellate attorney 9/4/60

(10)

XIII

THE SIRHAN DEFENSE TEAM

According to the newspapers, **Russell Parsons** was the first attorney named to defend **Sirhan Sirhan**. In fact, the first lawyer picked was **Grant Cooper**, the most prominent criminal lawyer in California. **Cooper** was personally chosen by **A.L. Wirin**, chief counsel for the **American Civil Liberties Union** in Los Angeles. Wirin had been in constant contact with the young Jordanian immigrant immediately following the assassination of **Robert Kennedy**, his avowed purpose to protect the suspect's constitutional rights and gain him a fair trial. Wirin seemed uneasy in the role, and clearly did not want to represent Sirhan. So the name of **Grant Cooper** was agreed upon between Sirhan and Wirin. According to his notebooks, Sirhan was fascinated with criminal cases, particularly the murder trial of a deputy district attorney who was convicted of killing his wife and her lover. So the name of **Grant Cooper** was well known to Sirhan. But Cooper's name would not be made public for awhile. He was tied up in United States District Court, representing a defendant in the **Friars Club** cheating scandal. * And it was agreed that should Cooper's name be linked publicly with Sirhan, it might jeopardize his case in federal court. So someone, it's not known exactly whom, provided the names of several other lawyers who could possibly handle the case until Cooper was available. The list was taken to Sirhan Sirhan at his jail cell, and almost without hesitation he looked at the six or seven names available and selected **Russell Parsons**. Parsons was not as well known to the public as **Grant Cooper**. But in legal circles, at one time, his name was almost a legend.

It was after Cooper ^(Horn) secretly agreed to head Sirhan defense team that Cooper acquired those forbidden Grand Jury transcripts in **Trial's** case — 265

Those well acquainted with Parsons said he had a deep hatred for Robert Kennedy. The hatred dated back to the time Kennedy was a counsel for the Senate Rackets Committee which had been looking into Parsons' connections with the underworld.

Almost immediately after Parsons was named counsel for Sirhan, he created a furor in an interview that was covered by every television station and newspaper in Los Angeles. Parsons said Sirhan was getting mail from people "who thought he had done a good thing."

Despite that remark, Russell Parsons' legal qualifications were in outstanding order although his age, about 70, hardly made him a candidate for a gruelling criminal trial that would be the most publicized in American history. There was speculation that Parsons had been selected because the prosecution had an ironclad case and he would be the ideal choice to appeal the verdict. Parsons was an expert in the field of evidence. He was the author of the appeal that led to the famous Cahan decision by the U.S. Supreme Court which laid down new ground rules governing the use of evidence by police and the prosecution. He was also the author of another appeal that turned into a landmark case, the Caruso decision.

When Parsons took the Sirhan case his legal credentials were well publicized, but past and present connections were overlooked. The connection with former policeman Michael McCowan was a matter of public record. And soon McCowan would be at Parsons' side in the role of chief investigator.

(More)

266

948

In the early 1940s, in his role as a deputy district attorney, Parsons was one of three prosecutors assigned a licensing scandal involving former California liquor czar **William G. Bonelli**. Bonelli (who eventually fled to Mexico) began playing rough when he learned Parsons was on the case. Parsons was first accused of falsifying his civil service application by stating he had never been arrested. It was brought out that as a young man in 1928 Parsons was named three times in felony complaints that charged him with issuing bad checks. The previous year, in San Bernardino County, Parsons reportedly made good on a number of checks bounced by the bank. All of the checks were for small amounts of money.

Still again, in 1927, Parsons pleaded guilty to obtaining property under false pretenses in a Whittier Justice Court and was given a six-month suspended sentence. Responding to the charges, Parsons admitted he had been financially embarrassed in 1927 and 1928. He said the transactions resulted from an oil company he managed which ran into financial trouble. The ^{old} charges against Parsons were made public by a Los Angeles civic leader named **Clifford E. Clinton**, leader of a political organization named CIVIC. Clinton was a bitter political foe of the district attorney at that time, **Burton Pitts**. Parsons had Pitts' support all the way. Parsons managed to stay on the case and county officials refused to take action against him despite the false statement in his job application.

(more)

267

In the late 1940s, Parsons went into private practice. One of his major cases involved the defense in 1949 of a number of high-ranking Los Angeles policemen who had been indicted by the grand jury on corruption charges. The word started spreading that Parsons could be counted on when a cop was in trouble. Then, too, there were rumbles that Parsons was a mouthpiece for the "mob."

In 1950, the reform mayor of Los Angeles, Fletcher Bowron, finally crumbled under too much political crossfire from his old enemy, the Los Angeles Times, and was singled out for a recall election. Among those who decided to oppose Bowron was attorney Russell Parsons. The rumbles of mob connections grew louder and finally the Bowron forces unveiled their most important piece of evidence to make the point, a letter Parsons had written in December 1944 to the chief county probation officer in Cleveland, Ohio. In that letter Parsons asked that probation be lifted in Ohio on ^{Mickey Cohen} ~~Sammy Cohen~~, the small time hood who made good as the number one mobster on the West Coast after he moved to Los Angeles. Mickey Cohen's name was a legend in 1950. Besides beating up other hoods who picked on little old ladies, Cohen managed to survive assassination attempts; keep control of a flourishing bookmaking industry, and enforce what had to be enforced in the circles of the underworld. So Parsons' letter on Cohen's behalf came as a mild surprise, particularly that part in which he wrote about Cohen's "rehabilitation."

(more)

268

+230-2
Parsons

RUSSELL E. PARSONS
ATTORNEY AT LAW
SUITE 400 METROPOLITAN WATER DISTRICT BLDG
300 WEST THIRD STREET
LOS ANGELES 10, CALIFORNIA
MUTUAL 3823



December 18, 1944

Mr. William Dillon
Chief Probation Officer
Cuyahugo County
Cleveland, Ohio

In re **Melkie Cohen**

My dear Sir:

Please be advised that I have known Mr. Cohen for four or five years and am also acquainted with a number of substantial people here in the community with whom he is acquainted and associates. I understand that he is desirous of terminating his probation proceedings and I am sure that his conduct here indicates that he has rehabilitated himself. Anything you can do for him will be much appreciated.

Very truly yours,


RUSSELL E. PARSONS

REP:sk

269

asked to comment about the letter, Parsons said he could not recall writing it. But he did recall that Cohen had gotten into some kind of trouble in Cleveland once upon a time. (The records in Cleveland showed that Cohen and one of his followers, Frank Niccoli, had been convicted of embezzlement in Cleveland in 1949. Parsons emphatically denied that Cohen was a contributor to his campaign. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I'm not very friendly with Cohen at the moment." It was the contention of the Bowron forces that the recall election was financed by the underworld. Parsons made a poor showing and that ended his career in politics.

Among Parsons' more famous clients was a local Mafia kinpin, Joe Sica. Defending Sica on charges of conspiracy and extortion in a case in which the underworld was accused of trying to muscle in and take control of welterweight boxing champion Don Jordan. Parsons described his client as "a neighbor who stuck his nose in a family affair and got hurt."

As a criminal attorney, Parsons was bound to associate with many shady characters. But, the fact is the Parsons' record is one of contradictions. One of the great problems during the trial of Sirhan Sirhan and the days leading up to it was that of security. Supposedly every person who came in contact with Sirhan was of unimpeachable character. Yet, at Parsons' personal direction, the man closest to Sirhan, the one who was constantly at his side, was a convicted felon, former policeman Michael McCowan.

(more)

270

