

RF-3, "Dealing with the McLevy Administration"

Time-Line location: Decade IV, Local Events, "Jasper McLevy"

RF: I used to attend the Common Council meetings now and then. Very little criticism of the integrity of the local administration. Just about zero as opposed to--. Every mayor we've had since McLevy has had enemies and they don't hesitate to point out things that they think should be questioned. This virtually never came up with McLevy.

I used to attend the Common Council meetings just for fun when Jasper was presiding.

I: What was that like?

RF: He was a master. Really a man with a limited education but tremendously astute and always told everything exactly as it was. I don't think the man ever told a lie in his life. He was incapable of it.

I: And did that endear him even non-Socialists? He was mayor for a long time.

RF: Yes. Well, of course he was in bed with the economic interests of the city as well. For the economic health of the city. I think his first official act when he took office was to prevail on larger industries and utilities to pay their taxes in advance which was the way he got enough cash flow in the city to pay the back wages and [unclear]. He was always hand in glove with the Warner's and the [unclear] and Company and the General Electrics.

I: What about the climate for small business? Businesses or family-owned businesses like yours?

RF: Well, of course, he established central purchasing. Previous to his administration each department did its own purchasing and what really got him into office was the coal scandals in the early 1930's when every

member of the Board of Education was getting free coal in exchange for its contract with the school system. You probably read some of those old newspapers. If you haven't, you should. There were indictments and people went to jail and whatnot and that's what put McLevy into office. So he established a central purchasing office and any department or library wanted to buy a table they had to bring a requisition for the table to central purchasing, put it out to bid and that was that. Our relationships with the city of Bridgeport were always on the up and up. The only problem sometimes was collecting.

I: There were delays?

RF: My father made a friend in the comptroller's office where he could go down and have our bill moved up a few [unclear]. They were always slow paying the bills but you never had the feeling that you were treated unfairly.

I: Was there ever a problem with some people winning favorable contracts over others. Favoritism in the city awarding business to particular businesses?

RF: In those days we never had any real evidence of it. We got our share of the public bids. I don't recall ever losing one unfairly. I think there was just one time when Remington Rand had a factory in Bridgeport at that time making carbon paper and typewriter ribbons and I guess they leaned on the administration to purchase those requirements from them since they were a local industry and taxpayer and so on. So the smaller bidders got frozen out on that one. That's the only instance I remember where the low bidder wasn't respected. I remember another instance at a Common Council meeting I went to and there was a contract for a firehouse and the low bidder who was the low bidder by a very substantial amount. Obviously there had to be a mistake because there were five or six around here and this little guy was way down there and did petition the city to allow them to withdraw from the contract which they told them they had made a mistake. They'd left out the line item for the structural steel or

whatever it was that was a big part of the contract. Jasper brought it before the Common Council and said that it certainly wasn't the intention of this city to force someone into bankruptcy because of an innocent mistake and he asked the Common Council to approve giving the contract to the next low bidder with the understanding that the other bidder who had made the mistake not be allowed to re-bid, that he be excluded from participation. The [unclear] was Solomon-like. That was Jasper. A combination of rigid honesty with plain common sense. They could have forced this guy to go through with the contract and he'd wind up cold broke and the city would suffer and the thing would never be finished. Do the right thing, that's all.