

# THE CURIOUS CRUSADE OF SHERIFF RATTERMAN

Newport, Kentucky, was once the wildest gambling center in the country. Not now, thanks to this "two-buck amateur"

The guy had a container of coffee in his hand and it was leaking, the way they always do, so he set it down on the bar right away and then he walked over to the checkroom and took off his coat. It was 7 o'clock at night, but this place called the Frolic, which is on Monmouth Street in Newport, Kentucky, does not get going until much later, and the one with the coffee had just put the key in the door to open for the evening. The Frolic is a big place. When you come in, there is a barroom. Then there is a hallway that leads to a big backroom where they have tables and a dance floor and an all-girl revue later on. It is a place built to do a lot of business. But, like the rest of Newport, it has been dead for the last couple of months. When the guy had hung up his coat, he walked back to the bar and started to open the coffee. "Yeah?" he asked, without looking at me. "I'm looking for this fellow Tito

By **JIMMY BRESLIN**





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Tito Carinci (left) managed hotel that stripper April Flowers (above) used to "work" on reformer Ratterman. But the frame didn't take, and Ratterman waltzed in as Newport sheriff.

Carinci," I said. "I heard I might find him here."  
"Wouldn't be here now. He drops in late. Too early for him now."

"Where do you find him?"

"I don't know. I got no phone for him. I don't know where he lives or what he does or nothing. All I can tell you is that you come around here later and he might be here."

"Well, I was just over in Cincinnati talking to this fellow I know, George Ratterman, and he was telling me some things that involve Tito and I want to talk to Tito about them."

"Ratterman?" the guy grunted. "You got some friends."

That's the way they all talked about Ratterman, as I went around Newport. The cab driver figured him for a phony. A cop said he was just a rich fellow who is around bothering people who are trying to make the payments. Bartenders grunt and say he is a guy with an angle. And a girl named Sue, who had to move out of town because she couldn't make a living with Ratterman around, had an idea of her own.

"He's got a nickname," she was saying. "In the football games they used to call him 'the Rat' on account of his name. You know, 'Ratterman . . . Rat.' Well, he's a rat, all right. A dirty rat bastard."

These cheers are for a simple reason. Until last spring, when 36-year-old George Ratterman, a former Notre Dame and Cleveland Browns quarter-

back, announced he was running for sheriff of Campbell County, Kentucky, Newport was a mob town. This old, faded, two-story city of 30,000 was the closest thing there was to being the center of America's illegal gambling industry. Today, the place is locked tighter than a bank, indictments have been handed down against several of the syndicate boys and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been lost because of the shutdown.

The mere fact that it has happened is hard to believe. Newport became a wide-open place during the Civil War when federal troops were garrisoned there. And it never bothered to change. Openly, with the active help of local authorities, Newport kept every one of its vices and turned itself into a Las Vegas on the Ohio. Things were so open the big gambling houses took ads in the Cincinnati papers. It is over now. George Ratterman, the independent reform, anti-vice sheriff did it.

Ratterman is a six-foot-two, 178-pound guy with blond hair that needs a little help in the front. As a football player, he was best known for being somewhat of a character. Until January, he worked as an investment counsellor. He is married and lives in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, a place where you find people who know what money is. He had never been in politics, knew nothing about them last spring when he entered the picture and doesn't seem to know a whole lot more now. And when it comes to such matters as gambling and mobsters and conniving and tricks, he is a total loss.

The whole thing is implausible. But it is always this way when you have an amateur. If you make your living

in a business such as gambling, the amateur is the guy you can't do any good with. The pro can be lived with, but when an amateur comes around it is all trouble. He starts asking questions and looking things up and nobody can talk to him. And if you try to do something to him he gets his back up and before it is all over somebody goes to the can and everybody else goes broke.

Which is exactly what happened when George Ratterman, a two-dollar amateur in the business of politics, decided to make a moral issue out of running for a job that pays just \$7200 a year, about half what Ratterman has been earning a year since 1947. "I don't know exactly how to say it," George tells you, "because it can sound bad. But I believe there is a little bit of a duty to other people in this. Somebody had to run for office if this situation was going to be cleaned up. And since I had the background of making my living with the public, as a pro football player and an announcer for games and the like, I felt it was my duty. And besides that, the minute these people tried that business on me all they were doing was making sure I'd be in this thing to the end."

The business they tried on Ratterman was one of the oldest tricks around. Tito Carinci, a fellow very well connected with mobsters, and the owner of record of a gambling and night club known as the Tropicana, brought Ratterman—who had been drugged in another place—to his joint last spring, put him in an upstairs room and also placed a stripper named April Flowers with him. Then, on schedule, the police barged in, arrested Ratterman for disturbing the peace, and everybody in Newport

Battle lines were drawn in court: Carinci and his "girls" (left) lost; Ratterman and wife (right) won. And Newport stayed closed.



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figured there would be no more trouble. But Ratterman wouldn't bend. He wouldn't let the frame stick. He caused so much trouble that state and then federal authorities stepped in and they put a padlock on Newport that may never come off.

Now usually, when you tell a story such as this, there are clichés which come to mind automatically. The town is called a "Sin City" and it has been "cleaned up" by a "courageous reformer." You've read hundreds of these tales over the years, and in almost every story you were reading about a few small-timers in a 50-cent town like Phenix City, Alabama, or, if it was some place larger, you were reading fantasy.

But Newport is another story. This was the big time. This was the town of Morris Kleinman and Moe Dalitz, the top Cleveland gamblers who also own large pieces of two Las Vegas casinos; the town of Gil Beckley and Sleep-Out Looey Levinson and Big Porky and Little Porky Lazoff. And, through front men like Tito Carinci, the town of Frank Costello and Phil Kastel and Bonnie Geigerman.

Newport seemed there to stay. The telephones rang all day in the big bookmaking offices in town. Most of the calls were long distance. Bookmakers around the nation used the big Newport offices as layoff centers and they sent messengers, who carried six-figure cashiers' checks, flying into Greater Cincinnati Airport to settle up with the layoff offices in nearby Newport. The action in Newport was tremendous. The guys handling the phones in one of the large offices had to keep a milk bottle under the table because there never was time, during the day, to get up and walk to the bathroom. You almost always called Newport with a big bet. You would sit in, say, Bobby Manziel's living room at his Tyler, Texas, ranch and drink his Wild Turkey bourbon while he called Newport and bet \$1500 on the underdog in one of those old Wednesday night televised fights. The guy on the other end of the phone in Newport took the action and said, thank you, it was his pleasure.

And at night, dice clicked across green cloth-covered tables, and dealers cut cards in places like the Beverly Hills Club, which was, simply, a close copy of any big Las Vegas place; sumptuous, with big-name floor shows, fine service and open, everybody-welcome gambling. A large part of Newport's population was employed in some part of the gambling industry. There were plenty of girls around town, too, and the good cabbies made up to \$200 a week steering out-of-town businessmen to places where they could lose some money and have some fun.

Now it is all gone. I could see that on this night after I left the guy in the Frolic who was drinking coffee and went out around town. Up the street, the Glenn Hotel was closed. The ground floor, which used to be taken up by the Tropicana Club, was dark and the windows were streaked with dirt. Tito Carinci used to run a wide-open joint there. Now it's dark and Tito has to spend time with lawyers.

Out from the center of town the Beverly Hills Club

was open, but it was a shock. The huge dining room was closed. They only had a bar and a small part of the restaurant operation open. All the gambling equipment had been shipped out of the place months before. Once, you drove over from Cincinnati to the Beverly Hills and shot dice out in the open and up on the stage Joe E. Lewis drank Scotch and kept saying everybody should have tried to swim the river instead of using the bridge from Cincinnati. "You could have drowned and saved your money," he kept saying. Now it is all gone and because of this amateur.

Which is what Ratterman was talking about late one afternoon last winter in a place called the Tappery, which is in the Netherlands-Hilton Hotel in Cincinnati. "You know," George was saying, "the thing that must have everybody over there worried is the gun. When I take over the sheriff's office next week I get a gun. I've never had one in my life and I don't intend to learn what to do with one of them, either. If something happens, that means anybody can get hurt. I'm liable to shoot anybody. Some big mobster who shouldn't be shot at under any circumstances is likely to get hit. The trouble is, ole Sheriff George will be blazing away at somebody down the block. I'll be shooting one way, aiming the other. I must have them terrified."

The people at the bar with him laughed. Ratterman, in quiet gray suit and tie, looked like anything but the new Bat Masterson of the Ohio. "I don't even know the names," he said. "When this trouble came up and they started throwing names around and asking me if I had seen them, I didn't know who they were talking about. I played in Cleveland with the Browns for a couple of years but I never heard of Morris Kleinman. Mushy Wexler? This is the first time I heard the name. I guess you're right, I'm an awful amateur.

"Well, if it'll make you feel any better, I'm going to be paid what I'm worth, too. I won't lose my amateur standing on the job. The sheriff in office now, fellow named Wagner, took care of that. The budget for the sheriff's office is \$51,000 a year. Their year runs from June to June. Well, with me taking over in January, Wagner went ahead, right after the election in November, and gave everybody in the office raises. He gave one fellow a \$4000 raise. By the time I take over in January the whole \$51,000 will be gone. I'll have to operate on a budget of nothing until June. There won't even be any pay for me. These people seem to be fighting this thing right to the last minute, I guess. It'll be a lot of fun." He laughed.

"How many kids do you have?" we asked.

"Eight," he said.

"What are you going to feed them on?"

"Hope." He laughed again.

The whole thing seemed crazy. Here was a guy sitting in a bar who didn't know the first thing about the gambling business and he was taking on a job for no money. And yet he would cost the betting industry a conservative million or so just by being around. Sitting with Ratterman, it didn't seem to make any sense. But this is only typical of Ratterman. This is a guy whose off-beat style has put washboard wrinkles into the foreheads of more than a few people in his time.

There was, for example, the afternoon back in 1946 when Notre Dame was undefeated (*Continued on page 91*)

