The Money Boys and the Cat Bill

by Noble Stockton

As a very young man, I worked for the Illinois State legislature. For the legislative sessions of 1945 and 1947 I was House Press Secretary, paid by the Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives (Republican). My duties were to do everything we could think of to assist the work of the newspaper reporters who covered the legislature — from the five Chicago newspapers, the press services, some others. I was fascinated to learn about the members of the House and to watch what they did.

The group that the reporters called the “Money Boys” were not the only corrupt members of the legislature but they were the most colorful. Representatives from the “river wards” along the Chicago River — that’s where the dead bodies vote early and often, — they made their mode of legislative “statesmanship” — if that’s the right word — into a kind of art form.

I remember, for instance, when Pete Granata introduced a bill to amend the law regulating places with liquor licenses to require that every establishment with a liquor license must be well-lighted inside and have large windows on the sidewalk so passers-by could see exactly what was going on inside. I asked one of my mentors what that singular bill was all about. “It’s a money bill,” he said. “They will shake down the bar owners’ association to kill their own bill.” It passed the House, with support from the elderly suffragettes in the House and the prohibitionist faction led by the Anti-Saloon League and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. But before debate began in the state Senate, Senator Roland Libonati — his brother was said to be Americanism chairman of the American Legion, and he staged a magnificent Italian dinner for newspaper people in an old Italian lady’s apartment on the second floor of a sleazy bar in one of Springfield’s more dubious neighborhoods — rose to move that the bill be set aside. Everyone knew the bar owners had finally come through.

But these “money boys” had a lighter side. They decided that Miss Gertrude Charney was funny and eagerly supported the measure that she proposed.

Miss Gertrude Charney, reasonably wealthy and somewhat mad, called herself “Friends of Birds of Oak Park, Ill.” With insane tenacity she lobbied for her proposal — a bill to protect birds from predatory cats. Every cat in Illinois should be kept on a leash and every stray cat must be captured, taken to a “cattery” and maintained in reasonable comfort. I found her unbearably obnoxious. When my old friends from the University of Chicago came to visit, found me sitting in the press box, and tossed pennies down from the balcony at me, I retaliated by introducing them to Miss Charney and telling her that they wanted to know all about her legislative proposals.

The “money boys” introduced her bill and cajoled everyone to support it. Whenever it was called up, they meowed loudly and filled the marble capitol with echoing cat-calls. It passed the House! Over in the Senate, I think that saner heads prevailed and it was defeated. That was in the 1945 legislative session. Two years later, when the legislature met again, here was Miss Charney, there were the “money boys” yowling away — and in this legislative session Senator Libonati and his
cohorts somehow bamboozled the state Senate into passing it. Governor Adlai Stevenson’s veto message was a masterpiece of gentle irony. (You’ll find the text at http://mrgunnar.net/ap.cfm?subpage=348265).

Miss Charney was heart-broken. She was never seen again in Springfield.

I took the money I had saved from working among the Republicans, went to the University of Chicago, ran out of money there and broke my heart and moved to Los Angeles where I eventually established residence as a Californian and entered UCLA. After a year or two I read in the Los Angeles Times that “Friends of Birds of Santa Barbara, Calif.,” was advocating in Sacramento a bill very like the “Cat Bill” that I remembered.

I wrote to my aunt in Springfield about it. She was still living in our old family home across the street from the Governor’s Mansion and sometimes encountered her neighbor Governor Stevenson. So she informed him that the “Cat Bill” was now at large in California. He told her to tell me to keep him posted. Unfortunately, it was never mentioned in the Los Angeles Times again.

I think the reason that Miss Charney met no success in the California legislature is that in that legislature in Sacramento there was no mob of humorous criminals quite like the “money boys.” from Chicago.