

Ed Hertel has been in Napa, CA wine tasting for the last week or so. Glad to see he arrived home sober.
vbg Glad to have you back, Ed. Another great Texas research job.

Take it away Ed.

This week's IOTD is again going back to my home state, and even more local, it's going down the street to a town I used to visit as a kid. The city of Richmond, Texas, lies on the southwest corner of Houston. As the capital of Fort Bend County (the suburb I grew up in), we were constantly going down to Richmond for driver's licenses, jury duty or to visit the big county library for school work (remember when we used to go to libraries to research things?)

I never knew much about Richmond. They had a couple good restaurants and as mentioned above, their library was top-notch, but to me, there was little else. As a kid, the old town didn't have much excitement. The main drag had been converted into a historical preserve where old building, long past their prime, had been converted from functional post offices and county government building into antique stores and museums. It was quaint and dainty – the perfect place to bring your grandmother on a sunny spring morning.

However, Richmond had a secret - one that they don't advertise. What the city planners don't want the everyday visitor to know is that on the other side of the well-manicured buildings lies a narrow road with a rather infamous reputation. Its official name is Calhoun Street, but for over a century it was called "Mud Alley". It's one of those areas that the city would like to forget, but of course for us researchers of vice, it is exactly what we want to uncover.

The search into this unknown area of Richmond's underbelly started with, of course, a chip.



BMC1

My note: Another Texas chip I don't have. Cough it up if you have trader. *vbg*

It's been worn pretty hard, but the hot stamp says "BMC".

The identification from the Mason records gave me a direction to start.

B.C. McKnight
Richmond, TX

1931

Although I was pleased to find the chip was local, I was a little worried. It's kind of ironic but local Houston chips are some of the more difficult to research. We have a great newspaper, the Houston Chronicle, which has been around a very long time and I have no doubt an extremely detailed story of the city could be gleaned from its pages. However, nobody has ever gone through and indexed the pages, nor have they been transferred to searchable databases. For such an extraordinary resource of local history, it is pretty useless unless you know the exact date and can access a library's microfiche collection.

Luckily for us, Mr. McKnight just happened to be mentioned in one of the biggest local stories of its time, and it made national news. The January 27, 1930 page one headline of the Galveston Tribune read, "JURY ALLEGED FORT BEND COUNTY SHERIFF HEADED HUGE VICE RING" and goes on to list 70 defendants from Richmond, including our B.C. McKnight. The investigation started here would last throughout the year and most of 1931. A little more information was obtained in June 1931 when B.C. McKnight made a play to get out of the sheriff's mess – "A motion to quash the indictment and suppress evidence was filed for B.C. McKnight, proprietor of a domino hall on Calhoun Street, Richmond."

Although McKnight's part in the tale to come is not a major one, what I was able to learn about this incident, and Richmond's seedy side was quite interesting. (I hope you feel the same way!)

The first bit information gleaned from the above is the location of the domino parlor on "Calhoun Street". What the article was attempting to show was not a flippant statement about a location, but an indictment of what kind of place this domino parlor was. Calhoun Street was not just any street, it was the infamous "Mud Alley", and the readers of the time would know what that implied.

Mud Alley was Richmond's way to collecting all that they saw as morally-suspect into one area. Since the 1880s when the railroad cut through the town, Calhoun street was developed to host all of Richmond's houses of prostitution, gambling and drugs. If anyone was looking for vice in Richmond they need only listen for the train.

Calhoun Street earned its nickname of Mud Alley in two ways really. The "Mud" could be figurative pertaining to the corruptibility, or it would also be quiet literal any time it rained (and it rains a lot in Houston). With buildings on both sides and a raised train track in the middle, it did not take long for the entire area to be flooded and the dirt roads turned into a muddy mess.

This photo of Calhoun Street from 1899 shows both its penchant for shady looking bars, and its ability to flood.



BMC2

As indicated by its infamous status, the activities of Mud Alley were a secret to no one. There have been times when attempts were made to clean up Mud Alley, but never with much success. The 1950s were particularly tough on the stretch of vice, but each time they declared it closed, the clubs would get back up. To some, this was inevitable, and really not that bad. At least the vice was contained in one area.

Even as late as the 1985, Mayor Hilmar Moore, “the attitude of Richmond people as always been, if that’s what you’re looking for, Mud Alley is where you go. And if you aren’t interested in that, stay away from Mud Alley.”

But getting back to our story, we need to know what was happening in the early 1930s, and who was this sheriff in the middle of this vice ring? The answers are both an interesting look into early vice and a tragic tale of greed and personal downfall.

The story starts the evening of January 18, 1930. Agents of the United States District Attorney’s office gathered in Houston with a plan of attack. As evening rolled in, they packed in their cars and split into eleven separate groups which descended onto Richmond’s Mud Alley. In a blitz, the agents busted through doors and rounded up everyone they could find. So busy was the haul that it was reported in one gambling den, “the agents allowed a poker game to continue while they waited for an immigration department patrol automobile to pick up the defendants. The raiders said the dealer, holding a stack of chips, looked up calmly as the officers entered, and, when they gave permission, continued dealing the cards.” Obviously, this was not these people’s first rodeo.

Although these clubs resulted in many offenders being arrested, it quickly became clear that the main target was the Richmond sheriff H. Wyatt Collins. He was picked-up along with the others and shown a side of the jail cell he was not used to seeing.

Sheriff Collins first made headlines in 1921 when he was instrumental in solving a Richmond murder. On February 15th of that year, a botched bank robbery resulting in the death of a cashier, and the thief in his haste left fingerprints. After two days of unwinding the clues, Sheriff Collins was able to make an arrest and received a full confession. In the press he was a hero and a rising star, but there was another side he kept close to the vest – one that would come out a decade later.

Fast forward to 1930 (the tail end of the Prohibition experiment) and the raids along Mud Alley... Sheriff Collins should have been participating in the raids, but instead he was picked up in his own Mud Alley speakeasy referred to in trial as “a little white house.” It was in this bar that the state alleged their undercover agents were served illegal liquor alongside Sheriff Collins. Although tenuous, the state decided to bring this small case to trial before the real fireworks would begin.

It took only a few days, but the Sheriff was able to deflect enough of the blame and the jury came back with a “not guilty” verdict. He won this round, but the biggest was yet to come.

Sheriff Collins Freed by Jurors

HOUSTON, May 1,--(UP)--
Sheriff H. Wyatt Collins today
was free of charges of possession
and sale of liquor and maintaining
a nuisance. A federal jury found
the Fort Bend county official not
guilty late yesterday. Collins still
is under indictment for conspira-
cy, however.

BMC3

It would take a year for the state and feds to prepare for their grand conspiracy case, but through their investigation they unraveled how the vice in Richmond worked. Illegal moonshine stills were common in the area and Sheriff Collins was to make sure he profited from them. Anytime a new distiller would come to town his first business was always with Sheriff Collins who would set the payoff price depending on the size of the liquor operation. Those who couldn't, or wouldn't, pay were subject to raids and harassment.

But Collins had his hand in other businesses as well. Any saloon wanting to serve liquor or any gambling den wanting to deal cards needed to pay for the sheriff's protection. Not only would it guarantee they would not be raided, but deputies would be on duty inside the clubs ensuring everything was on the up-and-up (as well as keep an eye on the business making sure the sheriff's cut was appropriate). It soon became apparent that doing illegal business in Richmond meant doing business with Sheriff Collins.

On June 22, 1931 the trial against Collins, five of his deputies and 31 others (including our B.C. McKnight) began in Houston. The state brought witness after witness who testified they were forced to pay Sheriff Collins protection money or face the consequences. Throughout it all, Sheriff Collins steadfastly denied everything. None of the conspirators would crack and they all stood firmly to their stories. A week later the jury was sequestered to an uncomfortably hot hotel room and left to figure it all out.

After a few days the exhausted jury emerged, and unfortunately for everyone, without a clear consensus. Hopelessly deadlocked, the judge had no choice but to cut them loose and declared a mistrial.

The state thought they still had a case and although they failed to get a conviction, they were willing to try again. A new trial was set for November.

This however would not be in the cards for Sheriff Collins. On September 26, 1931, Wyatt Collins was found dead in his bed. It was immediately reported that he died of natural causes, no doubt from all the stress, but soon after the coroner's report told a different story. "Death due to carbonic acid, self-administered." Sheriff Wyatt Collins chose suicide over another trial.

With Collins passing, the conspiracy case died with him. The remaining deputies and co-conspirators (including McKnight) were seen as insignificant pawns in Collin's empire and were released to continue their trades on Richmond's Mud Alley.

And so reader, that brings us back to where we started – the heavy worn "BMC" chip. It's always exciting to find a chip with a "C" on the end because there is always a chance it stands for "Club", however here it is obviously the initials are for B.C. McKnight. We like to assign club names to chips, but I'm betting there wasn't any official name to McKnight's domino parlor mentioned in the arrest records. Other's charged in the case had both person and clubs in the report; i.e. Bob W. Haggard (Bob's Place), Johnnie Robinson, Cleveland Brown (Eagles Café), etc. However in the case of McKnight, only his name is listed. This isn't surprising as many times back in the 1930s billiard and domino parlors were simply named after the owner. Look in most old city indexes under "domino parlors" and the list is mostly just names.

Example from Houston's 1930 city directory (Richmond's is unavailable):

Domino Parlors

American Club, 908½ Congress av
Beltz Fritz, 825 Washington
Franklin Refreshment Parlor, 706 Franklin av
Henderson J H, 2803 Odin av
Jefferson Wm, 823 Washington
Jim's Smokery, 1208 Congress av
Jones John, 1104 W Dallas av
Jordan J B, 409 Milam
Keep Moving Domino & Whist Club, 305½ Main
Malavansos C H, 421 Milam
Notias Steve, 815½ Congress av
Owl Club, 1409 Washington
Patterson J B, 2704 Odin av
Shackey & Payne, 1216 Hardy
Tappen Herman, 1417 Clark
Tuttle Arth, 1114 Preston av
Washington Domino Parlor, 607½ W Dallas av
Wilson J C, 710 Preston av

BMC4

I guess the expense of branding their business didn't outweigh the benefit for most of these places. Even in the focus of the first trial, Sheriff Collins' bar was only described as "a little white house" – certainly not the official name painted on the window, if there was one.

With all this in mind, I'm assigning in my own records the "BMC" chip as:

B.C. McKnight's domino parlor
B.C. McKnight
Calhoun Street
Richmond, TX
1931

And as for a wrap-up on Richmond's Mud Alley, my wife and I jumped in the car last weekend and took a look for ourselves. When we arrived it was clear that the hey-days on Calhoun Street were long since over. Of the two blocks of once crammed full of small houses of vice, today only a handful of graffiti filled shacks survive. They are now registered as landmarks, although I doubt many of the current residence know why.



BMC5

As with most of the history from the Era of Illegals, Mud Alley belongs to the ghosts.

Fun Facts:

Richmond's mayor Hilmar Moore served his post for 63 years, thought to be the longest serving mayor in history. He started his service in 1949 and continued until his death in December 2012. His father, John M. Moore, was Richmond's mayor during the 1930s (same time as our McKnight domino parlor).

In 1995, Levi's jeans needed a rural 1930s looking town to film a commercial. They chose Richmond's Mud Alley and the commercial went on to win multiple awards. See it here:

<http://vimeo.com/71829843>

My note: The local Sheriff's involvement is something we've seen many times over in the 'Illegal Of The Day' series. They could not have existed without local cops and politicians protecting them. We've even seen some protection go all the way to state capitols.