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*A Restless, Roaring Crowd: The Unexplored Dynamics
of the 1945 Bingo Riot in Evansville, Indiana**

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing political dynamics found in the city of Evansville, Indiana, have long been fertile ground for historians whose research has produced a number of academic books, chapters, and articles about the city's political nature. One dramatic political occurrence, the Evansville Bingo Riot of 1945, however, has been oddly ignored by labor scholars. This study examines this overlooked disturbance, finding it a result of a set of unique social, political, and personal dynamics.

KEY WORDS Indiana History; American Labor Studies; WWII Labor Unrest

In June of 1945, while the rest of the nation fastened its worried eyes on the last great land battle of WWII on the Japanese-held island of Okinawa, an odd and dramatic set of political maneuverings in Evansville, Indiana, occurred between the Republican mayor and the city's Democratic Party leadership. These confrontational schemes, in turn, brought about the so-called Evansville Bingo Riot, an event spurred by the mayor's "lifting the lid" off an earlier city gambling ban, allowing certain private clubs to hold bingo games while excluding a group called the Young Men's Democrat Club. Several Democratic Party leaders were arrested after holding a bingo game, and in an ensuing tense confrontation between a dozen police officers and more than seven thousand milling citizens outside the bingo parlor in downtown Evansville, two Evansville police cars were overturned by the angry crowd, and the police officers mocked. The restless crowd lingered for some time, finally forcing the police to flee the field of battle. Shortly afterward, the Republican-appointed police chief was fired for bungling the situation. Perhaps too because of his actions, the Republican mayor, Manson Reichert, lost his bid for reelection a year later.

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Interestingly, historians have yet to examine the seeming anomaly of this wartime riot to any degree, perhaps unable to bring the odd happening into any kind of contextual focus. Although, as noted, several thousand irate citizens were at the riot—one reporter called it a “restless, roaring crowd”—the riot is an all but forgotten event today. The failure of scholars to explore the dynamics of the riot is made even stranger given the fact that the political dynamics in the city of Evansville have long been fertile ground for historians whose research has produced a number of academic books, chapters, and articles about the city’s political nature (Bottoms 2008; Butler 2000; Feurer 2006; Lipin 1994; Lipsitz 1981; Mills 2003; Mills & Bottoms 2005; White 2005).

These previous studies clearly demonstrated that politics in the Evansville arena was a rough-and-tumble affair, fraught with aggressive no-holds-barred actions and responses. The actions of both political parties leading up to the Evansville Bingo Riot seemed to fit, on first glance, into this pattern. A closer examination of the unusual disturbance, however, indicated that this particular uproar was perhaps driven by the rich and complex eccentric culture of the River City, a set of interesting social, political, and personal dynamics. One element is for certain, however: The bingo riot in Evansville had little or nothing to do with the moral question of gambling.

“HOOSIER FOUR FLUSHERS, PICKPOCKETS, BULLYBOYS, WHORES, AND SUCHLIKE”

Nestled on a long curve of the Ohio River, Evansville, Indiana, had always been a town possessing two distinct faces. On one hand, Evansville maintained the powerful and emotional religious trappings of its frontier heritage, the city possessing as many churches as any other city in the Midwest. Furthermore, the majority of the initial settlers were upland southerners, backwoods people who brought an unflinching fundamental Protestant value system to the region. Mills (2000, 2006) pointed out that this value system was so pronounced among the dominant Baptist churches that it greatly influenced the overall social behavior of the region during the frontier era and beyond. Cady (1941:18) had earlier made the same observation: The power of many frontier churches over public offenses involving the moral principles of the community in frontier regions such as Indiana “had to be acknowledged on the pain of [church] exclusion.”

While the more interiorly located Protestant-dominated portions of the new state continued to keep their strict religious value system, Evansville developed another set of opposing social values, quickly gaining a reputation for being a city with more than its share of vices. An early traveler through the area even warned new settlers to stay away from Evansville, as such river towns attracted the rougher edge of society (Birkbeck 1818). One recent historian, Brian Butler, made this feature of Evansville the major theme of a study on social disorder. Butler began by noting how the Ohio River town in the early 19th century brought in “the curious and ambitious . . . to trade and to stay in the young river town,” with “river men, merchants, traders, gamblers and cheats, all [having] a foot in Evansville” (2000:17). Butler’s description suggested that Evansville was a more socially diverse place relative to the surrounding area and that the city tolerated what the more rural areas considered moral vice.

The passage of time brought even more vice to the city. Thomas Berger, an author of fiction noted for his meticulous historical research to get a setting right, made 1870s Evansville the opening scene in his novel *Little Big Man*. The narrative offered a powerful and interesting view of the city's dark side at that time, suggesting the city's waterfront had more than its share of "Ohio River boatmen, Hoosier four flushers on their way to New Orleans, pickpockets, bullyboys, whores, and suchlike" (Berger 1964:1). Many historians would come to agree with Berger's view of the city's sordid 1870s waterfront reputation. Newspaper accounts, court records, and personal accounts showed that at the riverfront area of Evansville, "drinking, gambling, and prostitution were common features of the social landscape" (Butler 2000:126).

By 1890, Evansville boasted of being the 56th largest city in population in the country. With that growth came a greater expansion of vice. Industrial urbanization, along with the heavy migration into the city of African Americans and German Americans, the latter with their cultural emphasis on brewing and consuming beer, expanded the number of taverns and gambling endeavors in the river town and led to great fear among Evansville's more social conservatives of a growing disorder in the city. To make matters worse, taverns and gambling moved from the waterfront to "throughout the city" and were enjoyed, to the chagrin of the conservative element, by many of the white non-German, non-Catholic population (Butler 2000:126). Middle-class conservatives, fearful of social disorder, however, did not give up the fight against what they perceived to be immoral behavior in the city. "Certainly many nineteenth century Evansvillians perceived their city in the midst of battle between arbiters of moral and public order on one hand and promoters on the other. Not only Protestant evangelical denominations but other voluntary associations provided voices of moral approbation in Evansville" (Butler 2000:20). The efforts of supporters of moral and public order, however, were most often unsuccessful because of the political dynamics of the diverse city.

"AN OPEN CITY"

By at least the early 1900s, both Republican and Democratic Party administrations were prone to ignore operators of these illegal practices in order to gain financial support during election times. In November 1919, for example, federal investigators hurried to Evansville to investigate a possible "whiskey ring" and illegal gambling that allegedly involved prominent Republican leaders. The federal court in Indianapolis went so far as to issue subpoenas to former Republican mayor Charles Heilman and Republican sheriff Herbert Males. In the trial that followed, Evansville was called an "open city" that tolerated immoral vices and local officials were said to be "fixed" not to intervene with the importation of liquor into the city or the operation of gambling houses. Federal judge A. B. Anderson of Indianapolis added to the concern over local corruption when he declared that "corruption holds sway" in the Evansville police department (White 2005:40).

In 1926, Republican Herbert Males was elected mayor of Evansville and apparently continued working with those in the city who ran bootlegging, gambling, and prostitution businesses. A few local voices spoke out about the situation. Circuit Court judge Charles Bock declared in a local newspaper, "If Males won't clean up the city, I

will” (*Evansville Courier*, November 6, 1926). Another newspaper report noted that “gambling dens and brothels in the city continued to operate with their ‘doors wide open’” and that some even used large electric signs to advertise their businesses, despite Males’ supposed order to have the police shut them all down (White 2005:63). In the 1930s and 1940s, it was the Democratic Party’s turn to let gambling and other vices flourish under its nose. These vices grew even more with the coming of war.

The Second World War brought large defense contracts to the city, along with a boom in industrial growth and population (Bigham 1991). By early 1944, “nearly forty-five thousand new industrial workers had arrived. That is nearly half the city’s total 1940 population” (Martin 1947:258). Adding to the throngs of thousands of new people now living in the city was a major Army base just a few miles away in Kentucky. Evansville was the main city that army personnel from this base came to to rest and to play, and “nightclubs, gambling, red light districts, and other activities flourished” (*Evansville Courier & Press*, October 14, 2002).

Interestingly, the continued political clout of this darker culture in Evansville can be seen in attempts by the federal government throughout the war to close down the practice of prostitution in the rollicking city. National leadership, concerned with the loss of manpower due to venereal diseases in cities where there were military industrial operations and military bases nearby, began a national effort in 1941 to stop prostitution in cities across America through a program called social protection. Lacking actual legal authority to stop prostitution, however, the federal social-protection effort, under the direction of the old gangster fighter Elliot Ness, worked with individual city law enforcement, trusting in city leaders’ sense of patriotism to lead them to close down prostitution operations (Turner 1956). An article in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* bragged that by 1943, “more than 350 cities and towns have closed red-light districts under the program” (*Journal of Social Hygiene* 1943:139). Given the power of the vice interest in Evansville, however, few cities in America resisted this “patriotic” effort with more zeal.

The federal representative for the social-protection program in the Evansville region was Janet Burgoon, whose office was located in Chicago. She reported directly to Elliot Ness. Evansville’s Democrat mayor, William Dress, was in charge of Evansville at the beginning of the war, and there was little effort on his part in the beginning to cooperate with Burgoon and the social-protection initiative (Craven 1955). In 1943, Burgoon wrote Ness that she hoped to get the recently elected Republican mayor, Manson Reichert, and his new Republican police chief committed to fighting prostitution in Evansville; however, she also reported to Ness that a rumor was already circulating that Reichert had made a deal “with the vice interest” (Cravens 1955:414). This rumor was likely to have been true, as the 1942 election between incumbent Democrat William Dress and Reichert, a former Democrat himself, had been a close contest. Given that situation, Reichert would have needed the support of local vice to win.

In the end, federal officials never sounded particularly “hopeful” about Mayor Reichert’s cooperation, citing that the Reichert “administration seemed reluctant to take the necessary steps to relieve the [venereal epidemic] situation” (Cravens 1955:415). As the war drew closer to the end, Burgoon reported to one superior that Evansville under

Reichert had earned the reputation of being “one of the worst offenders in Indiana” regarding the toleration of venereal diseases.

“WHEN GAMBLING AND POLITICS MIX”

Illegal gambling interests in Evansville during the war years proved even more politically powerful than prostitution. Janet Burgoon wrote Ness in 1944 that an Evansville newspaper editor had complained to her about the widespread corruption in the city and that “the city administration [Reichert’s] was dictated by the man who heads up the gambling interests” (Cravens 1955:416). There may have been truth to the accusation. John Scarne (1961), in his definitive history of gambling, argued that Evansville had more illegal gambling establishments per capita in the 1940s than any other city in the country. The information above suggests that in Evansville, neither political party ever questioned for long whether to crack down on the vices of gambling and other illegal practices. Both needed the money these enterprises offered.

Newspaper journalists and an ineffective Protestant Ministers’ Alliance seemed to be the only groups to call the city leaders to task. One Evansville newspaper complained in 1945, “It’s an old story. Every mayor in recent years, whatever his own private beliefs about gambling, has been forced to put down his foot,” with that foot soon coming off (*Evansville Press*, July 8, 1945). With Mayor Reichert’s mayoral term, however, the story grew complicated, revealing, within the context of the city’s ongoing political culture, a horrible political misstep.

In December of 1944, after a number of revealing articles in the *Evansville Courier* about the seemingly omnipotent power of illegal gambling in Evansville, and after a strong push by the Evansville Protestant Ministers’ Alliance, Mayor Reichert surprisingly put a “lid” on all gambling activities. A *Courier* editorial spoke of how completely unexpected the move was:

Last December [1944] it looked as if professional gamblers, under the Reichert administration, were going to take over this city lock, stock and barrel. The *Courier* fought that development as effectively as it knew how. We did so specifically on the grounds that widespread professional gambling is corruptive of democratic processes and democratic government. You can’t permit such a thing to grow and expand in your community without creating an evil, corruptive force that will take over the community’s political organizations and government in due time. Finally last December, the mayor did an unexpected thing. He not only closed the professional dice and poker games all over the city—games that were reaping a tremendous harvest of profit in this war boom town—but he also stopped all forms of gambling in private clubs. ... When gambling and politics mix in any form there

can be only one result. That is a perversion of democratic government—an insult to the men who are fighting and dying to preserve for us the right to enjoy democratic government. (*Evansville Courier*, June 13, 1945)

Six months later, Reichert made a stunning turnabout, allowing some forms of gambling in private clubs again. So what made Mayor Reichert fudge on his December 1944 promise in June of the next year? The earlier *Courier* series of exposé articles gives strong clues to the mystery.

Large bingo games and other forms of gambling had long been a part of the city's social landscape, raising great sums of money for charities and, more importantly, for both Republican and Democratic city election expenses. The *Evansville Courier* asserted in 1945 that “profits from both political club gambling and professional gamblers ... each go into political fields. They help nominate and elect officials and control party organization and shape local government” (*Evansville Courier*, June 13, 1945). The newspaper piece's comments about the connection between gambling and politics in the city hinted at how Manson Reichert likely found himself in a bind.

The city of Evansville most often went Democratic in elections. From 1906 to 1952, for example, nine out of eleven mayors were Democrats, with one mayor, Reichert himself, having been a former Democrat. Many Democrats, in fact, supported Reichert in the 1942 election, feeling they were basically “voting for another Democrat” (*Evansville Courier*, June 9, 1945). Reichert's victory was also something of a fluke, however, coming as a result of the election being held on an off year, so that Roosevelt was not a helpful factor with the Democrat ticket and because of infighting between the Democratic incumbent, William Dress, and local Democratic political strongman Charlie Eichel (*Evansville Press*, May 2, 1951). All this indicated that Reichert faced a tough political future in terms of his next election run, one that would demand heavy financing.

That Reichert unexpectedly lifted the lid on some forms of gambling suggested that his primary problem for the next election cycle was indeed one of finances—how to raise his own money while curtailing the Democratic organization's use of bingo and slot racing machines to do the same. His June 1945 lifting of the ban on some gambling for nonprofit and at nonpolitical clubs such as those operated by fraternal, veterans, and labor organizations, and for a private organization called the Caravan Club, was probably an attempt to solve this dilemma. It was the latter choice, allowing the Caravan Club to have gambling while forbidding any political clubs to do so, that spelled deep trouble for the mayor.

The Caravan Club, although its leaders denied the charge in a large one-page ad in the city's local newspapers (*Evansville Courier*, June 9, 1945), was well known to be loyal and financially helpful to the Republican Party. The Evansville chief of police, however, playing along with the mayor, declared in a newspaper interview that the Caravan Club was a fraternal club with no political affiliations. The *Courier* would have nothing to do with such a claim. “In reality,” the *Courier* asserted, the Caravan Club, “has been in professional hands, friendly to Republican politicians for some time” (*Evansville Courier*, June 13, 1945). Reichert's heavy-handed decree against the

Young Men's Democrat Club would give his opponents a powerful weapon with which to inflict great damage.

“THE STORMIEST FIGURE IN EVANSVILLE POLITICS IN MANY YEARS”

If things weren't hot enough, at this juncture, personality factors entered the drama. The exclusion of the Young Men's Democrat Club from playing bingo enabled the Vanderburgh County chairman of the Democratic Party, Charlie Eichel, to set up “a skillfully set stage” on which to attack Mayor Reichert. Again, it was a local newspaper that happily dived into the juicy story:

Mr. Eichel, in challenging the mayor on the ruling about political clubs, used the Caravan Club as an instance of discrimination. If he had not had this instance, he might not have whipped up much sympathy for his cause. ... [But] he wants the opportunity to raise political funds through gambling to maintain his political control of the Democratic Party. Despite all the things we dislike about this [Reichert's] administration—we fail to see how any sensible person can get excited about a battle to give Mr. Eichel a chance to operate a gambling layout as an adjunct of his political organization. (*Evansville Courier*, June 13, 1945)

Eichel was a particularly tough opponent. He was a longtime mover and shaker in the political world of Evansville, having “entered the political arena when he was 18.” He was considered “the stormiest figure in Evansville politics in many years.” Adding to the flames of political battle, the Young Men's Democrat Club was Eichel's baby, having been started by him as a way to fight the old-guard Democrats in town such as Mayors Frank Griese and William Dress. The *Evansville Press* (May 2, 1951) noted upon Eichel's death how his personality, as much or more than his political party commitments, had made him tick:

Charlie was a Democrat, but his followers weren't necessarily Democrats—they were “Eichelmen.” They would have been Republicans if he had told them to. It is known that these followers numbered from 1000 to 1500 whose loyalty was 100 percent. That's a sizable figure to reckon with in politics. They'd given him the shirts off their backs because figuratively, that's what he'd done for them.

As a side note, one might have also thought that religious considerations might have had a part in the story. Certainly, Protestant groups in the city had long fought

gambling and other vices. The city's Protestant Ministers' Alliance, for example, hoped to use the unexpected confrontation to attack all gambling in the city and to force Mayor Reichert to put the lid once more on all gambling. Reverend R. R. Ohaver, president of the alliance, led the charge. The *Evansville Courier* (June 11, 1945) reported, "Ministers throughout the city went before their congregations yesterday morning, read a special bulletin and circulated a petition as the first step in their plan of action [against gambling]. The next action is contemplated Tuesday, 'if the mayor will see us,' the Rev. Ohaver said." The Ministers' Alliance hoped to have a productive meeting with Mayor Reichert but were greatly disappointed. The *Courier* reported, "Mayor Manson Reichert was still 'smoking' from a hot session with a Young Men's Democratic Club delegation yesterday when a committee from the Evansville Ministers' Association called at his office." Still trying to absorb what had gone on in the meeting with the aggressive group of Democrat leaders, Reichert "sent word to the ministers that they would have to make an appointment to see him." The ministers, livid about the recent lifting of the ban against two forms of gambling to begin with, and now feeling brushed off by the mayor, left in a great huff. It was apparent to many now that the issue of gambling—from the administration's view, anyway—had little or nothing to do with perceived immorality.

The 1945 battle between Mayor Reichert and Charlie Eichel over the right of the Young Men's Democrat Club to carry out a public bingo game played out vividly on the front pages of the two Evansville newspapers, creating plenty of fireworks days before the actual bingo riot clash. The first real broadside included a letter presented to the Evansville mayor by the Young Men's Democrat Club's trustees. The letter declared an unflinching resolve by the group to hold the bingo game and stated that if arrested, they would ask for jury trials. The letter also gave the club's rationale for disregarding the mayor's proclamation:

Dear Mayor:

We, the undersigned board of trustees of the Young Men's Democratic Club, have read your statement that all the other clubs in Evansville can have bingo, but the Young Men's Democratic Club may not have one. We hope you will reconsider your decision. If you view all of the circumstances you will surely realize this is a very unfair position for you to take. The Young Men's Democratic Club was the first club to conduct bingo in Evansville, and through the years thousands of Democrats and their friends have spent this innocent pastime. Other clubs, lodges, Legion posts, churches, and unions followed the example of the Young Democrats and by means of bingo parties accumulated funds for club rooms and extensive charities. All of this occurred under the democratic administrations from 1930 to 1942.

The letter went on to assert that “[n]ever once did the Democrats deny equal privilege to the Republicans. In the years the Republican headquarters was located in the Huston building on Sixth Street, bingo parties were held there by the Republicans without so much as a harsh word from the Democratic officials.” Noting that “[a]t least 50 percent of the people in Evansville are Democrats,” the narrative argued that it was “extremely unfair that the clubs representing this large group should be discriminated against because of partisan politics. These are the tactics that made Hitler famous. The fair way, Mr. Mayor, would be to treat everybody alike.”

To further gain local support, the letter outlined the club’s extensive charitable contributions and social connections:

Our record as a charitable organization equals that of any club in the city. We have made gifts to churches to the widow in her time of need and to the unfortunate hoping to alleviate distress and sorrow. The officials of the Red Cross canteen, the Salvation Army and the United Service Organizations always welcomed our help. Surely, Mr. Mayor, we can qualify as a charitable organization. We have given picnics and boat rides for our members year after year. This certainly qualifies us as a social organization. We do not believe you can conscientiously perform your duties as mayor and at the same time persecute the members of the Young Men’s Democratic Club, because they are Democrats. (*Evansville Courier*, June 9, 1945)

The *Evansville Press* also carried a detailed article about the letter and the heated meeting. The mayor read some of the letter aloud, and at one point, grew irritated. “Now here’s some smart alecky remarks,” *the Press* reported. What angered the mayor was the claim he had betrayed the Democratic Party by switching to being a Republican and that he and his father’s company had been given many good contracts by the city under Democratic administrations. His response was that his family didn’t make their money by gambling: “We got the contracts because we were the lowest bidder.” Responding to his political switch, Reichert explained, “When I did change I changed over openly. Everyone knows where I stand” (*Evansville Press*, June 8, 1945).

Two days later, on the eve of the threatened bingo game, the *Press* reported that Charlie Eichel, head of the county’s Democrats, insisted that the Young Men’s Democrat Club “should not advocate violation of gambling laws. ‘A legal way’ to conduct public bingo games should be worked out, he said.” In contrast, the exclusion of the Democrat organization from bingo gambling when a Republican organization [the Caravan Club] was allowed to do so led Eichel to declare, “If we don’t have that bingo game Monday night, we might as well crawl in a hole afterwards” (*Evansville Press*, June 11, 1945). Eichel further claimed the problem was “not a personal matter. Mayor Reichert is a splendid gentleman and a conscientious officer and I would do him a favor any time. But

the Democratic clubs are being discriminated against in an unfair manner” (*Evansville Courier*, June 11, 1945). Eichel had thus given his blessing to the bingo game taking place. Personal or not, the stage was now set for a clash of two powerful wills.

The battle on June 11, 1945, between the Evansville police and bingo players, along with their legion of outside supporters, made front-page headlines in both city newspapers. The *Press* (June 12, 1945) reported how the gathering mob grew rapidly outside the bingo game room:

Men, women and children, a crowd eventually growing to 7,000 began assembling at the First and Main corner at 7 o'clock [p. m.]. The crowd gradually thickened and 30 minutes later the first serious traffic jam developed as the bingo was about to start. Sweating traffic officers waved their arms and shrilled their whistles in vain. Reinforcements moved up and blocked off Main Street at Dress Plaza and at Second Street, then blocked First Street at Locust and Sycamore.

In a matter of a few minutes, the First and Main intersection and the block on First Street between Main and Sycamore was closely packed. “Fire escapes opposite the UAW club First Street door—the only one open to the union hall—were crowded with youths and finally the roof and ledges were covered with crawling, whooping humanity.” The main entertainment for the evening, however, was yet to come:

At exactly 8 o'clock, Sergeants Wayne Berry and Dan Hudson, members of the vice squad, eased through the crowd and into the hall doorway. They went unrecognized as police officers. Upstairs, the vice men observed a “pay off” on a game, then left. The crowd grew thicker and noisier. At exactly 8:30 o'clock roars, hoots, and boos started on the Main Street edge of the crowd and moved inward with a dozen uninformed police officers. The officers made slow progress, literally plowing a path through humanity. The boos increased to an angry roar as they reached the doorway and shoved their way inside. Two police cars inched their way into First Street until they were almost opposite the union hall doorway. The single guard placed on each car was soon outmaneuvered by the seething crowd and within a short time the tires had been slashed and the aerials ripped off.

As time passed, the police who had gone into the bingo hall failed to reappear with their bingo-playing prisoners and the crowd “grew restless, roaring for action. In one of the frenzied moods that swept the crowd periodically, one of the police cars was

pushed over, its gasoline tank punctured. A smoker nearby flipped a cigarette into the gasoline that spread over the street. The officer on guard leaped to the spot and extinguished the tag as it landed.” Soon, the second police car was pushed over to the sounds of hoots and cheers. At this point, police considered using tear gas to try to dispense the unruly crowd.

Just in time, one of the arrested Democrat bingo men, Leonard Denton, appeared at the front of the building being used for the bingo game and begged by loudspeaker for the crowd of protesters to calm down. His pleas “fell on deaf ears.” Then Denton “pleaded with the milling crowd to disperse to permit the police to pass out the doorway with their prisoners.” But Denton was not an innocent in the event. He added a few other words that may have further fueled the restless crowd:

The announcer got in a few remarks about “Hitler methods” and “discrimination.” Later he took up the mike again and asked the people for an expression—did they approve of the bingo game being stopped by the police? The answer was a roar of ‘No’s’ and boos that echoed up and down the street. The crowd’s anger only grew worse. By 9:30 o’clock it became apparent that the crowd was adamant that it would not budge. The police gave up, let the players leave the building and confined arrests to the operators. Several uniformed officers remained on the outer fringes of the crowd but made no attempt to interfere with the demonstration. Occasionally could be overheard a heated conversation in which the word “discrimination” was frequently used. Pointed remarks were heard about the Caravan Club located across Main Street from the front of the union hall. Chief Freer recently included the Caravan Club among those clubs permitted to have machines and bingos.

The Evansville *Courier* (June 12, 1945) carried almost exactly the same report. Both papers’ stories suggested that the handling of the event basically had been a disaster. The *Courier*, for example, pointed out “one thing scheduled, according to an announcement of Mayor Mason Reichert several days ago, that all [160] participants and spectators to the game would be arrested did not occur.” The fact that this development did not occur could have been because there were more than 7,000 persons jammed around the intersections of First and Main Streets and especially around the entrance to the clubrooms on First Street. “It was very difficult to get in and out of the building. However, eight men charged with operating a gambling house were booked at the police station after the crowd had subsided sufficiently to allow the players to leave.” Police Chief Harry Freer justified his odd aggressive-passive actions by explaining, “We decided against an attempt to arrest the spectators inside the hall in the interest of the safety of the people outside. We could have dispersed the mob with tear gas or otherwise

but a lot of people would have been hurt.” The police chief further blamed newspapers and radio for “whipping up” public interest in the bingo.

Early on the morning after the riot, members of the vice squad and detectives gathered up “the evidence confiscated at the hall, including bingo cards, tables and chairs, public address system and corn markers.” As the vice squad walked to their cars, their arms burdened with bingo playing equipment, they kicked at the trash blowing around at their feet, rubbish discharged by the previous night’s riotous crowd.

The blowback from the riot was swift. The Evansville city council, seven of its nine seats populated by Republicans, publically condemned the Young Men’s Democrat Club and its supporters, the latter condemnation a not too subtle dig at county Democratic Party chief Charlie Eichel (*Evansville Press*, June 19, 1945). The eight Democrats arrested in the riot, however, soon gained the sympathy of many Evansville citizens and ended up paying small fines, and many of the Republican city councilmen would be defeated in the next election.

Mayor Reichert was incensed over what he perceived to be the inadequate number of officers on the job and the failure of the police chief “to issue advanced orders to prevent the crowd from forming” (*Evansville Press*, June 17, 1945). An angry Police Chief Harry Freer was pressured to resign by the mayor, and this was followed by the resignation of two Republican members of the Evansville Board of Safety who were angered by Freer being made the scapegoat for the mayor’s hardheadedness and for not having any say-so about the firing (*Evansville Press*, June 22, 1945).

After all the fighting, little changed. Less than a month after the bingo riot, the *Press* reported, “Well, we see where the gambling ban is still on tight in Evansville. But the bookies are operating again, bingo games flourish, number jars are out again in taverns and slot machines pile up the dimes and quarters” (*Evansville Press*, July 8, 1945). Ironically, Mayor Reichert would lose his next election attempt, but not to Charlie Eichel. Eichel’s old Democrat nemesis, William Dress, regrouped and defeated Eichel in the primary. Dress then went on to handily defeat Reichert in the November election.

“AS IF QUARRELING AND VIOLENCE WAS IN THE BLOOD”

Until this point of the study, only two forces have been highlighted as causes of the 1945 Evansville Bingo Riot: the city’s long history of vice’s influence on both political parties, and personality conflicts. Another important factor deserves more than a little note, however. The element in question likely heated up the conflict leading to the bingo disturbance. That element, the power of labor unions in Evansville and the fight by key industrialists to destroy unions, also places the riot in an ongoing history of the city of Evansville.

Labor historian Rosemary Feurer pointed out that in the 1930s, unionism in Evansville witnessed much growth, this despite the resistance of one of the most aggressive anti-union businessmen in the country, Louis Ruthenberg. Another labor historian, Samuel White, observed in this same vein that “[f]or working people in Evansville, the depression led to two competing visions of economic recovery. One vision was a belated form of welfare capitalism represented by the city’s largest

employer, Servel, and its president, Louis Ruthenberg. A second vision came under the rubrics of industrial unionism represented by the CIO” (White 2005:76).

In Evansville, labor unions and the Democratic Party were especially intertwined, and the 1930s saw the consistent victory of union-backed Democratic office seekers. In 1936, for example, “At all levels of the election in Vanderburgh County, Indiana, Democratic candidates won 70 percent of the votes” (White 2005:97). Meanwhile, political tension continued to run high into the 1940s as Democratic Party successes and the growth of unions continued to be fought tooth and nail by Louis Ruthenberg at Servel and by business leaders at the local Bucyrus Erie and Seeger Corporation plants (Feurer 2006). Together, this latter group “led a concerted effort by large industrial employers in Evansville to hold off unionization during the Second World War” (White 2005:111).

The war effort had tamped down some of the bitter animosity between labor and industrial leaders in Evansville as both sides were pressured to work together to help win the war. As the war wound down in 1945, however, Evansville unions and their anti-union detractors began sharpening their knives (White 2005). Such growing hostility likely fueled the edges of the 1945 Evansville Bingo Riot. Additionally, in 1945, Evansville Democrats had skillfully used the term “discrimination” to beat down Republican mayor Manson Reichert and the Republican Party over the mayor’s misstep in restricting the Young Men’s Democrat Club from playing bingo. This term likely resonated among working-class people in Evansville. A few short years later, the Republican leadership would return the favor, using the term “Communist” to wreak havoc among the Democrat leadership in the city, county, and region.

CONCLUSION

This work is an attempt to make sense of an event in Evansville, Indiana, history, the so-called bingo riot of 1945, an event that seemed to resist historic explanation. As this work indicates, however, the odd event was part of an ongoing local political drama that would soon become national in scope, an episode so dramatic that it may have drowned out the memory of the bingo riot event.

As postwar hopes for a secure international peace faded and the Soviet Union, once our ally, became a perceived threat, the Republican Party began to manipulate the fear of Communism in America to win back the White House and stifle the policies of the New Deal, heralding the beginning of the Red Scare (Caute 1978; Donaldson 1999; LaFeber 1997). American labor was the area most savaged by this strategy, and Evansville became one of the most glaring examples of the process (Feurer 2006; Lipsitz 1981). The city would be the location of two long labor disruptions and two brief riots in 1948, one riot involving the visit of Progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace to the city’s Veterans Coliseum to make an important speech on foreign policy. These riots would make national and international news (Mills 2003). A special national congressional hearing in Evansville, sponsored by Republican Congressman Edward Mitchell, followed that same year, supposedly seeking out the causes of strike violence and destroying a few Democrats’ reputations in the process (Bottoms 2008; Mills and Bottoms 2005). The *Evansville Courier* piled on as well, releasing a series of articles

exposing supposed Communists in Evansville, all of them Democrats (Mills 2003). Other violent strikes would follow into the 1950s, violence that seemed to reflect the city's long history of political quarreling, as if quarreling and aggression coursed through the blood of its very people.

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