



Plains Crusader: C. A. Sorensen's Assault on Organized Crime and the Political Machine in Omaha

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Article Summary: Crime boss Tom Dennison ruled Omaha for the first three decades of the twentieth century. Starting in 1929, an idealistic new attorney general was determined to bring him down.

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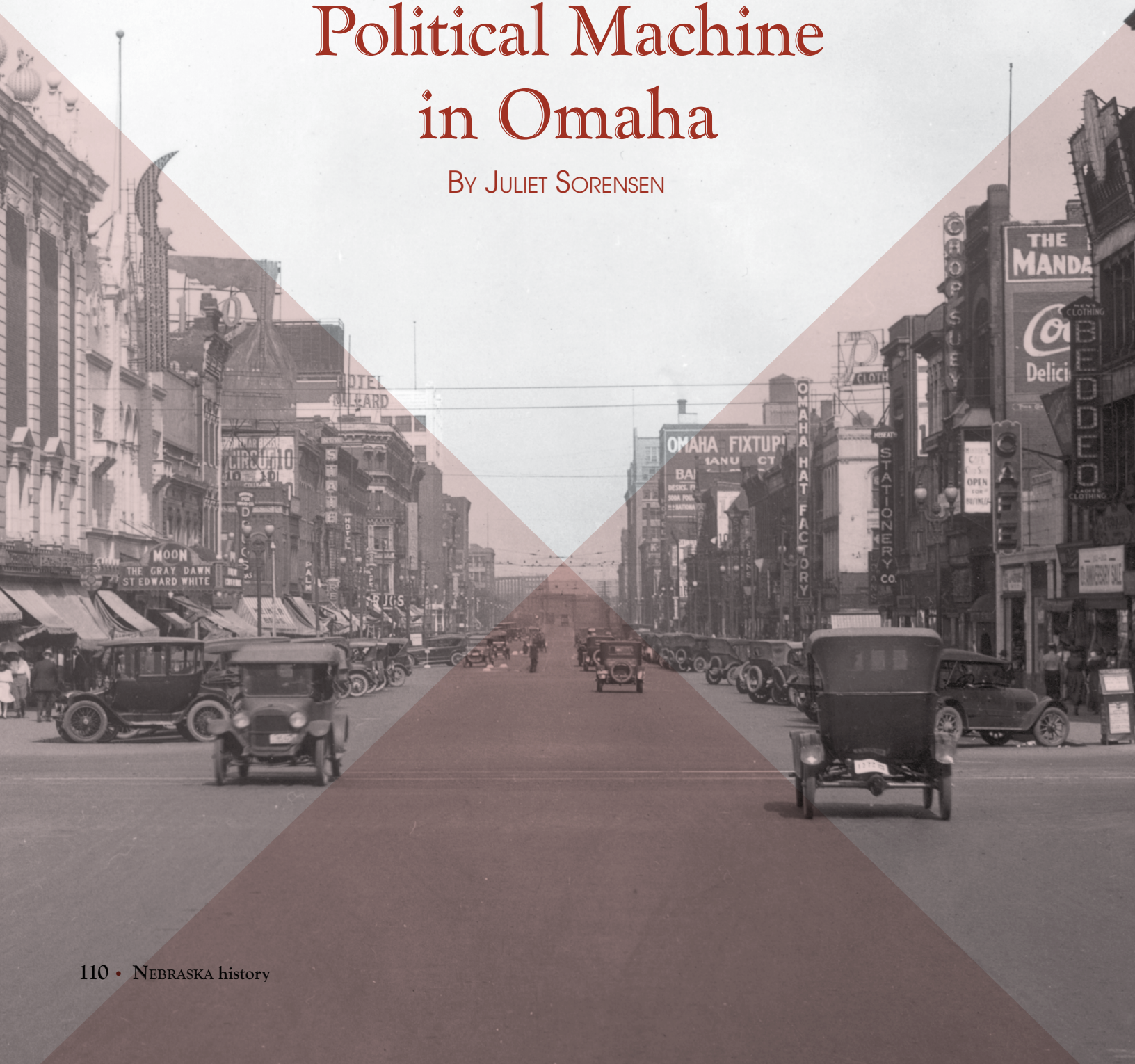
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Photographs / Images: looking left on Douglas Street from Fourteenth Street, Omaha, 1923; Tom Dennison; James C. Dahlman; inset article from the *Omaha Bee-News*, February 3, 1929: "State Jams Lid on Omaha Gambling! Sorensen to Oust Negligent Police"; inset article from *Lincoln Evening Journal*, June 11, 1929: "Sorensen willing to Mount Gallows"; Harry H. Lapidus; car in which Lapidus was shot; Roy Towl, Richard L. Metcalfe; Sorensen as Nebraska Attorney General; inset article from the *Omaha Bee-News*, March 3, 1932: "Here Are Seven Men Indicted by U.S. Jury"; inset article from the *Omaha World-Herald*, March 3, 1932: "'Glorious News' Is Sorensen's Comment"; Sorensen later in life, undated photo

PLAINS CRUSADER

C. A. Sorensen's Assault on Organized Crime and the Political Machine in Omaha

BY JULIET SORENSEN



Introduction: The Downfall of “A Small Al Capone Chicago”¹

In 1930 Omaha was a bustling Midwestern hub of meatpacking, stockyards, and packing houses. Its population had grown from 105,555 in 1900 to 214,175, as immigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, and Bohemia moved to the city by the thousands, eager to seize the opportunities offered by a growing economy.² To the naked eye Omaha was thriving, but the reality was grimmer: Omaha’s government and business community were under the control of organized crime.

The organization, known simply as “The Gang,” had been ruled with an iron fist by political boss Tom Dennison since the turn of the century. Dennison, a professional gambler and power broker, controlled not only electoral politics—filling the local slate with pre-approved candidates to ensure favorable treatment by judges, the chief of police, and the mayor—but also the city’s illegal businesses, including prostitution, gambling, and speakeasies. Honest businesses, too, were pressured by Dennison to pay The Gang for protection and to take out extortionate “juice” loans when in need of credit. The prevalence of these activities earned Omaha the reputation of a Sin City.

In two short years, however, The Gang’s grip on both the political and the criminal circles in Omaha was released completely. That The Gang disbanded so completely in such a short period is noteworthy, all the more so because its dissolution was due in significant part to a statewide elected official, C. A. Sorensen, also seeking political support in Omaha.

The Plains Crusader

The son of Danish immigrants, Christian Abraham (“C.A.”) Sorensen was born in a sod house in rural Nebraska in 1890, the eldest of ten children. After graduation from Loup City High School, Sorensen studied for two summers at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln. He then attended Grand Island Baptist College, which expelled him in 1912 after he gave a speech in a state oratorical contest questioning religious ritual and decrying humanity’s tendency to unthinkingly accept the status quo. Part of the speech, entitled “The Hand of the Past,” is instructive of Sorensen’s later approach to business as usual in Omaha:

There is a popular belief that rises like a mountain chain across the path of progress . . . the belief that things are sacred because they are old, or . . . dangerous because they are new . . . an undue reverence for the past and the achievement

of the dead. Thus, we, the living, are in intellectual bondage to the spirits of the dead . . . The voice of the past, right or wrong, is to us the voice of God . . . we offer up our prayers before the shrine of time-honored falsehoods.³

The result of the speech was a top prize in the contest and expulsion from Grand Island Baptist College.

After his dismissal from Grand Island, Sorensen completed his undergraduate and law studies in 1916 at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. As stated in his *Report of the Attorney General of the State of Nebraska* in 1932, he held lawyers to a high standard: “Only he whose character is beyond reproach, who loves learning the law for its own sake, who hates fraud, injustice and tyranny, and who is ever ready to champion every righteous cause, is entitled to call himself a lawyer.”⁴ A review of his early law practice gives a hint of what was to come: in 1918 Sorensen represented the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association in successfully blocking a referendum intended to invalidate a partial women’s suffrage law. Thousands of forged signatures were discovered on the petition for referendum, confirmed by depositions taken all across the state.⁵

Sorensen was skeptical of the “regular” leaders of either major political party in Nebraska at that time. The Republicans, he believed, were the captives of the out-of-state corporate industries of the time such as cement, electrical power, and railroads.⁶ As for the Nebraska Democratic organization, Sorensen wrote to U.S. Senator George Norris that it was “nothing but a patronage machine operating under a sign: ‘To the victor belongs the spoils.’”⁷

In spite of, or perhaps because of, his skepticism of Nebraska politics, Sorensen was drawn to government service. On the university campus in 1914, he organized the young Republicans in support of a progressive Republican candidate for governor, R. B. Howell.⁸ In 1918 he organized Farmers for Norris for Senate. In 1920 he managed the independent campaign of Arthur Wray for governor. In 1924 Sorensen was Norris’s campaign manager in a successful primary election. In 1928 Sorensen himself became one of seven candidates for the Republican Party’s nomination for the office of state Attorney General.⁹

The Old Man

The son of Irish immigrants, Thomas Dennison was born in Iowa in 1858. He traveled west as a young man, and emerged in Colorado as a professional gambler. Dennison’s personal habits were legendary. Although he made his living from

(Left) Looking east on Douglas Street from Fourteenth Street, Omaha, 1923. Tom Dennison’s longtime headquarters, the Budweiser Saloon at 1409 Douglas. Though unmarked by signage, the location appears in this photo in the first block at right.

NSHS RG2341-42 (detail)

Though never elected to public office, Tom Dennison controlled Omaha's electoral politics and organized crime for three decades.

NSHS RG2411-1319c



drinkers, Dennison himself was a teetotaler. Surrounded by figures of the underworld, he was soft-spoken and fashionably dressed, wearing an onyx and gold ring on one finger and a diamond stickpin above the "v" of his vest.¹⁰ He was alternately referred to as "The Old Man" or "The Gray Wolf," the latter nickname based on both his ferocity and his reticence.

Dennison lived on a large estate in Omaha. Security was paramount: the eight-and-a-half-acre grounds were surrounded by a six-foot-high fence, floodlit at night, and protected by guard dogs. One of Dennison's grandchildren recalled greeting Dennison's chauffeured car at the end of one day with his grandfather in the back seat, submachine gun in his lap.¹¹

Dennison established his dominance of the gambling, prostitution, and bootlegging rackets in Omaha by first buying out a series of policy games around the city.¹² Entrée into the gambling business led to entrée into the saloon business, as Dennison first managed, then owned saloons around Omaha, including the Budweiser Saloon at 1409 Douglas. Over time, his business ventures included slot machines, gambling, and horses, in addition to saloons.¹³

As gambling and bootlegging were illegal, Dennison needed political influence to protect his interests from law enforcement, and a political machine grew out of a crime machine. The former is a logical extension of the latter, as having "orders obeyed depended upon helping the right people win elections, and the crime machine became a political machine."¹⁴ In 1897 Dennison

promised to support mayoral candidate Frank E. Moores if he allowed his gambling businesses to continue in office.¹⁵ Moores was elected with Dennison's support, and Dennison's illegal enterprises flourished. A 1900 editorial called Dennison "the power behind the throne."¹⁶ He maintained that control with the support of police, judges, and juries, guaranteeing protection from law enforcement in exchange for payment. His control over Omaha's police department became virtually complete: whenever a raid was being planned that was not machine ordered, loyal police officers informed Dennison beforehand.¹⁷

With rare exceptions, Dennison dictated who was on the ticket and who won the elections in Omaha. For example, James Dahlman was mayor of Omaha for all but three years between 1906 and 1930, when he died in office. Criticized by the reform Republicans as a pawn of The Gang and willfully blind to bootlegging, Dahlman has been called "the wettest mayor in America."¹⁸

Muckraker Josiah Flynt Willard wrote an article about Omaha in 1901 headlined, "The Machine is Trimming This City." The article reported that Dennison was powerful enough to dictate which thieves were welcome to come to Omaha, protect them while in town, and tell them when they had to leave. "His say goes in this town clear from top to bottom. Why, even Croker in New York isn't a big enough man to order the 'guns' around that way."¹⁹

One can only imagine Dennison's ire, therefore, when he first encountered C. A. Sorensen.

The First Campaign

Reaction to Sorensen's candidacy for attorney general as a reform Republican was mixed. The *Tobias Times* editorialized, "He represents genuine Abraham Lincoln Republicanism." By contrast, his Republican opponents warned that if Sorensen chose to run as an insurgent, he would be charged not only with "party irregularity" but with being an "atheist, pacifist, communist and embezzler."²⁰ Perhaps because "party irregularity" was viewed favorably by members of his party disenchanted by the corporate interests Sorensen criticized, he won the Republican primary election in 1928 by 46,958 votes.²¹

In the general election, responding to criticism by the American Legion that he had not enlisted to fight in World War I, Sorensen issued a plea to all former servicemen to join him in a battle against the internal foes of America, "graft and corruption." In a letter to the business leaders of the state, he emphasized that he did not oppose corporations doing legitimate business, but rather corrupt

business practices. He called upon Nebraskans “to crush without mercy the gambling and liquor racketeers seeking to control many of our cities.” His endorsement of Prohibition won him the support of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League.²²

In the general election, Sorensen won 82 of 93 counties in Nebraska. His weakest performance was in Douglas County, the location of Omaha, where he lost by 8,844 votes.²³

The First Term

While Sorensen also prioritized early in his term the enforcement of a bank guaranty law and municipal ownership of electric power, he had no sooner taken the oath of office than he energetically set about dismantling organized crime and political corruption in Omaha. Specifically, as Sorensen himself reported to the governor, “one of the first steps taken by the attorney general after taking office was to cause the closing of eight notorious gambling houses in the city of Omaha.”²⁴ Sorensen’s tactic was a “public letter” to Omaha Police Chief John “Gentleman Jack” Pszanowski, ordering him to close all gambling establishments in Omaha. The letter named eight places where gambling was to be stopped by a specified date. Sorensen further warned Pszanowski that if this order was not executed, he would remove those responsible from office.²⁵ The letter had the desired effect, and Omaha police shut down the gambling dens with the help of state forces supplied by the governor.

Indeed, public letters to local officials across the state were a favorite tactic of Sorensen during his tenure as attorney general. As he explained to Governor Arthur J. Weaver, “When other methods have failed, pitiless publicity has been used in connection with law enforcement. We have found by experience that this is the most effective way of ridding a state or community of vice. The underworld cannot stand the sunlight of publicity. It can only prosper in darkness.”²⁶

The Gang was infuriated, not only by closure of the betting parlors but also by the public letter to Pszanowski, which was published in Omaha’s two newspapers, the *World-Herald* and the *Bee-News*. Tom Dennison claimed that Sorensen’s actions had been fueled by information from two Omaha reform Republicans, Morris Milder and Harry Lapidus, out of self-interest: their businesses competed with those controlled by Dennison.²⁷ Dennison instructed the local police to conduct their own noisy raids on those establishments identified by the attorney general’s letter and raiders, and to shut



James C. Dahlman (standing) served as mayor of Omaha from 1906 to 1918 and from 1921 until his death in 1930. Known as the “wettest mayor in America” for opposing Prohibition, Dahlman was a reliable Dennison ally.
NSHS RG2990-1

down those would-be new and independent enterprises not approved by the Dennison organization, while publicizing those activities as proof of the city’s “clean slate” on law enforcement.

Sorensen was unmoved. “No city or county is big enough to secede from the state in matters of law enforcement,” Sorensen wrote in a report to Governor Weaver.²⁸ Having shut down eight of Omaha’s betting parlors, Sorensen turned to the other source of gambling in Omaha, the beloved racetrack known as Ak-Sar-Ben.

Ak-Sar-Ben

Dedicated in 1920 by the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben (Nebraska spelled backwards), a civic organization, the Ak-Sar-Ben racetrack drew throngs of Nebraskans on race days. The method of placing bets at the racetrack, pari-mutuel betting, was a form of gambling in which those who bet on the winning horse share the total stakes, minus a percentage to the management. In spite of Ak-Sar-Ben’s position that pari-mutuel betting was not gambling because the amount a better won was not based on odds, Sorensen reasoned that it was as addictive as any other form of gambling. To that end, he sent a letter from the Office of the Attorney General to the management of the racetrack on

the law made it my duty to suppress gambling. Should I be a party to punishing little gamblers and letting the big ones go? Must I be punished and crucified politically as an object lesson to public officers who dare to enforce the laws?³⁵

Regardless, Sorensen believed, closing Ak-Sar-Ben was worth the trouble: he reported to the governor that "By this action, approximately three millions of dollars which are annually lost at the races chiefly by workers and persons of small means have been saved to the people of the city of Omaha and of the state of Nebraska to be used in the legitimate channels of business."³⁶

While the closure of Ak-Sar-Ben channeled money into legitimate business, it enraged The Gang, which was involved in racetrack operations both through State Senator Perry Reed—a member of the Dennison machine and also a paid racetrack official—and also by operating betting parlors throughout Omaha on the horses at Ak-Sar-Ben and elsewhere.³⁷ After receiving threats in relation to the racetrack, Sorensen sought the advice of Omaha Police Commissioner Roy Towl, a reform Republican adverse to Dennison, who counseled Sorensen to buy a gun for protection. He did, and kept it in his office drawer for years, happily never having occasion to use it.³⁸

The Second Campaign

For Sorensen and his opponents, law enforcement was a central issue in the reelection campaign of 1930—in addition to municipal electric power ownership and the candidacy for reelection of Senator George W. Norris. In reference to prohibition and gambling, Sorensen declared that "I shall do all within my power to create respect for law; not just one law, but all laws . . . I would make crime unprofitable in Nebraska." Criticized in his reelection campaign as anti-business, he replied that his opposition to fraudulent business practices was good for all business, particularly small business, but that he would not back down from his sharp comments about the big electric power companies and the cement trust, because he did "not want their out of state owners to control Nebraska politics."³⁹

After the closure of Ak-Sar-Ben, in an article entitled, "Nebraska Leaders Watching Sorensen [*sic*]," the *New York Times* wrote that "He is a man of great political sagacity . . . [but] every element of strength in Sorensen is the kind of thing that creates deep hatreds also."⁴⁰ These hatreds were reflected by regular Republican candidates running for a variety of positions in 1930.

For example, on August 11, 1930, the evening before the Republican primary, Richard Wood, the regular Republican candidate for the State Railway Commission, went on KFAB radio in Omaha and charged that Sorensen's assistant attorney general, Irving Stalmaster, who had applied for the temporary injunctions that closed gambling places in Omaha, was part of "the big gambling racket of Mr. Sorensen." Wood claimed that these injunctions had not been called up for an actual hearing in court, and that many of these buildings harboring gambling houses were in fact owned by Mr. Stalmaster's father-in-law, Omaha businessman Harry Lapidus. Moreover, Wood declared, Sorensen "took an oath before God and man that he would uphold the law justly and honestly. His promises to man are for naught and his oath to God is sacrilege, for he is a nonbeliever, an irreligious libertine, a mad man and a fool."⁴¹

In hopes of confusing the voters, Sorensen's opponents in the second campaign persuaded an Omaha dentist named Sorensen to declare his candidacy (along with a grocer named George W. Norris to run against incumbent Senator George W. Norris), but Dr. Sorensen became frightened and withdrew from the race at the last minute.⁴² In the primary, one of his opponents attacked "Sorensen's Jazz Regime," denouncing his methods of law enforcement and accusing him of enforcing the law for the sole purpose of seeking publicity.⁴³

In the end, Sorensen won big, carrying 89 out of 93 counties and winning 72,811 more votes than his Democratic opponent. Once again, however, he lost Douglas County by the widest margin.⁴⁴

The Second Term

C. A.'s success in reducing profits for Dennison and his associates led to retaliation during his second term as attorney general. The Dennison gang moved on two fronts: first, it reprinted copies of the Sorensen report on vice in Omaha for distribution to clergymen, legislators and others, spreading the word that the description of "filth and vice" therein was an indication of Sorensen's "perverted morals," which he had used public funds to distribute. Second, Dennison allies in the state senate reduced the attorney general's litigation fund from \$29,000 to \$15,000. Sorensen called the cut in his fund a "victory for crime," and singled out two state senators

SORENSEN WILLING TO MOUNT GALLOWS

IF HANGING IN EFFIGY IS
PRICE OF DUTY.

**Declines to Comment Upon
His Anti-Gambling Suit
Now Pending in the
Supreme Court.**

"If being hanged in effigy is the price of doing my duty I am willing to be hanged in effigy and also in actuality," replied Attorney General Sorensen when asked by reporters what he had to say regarding the press reports that he was hanged in effigy in Omaha as a result of his having obtained a restraining order against continuation of open gambling at the Ak-Sar-Ben race track.

Lincoln Evening Journal,
June 11, 1929, p. 2

Omaha businessman Harry H. Lapidus, community leader and longtime enemy of Dennison. Sorensen said that "Lapidus was behind most of the moves against the Omaha underworld for the past 20 years."

NSHS RG2411-3105



who led the effort, one of whom, Perry Reed, had been a paid official at Ak-Sar-Ben, judging races for \$25 a day.⁴⁶ An informant, Tom Crawford, told Assistant Attorney General Irving Stalmaster that Reed was controlled by Tom Dennison.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding the budget cut, Sorensen persisted in his clean-up campaign. The public was a valuable resource: as a result of the publicity given the raids, many citizens wrote Sorensen offering support and information about corrupt police officers and organized crime. One of these informants was the aforementioned Harry Lapidus, a prominent businessman, philanthropist, and anti-vice activist who openly opposed the Republican political machine in Omaha.⁴⁸ As owner of the Omaha Fixture Supply Company, Lapidus sold fixtures to restaurants, soft drink parlors, and bootleg outlets, positioning him to learn about organized criminal activities.⁴⁹ Proprietors complained to Lapidus about extortionate protection payments, and Lapidus, in turn, passed this information on to the attorney general's office.

On the night of December 22, 1931, Harry Lapidus was found murdered in his car. The police

concluded Lapidus had been heading home from Omaha's Jewish Community Center when he was killed by a shotgun fired from a car which drew alongside that of Lapidus.⁵⁰ Two days after the murder, Sorensen stated in Lincoln that Lapidus had actively sought to undermine The Gang: "There is no question but that he was a thorn in the side of The Gang . . . records of my office here show that Lapidus was behind most of the moves against the Omaha underworld for the past 20 years . . . if anything can convince the people of Omaha that the city should be cleaned up, this should do it."⁵¹

The local investigation of Lapidus' murder was poor. Police Commissioner Towl, a reform Republican independent of The Gang, learned about the murder of Lapidus not from Chief Pszanowski, or from the head of detectives, but rather from a reporter who called the commissioner hours after the crime. The chief claimed that he had been "under the weather" at home, and the chief of detectives asserted that he had fallen asleep on a friend's couch that night. Moreover, the police officers who did respond to the murder allowed the crime scene to be contaminated: a police car pulled alongside Lapidus' car, obliterating any tire tracks that might have been left by the car driven by the murderers, and officers as well as reporters combed the inside of the vehicle. No attempts to lift fingerprints were made until the next morning, by which time multiple people had placed their hands on and in the car.⁵²

Sorensen was outraged by the actions of the Omaha police, writing to the governor that "criminals and gangsters are bold because so much of our own law enforcement is indifferent, careless, and apathetic." He urged citizens to express their disgust through the vote: "Nebraska will never secure effective law enforcement until it ceases electing to public office officials who for fear of losing votes or because of an understanding with the underworld leaders fail to enforce the law. The public official who keeps silent or merely makes idle gestures of opposition against the gambling and liquor racketeers seeking to gain control in many of our cities and towns is a public enemy."⁵³

In light of the obstruction of the Lapidus murder by his own police department, Towl consulted with Sorensen and hired Donald Kookan—a former intelligence officer who was a criminologist, detective, and assistant director of the Secret Six, a society formed in Chicago by citizens struggling to contain the influence of Al Capone—to undertake an independent investigation of the crime.⁵⁴

In their investigation, Sorensen, Towl, and Kookan had the benefit of the cooperation of Tom Crawford,

Harry Lapidus was murdered on the night of December 22, 1931, shot in his car on Park Avenue beside Hanscom Park. Police were slow to respond and allowed the crime scene to be contaminated. No attempt to lift fingerprints was made until the next morning.

NSHS RG3882-30-7-5



a former Omaha police officer and member of The Gang. In 1924 the chief of police assigned Crawford to Dennison's office for "special duties"—immediately before the city elections—and Crawford assumed the role of Dennison's secretary. Crawford resigned from the force after others loyal to the Old Man accused him of being disloyal.⁵⁵ When Crawford learned that Dennison had sent word to the police department to remove him from the force, Crawford confronted Dennison and warned him that he could take incriminating information about Dennison to Sorensen and Roy Towl. According to Crawford, Dennison responded, "By God, if you talk, we will give you what we gave Gene Livingston," referring to a local racketeer who had been murdered after going to the authorities.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, Kooken and Sorensen concluded that a local prosecution of The Gang would be fruitless: officers were too corrupt to investigate; witnesses were too crooked or too afraid to talk; and the police department had damaged the forensic evidence in the Lapidus case so that very little could be done with it. Indeed, after commencing an investigation into the Lapidus murder in early 1932, Roy Towl was removed from his position as police commissioner by Mayor Richard L. Metcalfe—a Dennison pol—and transferred to the position of fire commissioner.⁵⁷

Instead of prosecuting the Lapidus murder, Kooken wrote Sorensen, they should go after the big fish—Dennison and The Gang—and their downfall might lead to a confession and additional evidence regarding Lapidus.⁵⁸

The Federal Case

Spurred by Kooken's letter, Sorensen appealed to the federal government to intervene, writing U.S. Senator R. B. Howell, another progressive Republican, attaching Kooken's report on the Lapidus killing and arguing that it was in furtherance of The Gang's ongoing conspiracy to violate Prohibition. Howell agreed, and joined Sorensen in referring the activities of The Gang to the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Prohibition Bureau.⁵⁹

Pursuant to the federal investigation instigated by Sorensen and Howell, on March 3, 1932, fifty-nine defendants, including Tom Dennison, three policemen, and a city prosecutor, were charged in a sweeping indictment referring to the defendants as the "Omaha Liquor Syndicate," and alleging conspiracy to violate the national Prohibition Act, bootlegging, extortion of local businesses, fixing juries, hijackings, and political influence over the police department.⁶⁰

The two-month trial began in October 1932. The star witness was Tom Crawford, the corrupt police officer turned informant, testifying pursuant to a grant of immunity. Crawford described how The Gang protected bootleggers who paid their protection money, arranged for the police to raid those who did not, forged signatures on bail bonds, and fixed juries. Crawford testified that Dennison consulted with Al Capone, his counterpart in Chicago, and modeled The Gang after the Capone organization. He further testified that Dennison had offered him \$1,000 to murder Lapidus—which he refused—and that Dennison had written a letter warning Lapidus that he would be killed.⁶¹ Dennison told Crawford that it was necessary to "get Lapidus out of the way" because he was responsible for shutting off income to The Gang.

The defense attacked the cooperating witness, asserting that Crawford was a liar who couldn't be trusted. Defense witnesses dismissed his assertion that he was Dennison's secretary, describing him rather as a groupie whom Dennison had not taken into his confidence. Witnesses for the defense included top elected officials in Omaha: the mayor, chief of police, the chief city prosecutor, a city commissioner, and the assistant city attorney. Mayor Richard Metcalfe testified that he considered Dennison to be such an upstanding citizen that he had asked for his help in solving the Lapidus case.⁶²

Dennison also testified in his own defense, the *New York Times* describing him as "palsied but powerful." He issued a series of denials, stating that he had never met Capone, that he had never been involved in a liquor syndicate, that he had never tried to influence police commissioners or juries, that officers did not make raids at his suggestion, and that Crawford had never been his secretary—indeed, that he had never associated with Crawford at all. *The Times* also appreciated the larger ramifications of The Gang on trial:

[i]t is not so much the formal charge as the collateral and incidental revelations growing out of it which have aroused public interest. These represent the conspirators as a gang organized not only to carry on a liquor traffic but to monopolize and control it in this territory and modeled after the Capone gang of Chicago. It is alleged, in fact, that the syndicate and its practices established after a consultation with Capone and a study of his methods . . . a series of murderous assaults . . . within the last two years were made pursuant to the effort of the gang to throttle competition or to prevent interference with its activities.⁶³



Omaha Police Commissioner Roy Towl, a Sorensen ally, launched an investigation into the Lapidus murder, but was removed from office by Mayor Richard Metcalfe and transferred to the position of fire commissioner. Towl replaced Metcalfe as mayor in 1933.
NSHS RG1477-01



Richard L. Metcalfe, the last Omaha mayor backed by the Dennison machine.
NSHS RG3882-1-24-2



C. A. Sorensen as Nebraska Attorney General. Nebraska Blue Book 1929-31

Midway through the trial, on November 10, 1932, the prosecution was dealt an unexpected blow: the presiding judge, Joseph W. Woodrough, granted a motion for a directed verdict of acquittal for seven of the defendants, ruling that no reasonable jury could find them guilty of conspiracy based on the evidence presented at trial.⁶⁴ The judge declared a mistrial for an additional sixteen defendants after the close of all of the evidence, on November 28, 1932, when he stated that he was unable to remember what the evidence was as it applied to those individuals.⁶⁵

Only sixteen now remained on trial for conspiracy to violate the Prohibition Act, including Dennison. At closing arguments, the assistant United States attorney appealed to the common sense of the jury in urging them to convict Dennison: "In an organization for monopoly of the liquor business, who logically would be its head? . . . who but a gambler who has found gambling not so profitable, and turns to the liquor traffic as a more profitable venture? And who but a man with political influence could operate and hold together such a syndicate, hold in line not only the members, but police officers as well?"⁶⁶ By contrast, counsel for the defense argued that Crawford represented "everything that is vile," and that Dennison was "not a liar and contemptible rat like Crawford."⁶⁷

After a week of deliberations, the jury reported on December 12, 1932, that they were hopelessly deadlocked. Judge Woodrough declared a mistrial. The government decided not to retry the light in light of the anticipation of the abolition of prohibition laws, and no verdict was ever reached in the trial of Tom Dennison.⁶⁸

After the mistrial had been declared, several jurors sought to meet with the assistant U.S. attorney who tried the case. Over coffee in an Omaha hotel, they told him that they were sure at least one of the other jurors had been bribed by the defendants, but had no proof.⁶⁹ Years later, the widow of another juror told a historian that her husband, too, had been offered a bribe in exchange for holding out for acquittal. It was standard practice for jurors to be paid a fee for their service, and the farmer and his wife badly needed this sum in light of the depression and the upcoming winter. A relative from Omaha intimated that he could arrange for the farmer to be selected as a juror in the Dennison trial, but in exchange for serving and receiving his fee, the farmer had to promise to cast a vote of not guilty.

As the trial bore on, the farmer was convinced of Dennison's guilt. His oath to serve as an impartial juror outweighed his promise to the relative from the city, and he voted to convict. During the

week of deliberations, however, he became convinced that others had been similarly contacted, but unlike himself, stuck to an innocent vote so as to deadlock the jury.⁷⁰

Despite the absence of a guilty verdict, the bell tolling the extent of The Gang's control of Omaha could not be unrung. Tom Dennison and his co-defendants appeared at trial not as benevolent supporters of commerce and community, but rather as ruthless racketeers. Trial testimony about his political, vice, and bootlegging machines, widely reported in the local and national papers, turned the tide of popular opinion against The Gang.

As the 1933 city election approached, progressives in Omaha formed the Independent Voters League. The IVL promised "a new deal for the voters and taxpayers and a general change at City Hall."⁷¹ While the IVL leadership was dominated by the middle class, many businessmen were willing to contribute to the effort confidentially. The *World-Herald* editorialized that the city's temper was for "change and new blood" in the city council.⁷² For the first time in decades, a Democratic primary was held without a certified Dennison slate.

On the night before the election, anticipating a victory, IVL workers sang, "The old gray wolf, he ain't what he used to be," at campaign headquarters.⁷³ On Election Day, only two incumbent commissioners were elected, one of which was Roy Towl, who was then selected by his fellow commissioners to become Omaha's new mayor, replacing Dennison pol Richard Metcalfe.⁷⁴ For only the second time in the twentieth century, the machine's opponents occupied Omaha's City Hall. This time, the machine would not return. The trial provided a basis for the citizens of Omaha to vote against the organization.

Dennison died on February 14, 1934, a few weeks after suffering injuries in a car crash. Over a thousand people attended his funeral, including leading politicians and law enforcement in Omaha. Said the *World-Herald* on "The Old Man's" death:

In his 44 years in Omaha, Dennison became widely known. His name long was linked with underworld associations, and he was the center of many a bitter fight. Feared and hated by his foes, he was no less beloved by his friends. But through the strife that seethed around him he moved always serenely, disclaiming both the wickedness of which he was accused and the power with which he was credited. He fought his enemies grimly, but quietly, and his charities, reputed to be many, were just as quietly bestowed.⁷⁵

The Fate of the Plains Crusader

The Dennison slate and C. A. Sorensen were voted out of office within a year of each other. In 1932 Sorensen sought a third term as attorney general, but the Roosevelt Democratic landslide ousted Republicans across the country. In addition, Sorensen's unsuccessful and largely unpopular effort to implement a state highway patrol force was a focus of the attacks against him.⁷⁶

In 1934 Sorensen agreed to carry the insurgent Republican banner into the Republican gubernatorial primary, but was defeated. Although friends urged him to run for Senate that year against R. B. Howell, he refused, stating that "I've always supported Senator Howell and would not run against another progressive Republican who has a good record."⁷⁷ In a letter earlier that year to his son, written while on a business trip, he wrote: "If mother consents, I will run for either governor, senator or congressman."⁷⁸ However, Norris ran again for re-election in 1936, and Sorensen's Senate dreams were deferred indefinitely as he led the effort to re-elect Senator Norris as an Independent Republican. In 1938 Sorensen was an unsuccessful candidate for the non-partisan post of chief justice of the Nebraska State Supreme Court.

In 1940 Sorensen was Nebraska state chairman of Independents for Roosevelt. By then over fifty and having been on the statewide ballot in Nebraska five times between 1928 and 1940, he promised his wife Annis that he would never run for office again.

In a letter to a friend in 1940, Annis described her husband and alluded to his abandoned dreams of higher office:

My husband is a Dane, with a very reserved personality. I don't altogether understand him. He has gone thru greater hardships than I, and as the eldest of 10 children is still called upon for much financial help. He takes it all and never whines. His law is his life; he would have likes [*sic*] to be United States Senator but that takes a private fortune if you are independent of political bosses and machines. He has given up his own personal desires to provide for his own family.⁷⁹

A final opportunity for Sorensen to return to public life came in July 1941, when eighty-year-old U.S. Federal District Judge Thomas Charles Munger, based in Lincoln, announced his intention to retire effective July 31.⁸⁰ Senator Norris promptly asked President Roosevelt to nominate Sorensen. A memorandum from Roosevelt to Attorney General Francis Biddle dated July 25, 1941, directed Biddle

"[t]o check on this and speak to me about it." Three days later a handwritten memo to Biddle from the President noted, "Abe Sorensen—Lab. Repub. Voted for Norris and me, from Lincoln. Try to get Laurence to o.k.- Get him on a list of acceptables."⁸¹

But Judge Munger retired, and the judgeship remained vacant. The *Omaha World-Herald* reported on August 3, 1941, "Under the surface, Nebraska's regular Democrats are waging a mighty battle to keep C. A. Sorensen of Lincoln from getting the federal district judgeship." The first Democratic strategy to stop Sorensen, according to the *World-Herald* political columnist, was to unite all the other aspirants behind a single Democratic candidate for the judgeship. "The Democrats will try to blast Sorensen while leaving their own field wide open . . . The idea was that it would be easier to knock off Abe with a rifle than a shotgun."⁸²

In a series of secret meetings, President Roosevelt's executive assistant Eugene Casey met with Omaha's political and business leaders on the question of the judicial nomination. One of the attendees was an Omaha businessman, O. Fletcher Neal, Nebraska's representative on the Democratic Party's National Finance Committee, a millionaire donor and fundraiser. A successful insurance executive, Neal had long borne a grudge against Sorensen. In a long letter to Senator Norris, one of the meeting participants described Neal as "the real dictator of patronage distribution in Nebraska, the head of the Omaha organization without title, who handles all the campaign funds. It was Mr. Neal who sealed the fate of Mr. Sorensen, who had offended him in many ways during his term as attorney general, when he took sundry pokes at the Omaha underworld, and was especially ungracious to Mr. Neal."⁸³ The staunch Omaha opposition to Sorensen's nomination had prevented it from ever taking place.

When Sorensen died in 1959, the obituary in the *Omaha World-Herald* described him as "best known to many Omahans as a vigorous crusader against bootlegging, gambling and vice in the city."⁸⁴ The *Lincoln Evening Journal* lauded Sorensen's work in Omaha and identified him as the force behind Dennison's fall from power: "Sorensen's terms as attorney general were marked by widely-publicized

Here Are Seven Men Indicted by U.S. Jury

Here are the seven Omaha political leaders and police officers who were indicted Wednesday by the Federal grand jury, investigating liquor conditions in Omaha:

1. TOM DENNISON, veteran political leader, released on \$10,000 bond.

* * *

2. W. E. NESSELHOUS, his business partner for many years, \$10,000 bond.

* * *

3. JOHN T. MARCELL, assistant city prosecutor in charge of South Side police court, \$10,000 bond.

* * *

4. ROSCOE RAWLEY, Marcell's political ally, \$10,000 bond.

* * *

5. PAUL SUTTON, detective sergeant, former inspector of police and chief of detectives, \$5,000 bond.

* * *

6. JOE POTACH, police sergeant, former head of the police morals squad, \$5,000 bond.

* * *

7. HARRY BUFORD, lieutenant of police, \$5,000 bond.



TOM DENNISON

Omaha Bee-News,
March 3, 1932

"Glorious News" Is Sorensen's Comment

Lincoln, Neb., March 2 (AP).—Attorney General C. A. Sorensen was elated over the report that indictments had been returned against Omaha police and political figures. "It is glorious news," he said. "It vindicates everything we have been trying to do for the past three years."

Omaha World-Herald,
March 3, 1932




crusades against organized crime, particularly in Omaha. He was chiefly responsible for the conviction and jailing of Tom Dennison, Omaha's corruption political 'boss' of the Prohibition era."⁸⁵

As attorney general of Nebraska from 1928 through 1932, C. A. Sorensen took a series of strategic legal and political actions with the ultimate goal, among other top policy priorities, of dismantling Tom Dennison's criminal organization and political machine in Omaha. Working with Towl, Kookan, and Howell, he was successful. Sorensen's independence was admired in retrospect, but

After serving as attorney general, Sorensen was unsuccessful in his pursuit of higher public office, but was instrumental in the development of Nebraska's system of public power and irrigation districts.
NSHS RG2411-52229

politically costly at the time; an editorial at the time of his death described him as "an independent thinker . . . who was not afraid to take strong stands which were not popular or accepted by the majority. He has left his imprint on the state for honest and sincere public service."⁸⁶

In June 1929, during the uproar over the closing of Ak-Sar-Ben, the *Lincoln State Journal* quoted an assertion made by Sorensen at his inauguration that summed up both his commitment to enforcing the law and his awareness that it came at a price: "I may not be Attorney General long, but I will be Attorney General."⁸⁷ He was correct. 

NOTES

¹ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 40.

² Table HS-7, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Population of the Largest 75 Cities: 1900 to 2000); Table 8, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Population of the Cities of 100,000 or more inhabitants, 1930).

³ C. A. Sorensen, "The Hand of the Past," address delivered at Grand Island Baptist College, Feb. 12, 1912 (reprinted in the *Grand Island Daily Independent*, Feb. 18, 1912).

⁴ C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1931-1932*, 20.

⁵ Betty Stevens, *A Dangerous Class: A History of Suffrage in Nebraska and the League of Women Voters of Nebraska* (Lincoln: League of Women Voters of Nebraska, 1995), 32-35; James E. Potter, "Barkley vs. Pool: Woman Suffrage and the Nebraska Referendum Law," *Nebraska History* 69 (1988): 14.

⁶ Sorensen declared it "intolerable that a board of directors in Chicago or New York should vote to spend thousands of dollars to elect a certain man U.S. Senator, governor, or attorney general in Nebraska." *Lincoln Nebraska State Journal*, Mar. 14, 1928.

⁷ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, 38.

⁸ Howell lost to the incumbent, John H. Morehead, but was later elected to the U.S. Senate and was a lifelong friend and political ally of Sorensen. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Nov. 5, 1914.

⁹ *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, Feb. 25, 1928.

¹⁰ Orville Menard, *Political Bossism in America: Tom Dennison's Omaha, 1900-1933* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989), 3, 12-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹² A policy game is a bet wherein the gambler attempts to pick three digits to match those that will be randomly drawn the following day. See, e.g., Nathan Thompson, *Kings: The True Story of Chicago's Policy Kings and Numbers Racketeers, An Informal History* (Chicago: Bronzeville Press, 2002).

¹³ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Nov. 16, 1932; Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 53.

¹⁴ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 153.

¹⁵ *Omaha Bee*, Apr. 15, 1897.

¹⁶ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Feb. 24, 1900.

¹⁷ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 229.

¹⁸ B. W. Folsom, *No More Free Markets or Free Beer: The Progressive Era in Nebraska, 1900-1924* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999), 60.

¹⁹ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Oct. 28, 1901. Richard Croker was a leader of New York City's Tammany Hall.

²⁰ *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, Mar. 7, 1928.

²¹ *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, May 2, 1928.

²² Sarah Zacher Rosenberg, *Christian Abraham Sorensen as Attorney General of Nebraska, 1928-1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 20-22.

²³ *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1928 (Lincoln: Nebraska Legislative Reference Bureau), 498-99.

²⁴ C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1929-1930*, 23.

²⁵ *Omaha Bee-News*, Feb. 3, 1929.

²⁶ C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1929-1930*, 234. See also Rosenberg, *Christian Abraham Sorensen*, 71.

²⁷ *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, Feb. 9, 1929.

²⁸ C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1929-1930*, 234.

²⁹ Letter to Chas. A. Gardner, Secretary, Ak-Sar-Ben Exposition Company, from C. A. Sorensen, reprinted in C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1929-1930*, 382.

³⁰ *State ex rel. Sorensen v. Ak-Sar-Ben Exposition Co.*, 121 Neb. 248, 236 N.W. 736 (1931) (Attorney General on own initiative had authority to maintain suit to enjoin repeated violations of anti-gambling statutes in form of pari-mutuel betting on horse races); *Lincoln Evening Journal*, June 10, 1929. The horses did not run again until Omahans organized a new lobbying effort to persuade the legislature to legalize pari-mutuel betting. See Nebraska Revised Statute 2-219, prohibiting gambling except "Wagering on the results of horseraces by the parimutuel or certificate method." As noted in the annotations, "Prior to amendment of Constitution of Nebraska in 1934, parimutuel system of betting on horse races was not authorized by this section. *State ex rel. Sorensen v. Ak-Sar-Ben Exposition Co.*, 121 Neb. 248, 236 N.W. 736 (1931), affirming 118 Neb. 851, 226 N.W. 705 (1929)."

³¹ *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, June 11, 1929.

³² *State ex rel. Sorensen v. Ak-Sar-Ben Exposition Co.*, (1929) 118 Neb. 851, 226 N.W. 705.

³³ *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, June 11, 1929.

³⁴ *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 1929.

³⁵ C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1929-1930*, 36-37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁷ Letter from Tom Crawford to Irvin Stalmaster, assistant attorney general, Sept. 12, 1932, quoted in Rosenberg, *Christian Abraham Sorensen*, 73.

³⁸ Theodore C. Sorensen, in discussion with the author, April 2002.

³⁹ *Omaha World-Herald*, June 16, 1930.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, June 23, 1929.

⁴¹ Sorensen successfully sued Wood and the KFAB Broadcasting Company for libel, the Supreme Court of Nebraska holding that reading libelous words into a microphone on a radio broadcast publishes those words just as if they were written. *Sorensen v. Wood, et al.*, 123 Neb. 348 (1932).

⁴² Richard Lowitt, *George W. Norris: The Persistence of a Progressive: 1931-1933* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) 472-86.

⁴³ *Ord Quiz*, June 12, 1930.

⁴⁴ *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1930. In 1928, Sorensen won 77,159 more votes than his opponent. *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1928.

⁴⁵ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 267.

⁴⁶ *Omaha Bee-News*, April 21, 1931.

⁴⁷ Crawford to Stalmaster, Sept. 12, 1932.

⁴⁸ *Lincoln Star*, Dec. 23, 1931.

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1931.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Omaha Bee-News*, Dec. 23, 1931.

⁵² Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 277.

⁵³ C. A. Sorensen, *Report and Opinions of Attorney General: Nebraska 1931-1932*, 32-33.

⁵⁴ Kookon's official title for the purposes of investigating the Lapidus murder was Superintendent of Public Works of the City of Omaha, Nebraska. Don L. Kookon, "Post War Influence on Criminal Investigation," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* Vol. 35, Issue 6 (1945).

⁵⁵ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 293.

⁵⁶ *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 18, 1932. In May 1930, racketeer Gene Livingston was shot and killed after he offered to tell Sorensen and Towl "a complete story of official corruption in Omaha" in exchange for immunity from prosecution. *Omaha World-Herald*, May 2, 1930.

⁵⁷ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 267.

⁵⁸ "Report on the investigation of the murder of Harry Lapidus," Don L. Kookon to C. A. Sorensen, March 1932, referenced in Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 280.

⁵⁹ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 298.

⁶⁰ *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 3, 1932; *Omaha Bee-News*, Mar. 3, 1932.

⁶¹ *Lincoln Star*, Oct. 18, 1932.

⁶² In a letter to Roy Towl, Crawford referred to Metcalfe as "the errand boy for Dennison." Letter from Crawford to Towl, July 22, 1932, quoted in Rosenberg, *Christian Abraham Sorensen*, 73, n. 61.

⁶³ *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 1932.

⁶⁴ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Nov. 19, 1932.

⁶⁵ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Nov. 29, 1932.

⁶⁶ *Omaha World-Herald*, morning edition, Dec. 1, 1932.

⁶⁷ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Dec. 1, 1932.

⁶⁸ *Omaha World-Herald*, morning edition, Dec. 13, 1932. The repeal of Prohibition in the United States was accomplished with the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment to the Constitution on December 5, 1933.

⁶⁹ Menard, *Political Bossism in America*, 308.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 308-9.

⁷¹ *Omaha World-Herald*, morning edition, Jan. 13, 1933.

⁷² *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, Apr. 6, 1933.

⁷³ *Sunday World-Herald*, May 5, 1965.

⁷⁴ *Omaha World-Herald*, evening edition, May 3, 1933.

⁷⁵ *Omaha World-Herald*, morning edition, Feb. 16, 1934.

⁷⁶ Sorensen wrote to a friend that the "violent attacks on the highway patrol bill made it necessary for me to spend most of my energy defending it. I have no regrets for sponsoring the measure, but I see now that it was a club that was used very effectively against me." Sorensen to C. G. Wallace, Nov. 12, 1932, quoted in Rosenberg, *Christian Abraham Sorensen*, 109. The state highway patrol was in fact implemented by an act of the legislature in 1937. Official website of the Nebraska State Patrol, <https://statepatrol.nebraska.gov/aboutus.aspx>, accessed July 24, 2014.

⁷⁷ Sorensen to Carl F. Marsh, July 15, 1932, quoted in Rosenberg, *Christian Abraham Sorensen*, 98.

⁷⁸ C. A. Sorensen to Theodore C. Sorensen, 1934. Author's collection, Chicago, Illinois.

⁷⁹ Annis Chaikin Sorensen, Lincoln, NE, to Frances ____, May 20, 1940. Author's collection, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸⁰ Official website for the District of Nebraska, <http://www.ned.uscourts.gov/public/judicial-archive/munger-t-c>, accessed July 5, 2013.

⁸¹ Memorandum, Franklin D. Roosevelt to Francis Biddle, July 25 and 28, 1941, President's Official File 208-b, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. "Laurence" may have been James Lawrence, publisher of the *Lincoln Star* and a Roosevelt supporter.

⁸² *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 3, 1941.

⁸³ Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, 47.

⁸⁴ *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 31, 1959.

⁸⁵ *Lincoln Evening Journal*, Aug. 31, 1959.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Lincoln Nebraska State Journal*, June 11, 1929.

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