

Missouri's Poli-ticks: A Who's Who of Government Bloodsuckers

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In the final section, we focus upon waste and corruption in local communities. City governments, school administrations and housing authorities are put to the question. We call it:

Bad Neighbors

Schools are the main feature of this issue. We'll review some of the most unscrupulous officials to take the reins of power in recent memory.

The Gamblers

The Story of **Henry Williams**, Riverview Gardens School District Superintendent
and

The Riverview Gardens School Board

The Charges: Embezzling \$100,000, Defrauding School Reserves of \$10,000,000

The Accusers: State Auditor Susan Montee, Citizens of Bellefontaine Neighbors

Overview:

In July of 2002, the school board of Riverview Gardens took a gamble. They hired Henry P. Williams, a man with a checkered past, as their superintendent. Williams had lost jobs as superintendent in Syracuse, New York, Little Rock, Arkansas and Kansas City before coming to St. Louis.

Unfortunately, Williams also liked to gamble. During his tenure at Riverview Gardens, he visited the riverboat casinos an average of 190 days each year, and lost over \$176,000.

Williams also liked to travel. The board let him use district money to fly across the world. He visited faraway cities such as London, UK and Cape Town, South Africa.

He wasn't the only one to go sightseeing, however. Board members, administrators and teachers had a free hand to travel as well. The district spent at least \$1.7 million over four years on travel expenses.

In 2006, after numerous requests by local taxpayers, the state performed an audit, which was released in March of 2007. The school board removed Williams after the audit revealed that he had embezzled \$100,000 for his life insurance fund, and diverted money to his daughter, his girlfriend, and her family.

In the end, the real gamblers – the taxpayers – had lost their bets.

The Aftermath:

Williams pled guilty in county court to theft and tax fraud shortly after his removal. He spent 30 days in jail, and then was released on a 10-year probationary sentence.

Williams was ordered by the court to repay \$102,724 to the district, and \$300,000 in unpaid taxes.

The state audit blamed not only Williams, but the entire leadership of the district for lavish spending and poor documentation. The district's cash reserve had fallen from \$12 million to \$1.6 million in just five years.

Despite fiscal mismanagement, nepotism, and traveling an average of 8 times a year on the public dime, no school board members were held accountable for the district's demise.

Henry Williams died on April 23rd, 2012, at age 70. He still owed \$30,000 to the district and \$275,000 in taxes.

The gambling habits and criminal acts of Williams, among other school and state officials, prompted the Missouri Gaming Commission in 2009 to add certain civil servants to their "blacklist" of people who are banned for life from casinos.

The list, started in 1994, had formerly only contained the names of mobsters and career thieves.

The Riverview Gardens School District, nearly bankrupt, failed to meet state standards and lost its accreditation in 2007.

It has never recovered.

The Candy Man Can

The Story of **Fred Czerwonka**, St. Joseph School District Superintendent
with **Wendy Czerwonka**, Director of St. Joseph Homeless Program

and

Dan Colgan, Board President of St. Joseph Schools
with **Mark Colgan**, Technical Director of the District Warehouse

and

Doug Flowers, St. Joseph Human Resources Director
with **Tammy Flowers**, Technical Director of Early Childhood Programs

The Charges: Defrauding the St. Joseph School District of up to \$40,000,000,
Nepotism, Libel, Corruption

The Accusers: Trustee Chris Danford, CFO Beau Musser, Reporter Sam Zeff,
State Auditor Tom Schweich, Ballotepedia and various news agencies

Overview:

The agenda for the March 24th, 2014 school board meeting in St. Joseph promised nothing new. Board Trustee Chris Danford, however, had something to say that nobody anticipated. Speaking in full view of the public, Danford – a former teacher in the district – blasted the school superintendent for paying out \$5,000 bonuses behind the board’s back, while the district budget had recently suffered a \$3 million cutback.

Her speech sparked a round of recriminations and scandal that would end up uncovering possibly the biggest case of school corruption in Missouri’s history.

Superintendent Fred Czerwonka had used school money to dole out 54 “stipends” of \$5,000 to administrators in the district. The \$270,000 payout had all the appearances of a massive bribery scheme to buy loyalty.

For his generosity, people started calling Czerwonka “The Candy Man”.

But why were the bribes needed? Czerwonka claims that it was necessary because of “poor morale”. In reality, however, it appears that giving money under the table to keep administrators quiet was a common practice dating back long before Czerwonka came to St. Joseph.

In fact, the Board President, Dan Colgan, had been superintendent when the whole payout scheme had started 14 years ago. Dan Colgan had used his influence with the board to bolster his salary and pension by as much as *80% above his publicly stated salary* by using secret stipends, tax-sheltered annuities, car allowances, etc. In 2002, Colgan’s salary was \$108,000, but he was actually raking in over \$185,000.

Later, as board president, Colgan likely used his influence to get his son, Mark Colgan, promoted to “Technical Director” at the district’s warehouse. The promotion came with a \$15,000 salary bump, even though Mark worked in an office two miles away from the actual warehouse.

Nepotism was rampant in the district. Fred Czerwonka's wife, Wendy, was hired at the same time as her husband, to a full-time position that had formerly been part-time. Tammy Flowers, the wife of the Human Resources Director, was given a promotion to "Technical Director" and a \$10,500 raise, even though her job responsibilities remained the same.

Most of these problems were known, or at least suspected, before Danford blew the whistle on the Candy Man stipends. By making them public record, however, Danford had gained the attention of the authorities. The FBI began a legal probe and set up an office in St. Joseph. A Kansas City grand jury issued subpoenas for school records.

State auditor Tom Schweich sent a team to the troubled district in April of 2014. He anticipated that the audit would be complete by the fall. Instead, the audit took almost a year. It was made public in late February of 2015.

The results were crushing. The State Auditor's team had found that \$3.8 million in kickback money had been paid to administrators in the last year alone. His office estimated that at least \$25 million over eight years, and possibly as much as \$40 million over 14 years, had been doled out in administrative "stipends".

Beyond that, and nepotism, the audit found frequent violations of the Sunshine Laws, school policy, state policy, recordkeeping, credit card (or "procurement cards") policy, proper fuel use, the proper sale of bonds, and bidding procedures.

The Aftermath:

Following the State Audit findings, Fred Czerwonka was fired on February 20th, 2015. Dan Colgan refused to attend the Board meeting or vote.

Under public pressure, Dan Colgan resigned from the Board of Trustees on March 5th, 2015. His free lifetime health coverage, paid by the district, was revoked in mid-September.

Mark Colgan's warehouse position was eliminated in August.

A school tax renewal was scheduled to be put to a vote in April. After the scandal, the board withdrew it. The district lost \$6.5 million in revenue.

Fred and Wendy Czerwonka were both hired by the Caruthersville School District. Fred is director of school services, and Wendy teaches business.

The FBI and grand jury investigation is still in progress.

Liar Liar

The Story of **Dianne Critchlow**, Fox School District Superintendent

The Charges: Corruption, Libel, Destroying Public Records, Nepotism, Fraud

The Accusers: Citizens of Arnold, various news agencies, CFO John Brazeal

Overview:

Dianne Critchlow, before her early retirement, was being paid a public salary of \$260,000. Including perks, the Fox school district was paying her \$337,000 overall. She was the 3rd-highest paid school official in Missouri.

Yet it wasn't enough.

Four Arnold residents – Rich Simpson, Dan Mueller, Sam Ferry, and Michelle Tyler questioned nepotism in the district and a lack of financial transparency. They made numerous requests for public records, which were routinely denied.

In early 2013 the district's lawyers informed them that their behavior qualified as harassment. The Arnold residents got angry, and retaliated by having an online discussion about the district's problems.

During the same time, anonymous people posted false stories about three of the four critics (Mueller was not included), claiming that they were sexually depraved. The three targeted citizens hired a lawyer and filed a libel suit. In 2014, under the power of a subpoena, the posts were traced back to their source.

The liars had used the home computers of Superintendent Dianne Critchlow, her husband and director of the Bridges Alternative School, Jamie Critchlow, the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education Dan Baker, and his wife, assistant principal and Federal Programs Manager Angela Baker.

This discovery led to a media frenzy and a full-blown scandal for Fox schools. Soon, everyone was interested in the district's finances. It didn't take long for investigators to uncover that Critchlow had been abusing the school credit card. She had used it for personal meals, golf trips, and even to pay off a red-light ticket.

The corruption ran much deeper, however. Critchlow's administration had somehow lost millions of dollars. Because of poor recordkeeping, the responsible parties were unknown. To top it off, Critchlow's husband had been hired as director of an at-risk program for \$124,000 a year.

When Critchlow had asked the Fox School Board for her quarter-million-dollar salary, she had explained that you must pay for quality.

Honesty, apparently, wasn't one of the qualities she was describing.

The Aftermath:

An internal audit by the new CFO, John Brazeal, revealed a \$7 million shortfall for the next year's budget, forcing the school to make cutbacks. The

auditor explained that financial details were hard to find, because Critchlow's administration had altered or destroyed many key documents.

Critchlow's husband was fired in June of 2014.

Critchlow protests her innocence concerning the lies posted about the three critical taxpayers. Her attorney claims that she considered suing the district.

The Board paid incentives totaling just under \$3.6 million for 128 employees to leave. They also bought out Critchlow's contract one year early, paying her over \$220,000 to leave, including unused sick time, vacation time, and an annuity. All of the replacement administrators were hired at a lower salary.

Dianne Critchlow is facing no criminal action.

The Critchlows petitioned to transfer the libel suit to a federal court, which has delayed the trial for a year and a half.

Meanwhile, Dianne Critchlow has been hired by Pearson, a multi-billion-dollar testing corporation, to oversee the integrity of its state MAP tests in Missouri schools. The state's education department (DESE) approved her for the job.

Despite his role in the libel scandal, Dan Baker was retained by the district – although not in his former position. He was appointed the principal of Seckman Elementary School. His salary remains around \$150,000.

Angela Baker was put on two weeks' leave without pay, but otherwise remains with the district. Her annual salary is over \$100,000.

CFO Brazeal urged the school board to request a state audit, which they did. The audit began late in 2014 and was scheduled to be released in September of 2015.

It is still in progress.

Out of Thin Air

The Story of **Michael Song**, UMKC Business Professor
and

John Norton, UMKC Business Professor

The Charges: Collecting \$1,636,000 for Falsifying Student Achievements

The Accusers: Pricewaterhouse Coopers, The Kansas City Star

Overview:

In 2013, the Bloch School of Management – part of the University of Missouri in Kansas City – seemed to be on the fast track to success. Its entrepreneurial program was rated very highly, albeit not yet in respected circles. One publication, the *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, ranked it as the top business program on the planet. *The Princeton Review* put the program in the top 25 for four years running.

An investigation by *The Kansas City Star* in 2014, however, said otherwise. It implied that the program’s creator and director, Michael Song, had been cooking up false data. His subordinate, managing director John Norton, then fed the incredible stats to business journals in order to get a #1 ranking.

An independent university audit by Pricewaterhouse Coopers put the definitive black mark on Song and Norton’s supposed “success”. The audit revealed that Song’s program had grossly inflated its membership, the number of businesses it had started, and its clubs. Early in 2015, *The Princeton Review* stripped Song’s program of its top rankings.

By that time, Song had been collecting an annual public salary of \$250,000 and Norton a public salary of \$159,000. During the four years that the pair had been lying about their accomplishments, they had made a total of \$1,636,000.

Perhaps they knew a thing or two about business after all.

The Aftermath:

Both Professor Song and Professor Norton resigned following the scandal.

Chancellor Leo Morton refused to name the people responsible, but admitted that the scandal was a “hit to our brand”. He stood behind the #1 ranking for the Bloch School program from the *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, even though it was given during the period that Song and Norton were fudging the facts.

John Norton admitted to falsifying data, but claims he only did it because of pressure from his boss, Michael Song.

Neither of them are facing any legal action.

The Phantom Purchase

The Story of **Thomas Stritzel**, Chief of the St. Louis Park Rangers
and

Joe Vacca, Deputy Commissioner of the St. Louis Parks Division

The Charges: Defrauding St. Louis City of nearly \$473,000

The Accusers: St. Louis Metro Police, the FBI, U.S. Attorney's Office

Overview:

Whenever the park rangers of St. Louis needed a radio replaced or repaired, Thomas Stritzel, their chief, would make a request to Joe Vacca, a high-level bureaucrat in the Parks Division. The request would ask a favored company to do the work. Since the amount was “small”, the job was not open to competitive bidding.

Vacca would grant the requests, all for one company to do the radio work, year after year. As long as the total for the year was under \$60,000, and no single purchase was too “large”, the city's auditors were happy.

There was just one problem: the radios in question didn't exist. Nor did the work. Or the company.

Instead, the funds were ending up with a sham company called Dynamic Management Group. From there, the money went straight into the pockets of Stritzel and Vacca. The two men also spoke with a pair of vendors and convinced them to inflate their bills to the city. The extra money was then pocketed by Stritzel and Vacca.

The embezzling scheme began in January of 2005, and lasted for seven years. It came to a crashing end on December 31st, 2012, when a legal probe began into their activities.

The Aftermath:

Late in 2013, the law finally caught up to Stritzel and Vacca. Investigation by the FBI and St. Louis police prompted the pair to plead guilty to charges of fraud.

On January 27th, 2014, they were each sentenced to 3 years in prison by a federal court, and ordered to repay the amount of \$472,722.

The head of St. Louis Parks, Gary Bess, publicly apologized in 2013 and vowed to make changes in their purchasing policies.

A Murder of Crows

The Story of the Incestuous **Municipal Courts** of **St. Louis County**

Including:

Paul D'Agrosa, Judge for Olivette and University City; Private Defense Attorney

John Newsham, Crestwood Judge; Private Defense Attorney

Donnel Smith, Judge for Dellwood and Greendale; Prosecutor and City Attorney for Berkeley; Prosecutor and City Attorney for Moline Acres; City Attorney for Pine Lawn and Velda Village Hills; Private Defense Attorney

Keith Chung, Ladue Judge; Prosecutor for Crystal Lake Park, Frontenac, Normandy, and St. Ann; Private Litigator and Defense Attorney

Ronald Brockmeyer, Judge for Breckenridge Hills and Ferguson; Prosecutor for Dellwood, Vinita Park, and Florissant; Private Defense Attorney

William Buchholtz, Judge for Bella Villa, Country Club Hills, and St. Ann

Steven Clark, Judge for Hanley Hills and Valley Park; Prosecutor for Country Club Hills and Velda Village Hills

Dan Boyle, Florissant Judge; Private Litigator

Charles Billings, Judge for Des Peres, Fenton, and Overland; Private Defense Attorney

Ethan Corlija, Prosecutor for Jennings; Private Defense Attorney

Alan Baker, Hillside Prosecutor and City Attorney

Phillip Ayers, Calverton Park Judge; Greendale Prosecutor and City Attorney

Sam Alton, Edmundson Judge; Breckenridge Hills Prosecutor and City Attorney; Olivette Prosecutor; Pagedale City Attorney; Private Litigator & Defense Attorney

Victor Thompson, Judge for Hillside

Tim Engelmeyer, Creve Couer Judge; Prosecutor for Chesterfield, Des Peres, and Valley Park; Private Defense Attorney

Raphael Morris, Judge for Northwoods and Pagedale; Private Defense Attorney

Robert Horan, Prosecutor for Bellerive Acres

Jennifer Fisher, Judge for Berkeley and Moline Acres

Stephanie Karr, Prosecutor for Ferguson, Bel-Nor, and Hazelwood; City Attorney for Ferguson, Edmundson, Calverton Park, and Bellerive Acres

Kevin O'Keefe, City Attorney for Bellefontaine Neighbors, Bel-Nor, Clayton, Cool Valley, Des Peres, Frontenac, and Hazelwood

and

Charles Kirksey, Judge for Bellerive Acres, Normandy, and Wellston

The Charges: Collusion, Corruption, Perverting Justice

The Accusers: The Washington Post, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the U.S. Department of Justice

Overview:

St. Louis County has 81 separate municipal courts. Some cities are small. Yet even the tiniest can afford to maintain a court, because the legal system not only pays for itself – it turns a tidy profit.

The system of “justice” in St. Louis has three rungs. At the bottom are the police and clerks who depend upon the system to pay their salaries. In the middle are the mayors, chiefs and city officials who likewise profit from fines.

At the top are the lawyers.

A small group of lawyers form an exclusive club of “elites” that hold multiple positions in different cities – in one city they might be a judge, in another a prosecutor, and in yet another a city attorney. Many also have a private practice as defense attorneys.

These office-collectors put themselves into a position where conflicts of interest are a regular occurrence, and favors are routinely traded between judge/prosecutors and judge/defense attorneys.

An example is the hit-and-run incident in Jennings, where police recorded that Thomas Battreal, Sr., drove into a man in a crosswalk, slowed down, and then drove off. His lawyer was one of the “elites” – Ronald Brockmeyer – as was the prosecutor, Ethan Corlija. When the case came to court, Battreal was charged with “illegal parking” and fined \$250 plus court costs.

Such wheeling and dealing pays off for the elites. Brockmeyer made over \$1,500 *per hour* as the prosecutor for Florissant alone.

Meanwhile, the poorer residents in the county cannot afford an attorney at all, much less the get-out-jail-free version. The elites preside over courts that remorselessly suck money from these people, or jail them until someone pays up.

Berkley, for instance, collected \$111 of city fines *per resident* in 2013, issued more tickets than its population (9,000 people vs. 10,452 tickets) and had 2 outstanding arrest warrants *per resident*. Bel-Ridge collected \$450 in city fines per resident, and issued 3 times as many tickets as its population.

The list goes on: Cool Valley had 6 times as many arrest warrants as people and collected \$314 per resident; Pine Lawn had 7.3 times as many arrest warrants and collected \$576 per resident; and Country Club Hills had a truly ridiculous 26 *arrest warrants per resident*.

The appalling situation received no media attention, despite being an “open secret for decades”, as a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* writer later admitted.

Then, in 2014, riots broke out in the city of Ferguson.

The Aftermath:

Although most of the media focused exclusively on racism and police brutality to sell copy about the Ferguson riots, *The Washington Post* published an epic 45-page article on the larcenous behavior of St. Louis' city governments.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* tardily followed the example of *The Washington Post*, and printed a series of articles exposing the antics of the “elite” lawyer-judges. It published a list of names and offices late in 2015.

Following criticism in the Ferguson report by the U.S Department of Justice (DOJ), Ronald Brockmeyer resigned both his judgeships and his three offices as prosecutor.

Charles Kirksey – also criticized in the DOJ report –resigned all three of his judgeships in April of 2015. A local investigation revealed that he had withdrawn money from a client trust fund to pay personal bills.

In 2015, the General Assembly passed a law, SB 5, that limited a city's revenue from court fines to 12.5% of its total income in St. Louis County, and 20% outside the county. It was signed by the governor on July 10th, 2015.

Several St. Louis County cities have sued to have the law repealed.

The case is still pending.