

Back from the past

Former DA recalls scandal that tumbled him

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The man who as district attorney was caught up in a scandal in the 1950s that led to his departure from office — and to the Pulitzer Prize for the Register-Pajaronian — came back to Watsonville yesterday and talked of his fall from grace.

Charles Moore, now a 60-year-old Roman Catholic priest at The Gathering of the Way Church in Pacific Grove, told the Watsonville Rotary Club that it was a combination of his naivete and misplaced faith in

a friend that led to his downfall.

Moore was accused of using the "color" of the district attorney's office to allow his friend Raymond Jehl, who had run a gambling operation, to set in motion a conspiracy to solicit bribes and to extort money. He was also charged with having falsely and maliciously accused prominent local figures, including the foreman of the grand jury and the former mayor of Watsonville, of having "connections with vice."

The story broke wide open when former R-P photographer Sam Vestal shot incriminating photos linking Moore with Jehl.

"Ray (Jehl) took advantage of me, as it turned out," Moore said, "and Sam Vestal managed to get the Pulitzer Prize for the Register-Pajaronian."

Moore was charged with willful and corrupt misconduct, and resigned after one year in office shortly before the start of a trial that resulted in a jail sentence for Jehl.

Yesterday, Moore described his younger self as a man innocent of any wrongdoing who was unwittingly used by others.

"I never received a dime," he said, "and I didn't sell out. I was simply foolish and naive, and too much believed in the Lone Ranger."

Local businessman Ed Pio, who introduced Moore and attends his church, said that at the age of 26, Moore became

the youngest district attorney in the state when he was elected. He is now considered something of a maverick in the Catholic Church.

His appearance at yesterday's Rotary Club luncheon was unusual, said Pio, in that it was his first public appearance here since his resignation 32 years ago.

In his speech to the Rotarians, the tall, white-haired priest described his surprise at being elected to the office of district attorney in the mid-50s. He had been in the county only nine months, he said, when he beat the incumbent by a 2-to-1 margin.

He said he felt like Robert Redford's character felt in "The Candidate" after unexpectedly winning his campaign.

Moore said, "He (Redford) turned to his campaign manager and said, 'What the 'H' do we do now?'"

Moore said he obtained the first murder conviction in the

county in 20 years, against a Pentecostal minister who traveled to Santa Cruz from Texas to shoot his ex-wife's new husband.

The trial was reminiscent of scenes in the movie "To Kill a Mockingbird," where eager observers jammed the courtroom and overflowed into the street, Moore said.

Neither Judge Leo Atteridge nor the court reporter liked him, he added, and everyone was surprised when he won a conviction.

"That was the end of me," he said.

The elation from his successful election bid, coupled with his win in the courtroom, was dangerous for a naive young man who was sitting in one of the most powerful offices in the county, he said.

Moore next decided to make good on his campaign promises, which he said was another serious mistake, because they were very foolish promises.

The "great issue" in his campaign was a pledge to clean up Watsonville, he said.

"I said, 'I'm going to clean up Watsonville.' I didn't know exactly how it was dirty, but people told me it was."

He started going after the city's gambling activities because people complained family men were spending their money on gambling instead of on their children, Moore said.

Moore led a raid on a bar that was paying off on a pinball machine.

He described how a Santa Cruz resident, reportedly a brother-in-law of Al Capone, tried to bribe him and of how Moore threw the money back at him.

He was too naive to realize the power behind the county's gambling activities, Moore said. He said if he'd actually known that Santa Cruz County was enmeshed in a nationwide heroin-smuggling ring — smashed a few years later — he probably would have wound up dead.

As it was, he made the mistake of befriending Jehl, who had contributed to his campaign. Even his mother trusted Jehl, Moore said.

He said his mother told him, "Charles, there are only two people in this county I think you can trust — me and Ray Jehl."

Moore portrayed Jehl as a

Judas who took advantage of his naivete. "It's funny," he said. "Santa Cruz means 'Holy Cross.' In those days, I thought I had been crucified."

These days, Moore said, he realizes his disastrous Santa Cruz experience helped him learn what he needed to know about the world. Now he's busy working on broader issues, like world ecology, and he's happy to be alive.

Frank Osmer, who was Watsonville's police chief at the time of the scandal, elicited laughter when he stood and thanked Moore for his charitable attitude.

"I am going to have to tell you," he said, "that I was the one who called Sam Vestal to come out and take that picture."

Moore said later he harbors no grudges. Once he might have been governor, he said, but he was glad after he came to understand politics that it never happened.

He still has a good feeling for Watsonville. "It's still my idea," he said, "of what's best of the typical American town."

WATSONVILLE
HISTORY
1970's-1980's

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE