

The United States v. Thomas Dennison, et al.

The Defendants

Like many cities of the early twentieth century, Omaha was once ruled by a corrupt political machine. Omaha's political boss was Tom Dennison, and his key lieutenant and business manager was Billy Nesselhous.

Dennison settled in Omaha in 1892, after prospecting and gambling in Colorado. Nesselhous settled in Omaha seven years earlier. He was a former jockey who made his living in saloons and on street corners, gambling with shell games and dice. Dennison saw in Nesselhous a keen ability to persuade others and a gift for the careful calculation of odds. Together, they formed a lucrative joint venture. Dennison controlled elections in Omaha's Third Ward, giving him political patronage powers. Nesselhous managed the city's gambling, liquor, prostitution, and loan shark operations, under Dennison's direction.

Before Prohibition, Dennison operated his business out of the Budweiser Saloon at 14th and Douglas Streets. He later moved his office one block west to the Karbach building. Police commissioners beholden to Dennison passed on his instructions to their officers. Police cooperation ensured that competition in vice industries was eliminated, and legitimate businesses paid tribute for protection. At times, the machine's domination of vice operations was violent. During Prohibition, Omaha police shootings included the killing of bootleggers who were in competition with the Dennison-Nesselhous syndicate.

Some well-known Nebraskans, including Sarah Joslyn, N.P. Dodge, and Senators George Norris and R.B. Howell, publicly opposed the Dennison-Nesselhous syndicate. Others viewed it as a necessary evil that protected Omaha from a takeover by the crime syndicates of Chicago and Kansas City. Eventually, federal agents and Nebraska Attorney General C.A. Sorensen decided to move against Omaha's crime syndicate. Federal agents carefully investigated Dennison and Nesselhous's activities, and brought Dennison, Nesselhous, and 57 other defendants to trial.



William "Billy" Nesselhous



Tom Dennison