

Battle of Athens: The Forgotten History of the Tennessee Rebellion Against Local Government

The fight for civil rights in America is not limited to black Americans. Nor is the American Revolution limited to the 1700s. Case in point: The Battle of Athens. This was a pitched physical confrontation lasting two days in 1946, but with roots stretching back into the 1930s. It is part of an overall pan-racial resistance to anti-democratic government forms throughout the United States – and an oft-forgotten moment in American history.

A corrupt political machine run by E.H. Crump was centered in Memphis, but had influence throughout the entire state of Tennessee. This extensive influence was used to alter the election laws and charters of cities and counties to make the electoral process more favorable to Crump and his men. Sheriffs and their deputies were paid on a fee system, whereby they received more money the more people they incarcerated — with predictable results. Travelers and tourists were hit hardest, with buses traveling through Crump-controlled areas pulled over and (the entire bus) ticketed for drunkenness.

This was felt particularly sharply in McMinn County, which was historically Republican. It has been alleged that the basis of Crump's political power was delivering this Republican stronghold to Democrat President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1936 election. The Justice Department investigated election fraud there in 1940, 1942 and 1944, but declined to take action. The poll tax and politicized ballot counting were the most common methods of fraud, as well as that old standby of having dead people cast ballots.

The advent of World War II made matters worse. Most of McMinn County's young men were off fighting the war. This meant that the county began scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to appointing lawmen. Ex-cons were not considered unworthy and many were hired to help the county meet its needs. Gambling and bootlegging were permitted for those politically connected individuals within the county. To make matters worse, the machine was firmly in control of the newspapers and schools, and was the most gainful employment in the county.

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