

1-1-2015

# Numbers And Neighborhoods: Seeking And Selling The American Dream In Detroit One Bet At A Time

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**NUMBERS AND NEIGHBORHOODS:  
SEEKING AND SELLING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN DETROIT  
ONE BET AT A TIME**

by

**FELICIA GEORGE**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2015

MAJOR: ANTHROPOLOGY

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support and guidance of a very special group of people. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee chair and advisor, Dr. Todd “714” Myers. I cannot express how lucky I was the day you agreed to be my advisor. You planted the seed and it is because of you “Numbers and Neighborhoods” exists. Thank you for your guidance, support, patience, encouragement, and constructive criticism. I cannot thank my other committee members, Dr. Stephen “315” Chrisomalis, Dr. Andrew “240” Newman, and Professor Johnny “631” May enough. Each of you brought an important skill and perspective to this project. Thank you all for your pearls of wisdom, comments, and suggestions. You all greatly improved this project.

In addition, I would like to thank my “562” (Barbara Dale) and my “741” (Jasmine George) for their love and support. They were the best free assistants EVER! Mom, thank you so much for all of the hours in the library and scanning pictures. You will never know how much I appreciated you. Last, but certainly not least, a heartfelt thank you to my husband, Anthony George. You are the best “328,” “456” and “519” a woman can have. Thank you for your constant love, support, and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you for the endless talks about Detroit and numbers, for being my sounding board, editor, and jack-of-all trades. I love you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments _____	ii
List of Figures _____	iv
Chapter 1 “Introduction” _____	1
Chapter 2 “First there was the Lottery” _____	21
Chapter 3 “Policy Playing Comes to Detroit” _____	31
Chapter 4 “Meet John Roxborough, Detroit’s Founding Father of Numbers” _____	46
Chapter 5 “Numbers Playing takes over Detroit in 1928” _____	63
Chapter 6 “Gustav G. Carlson’s Study of a Culture Complex” _____	104
Chapter 7 “Trials and Tribulations of the Numbers Men” _____	117
Chapter 8 “Detroit’s Dream Dealers Go On Trial” _____	148
Chapter 9 “John Roxborough: Entrepreneur, Philanthropist, and Race Man” _____	170
Chapter 10 “Fuller Hit’s Story” _____	189
Chapter 11 “The Numbers Game Evolves - The Destruction of Black Numbers and Neighborhoods” _____	202
Chapter 12 “What about Women? Francis Childress’ Story” _____	232
Chapter 13 “The Legal Numbers Man: The State of Michigan” _____	242
Chapter 14 “Numbers Gambling, the Automotive Industry, and Big Will” _____	269
Chapter 15 “312 Plays for Playing the Numbers” _____	286
Chapter 16 “Choosing Your Number: Science versus the Supernatural” _____	297
Chapter 17 “Conclusion” _____	320
References _____	334
Abstract _____	374
Autobiographical Statement _____	375

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Policy and Numbers Houses in Detroit circa 1935 \_\_\_\_\_ 127

## CHAPTER 1 “INTRODUCTION”

Numbers gambling in Detroit provides insight into the idea and performance of community solidarity<sup>1</sup> within the urban landscape of the United States. The following study offers a detailed account of how the informal economy of neighborhood-based gambling takes shape and thus forms a place within local communities. Currently, there is limited research on the topic of numbers gambling and the role it has played in community solidarity and development. The purpose of this dissertation is to expand the knowledge and understanding of numbers gambling in Detroit from 1919 to 2000, by determining how numbers gambling (as an informal economic activity) was formed and how it operated, not only as an illegal activity which served the community economically, but also as an institution that bound members of the community together socially. This dissertation looks at the legal issues surrounding numbers gambling in Detroit, as well as incorporates issues concerning community, kinship, history, economics, and politics.

The *underground economy*, which is better called the *informal economy* to lessen its subterranean connotation, has been defined as “...the sum total of income-earning activities with the exclusion of those that involve contractual and legally regulated employment” (Portes & Sassen-Koob 1987:31). Informal economies can be collective and well-organized activities, which are able to operate due to the support of entire neighborhoods, communities, or industries (Weiss 1987:217). The purpose of my study will focus on how numbers gambling shaped and defined urban neighborhoods and on the communal relationships formed in these neighborhoods over time.

Numbers gambling are games of chance usually operated within the informal economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Durkheim’s concept is that solidarity, “represent the totality of bonds that bind us to one another and to society, which shape the mass of individuals into a cohesive aggregate” (Durkheim 1984:331).

The term number gambling refers to the practice of wagering on the outcome of certain numbers. It embraces a variety of games which differ principally in the way the winning number is determined. The two basic types are 'policy,' in which the winning number is obtained by a drawing, and 'numbers,' in which the winning number is derived from various published statistics (Carlson 1949:189).

This project will focus on these two basic numbers games, "policy" and "numbers." Policy has been called the lottery's "illegitimate offspring" because it originally derived from legal lotteries (Asbury 1938:88).

Policy appears to have originated in the London Lottery shops in the first half of the eighteenth century, and was developed by the ticket dealers as a sideline to their regular businesses...its main purpose which it certainly fulfilled after being transplanted to America, was to bring gambling within the reach of those who couldn't afford to buy even a share of a Lottery ticket. For a trifling sum – in many places as little as a farthing – a player could 'insure a number:' that is, he could bet that any number of his own selection would appear in the drawing of a designated Lottery (Asbury 1938:89).

In policy, a player attempts to guess what numbers, ranging from one to 78, will be selected. Numbers from one to 78 are placed in a container and anywhere from 12 to 36 of them are pulled from the container. In order to win, a player simply has to correctly choose either a single or multiple numbers. Numbers is a variation of policy. "Numbers is simply Policy reduced to the simplified form in which it was played in England almost two hundred years ago. The only real difference, aside from changes in terminology, is the source of the figures upon which the play is based" (Asbury 1938:88). When playing the "numbers", players select a three-digit number. If the three-digit number is correctly selected, the player wins. Unlike policy, which requires numbers to be drawn, the winning numbers for the Detroit numbers game came from one of several sources, which included the financial clearing house totals and, later, winners of horse races (Carter 1970:31).

Anthropology offers tools for taking a broad look at numbers gambling that are not limited to legal, economic, and political contexts. Anthropology accounts not just for the etic, but for the

emic as well. “Emic and etic distinguish the understanding of cultural representations from the point of view of a native of the culture (emic) from the understanding of cultural representations from the point of view of an outside observer of the culture (etic)” (Barfield 1997:148). In other words, this study provides not just a researcher’s perspective on numbers gambling, but includes the perspectives of the people involved in this activity to include players, numbers writers/collectors and operators. My study examines how numbers gambling evolved within black communities from 1919 to 2000 in Detroit, using both historical and ethnographic methods.

The communities and historical framework were chosen because they represent where and when the majority of southern blacks migrated when they came to Detroit. According to the United States Census, in 1920 the total population in Detroit was 993,678. Blacks accounted for 40,838 or approximately four percent of the total population (United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1920:496). At that time, blacks owned about 360 businesses, and Detroit was a beacon to southern blacks who dreamed of settling in a place that offered better educational, employment, and living conditions (Wylie 2008:97). By 1930, the black population had increased to 120,000, and Detroit’s Paradise Valley (located on the east side of Detroit) was known throughout the country for being a center for black businesses and entertainment. “Detroit gained a national reputation for being a haven for black businesses” and became known as “a land of milk and honey” (Wylie 2008:97).

Numbers gambling was largely credited by many Detroit blacks for allowing a number of black businesses to exist. The men and women who ran numbers gambling establishments funded businesses and institutions when mainstream banks would not (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:65-66). This allowed Detroit’s black community to have access to neighborhood



businesses and services that are essential to any self-sufficient thriving community. For example, these neighborhood businesses included hotels, bars, insurance companies, loan offices, real estate firms, newspaper stands, barbershops, and shoe shine parlors (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:66 & 102). These flourishing businesses, which were supported by numbers gambling, gave the community a sense of pride in the numbers men and women, as well as the businesses in their community. People looked at the businesses and the people responsible for them as a positive example of what the race could produce (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:66-67 & 155). Numbers gambling in Detroit also employed many people within the black community during the 1930s, when employment was otherwise in short supply (Cousins 1938:16). This relationship between gambling, local economy, and social-structural support contributed to the community's solidarity formed around and through "numbers."

My dissertation fills a major gap in the current literature as it pertains to numbers gambling, in Detroit. This project addresses the history and formation of numbers gambling in several Detroit communities, and describes both the economic and social function it served for communities, while simultaneously taking into account the unambiguous legal status of the activity. Finally, I explore what motivated people to play the numbers in the first place as well as what strategies they used to play the numbers.

There are three aims of this project:

1. To describe the history and formation of numbers gambling in neighborhoods on Detroit's east and west sides. The goal is to describe the organizational structure, daily routines, and activities of numbers gambling organizations.
2. To determine why and how numbers gambling bonded and solidified neighborhoods in Detroit. The aim is to explore both the economic and social function of numbers gambling. The goal is to determine how numbers gambling as a form of economic exchange solidified social relationships.

3. To determine why and how individuals played the numbers in Detroit. The goal is to explore what motivated people to play the numbers and what strategies they used (including luck, dreams, religion, etc.) in playing the numbers.

### Theoretical Framework

Numbers gambling has had a significant effect on communities throughout the United States (Anderson 1979; Dunstan 1997; Lasswell 1972; Liddick 1999; Schatzberg 1993; Schatzberg and Kelly 1996; Steffensmeir and Ulmer 2006; Weinstein and Deitch 1974). It has served a number of functions within society, most obviously as entertainment and sport. However, numbers gambling has also served other important functions historically. It acted as a vehicle for achieving wealth for a number of immigrant and minority groups. Both the Italians and the Jewish operated Purple Gang used numbers gambling to achieve power and wealth in Detroit (Detroit News 1938c:1&15). Roger Waldinger described this activity as filling an “ethnic niche” (Waldinger 1996:3). According to the “ethnic niche” theory, competition for jobs and wealth occurs between newcomers and mainstream society (Waldinger 1996:3-6). The newcomers (who are generally migrants and minorities) start at the bottom of the economic ladder and through kinship and network ties, begin to move from the bottom (where ethnic concentration can be found) to more favorable jobs and wealth. As ethnic groups move out of their concentrated ethnic niche, opportunities arise for other minority groups to fill the roles that were vacated (Waldinger 1996:3-6). Francis Ianni argues that an “ethnic succession” was occurring in organized crime in the 1970s. Ianni posited that blacks were taking over numbers gambling from Italians, and that this takeover was a form of social and economic mobility (1974:313-314). Detroit has historically been a city defined by its racial boundaries, which at times have served to isolate blacks from the mainstream economy. My study explores whether numbers gambling formed because of “ethnic succession.”

Another theoretical framework that gives light to the importance of relationships in numbers gambling can be found in Marcel Mauss' notion of exchange (Mauss 1990). In his 1925 work, *The Gift*, Mauss argued that exchange (specifically gift giving) builds relationships and bonds people together (Mauss 1990:23). Mauss sought to understand what compels people in archaic societies to obligatorily reciprocate gifts, and explored what power is in the gift that causes the recipient to reciprocate the gesture. Mauss used a comparative method to study the custom of gift giving and potlatch in Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest. By studying these groups, Mauss found that the archaic form of exchange was made up of a gift being presented, received, and then reciprocated. This was shown best by Mauss' analysis of Bronislaw Malinowski's work studying the Kula circle (Malinowski 1922:92). The Kula consisted of the ritual of giving and receiving gifts. The Kula served to display generosity and the freedom to give. It established relationships and bonds outside of it. Most importantly the Kula was the concrete expression that shows how all other institutions (relationships, class structure, community, politics, etc.) are linked (Mauss 1990:21-30). Mauss' premise was that gift giving is an act of collective solidarity which created mutual obligations of exchange. This study will explore whether numbers gambling, like gift giving, is a form of economic exchange that acted as a system of "total services" (Mauss 1990:13). In other words, it will examine if numbers gambling was an exchange system that individuals and groups used to fulfill each other's needs (Mauss 1990:70).

At the peak of numbers gambling (in the early 1940s), the city of Detroit was experiencing rapid change and turmoil. Issues of race and inequality caused tension in neighborhoods and the workplace as blacks were segregated from whites and denied equal

opportunities. In addition to these issues, Detroit was dealing with tensions caused by labor disputes and war production.

[...] too many of the people of Detroit are confused, embittered and distracted by factional groups that are fighting each other harder than they are willing to fight Hitler...Detroit is a city of violent extremes. In the 1920's it made so many automobiles that it got rich and expanded beyond its wildest dreams. But in the 1930's it sank lower into the great depression than any big U.S. city. Its large banks were the first to close and its labor wars were the most vicious in the nation...Now Detroit is flushed with feverish prosperity again but it still seethes with racial, religious, political and economic unrest. More than half its population of nearly two million came to Detroit in the last 20 years. They have no great love for their city and they give their loyalty to their own group, creed or union (Life 1942:17-19).

It was reported that "...the peculiar forces in Detroit have made the racial situation much more acute there than in most other cities... (Brown 1944:24). It can be argued that racial solidarity formed in response.

The simplest expression of racial feeling that can be called a form of Black nationalism is racial solidarity. It generally has no ideological or programmatic implications beyond the desire that Black people organize themselves on the basis of their common color and oppressed condition to move in some ways to alleviate their condition (Bracey, Meier and Rudwich 1970:xxvi).

This created the environment that made it conducive for numbers gambling to operate and flourish. Numbers gambling provided professional employment opportunities for blacks when they were denied other opportunities, and acted as a financial institution for blacks that were denied access to mainstream financial institutions. Numbers gambling offered a chance at the "American Dream" for blacks who were otherwise denied it. In 1931, James Truslow Adams, a writer and historian first used and defined the term "American Dream" in his book, *The Epic of America*. According to Adams, the American dream is

[...] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of

motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 1931: 404).

Numbers gambling became a means to remedy economic and social injustices. The conflict caused by racism, and numbers gambling's role in righting it, caused people in the affected neighborhoods to rally behind gambling as something of their own. In other words, numbers gambling acted as a means to not only provide resources that were otherwise denied, but it also brought people within the community together by acting as an instrument for community solidarity. Due to this the community rallied around the institution of numbers gambling for entertainment, as a source of pride, and for basic financial needs. I postulate that numbers gambling, like the Kula circle established relationships and bonds within the community because it served as a means to circulate and redistribute resources within the community. There was power in numbers gambling that compelled gambling operators to perform a form of reciprocity with the communities and people who supported their operations. In some way, each party was dependent or tied to the other. Numbers gamblers and people in the community depended on the resources generated by numbers gambling, and numbers operators depended on their business. In other words, operators felt obligated to support neighborhoods financially and symbolically due to the support of the community in their business, and this contributed to the solidarity and social binding of the community/neighborhoods. Neighborhoods and neighbors supported numbers gambling by not just working in them and placing bets, but also by trusting them and protecting their businesses from law enforcement, which was a display of solidarity. Finally, I posit that the reciprocity displayed by the numbers operators solidified their place and status in their respective neighborhoods and communities while at the same time ensuring the masses continued to place bets with them.

Clifford Geertz in “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” notes that cockfighting (in 1958), symbolized or represented the larger context of Balinese society (Geertz 1972:26-27). Geertz’s focus in this essay was to interpret what meaning the Balinese attributed to cockfighting. By observing the sport and the social forms that surrounded it, Geertz was able to draw parallels to what was going on inside the Balinese community. Geertz posited that the cocks were symbolic of the men in the village, and tied up in the cockfight were themes involving “animal savagery, male narcissism, opponent gambling, status rivalry, mass excitement, and blood sacrifice (Geertz 1972:27). Geertz also pointed out the significance of “deep play” in the cockfights. “Deep play” was defined as play in which the stakes involved were so high that it was irrational for anyone to participate. In the case of the cockfights, the Balinese placed risky and high stake wagers on fights not because they were irrational, or because money did not matter. Rather, Geertz found that the high-risk wagers were placed not just for monetary gain, but because of the status linked with such a bet. Bettors were not just wagering money, but were placing a part of themselves (their pride, esteem, masculinity, etc.) on the line as well. In other words, cockfighting was not just about monetary gambling as much as it was about status gambling (Geertz 1972:17). Similar to Geertz’s work (utilizing interpretative anthropology as a framework), my study explores what motivates people to play the numbers. Like Geertz’s findings, I assert that numbers gambling for individuals was (and is) more than just wagering money (against steep odds). In this study, I argue that numbers gambling was a cultural activity that provided numerous economic and social benefits. Like anthropologist Jayne Curnow, I argue, “gambling is a viable economic strategy” (Curnow 2012:101). Curnow in 2004 and 2005 studied the Ngadha people on the island of Flores in eastern Indonesia. She examined how gambling, to include the illegal lottery was not risky business. Curnow found that

“for the Ngadha people, gambling is primarily a social activity that provides a forum for the public circulation of cash...” (Curnow 2012:101). Numbers gambling did the same for its black community seventy-five years earlier in Detroit, and this study will expand on the importance that numbers gambling has had as both a social and economic activity.

### Previous Studies

Previous studies concerning numbers gambling have examined the criminal aspects of gambling over time (Asbury 1938; Ianni 1976; Schatzberg and Kelly 1997; Schwartz 2006) as well as the motivations underlying gambling. Other studies have examined the social and financial functions of numbers gambling (Anderson 1979; Dunstan 1997; Lasswell 1972; Liddick 1999; Schatzberg 1993; Schatzberg and Kelly 1996; Steffensmeir and Ulmer 2006; Weinstein and Deitch 1974). Kaplan and Maher (1970) studied the economics of the numbers game, and found that it was the primary source of funds for organized crime (Kaplan and Maher 1970:391). The economists posited that the numbers game was a major factor in the ghetto’s economy, and acted as a source of employment for the poor and unskilled (1970:401). Kaplan and Maher felt the game flourished because good citizens supported it. They noted the billions of dollars generated by numbers gambling was controlled by the Syndicate who did not pay taxes, used a significant share of the money to bribe police and politicians, and to fund other criminal activities. Finally, it was estimated that it cost the government tens of millions of dollars to enforce laws against numbers gambling (Kaplan and Maher 1970:403).

Sociologist Ivan Light (1977) noted that mainstream financial institutions have historically failed to serve poor communities. As a result of this failure, blacks invented numbers gambling. These numbers gambling banks acted as a source of capital and financial savings and loan institution, as well as a business investment for urban black communities.

Light suggests that when other legitimate and mainstream financial institutions refused to service blacks, the numbers operators stepped in to fill the void. Light believed that numbers gamblers did not play the game for fun or sport; rather they play the game as a rational economic activity (Light 1977:896). Light posited that most numbers gamblers used betting on the numbers as a form of personal savings. For them it was a means to convert scarcely missed change into a lump sum (Light 1977:896). In addition, numbers gambling was convenient for players who could easily place a bet while out conducting ordinary business or in the neighborhood with a numbers writer who they found to be friendly and trustworthy. Numbers gambling offered employment for those in need at times, and the operators were able to offer credit and loans to poor people who banks would not normally extend credit. Finally, numbers operators were able to loan money to black businesses, and “numbers bankers have been leading philanthropists in depressed black neighborhoods, making donations to churches and athletic teams, and providing Christmas and Easter baskets for the poor (Light 1977:898). Although Light found that numbers gambling mimicked banks, he thought they were an irregular financial institution and “have not provided a level of financial service sufficient to sustain economic development, even though they helped to close a gap left by the chronic malfunction of mainstream financial institutions” (Light 1977:901). Light concluded that numbers gambling existed or was created by both institutional and cultural issues.

On the institutional side, the malfunction of mainstream financial communities in low-income communities creates a financial problem. Residents reach into their cultural repertoires for solutions...When institutions obstruct, victims cope...True, numbers gambling is a remedy, but a wasteful one; and the chronic malfunction of financial institutions which encouraged this remedy does not render numbers gambling a fully satisfactory alternative (Light 1977:901).

I propose that numbers gambling in Detroit not only served a social function but an economic function that was not wasteful.



Mark Haller (1991) examined the social history of numbers gambling in Chicago from 1900 to 1940. Haller, a historian, found that the culture of numbers gambling and entertainment not only influenced the social life and economy of the neighborhood, but also played a vital role in black politics, business development, sports and entertainment. Haller found that the development of black entertainment, black gambling syndicates, and black politics were interrelated and impacted the ghetto. Haller felt the history of black entertainment and black gambling occurred in three phases. These phases paralleled and reflected the development of black politics in Chicago (Haller 1991:720). The first phase was from 1900 to 1915. At this time he found blacks played a marginal part in Chicago's politics and therefore blacks involved in gambling and entertainment sought and negotiated favors from white politicians. In this first phase black policy operators could only operate in association with white partners. The second phase occurred from 1915 to 1931, and at this time blacks had gained political control of two wards in the heavily black populated South Side of Chicago. This occurred when the black population in those areas quickly increased. Although a minority in the city, black voters became critical in electing the city's mayor at the time. For their support of him, the mayor "fostered and protected the development of gambling and entertainment in the black wards" (Haller 1991:721) Black policy operators at this time were able to operate independently of white partners. The final phase began in 1931 and ended in 1940. This phase marked when Democrats gained control of the city government, and the Depression brought about great financial woes in the ghetto. "These developments created a crisis for the traditionally Republican politicians of the black belt and for the gambling and entertainment enterprises linked to them" (Haller 1991:721). This forced black politicians and policy operators to forge new political organizations and alliances with the Democratic Party. Throughout this final period changes

occurred. Black entertainment became more legitimate and became more dependent and controlled by whites. This meant that black policy operators and politicians played a smaller role in the promotion and protection of the entertainment industry. However, black policy operators, whose wealth was enhanced due to the Depression, investment in legitimate businesses and participated in a number of charitable activities. These activities solidified their influence and respectability (Haller 1991:733).

Donald Liddick Jr. (1995) examined the political and social history of numbers gambling in New York City in the 1960s. Liddick examined the organization of the numbers gambling market by describing their structure and location. He concluded his study by describing the effect that numbers gambling had on the social process of communities within New York City. The data from Liddick's study were derived from police reports and wiretaps. Liddick used the "enterprise model" as the framework for his analysis. The enterprise model proposes that organized crime is structured similarly to legitimate businesses, and as such is simply an extension of legitimate market activities. The model further posits that as long as demand exists, a supplier for the demand will exist, and entrepreneurs will seek to meet the demand (whether it is legal or not). Liddick's study of numbers gambling in New York City found that numbers gambling served a function in society by providing jobs, recreational services and financing for other institutions. Numbers gambling stimulated neighborhood economies, and influenced politics. Numbers organizations were both formal and informal in their structure, and were adaptive when necessary for success. Symbiosis occurred between numbers organizations and law enforcement whereby each influenced, shaped, and profited from the other. He further noted that the enterprise model was limited as a means of fully explaining numbers gambling because

it did not allow for the study of informal and symbiotic relationships or the importance of power in structure.

Steffensmeir and Ulmer's (2006) sociological study found that numbers gambling functioned not just as an economic activity for the socioeconomically disadvantaged, but were long-term successful business ventures. Steffensmeir and Ulmer used a cultural assets and social capital theoretical framework to analyze black and white control of numbers gambling in two major eastern state cities from 1970 to 2000. They analyzed information from several sources, including interviews with key informants who participated in numbers gambling, newspaper articles and government archival records. They concluded that black numbers gambling operators were historically the main business owners, but had steadily lost control to Italian American operators. Blacks had lost control due to the aging of numbers bankers, a change in business structure and operations, an increase in law enforcement activities, competition from legal state lotteries, and because of the breakdown of neighborhoods due to the expanding drug economy. This finding was in direct contrast to the "ethnic succession" theory. Ethnic succession theories came from the Chicago School of sociology. For example, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess suggested that as different ethnic groups upgraded their occupations over time, less fortunate ethnic groups would step into those newly abandoned occupations in a process they termed "ethnic succession" (1921). In other words, ethnic succession theories do not explain trends in the numbers gambling, because Italians were not the first to control the racket. Rather, blacks cultivated and controlled numbers gambling before Italians. Furthermore, Steffensmeir and Ulmer noted that numbers gambling was not created by the socioeconomically disadvantaged and was not simply an economic activity. Rather, they found that cultural assets and social capital (for example, the ability to use network connections for financial capital) were

needed in order to be successful in the numbers gambling business. Finally, they noted that different ethnic groups differed in how they operated their numbers gambling business and in their success.

Gustav Carlson, an American anthropologist, studied numbers gambling during the early 20th century in Detroit. Carlson believed numbers gambling influenced the culture and behavior of Detroit's poor blacks because it offered a means of survival. In his study, Carlson argued that numbers gambling was a cultural trait that was "predominantly an urban negro activity" that became popular after 1929 due to a change in the economy. A more in-depth discussion of Carlson's study will be presented in chapter six.

Although previous studies have shown how numbers gambling benefited the community economically, these studies did not address issues concerning solidarity and social ties. My study explores whether numbers gambling (as found in the studies completed by Steffensmeier, et.al) provided economic benefits in Detroit (which included employment for hundreds of people, investments in legitimate businesses, contributions to charities and churches, and funding for entertainment). My study also explores if numbers gambling provided social benefits, which included providing a symbol of black success and pride for the community, as well as political power. Finally, I examine whether numbers gambling as a form of economic exchange created community solidarity within the communities it served. This is accomplished by providing the perspective of the people involved (emic) versus previous studies, which were etic in nature.

### Methodology

The study was conducted over a three year period from June 2010 to June 2013. Archival research methods and oral histories were employed to achieve the historical goals of the project. These methods were necessary for the success of this project because the culture and

community of numbers gambling in Detroit has changed over time. One of the strengths of using archival documents and sources in undertaking the research was the fact that archival information reflects the views and values of the person interviewed, author, the newspaper, or mainstream society at that time. This subject matter spans more than 80 years, and as such, living sources for some phases of study were limited or nonexistent. To properly re-create and understand the culture, community, and political economy throughout this period, historical documents provided rich (and much needed) evidence and data.

Archives were used to gather information concerning the history of numbers gambling in Detroit, as well as numbers gambling's organizational structure and business practices. These sources also provided information concerning numbers gambling communities. Archival resources also provided a legal, political, religious, and community viewpoint concerning numbers gambling. Court records from Detroit's Records Court, Wayne County's 3rd Circuit Court, Michigan Court of Appeals, Michigan State Supreme Court and U.S. District Court were used<sup>2</sup>. A number of newspapers were used as well. These papers, stored on microfilm and available at Wayne State University and the Detroit Public Library, included the Detroit Free Press, Detroit News, Detroit Tribune, and Michigan Chronicle.<sup>3</sup> The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs located at the Walter Reuther Library, Detroit Public Library's Burton Historical Collection, and the Bentley Historical Library were used throughout the study.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These records were accessed via Lexis Nexis Academic and Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER). Lexis Nexis Academic provides access to over 10,000 news, business, and legal sources from 1980 to the present. PACER is an electronic public access service provided by the federal Judiciary that allows the public access to case and docket information from federal appellate, district and bankruptcy courts. Its purpose is to provide public access to court information via a centralized Internet service. In addition, historic court records for Detroit (covering 1929 to 1941) stored at the Archives of Michigan were used.

<sup>3</sup> Other newspapers used were accessed via Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>4</sup> These collections contain oral histories and interviews as well as data concerning Detroit's political and economic history.

Life narratives were used because they are a powerful method used to interpret, understand, and convey experience (Mattingly 1998:25). The construction of narratives allows a person to make sense or meaning out of experiences in their recounting. Narratives are an excellent method for informants to express their point of view. Three key informants with direct experience with numbers gambling were interviewed through a life history approach. All were black and had ties to numbers gambling in Detroit. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews took place on a weekly basis over a one-year period. The key informants had intimate knowledge concerning numbers gambling. Two informants were related to numbers operators, and one informant was a former numbers operator and runner who organized, owned and operated numbers gambling establishments. I identified the key informants through preliminary research and fieldwork planning activities.<sup>5</sup> A life history approach allowed informants to discuss past conditions and change over time, which in turn provided insights into the values and beliefs that helped to tie numbers gambling to communities and vice versa. The key informants ranged in age from 50 to 90 years of age. The collective memory of this age group covered the period of time from 1930 to 2000. I used semi-structured interviews with open-ended responses to further inquire of these three key informants concerning their life experiences with numbers gambling in Detroit. The open-ended question and response format was used to allow the informants to respond to the topics raised on their own terms (Bernard 2006:211).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I asked family, friends, and neighbors if they knew anyone who had knowledge of numbers gambling, and in turn asked them to ask their family, friends, and neighbors. As a result of this, I was able to identify two key informants. While doing research on numbers gambling on-line I found the third informant who was soliciting information concerning the same topic.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews took place telephonically, and in public places after the informants granted consent. Weekly interviews were approximately one hour in duration, and some interviews were recorded with the consent of informants. Due to time constraints one key informant provided written answers to posed questions after the initial interview. All data collected concerning the identity of informants was confidential. In order to maintain confidentiality and privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to key informants. Topics covered

In addition to the three key informants, five other adult informants were interviewed over a 12-month period. These participants, three women and two men, were black Detroit residents who at one time lived and played the numbers in the targeted research area. The participants ranged in age from 52 to 80. The purpose of including these informants was to provide information on how and why they participated in numbers gambling. These informants also told what numbers gambling meant to them, as well as, to the communities they lived. I asked these participants to describe what strategies they used in playing the numbers.<sup>7</sup>

### Plan for Analysis

The collected data and recorded interviews were coded and organized into broad conceptual categories. Once data was gathered it was described, analyzed and interpreted. Ethnographic content analysis was used to analyze data in order to understand what numbers gambling in Detroit meant to the community. Ethnographic content analysis:

...consists of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid. Although categories and “variables” initially guide the study, others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study. Thus ECA is embedded in constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (Altheide 1987:68).

Data were drawn from interviews, some of which were recorded and transcribed, and from non-recorded interviews. Detailed notes were taken from the non-recorded interviews. At the conclusion of these interviews, I went over my notes with the informants in order to ensure

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included: numbers gambling, playing the numbers, Detroit communities and neighborhoods, history of Detroit, kinship, class, race, politics, the auto industry, religion, the state lottery, luck, chance, dreams, the meaning of numbers, and the American Dream.

<sup>7</sup> These informants were interviewed initially for one hour via a semi-structured interview format. Interviews took place telephonically, and in the informants' homes after the informants gave consent. Some interviews were recorded with the consent of informants. All data collected concerning the identity of informants was kept confidential. Again, in order to do so, I assigned each informant a pseudonym.

quotes and information was accurately captured. In addition, one key informant chose to write the answers to some questions. Once the qualitative data from the interviews and archival sources were analyzed, it was then coded for patterns, and themes. Reoccurring themes and patterns concerning social change, unity and community, conflict, power and pride, and chance and fate was organized and interpreted. An interpretation of the data was conducted to ascertain how and why numbers gambling (as an economic activity) operated to bond and unify Detroit communities.

The first aim was to describe the history and formation of numbers gambling in Detroit neighborhoods. When analyzing data for this aim, data were used to provide an accurate description of numbers gambling organizations in Detroit neighborhoods. This description includes information concerning location, make-up of organization, function of, daily routines, and history. The purpose for analyzing data in the first aim was to also determine if Detroit's numbers gambling operations were similar to previous studies (which described the organization, function, and purpose). Data for the second aim were collected and organized and used to determine why and how numbers gambling as a form of economic exchange bonded and solidified neighborhoods in Detroit. The goal was to explore both the economic and social function of numbers gambling. Data from the third aim determined why and how individuals played the numbers in Detroit. The data was used to explore what motivated people to play the numbers and what strategies they used (including luck, dreams, religion, etc.) in playing the numbers.

Finally, when writing and organizing my dissertation, I chose to deviate from the traditional format. Instead of having longer chapters with subsections, I instead used shorter



thematic chapters with the goal of presenting a variety of diverse topics which are interlinked and necessary to fully explore numbers gambling in Detroit.

## **CHAPTER 2 “FIRST THERE WAS THE LOTTERY”**

A lottery has been defined as “...any prize contest based entirely on chance, and which requires entrants to pay a fee or buy something to take part” (Sullivan 1972:3). Lotteries have been around since antiquity, and played a major role in the development of America. In England, lottery tickets were sold as a way to fund the first American colonies (Sullivan 1972:5-6). Early American colonists took direction from the British and used lotteries as a source of revenue as early as 1719. Lotteries were a financial source used by the colonies to build schools, colleges, churches, bridges, and roads, and funded the American Revolution (Ezell 1960:13-62). Lotteries were a popular source to raise revenue because they were an alternative to taxes, did not require large amounts of capital to run, and were a way to raise large sums of cash quickly. Lotteries at this time were generally accepted and popular, and by 1790, “were so strongly entrenched in the economy and habits of the American people that even if there had been strong oppositions, state legislatures only reluctantly would have considered abolishing the schemes” (Ezell 1960:81). By 1790, there were approximately two thousand legal lotteries in the United States, and legislators throughout the country were authorizing the use of a lottery for one reason or another (Asbury 1938:76-77). By 1833, it was estimated that \$67 million in lottery tickets were sold in at least eight states. This figure was five times the federal government’s budget at the time (Schwartz 2006:149). Although all levels of government used the lottery to assist in the financing of a number of public projects, there were also a number of privately run lotteries whose purpose was for personal gain and in some cases charity (Schwartz 2006:149).

As the lottery business grew, the need for people to run these lotteries grew as well. A number of enterprising individuals would become ticket brokers, lottery contractors, lottery managers and promoters. Ticket brokers would buy lottery tickets at a discount rate and then

resell them at a profit at their own lottery shops or through the mail. Lottery contactors would set up branches throughout the country in order to represent various lottery companies. To increase lottery sales, promoters would send out handbills and place advertisements in newspapers throughout the country. Lottery tickets were not affordable to all, and this opened the door for some brokers to sell a ticket to a number of people in fractions. This practice of selling tickets in shares allowed for poor people to be able to play (Schwartz 2006:148).

The participants who won lotteries used their winnings for a number of ventures. For some, lottery winnings meant instant wealth, but for others it meant life and freedom. Denmark Vesey, a slave, in 1800 won a lottery prize in the amount of \$1,500 (Schwartz 2006:149). With his winnings, Vesey purchased his freedom from his master and opened a carpentry shop. Vesey crusaded against slavery, and would later enlist over nine thousand slaves and free blacks in a failed insurrection. Schwartz posits that Vesey's story demonstrates how the lottery leveled the playing field between the "haves and have nots." According to Schwartz, "The Denmark Vesey story illustrates the social upheaval inherent in lotteries: The poor and powerless might, through a stroke of luck, gain a fortune" (Schwartz 2006:150). This flew in the face of the conventional Protestant work ethic, which stressed the importance of hard work to achieve success. However this did not matter to, "...economic outsiders, like African-American city dwellers and poor immigrant women – who bought policy slips and continued to gamble on the possibility that the market economy was no more rational, no more just, than the random numbers of a lottery drawing" (Fabian 1990:107).

While many lotteries were legitimate, fraudulent activity became increasingly widespread in the 1820s. It was not uncommon for agents and lottery managers to elicit large fees rendering the profits for winners to be small to nonexistent. Some unscrupulous agents and managers

would advertise lotteries, which did not exist, and then flee the area with all money garnered from ticket sells (Schwartz 2006:148). As a result of the frauds plaguing the masses, a number of newspapers warned against the evils of the lottery. The Detroit Free Press on March 8, 1832, reported that the lottery was like a “mirage of the desert”, which deceived the poor and the rich with promises of riches. The article warned of the “evils” of this form of gambling, and forewarned the reader of the perils of trying to get something for nothing. The article warned citizens to avoid avarice, advised against using the lottery as a “miserable plan of finance”, and foretold of the need to “eradicate this cancer from the bosom of the state” (Detroit Free Press 1832:2). Even when the poor worked hard, the newspapers told of how they still became victims of the lottery. On September 5, 1855, the Detroit Daily Free Press in an article entitled, “A Story and a Warning,” told readers of a hardworking man, “a poor but industrious mechanic” out of New Orleans who labored for years to purchase a home for his family. According to the article, the man would each Saturday night give his wife his weekly salary to put away for the purchase of the family home. After a few months, the man believed he had accumulated at least a “couple thousand dollars” for which he wanted to purchase a piece of property at a bargain rate. When he attempted to retrieve his hard earned earnings from his wife, he learned she had “wasted all his hard earnings in the purchase of Havana Lottery tickets!” Upon hearing this, the hard-working husband broke out in a maniacal laugh, left his wife and children, and committed suicide (Detroit Daily Free Press 1855:2). A few years later, the paper reported how one man, who won \$15,000 from the lottery, went on a spending spree, lost his money and then died. In the same article, the paper also told of another young man who won \$1500 and then went “crazy in consequence” (Detroit Daily Free Press 1857:2).

In the 1840s and 1850s reporters in the northern papers described gambling by African-American men and women. They were particularly struck by their

passion for policy. Policy play allowed side bets on official lotteries, but it continued as “numbers’ long after most nineteenth-century lotteries had closed. White writers looked with wonder and disquiet at the superstitions and dreams that informed policy play and worried that simple play revealed dangerous ways of thinking. Policy players, trapped in irrational superstitions, could never be turned into the good citizens needed to run an economy of rational profit seekers. Reformers argued that policy play offered no real hope of a return, and they tried to explain that the folly of players meant great profits for the criminal businessmen who had organized the numbers racket in northern cities. Reformers exposed the ways policy financed organized crime out of the minute speculations of the very poor, but they phrased their appeals to policy players through a rational common sense the poor who continued to play policy did not, by definition, possess. The dreams and superstitions of policy players, however, continued to offer a distinct commentary on capitalist economics (Fabian 1990:8-9).

In addition to selling lottery tickets, some lottery agents offered insurance or a “policy.”

One of the most lucrative phases of the agent’s business and the source of one of the most severe complaints against the lottery came from “insurance.” No new phenomenon, it became widespread with the facilities provided by the many brokers. Benjamin Franklin recorded evidence of an earlier form when in his lottery of 1748 certain persons agreed, for a premium of 20 per cent, to make up any deficiency between the prize and the chance’s cost...By the nineteenth century “insurance” or policy was widely practiced by those not having the price of a chance. Before development of the ternary combination system of lotteries, the physical act of drawing out the tickets consumed weeks and even months, depending on how many were drawn each day. On each day of drawing a certain portion of the lots were taken from the wheel, and any person could bet that a particular number would be drawn the next day, according to a ratio of increasing odds. If his guess, usually based on a dream or some omen, were correct, he did not receive a “prize” or “blank” but the amount for which it was “insured”; otherwise, he lost his bet (Ezell 1960:95).

States across America began to tire of lotteries and began to ban them. When a state declared a lottery illegal, a policy shop would open in place of the closed lottery shop. These policy shops no longer sold policy insurance, but allowed clients to bet on individual lottery numbers that were held in other states. In the 1830s, the winning lottery numbers were based on the drawings of the New Jersey Lottery; however, when this lottery was banned in the 1840s, the winning numbers were based on the drawings from the Kentucky Literature Lottery (Asbury 1938:91-92).

Policy, like lottery had a reputation of being a bane on society. It was reported in 1858 that policy was dependent on the lottery business and generated about \$10,000 daily. “The policy tickets vary in price from one cent to one hundred dollars, and find customers mostly among the poor, ignorant, and superstitious part, of our population. With the downfall of lotteries, the policy business must cease to exist” (Detroit Free Press 1858:1). Although both the rich and poor gambled, it was the poor who suffered harsh criticism for participating. “What was for the poor a dangerous vice was for the prosperous the cultivation of the uncertainties (or of the conspicuous waste) that assured humanity would continue to evolve in the future” (Fabian 1990:151). By 1858, all state sanctioned lotteries in the United States were located in the south because northern states had outlawed them (Schwartz 2006:150). Although the lotteries were located in the south, roughly three quarters of their profits came from the sale of tickets in the northern part of the country. It was estimated that one lottery spent more than \$200,000 annually on advertisement, and sold more than \$200,000,000 in tickets. At this time it was estimated that the lotteries sold about \$800,000,000 in tickets yearly, but only paid out \$10,000,000 in prizes (Detroit Free Press 1858:1).



Office of Tho<sup>s</sup> Boult & Co.  
 GENERAL LOTTERY AGENTS  
 Licensed by the United States Government  
 NEW YORK.

Dear Sir

From what we can learn of Public Sentiment in your State, we are satisfied that there is among your People, a strong prejudice against dealing in Lotteries and feeling that this want of Confidence, cannot be removed, until some person draws a good Prize, who will make it known, we offer you the chance of a Handsome Prize in a Certificate of a Package of Sixteenths of Tickets in the Grand Havana Plan Lottery to be drawn (under the Management of J. E. Simmons & Co.) on the 30<sup>th</sup> day of June, 1865 (see enclosed grand scheme) these Legal and well known Lotteries are drawn by the Authority of the Legislature of Kentucky, under the superintendance of sworn and responsible Lottery Commissioners, we mention this fact to convince you, that no deception lies concealed under this communication; now as our object is to increase our business among your Citizens; by putting you in the possession of a Handsome Prize; we offer you the above described Certificate with however this understanding that after we send you the money it draws, you are to inform your friends and acquaintances that you have drawn a Prize at our Office, if you will do that we will truly bind ourselves; that if the Certificate does not draw you net \$6,000 we will send you another Certificate in one of our Ever Lucky Extra Lotteries for nothing you perceive that you now have an opportunity to acquire a Handsome Prize; that may never again present itself; Improves it before it is too late, by sending your Order immediately, as we shall have to pay the Managers of the Lotteries for the Certificate you must send \$10 in your letter to us the Price of the Certificate; All prizes drawn at our Agency are promptly paid at our Office in New York City; by draft or otherwise as the purchaser may direct; send us \$10 by return mail and give us the name of your nearest Bank so that there may be no delay in forwarding you a Draft as soon as the drawing is over. To facilitate the prompt execution of our proposal use the enclosed envelope and make your remittance to our Office in New York be careful to write in a plain hand your Post office, County and State. Wafer or Seal your letter so that it will not come open in the Mails Please consider this letter Strictly Private and Confidential, and send your order without delay

Very Sincerely

Thomas Boult & Co.

## HAVANA SCHEME.

### Shelby College Lottery of the State of Kentucky.

THOS. BOULT & CO., United States Licensed Lottery Agents.

CLASS 310,  
To be drawn in Covington, Ky., on Friday, June 30th, 1835.

### SCHEME.

1	Prize of....	<b>\$40,000</b>	is.....	<b>\$40,000</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>20,000</b>	is.....	<b>20,000</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>10,000</b>	} are.....	<b>20,000</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>10,000</b>		<b>20,000</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>7,375</b>	} are.....	<b>14,750</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>7,375</b>		<b>14,750</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>5,000</b>	} are.....	<b>20,000</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>5,000</b>		<b>20,000</b>
1	Prize of.....	<b>5,000</b>		<b>20,000</b>
4	Prizes of.....	<b>3,000</b>	are.....	<b>12,000</b>
11	Prizes of....	<b>2,000</b>	are.....	<b>22,000</b>
25	Prizes of.....	<b>1,000</b>	are.....	<b>25,000</b>
50	Prizes of.....	<b>500</b>	are.....	<b>25,000</b>
100	Prizes of.....	<b>200</b>	are.....	<b>20,000</b>
5,000	Prizes of.....	<b>20</b>	are.....	<b>100,000</b>
<b>5,200</b>	Prizes.....	amounting to.....		<b>\$318,750</b>

**PLAN OF THE LOTTERY.**—The numbers from 1 to 50000, corresponding with the numbers on the tickets, printed on separate slips of paper, are rolled up and encircled with small brass tubes, and placed in a Glass Wheel. The amounts of the different 200 full Prizes, similarly printed and encircled, are placed in another wheel. The number and prize drawn out are opened and exhibited to the audience, and registered by the Commissioners, the prize being placed against the number drawn. This operation is repeated until all the prizes are drawn out.

The 5000 prizes of \$20 each are determined by the last figure of the number which draws the highest Capital Prize, (\$40,000.) For example:—If the number drawing the \$40,000 prize ends with figure 1, then those 5000 tickets having numbers ending in figure 1 will be entitled to \$20. If the number ends with figure 2, then those tickets where the number ends in figure 2 will be entitled to \$20, and so on to figure 0.

**PACKAGES 10 DOLLARS.**

**Prizes payable in full without deduction.**

Remittances to T. Boulton & Co. can be made by mail with perfect safety; but if any person desires additional security, they can send a draft duly certified, (none others will be noticed) payable to our order—or have their letters registered, which will be equivalent to a positive and safe delivery to us.

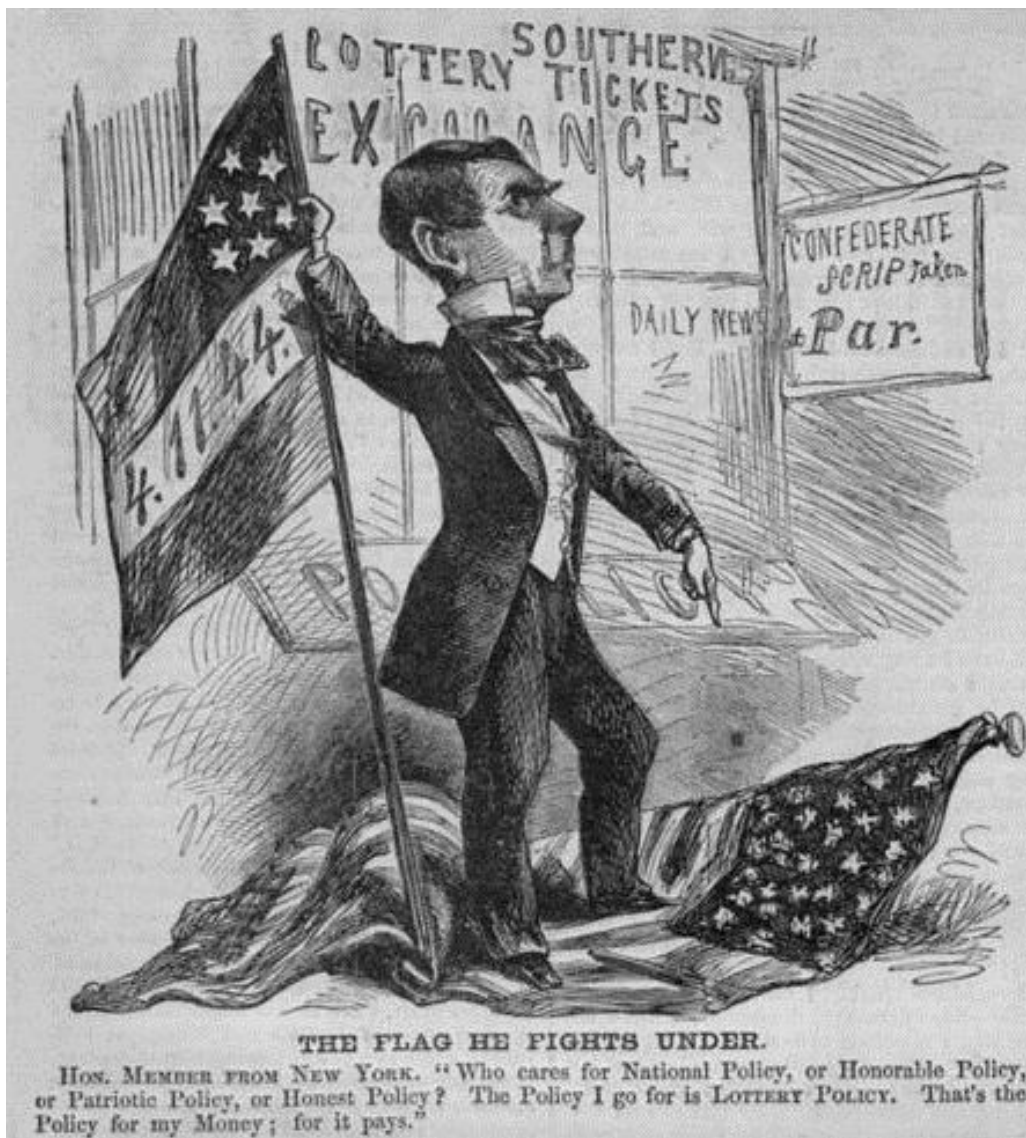
Prizes in all legalized Lotteries promptly cashed, and information given by addressing

**THOS. BOULT & CO., Box 5713 P O. New York City.**

The above is a typical letter (front and back) soliciting the participation in a lottery on June 30, 1865. The author of the letter knows that the people sentiments are against lotteries, but is urging the recipient of the letter to play so that they may win and show that lotteries are in fact beneficial.

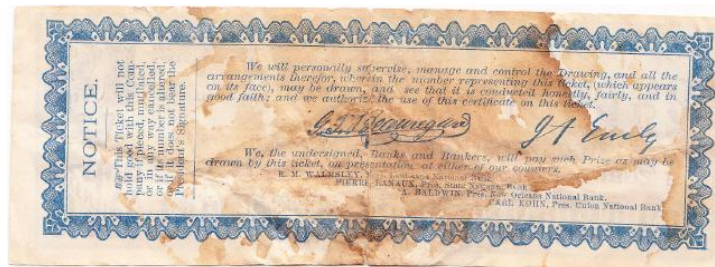
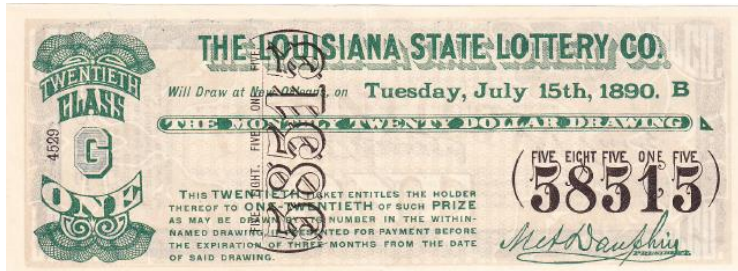


By 1860, the lottery's acceptability had waned for many Americans. John Ezell attributed this change in attitude to the shifting culture and values of Americans. Some Americans at this time were several generations removed from their native countries, and had established their own belief systems. These "new" individual-centered Americans believed in the principles of hard work, and the lottery (with its something for nothing logic) did not fit into this belief system.



On August 31, 1861, *Harper's Weekly* featured the above cartoon depicting New York Daily News editor Benjamin Wood, a Democratic congressman. The Civil War had just begun when the New York Daily News was charged with giving aid to the Confederacy. Wood operated a profitable lottery that sold tickets throughout the south. It was believed he was anti-war because of this.

In 1868, the federal government made illegal the sale of lottery tickets by mail, and by 1878 (with the exception of Louisiana) all states outlawed lotteries (Brenner & Brenner 2008:141). The Louisiana lottery continued to operate until 1893 when its charter expired, but policy continued to flourish throughout various states as an illegal activity.



Two (front and back) typical Louisiana State Lottery tickets scheduled to be drawn in New Orleans from 1890 and 1892. For one dollar, if drawn, the holder of the ticket would have been entitled to 1/20<sup>th</sup> of the prize.

The lottery in the United States during its early stages, acted as a means to fund public projects and charities, and then morphed into big business for massive profits. To increase profits and lottery play, ways were devised to allow the poor to play. As the poor, blacks, and immigrants gained the ability to partake, criticism was voiced and reflected in newspaper accounts. The poor were criticized for attempting to get something for nothing, and lottery was deemed an evil. Players were continually ostracized for being superstitious, ignorant, and for playing an irrational game. However for the poor, blacks, and immigrants, who were already denied opportunities in the market economy, lottery was no more an irrational option than working hard for nothing. Even when newspapers reported that a poor person had managed to win, their fate was usually disastrous. Either they died or went crazy. The message was clear, winning the lottery, or getting something without the benefit of hard work, resulted in punishment for this wickedness. After all, the notion that someone undeserving could be rewarded unjustly without the benefit of hard work violated the rules of meritocracy. Chapter three will take a closer look at how policy, an offspring of the lottery, developed in Detroit, and how it was used to define and portray blacks as a public evil.

### CHAPTER 3 “POLICY PLAYING COMES TO DETROIT”

Detroit’s population in 1880 was 116,340, which made it the 18<sup>th</sup> largest city in the United States. Detroit’s natural resources and location as a port within the Great Lakes made it a significant trading center. During this time Detroit was not yet an industrial giant, but it was beginning its ascent to becoming a major industrial city. In 1880, the city was made up mostly of whites (comprised of native born Americans and established immigrants from Canada, England, Ireland, and Germany). Only a small portion of blacks made up the city’s population (Zunz 1982:33). In fact, there were only 2,821 blacks in Detroit as compared to 113,519 non-black residents (Tenth Census 1880:420). Most blacks were located on the near east side of the city living with whites of all nationalities. Although blacks lived among whites, social interactions were limited. This area of the city housed mainly poor people and was considered crowded with a number of dilapidated buildings and “alley houses.” Alley houses were former sheds and stables that were erected in the alleys, which were created to remove ashes, trash, sewage, and to provide access to stables (Katzman 1973:69-74).

It was during these times and conditions that the Detroit Free Press reported one of the first accounts of policy playing in Detroit on December 3, 1880. In this article, a reporter who overheard a conversation between “a fresh young gentleman” and a “wisely gentleman” described what he learned while walking home at midnight in Detroit. According to the author, gambling was being played (to include Keno, faro, poker and policy) openly in the city. The author learned that policy was being operated in 15 to 20 policy shops in the city by hundreds of passionate policy players. The wise gentleman explained that policy was a game that almost no one understood, and explained that the office for which the numbers were drawn was out of

Covington, Kentucky. The men who sold the policy tickets (policy writers) received a percentage of their sales and turned over their books to one person who sent the books to Covington.

At Covington the numbers from one to seventy-eight are put in a wheel, and twelve are drawn out at noon each day. These twelve numbers are telegraphed to the headquarters or main office in every city and are replaced in the wheel and at 6 o'clock another drawing takes place, when thirteen numbers are drawn and telegraphed as before. Now, if you desire to play policy, you enter one of the numerous shops and pay, say, \$2, which is the limit, for a 'gig.' A 'gig' is any combination of three numbers from one to seventy-eight. Say you take this combination: 3-7-11; If these three numbers come out in the twelve drawn at noon you will get \$400 for your \$2. If you have put up but \$1 for the 'gig' you get \$200; if fifty cents you get \$100, and so on down (Detroit Free Press 1880b:1).

Policy playing was described as the reason a married bookkeeper and father of one in Detroit embezzled money from his employer. The policy-playing bookkeeper admitted he had stolen the money from his employer and was later found guilty of his crime (Detroit Free Press 1884b:8). Five years later it was reported that a Detroit detective arrested a 65-year-old man for running a policy shop in the heart of the city. According to the detective, he paid three numbers to be drawn that evening for ten cents. When the man was arrested he questioned why other establishments were being allowed to operate unmolested in the city (Detroit Free Press 1889:4). It was reported that Americans had acquired a,

[...]mania for lottery speculation and particularly for policy playing...These forms of gaming are confined to neither sex, nor do they know the limitation of age, occupation or social rank. The official list of drawings is scanned with equal solicitude by the leaders of society and the outcasts of the slums; by the reckless young blood, who takes a flyer by day and leads the german at night and by the decrepted old negro, who risks his last dime upon 4-11-44; by the veteran and the school-boy, by the philosopher and the proletaire (Quinn 1890:186).

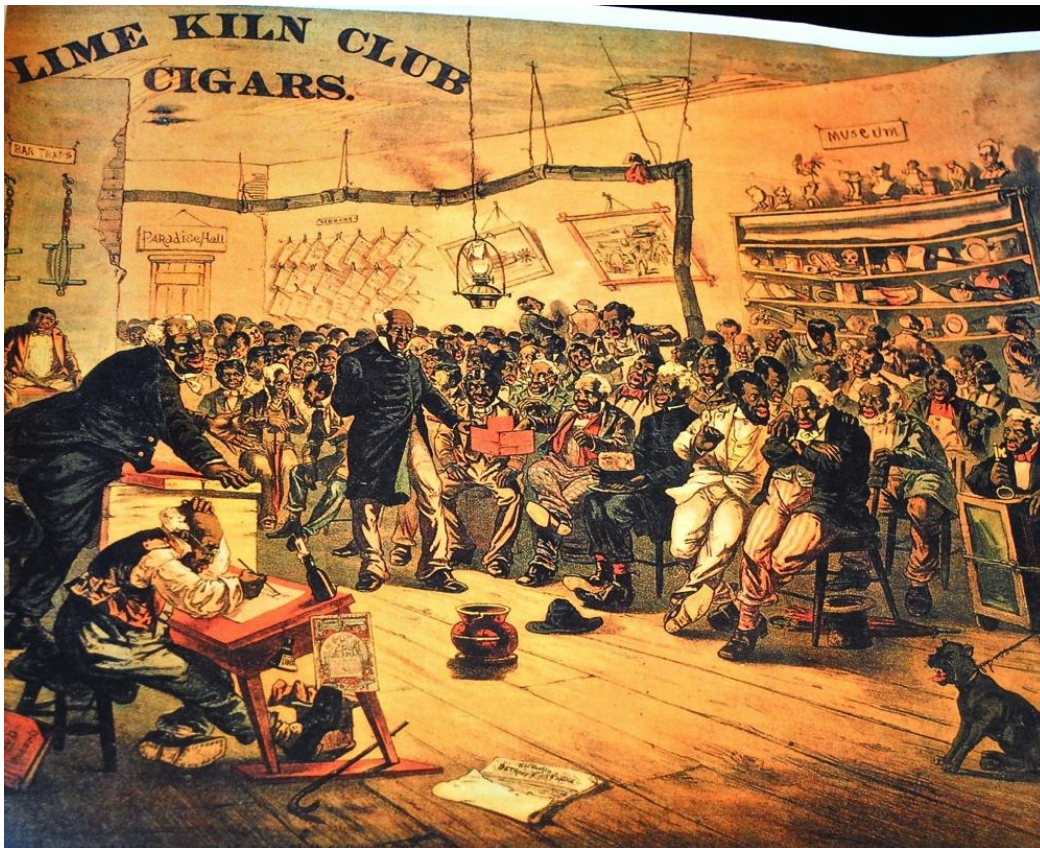
At this point policy playing was not linked to a race, and was played by all classes. However, Charles Bertrand Lewis and others would change the face of who played policy in Detroit. Lewis was a famed humorist who wrote for the Detroit Free Press under the pseudonym "M. Quad," and once was credited with making the Detroit Free Press "more generally quoted than

perhaps any other paper in America...” (Detroit Free Press 1895:13) At this time, the Detroit Free Press was a newspaper, which catered to Democrats. It frequently featured negative news stories about blacks in an attempt to appeal to the anti-black, white working-class (Kaplan 2002:43-47). Lewis wrote a series of weekly stories from the point of view of “Brother Gardner” which appeared throughout the United States. Brother Gardner was portrayed as an elderly philosophical “negro” who offered sage advice to readers in what was considered a “negro dialect” (Pound 1940:217). The character of Brother Gardner was described as

[...]a shrewd and quaint gentleman of color, who has all the idioms and characteristics of his race, but is not a burlesque of our colored fellow citizen; he handles his own people gently, but satirizes the foibles, frailties and weakness of the whites inimitably. His sayings might be termed explosive wisdom – the reader is sure to imbibe a wise thought, but it is certain to explode within him (Detroit Free Press 1886:12).

Lewis admitted in a New York Times article in 1912 that “Brother Gardner” and the associates of the Lime Kiln Club were characters loosely based on an “...old negro who used to frequent the market in Detroit with a dog and whitewash pail, looking for a job. That nigger, two other niggers, and the dog were the only real basis of the Lime Kiln Club.” (New York Times 1912:SM10) The Lime Kiln Club was a fictional club that was made up of “negroes” from across the country. Among its honorary members were 16 former judges, 12 captains, 24 colonels, 10 majors, seven generals, 22 elders, eight deacons, 13 reverends, and a number of other professional men. Although the club members were portrayed as being professional, Lewis had the men speak in rough “negro” dialect, and gave them names such as “Judge Holdback Johnson,” “Giveadam Jones,” and “Professor Tranquility Hanover.” This served to portray blacks as inferior and primitive. It ensured that whites viewed blacks negatively and as different from them. “The use of caricatured dialect is designed to heighten the distance of the narrator (and his reading audience) from the black speaker” (Kaplan 2002:44). In addition, Lewis

portrayed these professional men undertaking in stereotypical activities. For example, it was not unusual to find the members of the club eating watermelon, physically fighting among themselves, and drinking (Quad 1892:17). Numerous letters and people would arrive at the Detroit Free Press wanting to know the location of the Lime-Kiln Club. Lewis never confessed that the club and characters were fictitious, but instead would make excuses as to why people could not visit the club or meet the members. Lewis' Brother Gardner and the Lime-Kiln Club was so popular that Brother Gardner's name was as familiar as any household word. The popularity was due to Lewis' column appearing in 10,000 newspapers across the country (Detroit Free Press 1882d:13). Lewis would first pen a play about Brother Gardner and the Lime-Kiln Club in 1882, a book about the club's meetings in 1892, and later, Brother Gardner and the Lime-Kiln Club's image were used to sell tobacco and cigars.



Brother Gardner and the Lime-Kiln Club's stereotypical image used to sell cigars in the 1880s.



*The Lime Kiln Club,  
Brother Gardner in the Chair.*

"Dis Club hab eberv reason to be proud of de Stove Committee. We has tried all de other stove polishes. We has been stunk out wid so-called peperashuns and seen de piping rust to pieces, till de stove-pipe was a tumbled down disgrace to de good name of de Lime Kiln Club. De honah of dis occashun belongs to Brudder Shindig, who has made a name for hisself, by introducing Dixon's Big cake of Stove Polish, and has covered hisself wid shine. Stand up, Brudder Shindig, and let us gaze upon your countenance. Now, my frens, let us draw a lesson from dis: Seek and find out for yerselves, and when you's got a good ting stick to it, so dat, like DIXON'S STOVE POLISH, you may not only be a use to de community in which yer libes, but a shining example for de rest of mankind.

"De club owes a vote of thanks to de Stove Committee, an' to Brudder Shindig in particular, an' extend de heartfelt thanks of de Lime Kiln Club to DIXONS for de valuable addition to de comfits of dis life through their CARBURET OF IRON STOVE POLISH. Wid one drawback, Brudder Shindig—you orter haf found dis outen befo' for de DIXON'S STOVE POLISH has bin in de market SINCE 1827,—58 YEARS."

*(Signed)*

No.	No.
1. BRO. GARDNER,	7. ACCORDINGLY DAVIS,
2. OLD MAN JENKINS,	8. STEPOFF JOHNSON,
3. BRO. SHINDIG,	9. TRUSTEE PULLBACK,
4. STEPBACK SMITH,	10. SICKLES SMITH,
5. GIVE-A-DAM JONES,	11. SIR ISAAC WALFOLK,
6. SUNDOWN DAVIS,	12. LAVBACK JONES,

*Committee.*

**FIFTY-EIGHT YEARS IN MARKET!**

THE OLDEST, THE BEST, THE NEATEST, THE QUICKEST.

**DIXON'S STOVE POLISH**

ASK YOUR DEALER FOR  
JOS. DIXON CRUCIBLE CO., JERSEY CITY, N. J.

Brother Gardner and the Lime-Kiln Club's stereotypical image (front and back) used to sell stove polish circa 1886.



With a strong following in October of 1880, Lewis wrote a column whereby Brother Gardner admonished a member of the Lime-Kiln Club for frequenting a policy shop in the city. Brother Gardner admitted to the members of the club that he, like any other black man, in the country knew the workings of policy playing because he had heavily played.

Now, gem'len, I've bin right dar. In da y'ars gone by I knew as much about 'gigs,' 'saddles,' 'blinds' and 'straddles' as any black man in this kentry will eber get frew his wcol. I played high an' low. I played till I couldn't rest. I played out all de money I could airn or borry, an' I neber cum widin fo' hundred miles of makin' a strike. It's a mighty enticin' bizness. Put a black man in one eand of Michigan an' de policy shop in de odder an' de two would find each odder by de shortest route. Yet, as I said befo', it's a losin' game an' it's mean bizness (Detroit Free Press 1880a:9).

Lewis ensured that the minority black population of Detroit was signaled out for playing policy, and expressed the attitude that policy playing was a compulsion that black men could not resist. Since many people thought Brother Gardner and the Lime-Kiln Club were real, and thought the portrayal was not burlesque in nature, Lewis' column reinforced the notion that policy playing was a widespread "negro" activity and as such vilified it further. In other words, Lewis through his column created the stereotype and negative connotation that blacks compulsively played policy and this stereotype became a part of mainstream America's common belief system.

Ten policy shops in Detroit were closed on February 17, 1881 when managers out of Chicago came to the city and took away the books of the policy writers. The policy shops were closed based on orders from officials out of the Chicago headquarters due to "local pressure against gambling dens and immoral places" (Detroit Free Press 1881:1). A year later the Common Council of Detroit passed an ordinance in an attempt to put an end to policy playing. The ordinance made illegal "lottery, policy, bucket shop, board of trade, or any like scheme or place for drawing or disposing of money within the city..." and prohibited all lotteries "...for the drawing or disposing of money, or any other property whatsoever, and punish all persons

maintaining, directing or managing the same, or aiding in the maintenance, direction or management thereof” (Detroit Free Press 1883:1). Upon the passing of the city ordinance, five policy shops immediately ceased operations and the remaining ones were set to close the following day (Detroit Free Press 1882b:8). By May 21, 1882, 17 other policy shops were served orders to cease operations in the city of Detroit (Detroit Free Press 1882a:1). By the end of the year, the public was told how the “lowly, the vicious and the heathen” paid homage to policy in an article (Detroit Free Press 1882c:3). The author described going to a dark, smelly and filthy saloon occupied by a “short burly Negro” who served as a bartender, a cripple who played the fiddle, and a young man who was taking numbers for policy playing. The author, not being able to withstand the filth and smell of the saloon, ran from the establishment before he could place a bet or properly learn the game. The article ended by warning readers against the perils of policy playing. In this article, the author, who was probably white, due to the fact there is no record of any reporters being black at that time writing for the Detroit Free Press, made it a point to mention the race of the bartender of the saloon, but neglected to mention the race of the young man who was actually taking the policy bets, which leads one to believe the policy taker was not black.

On April 18, 1883, the Michigan Supreme Court rendered an opinion concerning the city’s ordinance. As part of its opinion the court noted that:

Lotteries generally involve large sums of money or large prizes of some kind, and circulate their tickets in large numbers and in all parts of the country. All classes and persons of all ages are tempted to invest in the chances of sudden riches, and it is matter of history that the passion for such investments has led to serious and widespread mischief. No other form of gambling operates so extensively in its dealings, or demoralizes so many people. It is this extensive reach and not merely its speculative purposes which makes lottery gambling so dangerous (Detroit Free Press 1883b:1).

In a continued effort to prevent people from playing policy, Detroit newspapers carried dozens of articles that told of the irrationality and disaster derived from playing policy. One article described the ignorance of a policy player who could not grasp the concept that it took him \$1,500 to win \$300 (Detroit Free Press 1883a:13). In 1884, an unknown man called “Mr. Merryweather” allegedly gave a Detroit Free Press reporter an interview. According to the reporter, Mr. Merryweather an expert on policy who played daily had recently won \$50 when he played the numbers, 56-22-44 for a mere twenty-five cents. Mr. Merryweather advised the reporter that, “There’s very few coons in Detroit that don’t play policy, I’m tellin’ you, and then again there’s as many white folks into it as coons.” Mr. Merryweather then went on to tell of two people who hit the numbers for large sums of money, and of a woman who missed out on her riches when she neglected to play the numbers from her dream. Mr. Merryweather felt that policy was “the best honesty if you win...” (Detroit Free Press 1884a:17). However, a few weeks later, Mr. Merryweather changed his tune and warned readers to be leery of policy shops. “The fellers that runs dem gits twenty percent of all they git out of the suckers. They have ropers-in all ‘round town and you can’t hardly strike a saloon in some parts of the city that don’t write up policy books.” Mr. Merryweather further warned readers that

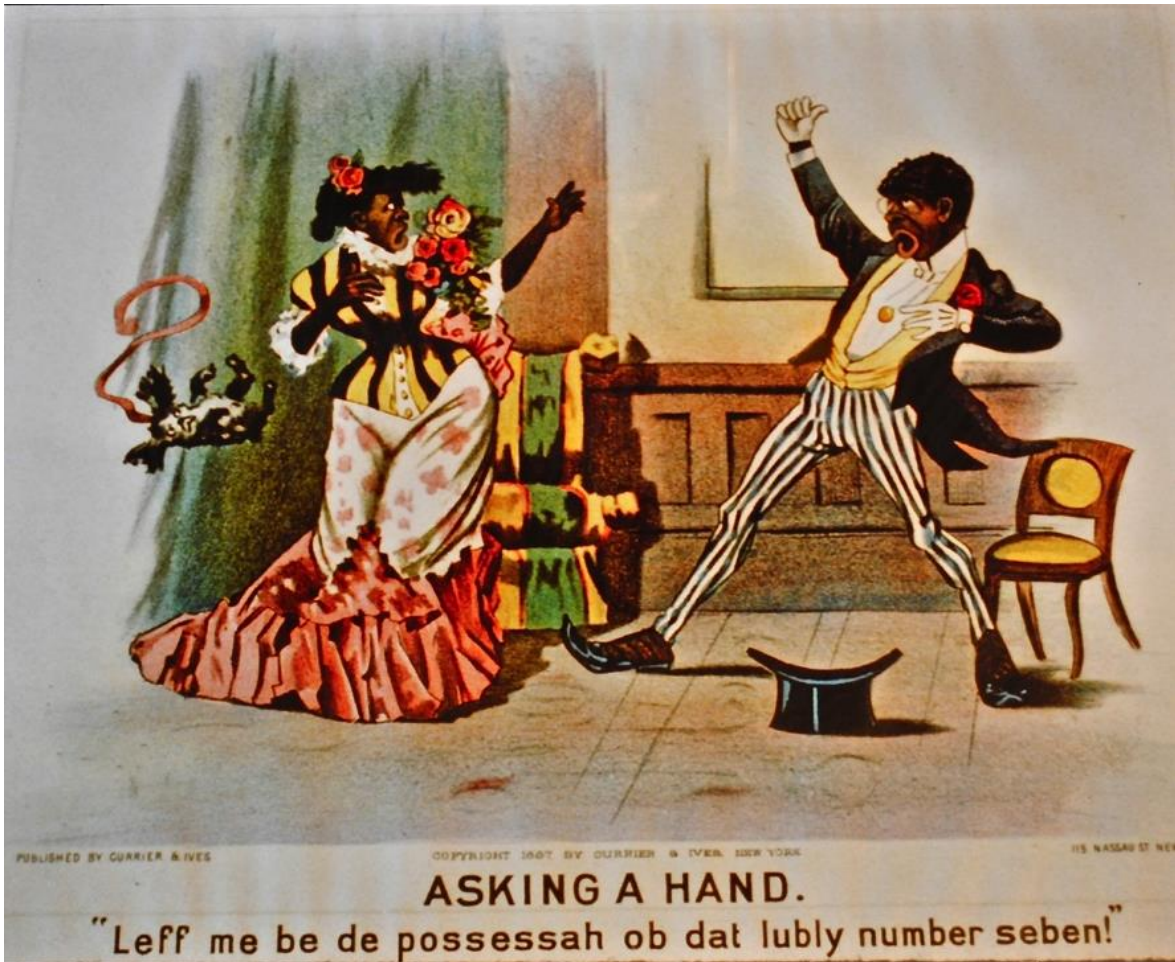
[...]the feller that plays it generally gits left. If he makes a strike once he’s certain to go in heavier and in the end he’ll be beat, sure’s your bawn...No, sir, don’t you tackle policy, if you know when you’re well off; ‘n’ if you’ve got any boys a growin’ up tell ‘em to learn the burglar’s trade b’fore goin’ into policy. The feller in State’s prison’s better off than the feller that’s once gone on policy (Detroit Free Press 1884c:23).

In spite of reports that indicated both blacks and whites played policy, three years later, the Detroit Free Press was reporting that policy playing at the 160 policy shops in the city was “...one of the greatest hindrances to the prosperity of the colored people. When once infatuated with policy, as many of the colored people are, it readily relieves them of all their spare change”

(Detroit Free Press 1887:5). This report was made a few years prior to the 1890 census, which disclosed that blacks accounted for only 3,431 of the city's 205,876 residents (U.S. Census 1890:464). On April 19, 1892, it was reported that at least 15 policy shops existed in the city, and at least 25 subagents made their living from the sale of policy numbers. Policy players at this time were able to buy their numbers directly from subagents or from saloons, pawnshops, barbershops, and small stores. According to this article,


Nine-tenths of the patrons of "policy" in this city as well as in all cities in the country are colored people-barbers, waiters, roustabouts, servant girls, washerwomen and whitewashes-who, earning from \$4 to \$15 a week, devote at least one-fourth of their wages to "policy." Their purchases of numbers are chiefly in fifteen or twenty cent investments and when they fail to win, their first thought is as to what combinations they shall play next. They waste no time in regrets and one failure or fifty failures do not rob the game of its fascination. When they win they do not lose their heads and spend the winnings in idleness and dissipation but renew their dream-book and omen studies buying numbers more frequently and for larger amounts of cash, until their prize returns from whence it came-to the lottery company (Detroit Free Press 1892:8).

A city official who was credited with investigating policy playing indicated that over \$200 worth of policy tickets were bought daily in Detroit by about 500 regular policy playing "fiends" (Detroit Free Press 1892:8). The numbers given by the newspaper and the city official are questionable. At no point does either tell how they derived their figures. These depictions of blacks by the Detroit Free Press and the police came at a time when the reported incidents of discrimination against black citizens increased considerably in the city (Katz 1973:93).



Stereotypical image of blacks being portrayed as illiterate, superstitious policy players in 1887.

Americans had such a taste for games of chance that some businesses took advantage of the opportunity to increase their revenue with its lure. In 1901, the American Bee Journal offered anyone who subscribed to their magazine a chance to win \$15,000 by simply guessing the numbers of votes that would be cast in Ohio, Iowa, and Massachusetts in November of 1901.

No **44407**  
 SERIES O.  
**PRIZES**  
  
 Estimated Vote  
1897435

This Certifies that the holder of this certificate has deposited with the PRESS PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION, of Detroit, Michigan, an estimate of the total aggregate vote of the States of Ohio, Massachusetts and Iowa cast for Governor on the 5th day of November 1901, and is therefore entitled to participate in the distribution of \$15,000, to be awarded by said Association in 1000 Cash prizes to successful estimators.

The official certificate of the Secretaries of the States named will determine who are the successful estimators and the holders of certificates entitled to prizes will be announced within 30 days after the result has been ascertained.

The parties holding such certificates will receive payment by presenting same to the Press Publishing Association at Detroit, Mich., or through any bank in the United States or Canada within 60 days hereafter.

THE NUMBER, ESTIMATED VOTE, DATE, AND CONDITIONS STATED IN THE DETACHED COUPON MUST CORRESPOND WITH AND APPLY TO THIS CERTIFICATE.

Date 1901. PRESS PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION, DETROIT, MICH.

**A FORTUNE FOR AN ESTIMATE.**  
 \$15,000 given away in 1000 cash prizes to those making the nearest correct estimates on the total aggregate vote cast for Governor in the States of Ohio, Massachusetts and Iowa on the 5th day of November 1901.

To the nearest correct estimate	\$5,000.00
To the 2nd	2,000.00
To the 3rd	1,000.00
To the 4th	800.00
To the 5th	600.00
To the 6th	500.00
To the 7th	400.00
To the 8th	300.00
To the 9th	200.00
To the 10th	150.00
To the next 10 nearest	\$15 each—150.00
To the next 30 nearest	\$10 each—300.00
To the next 142 nearest	\$5 each—710.00
To the next 180 nearest	\$4 each—720.00
To the next 196 nearest	\$3 each—588.00
To the next 200 nearest	\$2 each—400.00
To the next 200 nearest	\$1 each—200.00

Total, 997 prizes amounting to 12,000.00

In addition to the above Prizes, the following Special Prizes will be Paid.

To the person making the nearest correct estimate before July 10th.....\$1,000.00  
 To the person making the nearest correct estimate between July 10th and August 10th.....\$700.00  
 To the person making the nearest correct estimate between August 10th and September 10th.....\$500.00

Total 1000 prizes, amounting to \$18,000.00

In case of a tie, or that two or more estimators are equally correct, prizes will be divided equally between them.

**VALUABLE INFORMATION.**  
 The combined Official Vote in these three States in

1891 was	1,687,498	
1892 "	1,684,420	Increase 9.56 per cent
1893 "	1,618,422	decrease 4.04 "
1894 "	1,583,857	" 6.10 "
1895 "	1,676,452	Increase 2.71 "
1896 "	1,926,712	" 22.22 "
1897 "	1,572,109	decrease 8.40 "
1898 "	1,732,640	" 2.52 "
1899 "	1,673,803	Increase 7.33 "
1900 "	1,995,010	" 19.38 "

The contest will close Oct. 31st. The names and addresses of the successful estimators will be published in the papers using this offer.

**CERTIFICATE OF BANK PRESIDENT:**  
 I hereby certify, that the Press Publishing Association has deposited \$15,000 in the Central Savings Bank, Detroit, Mich., for the express purpose of paying the Prizes in their Contest on the Combined Official Vote of the States of Ohio, Massachusetts and Iowa, and that this fund can be used for no other purpose.

*W.A. Purge*  
 President Central Savings Bank,  
 Detroit, Mich.

Ticket (front and back) issued by Press Publishing Association in return for year's subscription of American Bee Journal. The owner of the ticket guessed 1,897,435 votes would be casted.

In 1902, Albert Adams, a white millionaire gambler out of New York was credited with controlling the Frankfort and Kentucky Policy Company (a \$3,000,000 year operation). His company was in existence for approximately forty years, and was operated in every major city in the United States (to include Detroit where forty to fifty policy shops were in operation in 1902). Adams was able to successfully run his policy shops because various high ranking politicians and the police allowed him to operate while preventing rival companies from setting up shop in Detroit (Detroit Free Press 1902a:1). The Detroit police, however, indicated that the police did not protect policy shops, and stated that:

About that policy game in Detroit? It is nothing but a negro's game, and I considered it not important enough to pay much attention to it. They are a sly lot, you know, and it is hard work to catch them with the 'goods.' They carry their policy plays and policy sheets in their hats, up their sleeves and make their play in a secret manner (Detroit Free Press 1902b:1&10).

The following day the Detroit Free Press would indicate that roughly 4,000 poor, ignorant, and superstitious people played policy. Twenty-two years after reports of policy playing appeared in the Detroit Free Press (when blacks only made up 2.4% of Detroit's population); blacks (who now numbered 4,111 residents in the 1900 census or 1.4% of the total population) were attributed with making up the majority of the 4,000 policy players in Detroit. If one were to believe the Detroit Free Press and the superintendent of Detroit's police department, virtually every black man, woman, and child played the "vilest" gambling game in the city: policy (Detroit Free Press 1902b:10). While the Detroit police department blamed blacks for being the majority of policy players in the city, the press accused the police department of protecting the policy houses in the city (Detroit Free Press 1902c:1). This was not unlike what Fabian noted, "The northern press had long singled out African Americans of both sexes as the particular

patrons of the lottery, although patrons were certainly numerous in many poor and immigrant communities” (Fabian 1990:136).

Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, more and more blacks migrated to the city. They came for a number of reasons including avoiding unfavorable economic conditions in the south, for better wages, jobs, for better housing, education, and anticipated improved social conditions. What they found however amounted to more of the same. Housing was hard to come by, and when it was found, the cost was astronomical (Haynes 1969:21). Due to the lack of housing, it was not uncommon to find blacks being forced to live in unconventional locations, including saloons, gambling places or “buffet flats,” defined as “a sort of high-class combination of a gambling parlor, a blind tiger and an apartment of prostitution” (Haynes 1969:21). These establishments were run in what were considered respectable private homes that catered especially to the youth and unsuspecting (Haynes 1969:21).

On April 2, 1903, the Detroit Free Press raised fears by reporting the taste for policy playing was now influencing the young. The paper warned that “Of all the forms of gambling policy is surely the worst....for it corrupts the young, and is especially demoralizing to girls” (Detroit Free Press 1903a:5). No reason was given as to why it was especially demoralizing for girls, but its tone would have struck fear in the religious, hardworking Detroiters. In July of 1908, the Detroit Free Press accused the “colored” population of Detroit of attempting to bring back policy, which had “practically been a dead letter for some time” (Detroit Free Press 1908b:12). Allegedly a “well dressed” colored man, who had an abundance of money, came into the city in the area of Gratiot and St. Antoine and tried to revitalize the game. The article indicated the colored man was only partially successful, due to the colored population being suspicious (Detroit Free Press 1908b:12). This accusation came at a time when it was reported



the “colored” population in Detroit had reached approximately 17,400 (Detroit Free Press 1908a:10). Policy’s reputation as an evil, whether fairly obtained or not, was already being linked to blacks in spite of the fact that one month later it was reported that a white counterfeiter was accused of running a policy game in Detroit on Hasting Street (Detroit Free Press 1908d:24). It would take another decade before blacks would successfully operate policy in Detroit.

This chapter focused on the first accounts of policy playing in Detroit. It described how a number of Detroiters were passionate about playing the game. In spite of this passion for the game, Detroit newspapers carried articles describing the evils of the game. Policy was blamed for causing other crimes to incur, and again the papers were used to warn against this vice. Fear mongering occurred. The public was told of policy’s attempts to corrupt the young and girls. What could be worse? This vile game corrupted the youth and instilled the wrong virtues (laziness, lack of self-control) in them. What would this mean for the future if a bunch of virtueless, non-deserving people, gained a fracture of success without hard work? At one point, it was even suggested it was better to be a burglar or locked in prison than to be a policy player. In other words, even in the pecking order of crime and criminals, none were lower than those who tried to get something for nothing, policy players. The year 1880 marked the beginning of the press painting numbers gambling as a black activity and attributing it to blacks in Detroit. The press’ portrayal of blacks was another form of discrimination that blacks were already facing in the city. Even before blacks made up a significant portion of the population, they were portrayed as the main people who played policy. To be black meant you played policy, and therefore were ignorant, superstitious, lowly, vicious, heathen, and vile. It was reported that once blacks were exposed to policy they had no self-control and lacked thriftiness. Even educated blacks were painted as ignorant out of control policy players. It is interesting to note

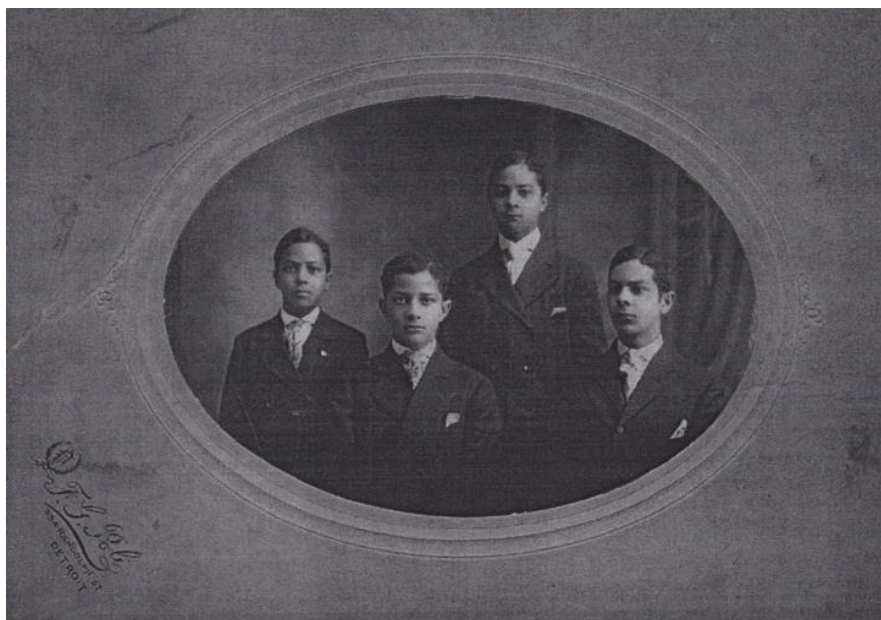
that even when blacks showed little interest in policy in 1908, their non-interest was attributed to them simply being “suspicious” of the “well-dressed” black man who was attempting to run the game. Their non-interest was not attributed to any positive virtue. The next chapter will explore why and how policy playing was brought to the black community by John Roxborough twelve years after the game seemingly disappeared from the city.

#### **CHAPTER 4 “MEET JOHN ROXBOROUGH, DETROIT’S FOUNDING FATHER OF NUMBERS”**

John Walter Roxborough was born February 21, 1892 in Plaquemine, Louisiana to Charles and Virginia Roxborough. His parents were of Scottish, Jamaican, Spanish, and Creole descent (Astor 1974:32). Charles Roxborough Sr. was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1860, and he and his family would later move to New Orleans. Charles Sr. was the only non-white in his high school, and was assaulted and stabbed by whites several times while at school (Williams Collection n.d.). In 1877, Charles Sr., considered a good student, was set to graduate, but was refused a diploma because he was black. Charles Sr. studied at Straight University and received his law degree in 1885, and opened a law office in Plaquemine, Louisiana. As time passed, Charles Sr. had to deal with a number of social and economic pressures because of his race, and moved his family to Detroit in 1895. Once in Detroit, Charles Sr. set up a law practice in 1899 (Michigan Chronicle 1975:1). John Roxborough recalled that his family moved into a mostly white, Polish neighborhood, where the Polish people treated his family well despite the fact he was black, and although at the time, he spoke mostly French and Spanish (Astor 1974:32). Charles Sr. later became involved in Republican politics, published and edited a four-page newspaper called the Republican Colored Independent, at aged 50 was a candidate for Michigan’s state legislature, and was considered to be part of the black bourgeois of the city. He died at age 54 in August of 1908, leaving a widow and four surviving sons (Detroit Free Press 1908c:5). The Roxborough brothers’ upbringing was one of privilege and their highly educated parents expected them to become educated as well.



Thomas, Charles & John Roxborough (date unknown)



Charles, John, Thomas, & Claude Roxborough as teenagers in Detroit (date unknown).

John's older brother, Charles, would follow in their father's footsteps and become first an attorney and then Michigan's first black state senator in 1930. John also began to follow in his father's footsteps to become an attorney, but after one semester at the Detroit College of Law, and one and one half years at the University of Detroit, he dropped out (Nunn and Washington 1935:A5). For one year while at Detroit College of Law, Roxborough played basketball for the college. During that time, one incident made a lasting impression on him concerning race inequality. Roxborough's college team played and practiced at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Each player was required to pay gym and locker fees, however Roxborough was banned by the executive secretary of the YMCA from using the gym and the locker room facilities because he was black. On another occasion Roxborough posed as a Native American in order to play in Anderson, Indiana (Cowan 1961:23). According to John Roxborough, college was not worth the exertion due to the ongoing social inequalities, which prevented educated blacks from obtaining employment in their fields of study. John Roxborough stated,

You'd ask for a job, tell them you were a college graduate, and they'd say, 'Oh yes, we have a porter's job for you.' To hell with education. What good would it do me? I made up my mind that when I got a chance to make money, no matter how, I'd take it. I would avoid embarrassing situations, like asking for a job when I was qualified. I also promised myself I'd help myself first then I'd help my black brothers (Astor 1974: 32-33).

Roxborough's attitude reflected the realities of the time. One study found that playing the numbers was one way that would allow blacks to accumulate a sizable fortune since, "Negro life has never afforded the economic basis for the development of a real black middle class" (Harris 1970:177). With this mindset, Roxborough was first employed as a clerk with the United States Post Office from 1912 to 1918, and as a clerk in the Wayne County Clerk's Office in 1918,

before becoming a bail bondsman (Nunn and Washington 1935:A5). While Roxborough was attempting to find his niche in life, he was no stranger to the black newspapers that followed the antics of the city's black elite. In 1917, Roxborough was good-naturedly described by the Chicago Defender as being a member of the gentry who had mastered the "art of elbow crooking" ("Tony Langston's Drama and Movie Review" 1917:4). In other words, Roxborough was an accomplished drinker of alcoholic beverages. During Prohibition in 1920, a reporter with the Chicago Defender noted that Roxborough, "the best hustler in Detroit, introduced us to a barrel of homeless brew that was a knockout; Johnny can always be relied upon to look after the strangers..." (Chicago Defender 1920:5). It is interesting to note that Roxborough's behavior was never classified as indecent or lowbrow, although the same behavior was looked down upon if committed by southern black men or women who were not considered to be a part of one of Detroit's elite black families. Although Roxborough's family was from Louisiana originally, his family had been in Detroit for 25 years and was considered to be part of Detroit's black elite because of his father's professional status and contribution to the community.

As Detroit grew into an industrial powerhouse in the 1920s, blacks and whites from the south continued to migrate into the city. Both groups came to better their lives. For many southern blacks, Detroit promised an opportunity to leave behind all memories of slavery. Some for the first time would be leaving the plantations where their families had previously been enslaved. Others were leaving these same plantations where they had tirelessly labored as sharecroppers. This past life was one of misery, where harsh treatment by whites and by the land they tended could be abandoned for the dream of a better future. Once these southern blacks arrived in Detroit, they found they had to contend with not only discrimination from white immigrants, but from southern whites who migrated with them and with whom they competed

for employment (Martin 1993:47). As blacks made their way into the city from the south, they were expected to adapt to mainstream values of the time by both whites and blacks. These universal middle class values of the time included being efficient, thrifty, sober, clean, industrious, and orderly (Levine 1976:86). Detroit's pre-existing black community, like whites, worried about the influx of "uncivilized" migrants. Detroit's black leaders felt that whites viewed all blacks the same, and the influx of migrant blacks' negative behaviors would be representative of all blacks. The fear was whites would assume all blacks were dirty, loud, and discourteous. Black leaders tried to remind whites "...the Black population of Detroit had been mainly families of a high grade, both in intelligence and well-being...self-respecting and respected for their intelligence and well-being. Some of them held responsible places in the commercial professions and community life of the city" (Martin 1993:5). In 1917, the Detroit Urban League formed the Dress Well Club. The purpose of the club was to improve race relations in Detroit between whites and blacks by educating southern blacks on the proper way to behave in public, and to decrease the increasing segregation in the city caused by "uncouth" blacks. In order to educate "uncouth" blacks, the Dress Well Club issued a brochure advising the "dos" and "don'ts" of proper public behavior for blacks. For example, the brochure advised black men not to crowd inside a street car while wearing dirty greasy overalls, not to loaf, avoid speaking loudly in public, maintain employment by being industrious, efficient, prompt and sober, be clean, go to church, keep your children in school, avoid buying on credit, and save money. The brochure went on to say that if you followed these rules you would get a better job, and help decrease prejudice and discrimination (Dress Well Club 1917). In spite of all these efforts, most whites treated all blacks in Detroit as a "single entity" (Martin 1993:5). As one black resident, Justine Rogers Wylie noted,

Here we were relegated to the oldest, shabbiest and most overcrowded parts of the city. We were excluded from most hotels, restaurants and other public places. This was a time when most of the teachers were white, most heroes were white and the fairy tale characters were white...The black middle class, the working poor and the unemployed all struggled to survive. But we were a remarkable people. It sometimes seemed that we could take the biblical seven loaves of bread and a few fish and feed the multitudes that were our nuclear and extended families (Wylie 2008:iv).

By the mid-1920s, in addition to poor housing, southern blacks had to deal with health issues brought on by filthy housing conditions, cold winters, and lack of immunizations for diseases such as smallpox. This all made for a hard existence for the newcomers (Martin 1993:41).

In spite of their hard existence, blacks felt their community was a city within a city. The people of the community were tied to each other not only by their race, but also religion, family, and the sense of community. People shared their homes with families and at times strangers in order to survive. This sharing of resources created a “communal spirit.” Family and communities were provided support for its members against racism and inequality found everywhere in Detroit. For blacks, “Hope prayers and determination were perhaps the only thing that black Americans had in abundance. With widespread poverty and the inability to fully experience the American dream, black entrepreneurs stepped up to the plate and took their place in Detroit’s business arena” (Wylie 2008:2-6).

During the 1920s, Detroit would gain its reputation for putting the world on wheels with the automobiles it manufactured. During the 1920 census there were 40,838 blacks in the city (out of 993,675). This number would grow to 120,066 blacks by 1930 (out of 1,586,662 Detroit residents) (U.S. Department of Commerce 1910-1970). Blacks were lured to come to Detroit shortly after World War I to address the shortage of manpower needed to run various factories in the city. Companies, in an effort to get the needed manpower, would import blacks from the south via train and busload (Detroit News 1935:15). As the number of blacks increased in the



city due to southern migration, criticism concerning their behavior increased as well. Blacks who were originally from Detroit continued to complain about the influx of the “southern negro.” These respectable “negroes” complained about having to contend with the “uncouth” southern hoodlums who disgraced the city. In an article from 1922, some of the original “cultured” blacks of Detroit were upset that race relations were deteriorating between them and the white citizens in the city. According to them, at one point black people were afforded every privilege, but due to the invasion of southern blacks those privileges had been revoked. The original black Detroiters, who were elitist, complained that they were being denied access to theaters, restaurants, and other public places because of the actions of the newly arrived disgracefully, loud, unrefined, and indecent black southern hoodlums. The “low-brows” from the south were blamed for the indecency in the city, which included prostitution, gambling, bootlegging, stabbings, and shootings. They were accused of cursing and using coarse language, and wearing indecent clothing. In the opinion of some of the refined black Christians, the “parasites should have been jailed and put in the workhouse...”(Chicago Defender 1922:1) These elite black Detroiters neglected to point out that more southern whites had migrated to the city than blacks. These southern whites brought with them their beliefs and values, of which included the attitude that segregation was just. It is possible that these attitudes impacted race relations more than the “uncouth” behavior of southern blacks. It was during this tumultuous time period that John Roxborough, who was from one of the original privileged black families of Detroit, would make his mark in Detroit by selling numbers to many, including “uncouth” blacks.

As a bail bondsman, Roxborough found that when someone was locked up and needed bail, they cared little what race the person was who could offer them freedom. It was as a bail

bondsman that John Roxborough would be introduced to ‘policy.’ According to him, one night he bailed out a Kansas City policy operator from jail. The policy operator offered Roxborough some advice that would change his life and financial status. The Kansas City policy operator told Roxborough of the riches that could be made in policy in Detroit due to the influx of blacks working at Ford Motor Company (Astor 1974:33). Based upon this advice, John Roxborough established the D&M Big Four policy house in a black eastside neighborhood in Detroit. This occurred sometime in 1919. According to Polk’s Detroit City Directory of 1919/1920, Roxborough’s occupation was listed as “real estate.” During this time, being involved in the “real estate” business was code for being a numbers operator. Roxborough was motivated to open policy houses in Detroit, “Because he witnessed how the game helped the economic situation of the “policy” operators as well as other members of the Negro communities in those cities...” (Carter 1970:44).

In policy, the object of the game was to guess what number (from one to 78) would be drawn from a box.

The winning numbers in policy, as in most other types of number lottery, are determined by a drawing. The range of numbers is from 1 to 78 with 12, 24, or 36 numbers being drawn...The manner of making the drawing varies with different parts of the country. In general there are three different ways of selecting the numbers. The first, and perhaps most important way is the one followed in Detroit. It is as follows: seventy-eight pieces of rubberized cloth about two inches square are taken and on each of these squares there is printed one number, the numbers running from 1 to 78. Each piece of cloth is rolled tightly and placed in a small metal tube about two inches in length and about one half inch in diameter. These tubes are placed in a large container- usually a can of some sort. The drawing in this case consists of taking 12, 24, or 36 of these tubes from the can, depending upon the type of house (Carlson 1940:16-17).

A player had the option to place a wager on either a single number or on multiple numbers. (Carlson 1940:18). Policy playing required a large investment in money and resources, and

“...required much paraphernalia such as the ‘policy’ or roulette wheels or containers, printing presses, large gathering spaces to accommodate the writers and/or other personnel needed in the actual operation of the game as well as the public, whenever possible” (Carter 1970:47).



Example of policy wheel used to draw the black rubber tubes containing the winning numbers.



Machine used to print out winning numbers drawn.



Winning policy numbers.

In one decade (by 1920) Detroit's total population had doubled, and one hundred thousand people found themselves without employment (Conot 1974:213). As a result, people found themselves living in deplorable conditions. Unheated and leaking barns, shacks, and tents were normal shelters. Food was scarce, and proper clothing for the harsh winters was nonexistent (Conot 1974:213).



Typical house in Black Bottom circa 1939.



Tent colony located in Detroit to accommodate housing needs circa 1939.

In spite of this, Roxborough successfully began operating his policy establishment during the depression of 1920-1921. By 1923 or 1924, Roxborough acquired Everett Watson as a partner in the Big Four Policy house (Carter 1970:44). As Roxborough continued to amass his wealth from policy, he invested his money in legal businesses as well. For example, in 1928 Roxborough co-founded the Great Lakes Mutual Insurance Company, which was formed to ensure blacks had access to affordable insurance.

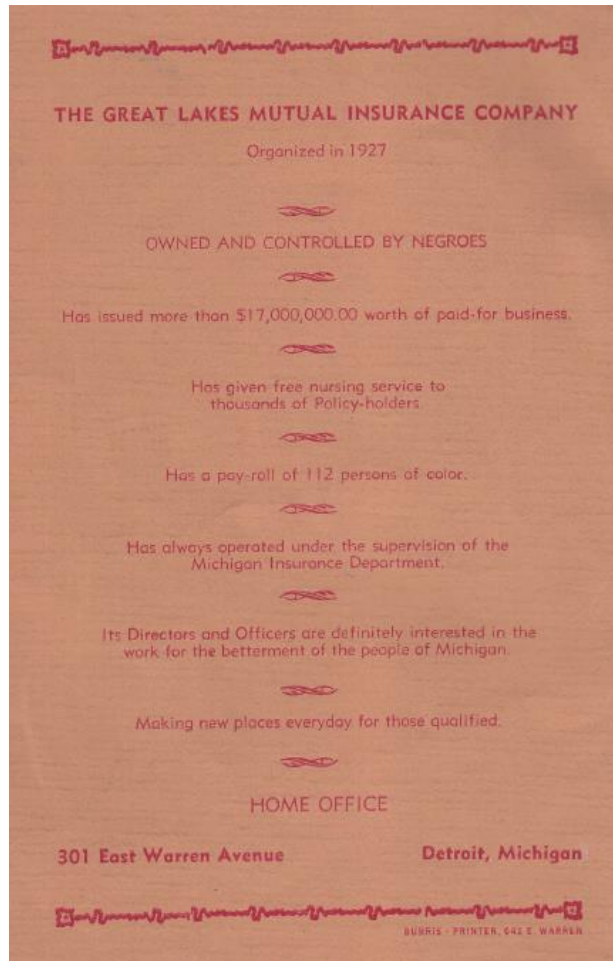
Because blacks were unable to secure loans from local banks or other mainstream lending agencies, a group of black men banded together to form the Great Lakes Mutual Insurance Company, “To assist blacks in financing homes and fostering business, and helping to relax credit restrictions placed on blacks.” Founded in 1928 with 250 policyholders and capital amounting to \$10,000, Great Lakes was organized under the leadership of Colbert Sorbrian, a prominent black attorney. The executive committee consisted of some of the city’s most prominent black citizens including: Charles H. Mahoney, attorney and the first black man to serve as full delegate to the United Nations; Moses L. Walker, president of the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP, and chairman of the Ossian Sweet Case Defense Fund; Robert Greenridge, founder of Parkside Hospital, Fairview Sanatorium, Victory Loan and Investment Company, and Eastside Medical Laboratory; William Osby, chief engineer of the Madison-Lenox Hotel, and founder of the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP; and Louis Blount, president of the National Negro Insurance Association, and vice-president of the National Negro Business League. Twenty short months after Great Lakes opened its doors for business, the stock market crashed. Banks and lending agencies unable to meet their financial obligation to the public closed their doors. Rising to the challenge, the company officers at Great Lakes used their personal monies to meet expenses and paid all claims. During the depression the company continued to write policies. By 1934 business had improved...That same year Great Lakes joined the National Negro Insurance Association. By year’s end Great Lakes had expanded and created two new companies: The Great Lakes Agency Company, which founded the Great Lakes Country Club in Holly, Michigan, for recreational use by blacks; and the Great Lakes Land and Investment Company, which purchased investment properties including the apartment building located at 457 East Kirby and known then as the Kirby Manor...By the mid-1950s Great Lakes Insurance Company had become the largest black-owned business in Michigan. According to its business records, it was a five million dollar institution with 106,000 customers and 275 employees (City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board n.d.:2-3).



Image of Great Lakes Insurance Company late 1930s.



The former Great Lakes Manor Apartment building located at 457 E. Kirby in Detroit. The apartment building was purchased by Great Lakes Mutual Life Insurance in 1935 and was the home to many of Detroit's black elite.

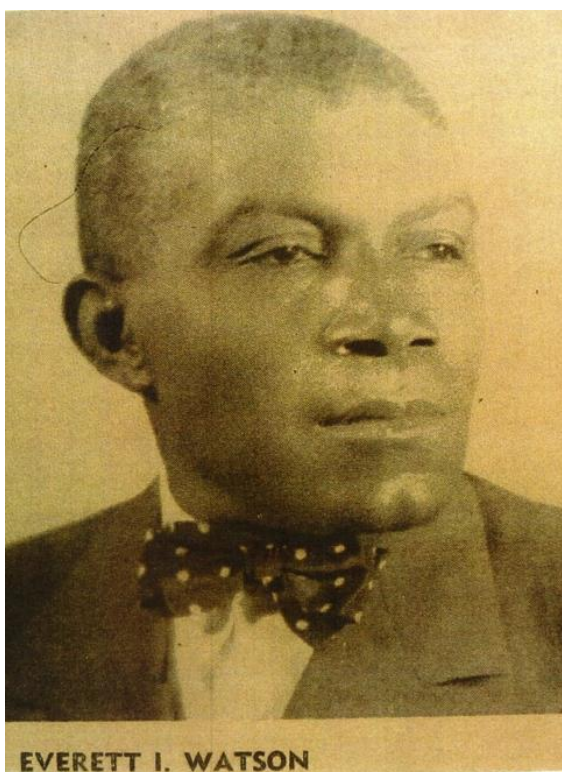


Great Lakes Mutual Insurance Company

Just as John Roxborough was known as the founder of numbers in Detroit, his one-time business partner Everett Watson was known as the black “numbers czar” of Detroit. Whereas Roxborough came from a black “elite” family, Watson did not. Watson was truly a self-made man. Everett Irving Watson was born in Woodstown, New Jersey in 1884, and moved to Detroit in 1910. At that time, Watson worked as a waiter on the boats that traveled the Detroit River. Being a waiter was one of the few occupations that a black man could obtain that was considered prestigious and paid well (Carter 1970:45). Watson first appeared in the Detroit City Directory in 1916, and his occupation was listed as a waiter. In Polk’s Detroit City Directory of 1919/1920, Watson’s occupation had changed to janitor. The next year, Watson had changed



occupations again and was listed as the manager of the Eastside Social Club. Watson entered into the policy gambling business as John Roxborough's partner in 1923 or 1924 (Carter 1970:44). However from 1922 to 1929, he is listed as either a waiter or manager for the Waiters and Bellman's Club located in a black eastside neighborhood in Detroit. The Waiters and Bellman's Club was a gambling establishment that offered liquor during prohibition as well as dice and card games. Sometime during this time period (possibly in 1927 when the opening of the "new" club was announced in the Pittsburgh Courier) Watson bought the club.



Watson's name first appears in a Pittsburgh Society column on December 31, 1927. At this time the paper reported John Roxborough, Watson, and some of Detroit's other "successful business men of the Race, gave funds to the Detroit Urban League to bring Santa Claus to over one hundred and fifty children" (Pittsburgh Courier 1927:9). In the same paper, it is noted that Watson was a guest at a banquet given for a newly elected city council member. Watson during this timeframe was able to amass enough wealth to purchase \$100,000 in contract certificates.

Contract certificates were similar to annuities, and entitled the holder to a lump-sum settlement after a set period of time (Detroit Tribune 1938a: 1). Watson in 1928 bought 200 acres of land in Grass Lake, Michigan, and a short time later added another 200 acres to his spread. On his 400 acres Watson and his wife Ida would build what was described as a beautiful estate called “Cherokee Farms” (Flory 2013:1). The estate included a lagoon, a series of knolls, a 10 acre private lake, farm buildings, a large barn, a milk house, a large chateau with dog kennels, a two bedroom house, an equipment building with living quarters, horse stables, a three car garage, and an English style main house comprised of nine rooms with three bathrooms (Barnes 1962:11).

This chapter explained how policy playing was introduced and played in Detroit’s black community by John Roxborough at a time when being black in Detroit equated to a hard life. Blacks who migrated from the south expected a better life in the city; however what they found did not always meet their expectations. City life was different than their previous lives, and blacks felt the pressure of conforming from many fronts. John Roxborough, an educated black man, knew that education would not be the key to his upward mobility (in spite of the belief which said otherwise). He understood that no matter how much education he had, because he was a black man, he had limited opportunities. For Roxborough, in spite of having what was considered a “good” job for a black man, numbers gambling would become the vehicle for upward mobility. Roxborough, motivated to enrich himself and to help other blacks, opened his first policy house. Roxborough and Watson were in fact self-starters who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. Ironically, because they were denied opportunities in the formal economy they accomplished economic success through the illegal and informal economy. Numbers gambling proved to be profitable for them and other numbers operators, and helped finance charitable activities throughout Detroit’s black communities. There occurred a blurring of lines

between the formal and informal economies of Detroit. When the formal economy failed Detroit's black community, it was the informal economy, which generated funding used for charities and for the financing of legitimate businesses in the formal economy. The next chapter will discuss how policy playing gave way to the new game known as "numbers." In addition, the following chapter will explain how numbers gambling continued to grow and became an important fixture in the community by providing hope and much needed community resources when the formal economy failed as a result of the Great Depression.

## CHAPTER 5 “NUMBERS PLAYING TAKES OVER DETROIT IN 1928”

The Great Depression officially began on October 29, 1929 when the stock market crashed. However, economic problems were evident in Detroit a year earlier, as a result of Henry Ford's vehicle model changeover (Conot 1974:248). In 1927, Ford decided to cease making the Model T and began production of the new Model A. As a result, Ford laid off 60,000 employees in Detroit and an additional 40,000 in other parts of the country (Conot 1974:248). Because of Ford's change in production, forty-five percent of welfare or relief recipients were former employees (Conot 1974:248). In September of 1929, shortly before the stock market crashed, 56,800 people were out of work in Michigan. After the collapse of the stock market in November that number ballooned to 212,500 (Conot 1974: 259). During this time of economic crisis, in 1928, Roxborough learned a new game of chance known simply as “numbers” from numbers operators Gus Greenlee, Teddy Horne, and Casper Holstein (Carter 1970:47). Roxborough offered this new game to players in addition to policy.

Holstein, originally from the Virgin Islands, moved to New York as a child with his mother in 1894. Holstein would eventually grow up and find work as a porter on Fifth Avenue (White, et. al 2010:150). In addition to his work as a store porter, Holstein was a bookmaker and operated a gambling house (White, et. Al 2010:151). Holstein has been credited with devising the premise and rules of the numbers game sometime in 1920, while one day sitting in a janitor's closet.

Came the day when, studying the clearing house totals, an idea struck Holstein between the eyes. Tradition has it that sitting in his airless janitor's closet, surrounded by brooms and mops, he let out an uproarious laugh and in general acted like a drunken man. That night when the pavement had been swept and the last clerk had gone, he sat in the basement until dawn studying the clearing house totals in the papers he had saved religiously. He had them for a year back. The thought that the figures differed each day played in his mind like a wasp in an empty room. It did not immediately occur to him how he was to use this

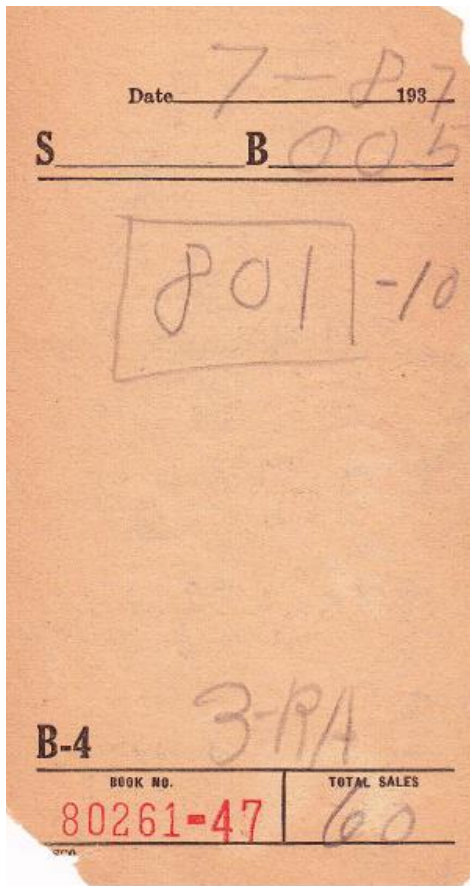
information, so for six months he thought it over, meantime stacking the dollars he could pinch from his porter's wages. At last he devised the simple scheme of selecting three digits, two from the first and one from the second total, by an unvarying rule, and having bets placed upon guessing the number. Thus, if the clearing house totals appeared 8,356,201 and 6,497,000 the winning number would be 567. He offered odds of 600 to one (Redding 1934:533).

Unlike policy, numbers was a simpler game, which required fewer resources to operate. For example, numbers did not require as many people to operate. People were not needed to pull the winning numbers, nor needed to print and distribute information containing the winning numbers. A policy wheel and printers were not needed because the winning number was not drawn. The winning numbers for the Detroit numbers game came from one of several sources, which included the ending numbers/totals of the financial clearing house totals (from 1928 to 1931) and later the winnings for horse races (Carter 1970:31). This occurred, "After the clearinghouses began publishing their figures in round digits rather than exact figures thus rendering them useless for numbers gambling, the winning numbers were based upon the racing results of any well known race track in the country" (Carter 1970:34). Numbers gambling was

[...]frequently referred to as three digit games since the number played usually contains no more than three digits and must be within the range of 000-999. The winning number in this type of game may be derived from a variety of sources depending somewhat upon the locality in which the play is made...In the Clearing House games the number is derived from one of a variety of sources, the most common being the total bank clearings, total bond sales, total stock sales, and United Treasury totals. The particular group of digits selected from those quotations as the winning number varies with place and time. Frequently the numbers of the thousand column are used. This if the closing figure on a certain exchange should be \$7,313,358 the winning number for that day would be 313...The Race Mutuel number is based upon the racing results any well known race track, the winning number is obtained by totaling the figures in the win, place, and show columns of certain of the races" (Carlson 1940:8-10).

For example, if a player placed a wager on the three, five, and seven races on a given day, and the totals paid for the three races was \$129.20, for the five races was \$235.20, and for the seven

racers was \$301.00, the winning number for that day would be 951. The winning number was derived from the first digit in front of each race's decimal point. The winning numbers could be found in a number of Detroit newspapers, and this made it easy for any player to ascertain the winning number. This method of determining the winning numbers also assured players that the winning numbers were not manipulated (Carter 1970:33). Newspapers "...published the winning numbers because of the popularity of the numbers game in both the Negro and white communities which stimulated sales. Also, one paper could not very well decline to publish the number when its competitors were doing so" (Carter 1970:33-34).



Losing numbers ticket from Big Four. Ticket is for the first three races. "801" was boxed and played for 60 cents.

<b>Mutuels Paid</b>	
<b>One Race Paid.....</b>	<b>\$ 18.20</b>
<b>Two Races Paid.....</b>	<b>77.20</b>
<b>Three Races Paid.....</b>	<b>114.60</b>
<b>Five Races Paid.....</b>	<b>193.00</b>
<b>Seven Races Paid.....</b>	<b>277.80</b>

Race track results for July 8, 1937 printed in the Detroit Free Press. The winning number was 874.

It is not clear how John Roxborough came to know both Gus Greenlee and Teddy Horne, but the men were similar in a number of ways. William “Gus” Greenlee was from a family that valued education. Greenlee’s brothers all obtained either a law or medical degree while he only attended college for a year. Greenlee would earn his money first from running bootleg liquor, and then later from running a numbers bank. With his wealth Greenlee purchased a Negro baseball team, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, and built a baseball park for the team in the black community. Greenlee also owned clubs, a pool hall, a café and grill, managed numerous boxers, and was a generous philanthropist in Pittsburgh’s black Hill District (Bankes 2001:19-23). Edwin “Teddy” Horne Jr. was from Harlem. His father was a teacher and editor of two newspapers, and his mother was an active member of the Urban League, the NAACP, the Suffragette movement, and a number of other social organizations. However, like Roxborough and Greenlee, Horne was impatient with education, and wanted to amass wealth quickly. For Horne, gambling was the way to do it (Horne and Schickel 1965:5-35). Horne had one daughter, Lena Horne, who later became world renowned for her singing and beauty. Lena Horne recalled that her father had moved to Pittsburgh and ran a hotel called the Belmont, which had both a restaurant and gambling room in the rear. In addition to the hotel, restaurant, and gambling club, Teddy Horne was involved in what Lena described as a “very lucrative numbers business” (Horne and Schickel 1965:77). Lena stated, “Numbers are a poor man’s preoccupation. You can buy a number for a few cents and you may strike it rich. It’s not likely, but it is a hope, and in the Negro ghetto it is about the only hope you can afford” (Horne and Schickel 1965:77).

Roxborough, a member of Detroit’s black bourgeois, introduced this new variation of numbers gambling to Detroiters. In order to generate interest in numbers, Roxborough stressed the payout for wins or hits were more lucrative than policy playing. For example, in policy a

five-cent wager paid ten dollars if the winning number fell; however, in numbers, a five-cent wager paid out twenty-five dollars. He did this to make it more attractive because the odds of winning were lower. Roxborough went farther to ensure trust in his numbers games by making sure he was seen with his writers, and by paying off winning bets called “hits” with new money. He also enlisted fortune tellers to predict numbers, and preachers to sell them to their congregations (Carter 1970:48). Roxborough’s presence with number runners sent the message to the masses that numbers gambling was acceptable. In addition, bets could be placed with as little as a penny, making it affordable (Detroit Free Press 1940s:4). By 1931 numbers would become more popular than policy playing in Detroit, “as the players feel that there is more fairness, despite the great odds, than is true in policy where the slips are likely to be juggled or the policy wheel fixed” (Afro-American 1931:16).

In 1928, Everett Watson severed his partnership with Roxborough’s Big Four numbers establishment, and opened his own numbers house called the Yellow Dog in Detroit’s black bottom (eastside) neighborhood (Carter 1970:44). This numbers establishment was located just a block and a half from Detroit police headquarters. Watson named his numbers operation after a southern railroad line, the Yazoo Delta (Young and Wheeler 1994:20). The Yazoo Delta, a very busy railroad line was nicknamed the Yellow Dog, and ran north to south in Mississippi. For some the Yellow Dog represented an escape from Mississippi to the north. The Yellow Dog numbers house represented an escape as well. It offered the hope and dream of winning a windfall for the cost of a few pennies.



**YELLOW DOG CO.**  
INSURES

M \_\_\_\_\_ Date 28 1937

0.5-1

800-1

876-1

815-1

995-1

123-1

3 R

©1857e

41581-31	TOTAL <u>7</u>
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Losing numbers ticket from Yellow Dog. The winning number for the day was 874. Ticket is for the first three races. Five numbers were played. One number, "800" was boxed, the other four numbers, "876," "815," "995," and "123" were played straight. The wager could have been for a penny or a dollar.

In order for a numbers organization to effectively run, a number of people were needed to fulfill specific roles or jobs. Every numbers organization required writers. Writers were essentially salesmen whose main job was to solicit business (bets and customers). Some writers worked solely for a particular numbers organization, and solicited business via door-to-door solicitation, while other writers wrote numbers as a part-time job. For example, the milkman would write bets for the customers on his daily route. Both men and women served as numbers writers, and were paid on average 25% of the total numbers they wrote. In other words, if a writer took in \$100 worth of bets, his pay or commission would be \$25. Writers could be found in neighborhoods going door to door, or in office buildings, stores, and factories. Candy and cigar store owners, barber shop porters and bartenders doubled as numbers writers as well (Detroit News 1940d:14). At one time a large numbers organization would hire thousands of

writers, and an average organization would employ from 300 to 500 writers (Carlson 1940:50). When a writer would take a number or a bet they would write the number in a book that recorded the transaction in triplicate. The original copy (usually yellow) would be turned in to headquarters. The white copy would be given to the person placing the bet, and the final copy would remain in the book. Once writers completed taking bets on numbers, they would turn the numbers or their "book" over to a pick-up man (Carlson 1940:50). The pick-up man's task was to pick-up the bets or books of the number writers for a specific area. The pick-up man would then transport the books and money to the numbers house. The number of pick-up men varied and depended on the number of writers an organization employed. Pick-up men received 10% of the total amount of money they collected from the writers in their territory (Carlson 1940:51). Once the numbers and money was taken to the numbers house (which was located in a variety of buildings), cashiers would tabulate the money and check the amount against the betting slips. Upon completion cashiers would turn the money over to the clerks whose job it was to enter the information in the house books. The betting slips would then be given to a number of checkers (Carlson 1940:51). Checkers were normally paid about \$10 a week, and number houses (depending on their size) would employ from 10 to 20. Checkers were responsible for checking betting slips for winning numbers (Carlson 1940:51-52). In policy houses, the operator would draw the winning numbers from a wheel. The operator drew the number in front of everyone present, and upon drawing the number called it out to a clerk who recorded the number (Carlson 1940:52). In numbers organizations, the winning numbers were derived from the newspapers via the total winnings of the horse races (Carlson 1940:53). However, sometime after 1935, Detroit newspapers, in an attempt to end numbers gambling, would stop printing race mutuel totals (Detroit Free Press 1940l:13). For a number of years, John Roxborough chose what racetrack

would be used to gauge the winning numbers. This information was communicated to players via cards, which were given to customers.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE BLITZKRIEG</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 2em;"><b>700</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>FIRE KRIEG</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">018 114 262 360 465 534 698 746 865 922</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;">North and West End</td> <td style="width: 33%;">Yellow Dog</td> <td style="width: 33%;">Rhode Island</td> </tr> <tr> <td>20-45-60</td> <td>4-31-62</td> <td>16-19-48</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4-17-19</td> <td>5-17-66</td> <td>14-33-38</td> </tr> <tr> <td>32-42-62</td> <td>7-47-50</td> <td>14-33-38</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>22-40-71</td> <td>54-56-73</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">Help Yourself</p> <p style="text-align: center;">131 342 391 468 209 303 104 611</p>	North and West End	Yellow Dog	Rhode Island	20-45-60	4-31-62	16-19-48	4-17-19	5-17-66	14-33-38	32-42-62	7-47-50	14-33-38		22-40-71	54-56-73	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE PROFESSOR SAYS</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">300 TO 1 ON THESE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">All Triples and</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td>101</td> <td>112</td> <td>212</td> </tr> <tr> <td>567</td> <td>725</td> <td>713</td> </tr> <tr> <td>319</td> <td>437</td> <td>369</td> </tr> <tr> <td>769</td> <td>123</td> <td>625</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">Eventually! Why not to-nite</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Y. D. Night Number</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SAFE SOUND SECURE</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>RELIABLE</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 0.8em;">LAST WEEK'S Y. D. NITE RESULTS</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td>THURSDAY</td> <td>May</td> <td>8</td> <td>452</td> </tr> <tr> <td>FRIDAY</td> <td>"</td> <td>9</td> <td>155</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SATURDAY</td> <td>"</td> <td>10</td> <td>392</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SUNDAY</td> <td>"</td> <td>11</td> <td>218</td> </tr> <tr> <td>MONDAY</td> <td>"</td> <td>12</td> <td>815</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TUESDAY</td> <td>"</td> <td>13</td> <td>552</td> </tr> <tr> <td>WED.</td> <td>"</td> <td>14</td> <td>064</td> </tr> </table>	101	112	212	567	725	713	319	437	369	769	123	625	THURSDAY	May	8	452	FRIDAY	"	9	155	SATURDAY	"	10	392	SUNDAY	"	11	218	MONDAY	"	12	815	TUESDAY	"	13	552	WED.	"	14	064	<p style="text-align: center;">—THE—</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PLAYER'S HELPER</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">AND</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Official Past Performance</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Record</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ISSUED WEEKLY</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="border: none;">SAFE</td> <td style="border: none; font-size: 2em; vertical-align: middle;">R E L I A B L E</td> <td style="border: none;">SOUND</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;">  </td> <td style="border: none;">  </td> <td style="border: none;">  </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border: none;">SECURE</td> <td style="border: none;"></td> <td style="border: none;">FAIR</td> </tr> </table> </div> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">This Issue expires May 23rd</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 0.8em;">This is not to be used for gambling purposes. FOR AMUSEMENT ONLY</p>	SAFE	R E L I A B L E	SOUND				SECURE		FAIR
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<p><b>Helper's Hopeful Hunches</b></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;">1st</td> <td style="width: 33%;">7th</td> <td style="width: 33%;">Nite</td> </tr> <tr> <td>639</td> <td>979</td> <td>141</td> </tr> <tr> <td>570</td> <td>074</td> <td>077</td> </tr> <tr> <td>426</td> <td>628</td> <td>809</td> </tr> <tr> <td>872</td> <td>213</td> <td>308</td> </tr> <tr> <td>564</td> <td>486</td> <td>201</td> </tr> <tr> <td>472</td> <td>245</td> <td>658</td> </tr> <tr> <td>133</td> <td>357</td> <td>996</td> </tr> <tr> <td>824</td> <td>400</td> <td>789</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"><b>HOT SHOTS HOT</b></p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td>741</td> <td>656</td> <td>579</td> <td>751</td> </tr> <tr> <td>053</td> <td>282</td> <td>108</td> <td>895</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">Goodies</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td>422</td> <td>125</td> <td>934</td> <td>611</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"><b>THE SWEETHEART</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.5em;">410</p>	1st	7th	Nite	639	979	141	570	074	077	426	628	809	872	213	308	564	486	201	472	245	658	133	357	996	824	400	789	741	656	579	751	053	282	108	895	422	125	934	611	<p style="text-align: center;">A complete Resume of all Mutuels since Jan. 1st. While we check and re-check these numbers with the Daily Racing Form for accuracy, we assume no responsibility for a printer's error.</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 0.8em;">1-2-3</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td>Jan.</td> <td>Feb.</td> <td>Mar.</td> <td>April</td> <td>May</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1. 833</td> <td>065</td> <td>347</td> <td>029</td> <td>831</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. 385</td> <td>H. H.</td> <td>010</td> <td></td> <td>870</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. 079</td> <td>384</td> <td>128</td> <td>553</td> <td>799</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4. 128</td> <td>958</td> <td>576</td> <td>082</td> <td>H.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>5. 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H.	056	682	203	955	13. 721	252	650	H.	085	14. 125	587	224	000	675	15. 881	742	628	691		16. 980	H.	H.	358		17. 922	064	835	110		18. 111	503	463	118		19. H.	374	639	901		20. 984	550	608	H.		21. 319	387	007	351		22. 072	347	211	230		23. 659	H.	H.	483		24. 504	378	017	781		25. 370	536	439	397		26. H.	274	165	422		27. 311	376	706	H.		28. 781	272	765	533		29. 651		595	852		30. 133	H.	643			31. 278		475			<p style="text-align: center;">3-5-7</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td>Jan.</td> <td>Feb.</td> <td>Mar.</td> <td>April</td> <td>May</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1. 321</td> <td>542</td> <td>780</td> <td>931</td> <td>151</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. 566</td> <td>H.</td> <td>H.</td> <td>037</td> <td>065</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. 973</td> <td>472</td> <td>830</td> <td>321</td> <td>914</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4. 882</td> <td>817</td> <td>638</td> <td>292</td> <td>H.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>5. H.</td> <td>958</td> <td>876</td> <td>062</td> <td>728</td> </tr> <tr> <td>6. 480</td> <td>273</td> <td>600</td> <td>H.</td> <td>850</td> </tr> <tr> <td>7. 444</td> <td>369</td> <td>748</td> <td>219</td> <td>032</td> </tr> <tr> <td>8. 477</td> <td>793</td> <td>305</td> <td>310</td> <td>929</td> </tr> <tr> <td>9. 881</td> <td>H.</td> <td>H.</td> <td>117</td> <td>785</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10. 042</td> <td>182</td> <td>609</td> <td>561</td> <td>431</td> </tr> <tr> <td>11. 139</td> <td>676</td> <td>214</td> <td>266</td> <td>H.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>12. H.</td> <td>636</td> <td>279</td> <td>327</td> <td>515</td> </tr> <tr> <td>13. 134</td> <td>200</td> <td>968</td> <td>H.</td> <td>558</td> </tr> <tr> <td>14. 576</td> <td>718</td> <td>419</td> <td>906</td> <td>525</td> </tr> <tr> <td>15. 183</td> <td>237</td> <td>880</td> <td>190</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>16. 029</td> <td>H.</td> <td>H.</td> <td>337</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>17. 229</td> <td>468</td> <td>525</td> <td>084</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>18. 335</td> <td>324</td> <td>371</td> <td>800</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>19. H.</td> <td>354</td> <td>965</td> <td>143</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>20. 419</td> <td>050</td> <td>834</td> <td>H.</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>21. 994</td> <td>702</td> <td>758</td> <td>107</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>22. 225</td> <td>724</td> <td>156</td> <td>029</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>23. 904</td> <td>H.</td> <td>H.</td> <td>372</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>24. 421</td> <td>818</td> <td>787</td> <td>150</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>25. 078</td> <td>691</td> <td>991</td> <td>700</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>26. H.</td> <td>434</td> <td>053</td> <td>219</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>27. 114</td> <td>687</td> <td>673</td> <td>H.</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>28. 168</td> <td>287</td> <td>524</td> <td>966</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>29. 115</td> <td></td> <td>558</td> <td>251</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>30. 333</td> <td>H.</td> <td>302</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>31. 304</td> <td></td> <td>551</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">Effective Apr. 28th until further Notice</p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.5em;">Time Limit for All Double and 1-2-3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1:00 and for 3-5-7 2:00</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;"><b>That Ole Work Out</b></td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;"><b>The 4 STAR Specials</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">870 474 316 130</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1st 7th</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">948 492 450 189</td> <td style="text-align: center;">716 607</td> </tr> </table>	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April	May	1. 321	542	780	931	151	2. 566	H.	H.	037	065	3. 973	472	830	321	914	4. 882	817	638	292	H.	5. H.	958	876	062	728	6. 480	273	600	H.	850	7. 444	369	748	219	032	8. 477	793	305	310	929	9. 881	H.	H.	117	785	10. 042	182	609	561	431	11. 139	676	214	266	H.	12. H.	636	279	327	515	13. 134	200	968	H.	558	14. 576	718	419	906	525	15. 183	237	880	190		16. 029	H.	H.	337		17. 229	468	525	084		18. 335	324	371	800		19. H.	354	965	143		20. 419	050	834	H.		21. 994	702	758	107		22. 225	724	156	029		23. 904	H.	H.	372		24. 421	818	787	150		25. 078	691	991	700		26. H.	434	053	219		27. 114	687	673	H.		28. 168	287	524	966		29. 115		558	251		30. 333	H.	302			31. 304		551			<b>That Ole Work Out</b>	<b>The 4 STAR Specials</b>	870 474 316 130	1st 7th	948 492 450 189	716 607
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The front and back of a numbers tip card from the 1940s. It provided what race track, the Belmont Park that was used for choosing the winning numbers. It also provided the winning numbers for the year.

The Detroit numbers organizations commonly used the race results from racetracks located in Maryland, New York, and Louisiana, depending on time of the year. Each policy or numbers house, also referred to as policy wheels or numbers banks, also employed a manager. The manager ran the organization for the owner, and was paid \$50 to \$200 a week depending on the size of the organization (Carlson 1940:53). Every organization had various other employees to include accountants, adding machine operators, typists, security officers, and telephone operators who answered the phone and gave out the winning number when called (Detroit Free Press 1939c:5). Security officers for policy organizations applied to be private policemen with the city. The Detroit City Charter provided security officers with special police badges and allowed them to carry guns. These special policemen were paid by the numbers organizations, but had full police powers like any other police officer (Detroit Free Press 1940a:1 &10). Finally, bail bondsmen and attorneys were retained to bail out and defend employees if arrested and charged with a crime. White firms or clients rarely hired black attorneys, so for some black attorneys, getting hired by numbers operators was welcome work.

Walter Norwood's numbers house, the Manhattan, is one example of a numbers operation. The Manhattan was located in Norwood's hotel, the Hotel Norwood.



Postcard of Hotel Norwood circa 1941.

Norwood employed approximately 60 employees, and had a number of partners who for \$7,500 could buy into his business (*People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al.* 1940:132). The main operations for the Manhattan took place on the second floor of the hotel. There was a hole cut into the floor and a pail on a conveyer rope was used to pull up the day's numbers. Pickup men would collect the numbers from writers and bring them to the first floor of the hotel. The numbers would be put in a pail, which would then be pulled up to the second floor for processing. Pickup men were not allowed on the second floor, and the second floor location added a layer of security against would be robbers and raiding police (*People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al.* 1940:98). Once the number tickets reached the second floor, they were distributed to six to eight employees to be sorted or "ran" (*People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al.* 1940:101). This process entailed adding up the tickets on adding machines to get the total dollar amount of tickets played for the day. Once this was done

and the first horse race number was determined, the tickets would be examined for winners or hits (People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al. 1940:105-106). After checkers identified the winning tickets, they wrote up envelopes showing what the winning number was, how much it was played for, who wrote the ticket, the writer's route number, and the date (People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al. 1940:110-112). This envelope was then given to whoever was in charge of the house to fill with the payout money. Once the payout money was placed in the envelope, the envelope was sealed, placed back in the pail, and sent back down to the pickup man. The pickup man would then give the envelope to the person who wrote the winning number and they would in turn deliver it to the winner (People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al. 1940:113).

The year 1928 also marked the point that white numbers operators became involved in numbers gambling (operating both policy and numbers operations). Prohibition was still in effect in 1928, and would not be repealed for another five years. However, white gangsters, who had earned much of their money from bootlegging, decided to diversify their businesses by branching out in both legal and illegal businesses. For example, some became involved in the cleaning and dyeing industry, owned taxi companies, and bookmaking and numbers gambling operations (Conot 1974:265). It was noted that the white number operators were attracted to numbers gambling for the same reason the black numbers operators were: huge profits. In addition to opening policy/numbers houses in Detroit's black communities, they also opened blind pigs or illegal establishments where they peddled prohibited whisky during prohibition. These whites were criticized by the black press for taking resources from Detroit's black community, and giving nothing in return (Chicago Defender 1928a:1).

Many white gamblers, attracted by huge policy profits, have opened up policy houses. Other syndicates taking advantage of lax conditions, have scattered blind

pigs over the black belt, where various brands of whisky are displayed with a recklessness indicative of high police protection. These bootlegging syndicates drain resources without giving anything in return (Chicago Defender 1928a:1).

One white numbers operator, Lou Weisberg, in 1928 sold numbers to both white and black number players. Unlike Roxborough and Watson, Weisberg had a reputation for dishonesty. He gained this reputation after he closed his business and failed to pay winners on a heavily played number. Weisberg would later reopen his numbers business with a black partner in an effort to regain customers (Detroit News 1938b:1).

A short time later, another mob made an invasion, setting up an elaborate office and began doing business in the white neighborhoods. Colored writers working for the colored numbers barons, in many instances, were beaten and barred from the neighborhoods where they had been working for a number of years (Cowans, Russ 1938:2)

Number and policy houses became so successful that small business merchants, ministers, professional men, landlords, insurance agents, and other “good, capable and honest citizens” united to rid Detroit of its “arch enemy” in 1928 (Chicago Defender 1928a:1). These groups claimed that numbers gambling drained more money out of the community than all other forms of gambling, and left little money for people to patronize their businesses, and contribute to the church (Chicago Defender 1928a:1). In addition it was purported that school children were playing numbers with their lunch money. In September of 1928, it was estimated that 3,000 people were employed as number writers, and all together about \$10,000 was played daily in Detroit (Chicago Defender 1928c:1). By December of 1928, one source reported that there were 51 policy houses in Detroit, and 5,000 numbers writers, who took \$30,000 daily in bets from players. These writers were accused of going door-to-door and enticing women to play. The women who played were purported to have neglected their homes, children, and insurance just to play. Police blamed the players, who they estimated to be in the thousands, and who

wanted to “get something for nothing” for the increase in numbers gambling (Chicago Defender 1928c:1). In response to this, a number of ministers preached against all numbers gambling, both policy and numbers playing. They described it as the “greatest evil” to assault the black race and threatened the progress of business (Chicago Defender 1928b:1). At a time when black Detroiters were facing high unemployment, inadequate housing, meager education, poor health, rampant tuberculosis and prejudice, one black minister stated, “There is nothing in Detroit that so affects the Negro as this policy wheel” (Detroit News 1928:2). This view was indicative of what some middle class blacks who had embodied mainstream values felt. These black Detroiters were not in tune with the problems that assailed poor blacks, and for them, the embarrassment of numbers gambling was truly an evil. On the other hand, blacks who faced numerous ailments caused by poverty found numbers gambling to be the least of their worries. Westside Detroit merchants attempted to raise money to hire private investigators to obtain evidence, to be used in grand jury proceedings against policy and numbers operators (Chicago Defender 1928b:1). The Detroit News estimated that daily policy playing in Detroit ranged from \$50,000 to \$80,000, and was mostly played by “Negros” (Detroit News 1928:1). Once again poor blacks from the south were being blamed by both Detroit’s black and white middle class leaders for the evils of policy playing. The Detroit News reported that one prominent Negro indicated,

The Negro workman comes here from the South, where he never had any experience in handling money, and at once begins to make what seems to him to be large wages. He is superstitious, and easily led. He falls an easy prey to the policy runners. Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to obtain much cooperation from the Police Department in our efforts to protect him (Detroit News 1928:1).

White property owners who lived in the east-central district of Detroit formed an organization called the East Central Detroit Improvement Association. The purpose of the organization was to fight crime and vice in their neighborhoods. The association wanted to



maintain property values in their area by improving and promoting the beautification of the area. According to the association, property values had declined because of gambling, bootlegging, and disorderly houses. The chairman of the organization stated,

Policy gambling among the Negro population in the district must be abolished...There are 25 blind pigs and 27 policy gambling houses within four blocks of the hotel, and we intend to drive them out. We do not intend to be spectacular about it, but we will see that other property owners are interested in the conditions and that the laws are enforced in this district (Detroit News 1928:1).

Although some ministers and community leaders spoke out against the numbers game, they did not speak for all ministers and leaders in the community. For example, it was alleged that Roxborough enlisted some “store front ministers” in 1928 to sell numbers to their congregations (Carter 1970:48). Storefront ministers ministered out of storefront churches, churches housed in former stores. Roxborough did this because ministers were always asking him for money, and he felt they should do something for him in return (Carter 1970:48). In addition, John Dancy, executive secretary of the Urban League and a leader of the community, had no problem vacationing with Roxborough. It was reported in the fall of 1928 that Dancy traveled to Idlewild (a black resort in the western part of Michigan) as the guest of Roxborough. While in Idlewild, Roxborough honored Dancy at an elaborate dinner party (Peyton 1928:A4).

Due to the mounting press coverage and pressure from various citizen groups, the Detroit police cracked down on numbers gambling by conducting raids and arresting violators. When this occurred, black numbers operators ceased operating, while white numbers operators conducted business as usual. When a white numbers house refused to pay off on a \$3,000 hit, black operators accused them of being crooked and blamed them for bringing unwanted attention to the numbers game. The numbers house alleged fraud had taken place during the drawing and refused to pay off the winner. When the winner did not receive his money, he hired an attorney

who brought the story to the attention of the press (Chicago Defender 1928b:1). Black operators feared the control of numbers gambling would be taken away from them and given to white number operators because they were told to cease operations by police and other authorities, while white operators continued to operate unmolested (Chicago Defender 1928b:1). In an effort to eliminate competition and to stay in business, Walter Norwood, a black numbers operator, partnered with Louis Weisberg, a white numbers operator. It was alleged that because Weisberg was white, the two operated without police interference. However, other black operators were forced to relocate their operations to other areas occupied by blacks (Chicago Defender 1929:1&2).

Meanwhile, the black community leaders of Detroit indicated they were not fighting black number operators, but rather were fighting numbers gambling because it was detrimental to the city's youth. While delivering this message to the masses, they also relayed a contradictory statement. The same black community leaders who on one hand were trying to eradicate numbers gambling also wanted to ensure that black numbers operators were treated fairly and that no switch of control (from black to white) took place (Chicago Defender 1928a:1). However, this is what occurred.

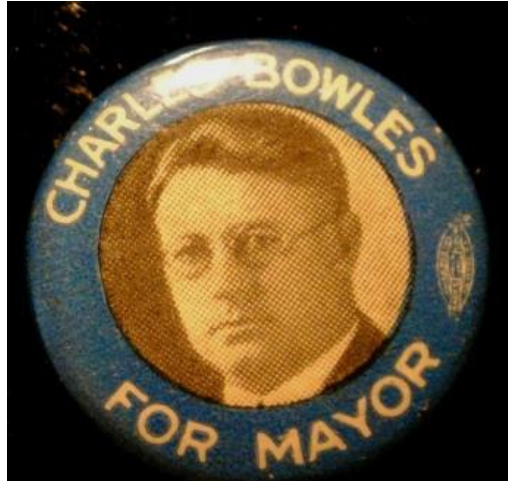
The police got busy and closed up all the policy houses, for a time, with a bluff at scaring the Negroes out of the business. In the interim whites tried unsuccessfully to gain control. When the houses opened up again several new places backed by "white money", opened, but as before soon went to the wall. As far as the ministers were concerned they were sincere in their efforts but the undercurrent opinion of the whole thing was that it was a crusade against the Negroes who control the activities Afro-American 1929:3).

Throughout 1929, both Roxborough and Watson were growing in both their legal and illegal businesses. Roxborough acquired the black newspaper, the Detroit Owl, and saved it from bankruptcy by investing \$20,000 in it (Cowan 1944:20). This was important because black

newspapers not only provided information that was relevant in the black community, but also provided professional jobs to blacks in the newspaper industry. Like other publications, Roxborough's Detroit Owl employed college students as staff members (Cowan 1961: 23). During the same period, Roxborough was elected as a director to the National Benefit Life Insurance Company, where his biography described him as being engaged in the "real estate, newspaper and insurance business" (Pittsburgh Courier 1929c:3). In July, it was reported that he, along with other "prominent Detroit men", were elected to the Crudential Bond and Mortgage Company (Pittsburgh Courier 1929a:2).

As Everett Watson continued to build his wealth, in 1929, at the age of 44, he began to have contact with the police. Police raided his realty office, Watson Realty Company, in June of that year. Detroit police confiscated \$20,000 worth of jewelry from the office, and \$1,200 from Watson's pocket. Watson had accepted the jewelry in pawn (although he did not have a license to run a pawn shop), and did not charge interest for the pawned jewelry. He admitted to running a policy game when the small rubber tubes used in policy play were discovered during the raid (Detroit News 1929:3).

Shortly after the stock market crashed in October 1929, the citizens of Detroit were tasked with electing a new mayor. The candidate they chose was Charles Bowles, a candidate who had been endorsed openly by the Ku Klux Klan (Pittsburgh Courier 1929b:4). Bowles took the oath of office in January of 1930 to serve a city with a deficit of twelve million dollars, a high unemployment rate, uncontrolled crime caused by illegal rum running and gambling, and a corrupt police department (Asher 1931:35-40).



Campaign button for Charles Bowles for mayor from 1929.

Four months after he took office, the people of Detroit were unhappy with Bowles. They charged that he had not kept promises he had made to be elected, and was “in-bed” with criminals after he fired the police commissioner. Many believed the police commissioner was fired for attacking vice in the city (Detroit Free Press 1930:1). Based on this belief and other accusations, approximately 90,000 people signed a petition to recall him. According to the petition filed by his former supporters, Bowles had committed a number of transgressions to include instituting “a policy of secrecy in public office”, and “tolerating lawlessness and countenancing license” (Detroit Free Press 1930: 1). Harold Emmons, the fired police commissioner, alleged that Mayor Bowles had warned him that enforcement of vice and gambling laws would destroy his political career. Bowles ordered a centralized vice squad to be formed against Emmons’ recommendations. It would later be alleged that the purpose of centralizing the vice operations was to make it easier to make payoffs and to ensure selective enforcement activities. Emmons felt that vice crimes should be handled by each police precinct (who had more resources) as they saw fit, and not be centralized to one small squad. Emmons further charged that once the vice squad was centralized, the “underworld” became more aggressive and boastful in their illegal activities. Some criminals declared they were

untouchable due to payoffs made to members of Bowles' administration (Detroit News 1930a:1&38).

A numbers operator during this time recounted how during the Bowles' administration a white Jewish gangster, Eddie Levinson, along with black numbers banker Walter Norwood, formed a partnership to monopolize the numbers game in Detroit. Levinson had strong ties to members of the police department as well as the mayor's office. On behalf of Levinson, a Detroit police lieutenant called a meeting of all of the numbers operators in the city. In a show of force at this meeting, the lieutenant advised the operators that Levinson would now control the numbers racket in Detroit. Upon hearing this John Roxborough told Levinson in no uncertain terms that he would not and could not get away with taking over the number racket (Carter 1970:50-51). In an effort to show that he (Bowles) was not soft on vice, in May of 1930, the new police commissioner, Thomas Wilcox, met with the leadership of the Detroit Police Department and informed them to "go the limit" against vice (Detroit News 1930a:1). Wilcox also ensured raids and arrests were carried throughout the city against numbers gamblers, bookies, and other gambling establishments. The results of these raids were captured by the newspapers, and helped reinforce Wilcox's image as an upstanding lawman who was bent on cleaning up vice in Detroit. Bowles' recall in July of 1930 from office, and the immediate action of Wilcox and the Detroit Police Department to show they were not protecting illegal ventures, ended Levinson's attempt to take control of numbers gambling in Detroit, and temporarily insured that blacks would maintain control over their lucrative numbers businesses.



Thomas Wilcox, center, is sworn in as Detroit's police commissioner by City Clerk Richard Reading. Detroit Mayor Charles Bowles stands by.

By January of 1931, it was being reported that black Detroiters were wagering \$50,000 daily on number gambling and the new mayor's campaign against lotteries "has been characterized by mildness, however" (*Afro-American* 1931:16). A black newspaper openly spoke of who were behind the games, and heaped praise on some of the numbers operators.

Underworld control seems to be lodged in three principal racial groups, Negroes, Jews and Polacks with the Negro syndicates seemingly far outdistancing their rivals in the amount of daily business. Mention numbers and policy here and one immediately thinks of John Roxie, Magus Clork, "Slick" Watsing Hamonds, Munce and Roan; "Jew" Levinson, Bernstein and others. Roxie, who it is said spent two years attending a local law college is easily the most outstanding of the Negro operators, and is looked upon as a sort of demi-god among the many patrons who play on his book. Suave, keen of mind, and possessed of a remarkable business sense, this man has made an institution founded on and governed by the spirit of fair play—for there is such a thing as fairness, even in numbers he insist (*Afro-American* 1931:1).

As Charles Bowles career as the city's mayor was imploding, numbers bankers John Roxborough and Thomas Hammond worked with other prominent black Detroiters to get

Roxborough's brother, attorney Charles Roxborough, elected to the state senate (Fields 1930:A9). With their financial backing and support, Charles Roxborough would become Michigan's first black state senator from 1932 to 1934. Even though Charles Roxborough was a state senator, he still found time to represent his brother in legal matters. For example, in July of 1932 Charles Roxborough served as an attorney for John Roxborough (described as a wealthy clearing house operator) in a reckless driving case. John Roxborough was found guilty and fined \$40 for driving his "new deluxe sedan" in a reckless manner (Pittsburgh Courier 1932b:1).

Even as the Depression overwhelmed the city and the people within it, numbers gambling continued on. It can be argued that business even improved. As banks failed, automotive jobs and other forms of employment declined; still, numbers gambling was still a comforting constant for the masses. "Eventually, even the worst jobs dried up. You had to live, so you scammed or stole or played the numbers in the policy houses that thrived in Paradise Valley...(Trost 1979:19A)." For a few nickels, the poor, hungry and downtrodden could wager on the hope that their number would fall and temporarily uplift them from the misery of the Depression. Ulysses Boykin, a former editor for the black newspapers the Detroit Tribune and Michigan Chronicle, recalled:

One day my mother told my father that she'd had a dream," Ulysses Boykins says. "He said, 'Well, Miss Curtis'-that's what he called her - 'will you loan me a dime?' That evening he came back and handed her an envelope with 50 new dollar bills inside. She said, 'You know I'm against the numbers because that's gambling but I'm not going to say anything more against it.' And they both went out and bought groceries and stocked up the house (Trost 1979:19A).

It was reported that jobless and hungry people in 1932 frequented the numbers houses "in a desperate effort to keep alive" (Pittsburgh Courier 1932c:4). One numbers operator alleged that numbers gambling helped keep the welfare rolls down because many people "were able to make enough money on small bets to carry them through the week" (Detroit Free Press 1938e: 4). It

was alleged that John Roxborough and the other black numbers operators would encourage the residents of the Black Bottom to play certain numbers. People were allowed to play those suggested numbers for up to 25 cents, which meant the hits would not be very large, but the payouts were large enough to buy needed food and fuel. The suggested numbers would often turn out to be the winning numbers. The numbers operators did this because the small hits or winnings allowed players to hit regularly, and created good will in the community (Carter 1970:117). Numbers operators also assisted the community by forming soup lines, distributing baskets of food, and providing fuel to community residents in need (Carter 1970:119). Everett Watson was known to pass out five-dollar bills twice a week to the poor during this time (Borden 2003:15).

During the Depression, not only did blacks play the numbers in hopes of “hitting the number” for temporary riches, but whites did as well. Robert Conot described the life of Marie Norveth, a white wife and mother during the Great Depression as follows,

Marie smoked to drive away her hunger. She bought the cheapest cigarettes. But two or three days before the next welfare payment was due she would be out of both money and cigarettes. Desperately she would sift through the meager stock of food for items she could swap for cigarettes. In the hope of making the big hit she played policy with the Yellow Dog Company; so another dollar disappeared weekly (Conot 1974:357).

Numbers gambling not only gave people who played the chance to win temporary riches, but numbers provided employment to many who could not find it elsewhere (Carter 1970:119). For example in 1930, Leonard Reid testified during a criminal hearing that he worked as a clearing house writer for John Roxborough’s numbers bank. In other words, he was paid to take people’s numbers and received a 25% commission (or 25 cents for every dollar generated) for every numbers ticket he sold. Roxborough hired him January 1, 1930 after he was laid off from the Ford plant in the summer of 1928, and could not find employment elsewhere (The People vs.



John Roxborough and John Doe alias Wilson 1930: 23-25). Another numbers writer described as being “a clean cut chap” noted,

I never dreamed that I would fall into this racket; but hard times causing me to lose my job, forced me to find something to do to keep the wolf away from the door. This was the only thing I could find. I make a fair living, but I’m telling you, as soon as I can get a legitimate job again I’m going to drop the whole business. There are many others in the same predicament in which I find myself, but what is a fellow to do if he’s hungry and has no place to stay? I ask you (Afro-American 1931:16).

As the unemployment numbers increased and overall conditions deteriorated, about 2,000 unemployed people gathered and demonstrated in front of city hall in October of 1930. The people demonstrating were asking that the city give \$20 a week to unemployed families plus five dollars for each child, for a termination on eviction proceedings, and free meals and housing for the homeless (Detroit News 1930b:3).



Detroit demonstrators protesting unemployment in 1930.



People crowded in Detroit Council chambers concerning unemployment problems in the city in 1931.

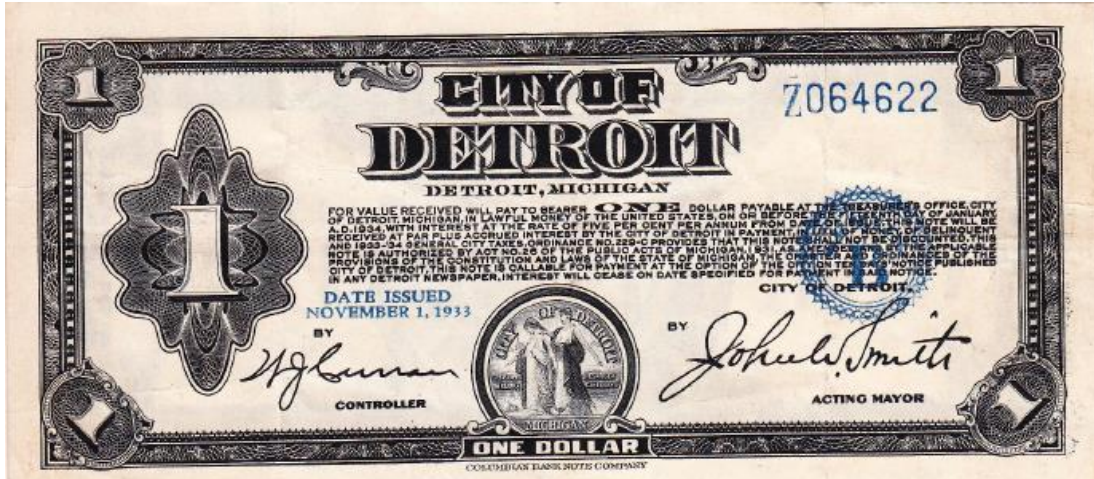
By July of 1931, conditions had not improved for the poor and unemployed. The city of Detroit's welfare department was running out of funding, and countless men, women, and children were going hungry (Detroit News 1931:1). It was noted in 1932 that blacks were hit the hardest in suffering because they were the "last hired and the first fired." The practice of firing blacks from jobs and filling them with whites was commonplace. The Detroit Better Business Bureau contacted stores, hotels, and other businesses throughout the city and informed them "...that idle white workers should be employed instead of colored workers" (Pittsburgh Courier 1932a:2). The Urban League found that government programs gave blacks little to no consideration, and unemployment for blacks tended to be four to six times higher than others. This in turn meant that blacks commonly were malnourished, increasingly sick, and had increased death, juvenile delinquency, and crime rates (Randolph 1933: 8). One crime that was noted to have increased was petty gambling (including policy and numbers gambling). Due to

segregation and limited housing for blacks, blacks found themselves having higher living costs than whites. During an informal canvas of black neighborhoods in Detroit it was found that every other black person was out of work (Randolph 1933: 8). In March of 1932, Detroit's welfare department announced that blacks made up only eight percent of Detroit's population, but accounted for 30% welfare recipients (Chicago Defender 1932:4).



Detroit eating houses for the poor and unemployed in 1931.

Not only were the common people of Detroit feeling the intense heat of the Depression, but larger corporations, municipalities, and banks were getting scorched. Banks were victims of their own greed, and a Senate investigation in January of 1933 exposed how much. “The men of finance were revealed to be fools, mountebanks, tax dodgers, manipulators of stocks, and speculators rivaling Mississippi riverboat gamblers” (Conot 1974:304). The investigation brought into question the integrity of Detroit’s justice system when it was revealed that more than 40 judges had a total of \$600,000 in outstanding loans at just one Detroit bank, and the state treasurer had an outstanding loan of \$100,000. When these friends of the bank officers failed to make payments, the banks looked the other way (Conot 1974:304). By February 14, 1933, banks had simply run out of money, because their on hand cash could not support depositors’ demands. In response to this problem Michigan’s governor, William Comstock, signed a proclamation declaring a bank holiday. This meant 436 banks and trusts were closed, and more than \$1.5 billion in deposits were frozen (Conot 1974:306). The closing of the banks caused Detroit to default on its bonds, and panic spread throughout the city. People with money feared going hungry and bought all available food, which then caused prices for food to skyrocket (Conot 1974:309). The lack of available money caused the city of Detroit to substitute it with scrip. Scrip was used to pay city employees, and was accepted as a form of legal tender. Over a short period of time approximately \$42 million was placed in circulation, which helped the flow of commerce in the city (Conot 1974:309). Although scrip was a form of legal tender, it was not money. Not every business would accept it, and people who were the holders of scrip at times found themselves being limited to where and what they could buy. In response to this, John Roxborough and other numbers men would exchange scrip for cash. This allowed the city employees paid in scrip to have the freedom to conduct business freely (Carter 1970:107).



Scrip (front and back) issued by the city of Detroit in 1933 during the Depression.

By 1935, there were 120,000 blacks who made up less than 8% of Detroit's total population, but they were feeling the stress of the depression more than most (Detroit News 1935:15). Although blacks made up less than eight percent of the population, they accounted for 23% of the people receiving welfare from the city, partly because, unlike their white counterparts, they were not being re-hired once they were laid off (Detroit News 1935:15). As the Great Depression raged on, numbers bankers, unlike the city, showed no shortage of money or resources. In fact they continued to have lavish lifestyles. For example, one black numbers banker who lived lavishly was Willie Douglas Mosely. Mosley was originally from Pratt City, Alabama, and worked in the coal mines before eventually settling in Detroit with his wife. When

he first came to Detroit he worked as a factory worker before acquiring a taxicab (A Friend 1935:1). Mosley had his first taxicab by 1921 (Detroit Times 1935a:3). Eventually Mosley would purchase ten taxicabs and become the owner of the Midway Taxi Cab Company. According to Polk's City Directory, until 1930 Mosley was listed as proprietor of the Midway Cab Company, but by 1931 he was listed as being in the "real estate" business. This may have been when Mosley became involved as a numbers operator/banker. As his wealth increased, so did his social capital and business interests. In March of 1933, it was reported that he threw a birthday party for his wife, and several wealthy and influential black guests attended the affair (Chicago Defender 1933:7). In April of 1933, he started the black weekly, Detroit Tribune. The Detroit Tribune was a black newspaper that was published weekly. An editorial addressing the public conveyed the following message:

With this initial issue, the Detroit Tribune makes its bow to the waiting public. It comes at a time of local and national crisis, when our people in this city and men and women everywhere are grappling with serious economic conditions, and are struggling to find their way back to better times. The Detroit Tribune comes in the spirit of service, seeking the opportunity to aid, to encourage and to inspire the masses in their struggle back to prosperity.... The Tribune is and always will be a clean, newsy, dependable, clear-eyed, progressive newspaper, published regularly every week, and representing and serving all our people, without prejudice or partiality. The humblest wage-earners of the group, as well as our business and professional people, deserve and shall always receive the same opportunity of publishing their news items and making themselves articulate through the medium of The Tribune (Detroit Tribune 1933b:8).

In this first edition of the newspaper, an ad was taken out by 20 individuals welcoming the Detroit Tribune, "the paper for which we have long been waiting," to the city (Detroit Tribune 1933d:6). Of the 20 individuals who signed the "welcome", 12 were involved in the numbers business and included John Roxborough and Everett Watson (Detroit Tribune 1933d:6). Three months later, Mosley described as "a new man of destiny" as a "money maker", "a prince of good fellows", and a "shrewd business man" purchased the Negro league baseball team, the

Detroit Stars (Pittsburgh Courier 1933:14). Twice in 1934, Mosley and his wife took month-long motoring vacations across the country, first in the south (Detroit Tribune 1934b:6) and then in the Midwest (Detroit Tribune 1934a:2). Mosley would ensure he gave back to the community that patronized his businesses. On December 25, 1933 he served free Christmas meals to 1,500 children and 400 adults (Detroit Tribune 1933c:2). The following Christmas Mosley described as one of Detroit's "Big Brothers who annually brings Christmas cheer to thousands of underprivileged children and adults in the community" gave gifts of candy, nuts and fruit to 2,000 needy children and 500 dinners to indigent adults (Detroit Tribune 1934c:2). As Mosley's wealth grew, so did his power and political influence. He was considered one of the Republican leaders of the black community and attended Republican state conventions as a delegate. Mosley was a member of the Wolverine Republican Club, and was a regular attendant of Shiloh Baptist Church (Detroit Times 1935a:3).

William Mosley's life and contributions came to a tragic end on May 24, 1935. On that day, William Penix, one of Mosley's one hundred numbers writers, shot him twice in the chest. Penix had worked for Mosley for several years, and for four years had played the number "756" regularly. On May 24<sup>th</sup> Penix had placed ten cents on the winning number and should have received \$50 for his winning bet. However, when Penix went to retrieve his winnings from his employer at Mosley's pool hall, Mosley refused to pay. Penix beseeched Mosley to pay him, but Mosley refused because the date on the numbers ticket was wrong. Penix explained to Mosley that he had written the ticket himself, and that Mosley knew he (Penix) was an honest man. Mosley still refused to listen and told Penix to leave his establishment with the parting remark, "Bill, I guess you're out of luck" (Chicago Defender 1935:2). Mosley escorted the enraged

Penix outside where Penix shot Mosley to death (Pittsburgh Courier 1935b:1). Mosley's pastor Solomon Ross stated,

I don't know how Bill Mosley got his money, but I do know that for five years he was a faithful attendant at services. I know also that Bill Mosley was loved and respected by his race and that untold thousands owe much to his genuine charity. He was without doubt a true benefactor of his race (Detroit Times 1935a:3).

In an editorial about him, Mosley was described as having

[...] occupied a unique place in the community, both in the business and political life of his people, and championed their cause on many occasions, when the masses were unaware of his activity on their behalf. Endowed with rare business genius a keen insight into human nature, this self-made man succeeded in almost everything he undertook. In proportion as his wealth increased, he increased his effort to serve the race; to give employment to deserving men and women; to help build new business enterprises, and to support civic organizations for the uplift of the group...All successful men and women have enemies and critics who envy them, and Mr. Mosley was no exception. Fair-minded people admit, however, that business men who operate honest lotteries for the masses who take chances on pennies and dimes, fill the same public demand and deserve as much consideration as the honest brokers on Wall Street, where wealthy citizens speculate in stocks and bonds (Detroit Tribune Independent 1935b:4).

Two days before Mosley's funeral, a funeral was held for former Detroit Recorder's Court judge William Connolly. It was reported that more than 2,000 people attended his services (Detroit Times 1935c:3). Seven thousand people would attend "policy king" Mosley's funeral and more than 25,000 viewed his body prior to the funeral (Detroit Times 1935b:3). The number of mourners caused traffic jams in the city. At the time, Mosley's funeral was described as the largest for a black man in the city of Detroit. Mosley was placed in a \$5,000 bronze casket (Detroit Times 1935b:3). The police provided an escort to the two hundred cars in the funeral procession, and Mosley's pallbearers included numbers bankers Everett Watson, Walter Norwood, and Thomas "Rooster" Hammond (Detroit Tribune Independent 1935b:8). When he died it was reported that Mosley was worth over \$200,000, owned 25 residential and business lots in the "Negro district," owned the Midway Taxi Company, the Detroit Tribune, the Midway



Café, a pool hall, and a nightclub. It was estimated his numbers business generated \$10,000 daily, and his home located at 5757 Vinewood was described as luxurious (Detroit Times 1935a:3). At one point during the Great Depression, Mosley's wealth exceeded a half million dollars (Pittsburgh Courier 1935b:1). Upon his death Mosley's brother Charles became the new owner of his numbers business (Chicago Defender 1941b:3).

Shortly after Mosley's death in July, the police raided the numbers/policy house of Thomas "Rooster" Hammonds and James Roan located in the black bottoms on Hastings Street. One black newspaper wrote about the raid and arrests,

As is customary two of the non-descript flunkies plead guilty to operating and maintaining a gambling place while the very suave operator, James Roan, with the Rooster, stood in the rear of the court room, accompanied by their white lawyers and watched the chumps take the fall. It is and has always been the custom to rob the poor and unsuspecting Negroes but when the Big Boy has any money to spend he just must get him an ofay lawyer to get him out of jail... This is enormous and strikingly sad when we think of the hundreds yet thousands of our Negroes who are living on welfare and saving their pennies and nickels which they sadly need for food and clothing to maintain "Rooster" Hammond and James Roan in magnificent luxury and furnish high powered cars to transport them about the city. It is very strange that the police have never raided their magnificent main office maintained at 420 Ferry street east, where they transact their main business with the aid of about twenty-five clerks. This place is situated just next door to Fairview hospital and in a decent neighborhood. A number of leading citizens have come to the office of this paper and a committee has been formed to call on the mayor and council to ascertain just who protects nefarious enterprises and sets such bad example for our young people. This octopus is strangling the Negro. Watch this paper in the next issue for more exposure of this gambling octopus. The reporter for this paper will get all facts and publish a full list of names and addresses so there will be no excuse on anyone's part. The "Rooster" and James Roan maintain a private office in the rear of the Arcade Barber shop where they meet the class of writers and pick-up men whom they do not want seen at their main office because they look too bad or are too poor. They are seemingly ashamed for the poor people to see the luxury in which they live and maintain themselves (Atlanta Daily World 1935:6).

Everett Watson also fared well during the Great Depression. Watson was known for owning an expensive automobile, and for being a "flashy" dresser and big spender (Michigan

Chronicle 1940:1). By 1930, Watson's occupation was listed as president of Watson Realty, and the society pages told of him and his wife motoring from Detroit to Los Angeles on vacation (Ross 1930:19). Watson would take part of the money earned from the numbers game and invest it in legitimate businesses. For example, in 1931, Watson purchased the Detroit Stars prior to Willie Mosley (Bak 1994:198). Watson was known to cruise and fish around the Detroit River in his Chris Craft yacht (Cowan 1935c:7). By 1933, he was an investor in and a board member of the Great Lakes Insurance Company. John Roxborough, one of the original founders of the insurance company founded the company to ensure blacks had access to affordable insurance. Five years after it was founded, the insurance company reported it had issued more than 14,000 policies, which represented more than \$5,500,000 worth of life insurance. The all-black company located in the community had paid its employees more than \$75,000, and had issued to policyholders \$25,000 in death claims. The insurance company also established free visiting nurse service to sick and injured policy holders (Detroit Tribune 1933a:2).

Watson cultivated political power in the community by donating money and services for fundraisers and political campaigns. For instance, in February of 1935, Watson donated the use of his nightclub to Harold Bledsoe. Harold Bledsoe was a prominent black attorney who at the time ran for circuit court judge (Cowan 1935b:8). A few months later, Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea demanded Watson and the other numbers operator pay him and his office protection money to operate. Duncan McCrea was elected Wayne County's Prosecutor in 1934. While campaigning for office, McCrea along with approximately 70 Detroit police officers, became members of the Black Legion (Detroit News 1936b:1). The Black Legion was an outgrowth of the Ku Klux Klan and was organized in 1925. According to its founder, the Black Legion was based on the "principles of the Old South" (Carlisle 1936:1). Those principles

were the need to “maintain southern chivalry and the ideals of the south before the Civil War” (Carlisle 1936:1). The Black Legion was notoriously ruthless and prejudiced against blacks, Jews, and Roman Catholics. However, McCrea’s beliefs about blacks did not prevent him from demanding and accepting money from them. In 1936 when McCrea’s membership as a Black Legion member was exposed, he claimed that he unwittingly completed the application for membership (Detroit News 1936a:1).

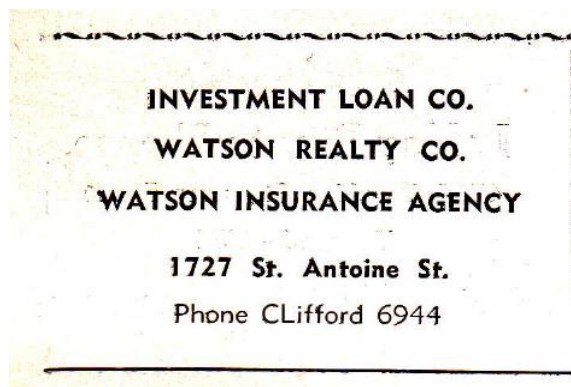
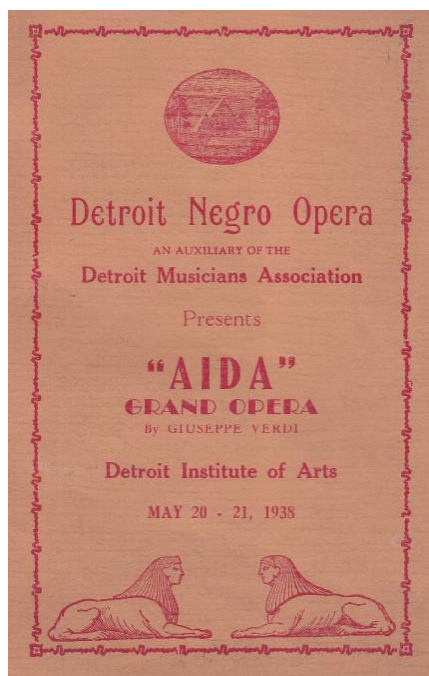


Wayne County Prosecutor, Duncan McCrea, in 1936 laughs as he holds up a newspaper declaring his membership in the Black Legion. McCrea claimed he unwittingly joined.

When McCrea demanded graft payments, a number of black numbers operators met at Everett Watson’s Waiters and Bellmen’s Club to discuss the prosecutor’s demands. The group also planned how to best handle a group of Italians who were attempting to “muscle into the racket” (Detroit Free Press 1940p:18). At this meeting, Watson was chosen by the other numbers operators, which included John Roxborough, Thomas Hammond, Irving Roane, Charles Mosley,

and Walter Norwood, to meet with the chief investigator for Wayne County, Harry Colburn, and Wayne County Prosecutor McCrea (Detroit News 1940a:1). It was agreed that monthly payments of \$1,500 would be made to the prosecutor's office to ensure the numbers organizations were protected and operated without prosecutorial interference (Detroit Free Press 1940b:3). Watson served as the graft collector on behalf of Detroit numbers operators for Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea from April 1935 to August 1939 (Detroit Free Press 1940f:1&7).

By 1935, the Everett I. Watson Real Estate Company provided real estate brokers and investment mortgages to the community, and bought sold, rented, managed, built, and remodeled various properties. His insurance agency sold individual, residential, business, vehicle, and property insurance. In February of 1937, he announced he would be opening the Everett I. Watson Investment Loan Company after he leased an office in a bank. The loan company provided cash loans ranging from \$50 to \$300 (Detroit Tribune 1937:1). Two years later, the Watson enterprises went from having one full time employee to nine part-time employees. He was credited with saving a number of properties in the community from foreclosure by making loans to blacks in the community who could not secure loans elsewhere. In 1938, Watson had provided over \$100,000 in loans (Detroit Tribune 1939b:3). In December of 1937, Watson and two other men formed the Paradise Valley Distributing Company. The beer distributing company was meant to be a sound business investment and was created to provide employment opportunities for blacks (Detroit Tribune 1941a:8). Watson also supported community ventures by buying ads in cultural programs that supported the arts in Detroit's black community. One such production he supported was the Detroit Negro Opera and its presentation of "Aida" that took place at the Detroit Institute of Arts in May of 1938.



May 1938 souvenir booklet of “Aida” and Watson Ad that appeared in booklet.

Finally, by 1938 Watson was managing heavyweight boxer Roscoe Toles. Sunnie Wilson, the former owner of the Mark Twain Hotel and Forest Club (located in Paradise Valley and at one time the largest black owned club in America) described Watson as “a soft-spoken, respectful man” (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:46). According to Wilson, “Mr. Watson was the first black I knew who owned a housing project. Some called him a numbers-man, but I looked upon him as a builder and developer” (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:46).

Roxborough's wealth during the Great Depression was evident in divorce proceedings filed by him against his wife Dora in 1934. According to the 1934 divorce complaint, the Roxboroughs' "lived luxuriously" (Roxborough v. Roxborough 1934). Dora Roxborough had diamonds worth \$10,000, a \$4,200 grand piano, a Packard automobile, monthly phone bills of \$100, and required \$1,000 a month for household and living expenses. John Roxborough possessed a 12-cylinder Lincoln automobile, wore socks that cost \$7.50 each, had 250 neckties, which cost \$1,625, and strove to maintain the "finest home of any colored man in Detroit" (Roxborough v. Roxborough 1934). Court testimony also revealed that John Roxborough had purchased Dora a home in Pennsylvania, furniture valued at \$15,000, and numerous expensive articles of clothing. Dora Roxborough contended her husband had bought her \$10 stockings, and numerous dresses and gowns ranging from \$100 to \$200 a piece in order for her to be the best-dressed woman in Detroit. These extravagant purchases were all made from July 1926 to October 1931 (Cowan 1936:12). John Roxborough.

The husband, owner and operator of gambling enterprises, sought a divorce on the grounds of extreme cruelty and requested an injunction to restrain his wife from interfering with him in his home, interfering with his business, or inflicting personal violence upon him. He alleged that she at one time shot a gun at him, was addicted to gambling, spent too much money, and generally caused him shame. She alleged that she armed herself after he physically beat her and further alleged that the husband failed to support her and was associating with other women (Roxborough v. Roxborough 1934).

During the divorce, John Roxborough was accused of hiding his finances and was charged with contempt of court for failure to pay alimony to his wife (Chicago Defender 1936a:23). John Roxborough would settle his divorce with Dora for \$30,000 in October of 1936 (Cowan 1936:12). In March of 1935, it was reported that Roxborough, along with 50,000 other people, attended the richest race in racing history (at that time) in Los Angeles. Many of the people who attended the race were considered celebrities, and Roxborough made a \$20,000 profit on the race

(Gould 1935: 17). At this time Roxborough had four numbers and policy houses: The Big Four, D & M, Royal Blue, and Last Train (Carlson 1940:46). He was described as, “one of Detroit’s best-loved citizens” and as being “possessed of keen business acumen” (Gibson 1935:20). It was reported that he was so popular that,

In Detroit, the news that Roxborough is in the neighborhood is a signal for a rush of persons seeking aid. At his office on St. Antoine Street, when he gets out of the car, when he walks down the street, there is always someone with a hard luck story. Many of these people he helps, when he finds that they are deserving...One will never know the number of youngsters that Roxborough has help through high school and college. He’s contributed in some measure, either directly or indirectly , to countless athletes among them Eddie Tolan, Eugene Beatty, Holman Williams, Clinton Bridges, Willis Ward and others. Some of them never forget his benefactions, a few are ungrateful. But through it all Roxborough has an abiding faith in humanity...(Gibson 1935:20).

Roxborough remarried in November of 1936, and by December it was reported, “Mrs. John Roxborough will be the Queen of Detroit Society. King Roxy, one swell guy, will build a magnificent palace for his queen. An invite to an affair of the Roxy’s now is like a ticket to the Blue Book” (Morris 1936:A6). A few years later John Roxborough hosted a lavish party at his home. The beauty of his home was said to strike awe in the guests. His home was equipped with a crystal bar, elaborate lighting and a recreation room, which contained a large jitter box and dance hall. The home was also furnished with spiral stairways, natural fireplaces, parquetted flooring, Venetian metal blinds, and leather furnishings (Gladys 1939:6).



235 Holbrook - site of Roxborough's mansion being built in 1936.



235 Holbrook in 2014.

Finally, in 1938 when Detroit was cited as having living costs higher than any other city at \$1,486.50 annually, Roxborough's home was robbed of \$3,000 in jewelry by his chauffeur



(Pittsburgh Courier 1938:6). In other words, for more than what one person needed to live in the city for a year, Roxborough owned in two rings and a diamond studded watch (Detroit Tribune December 1938b:1).

As this chapter shows, prior to and during the depression, black numbers operators made large sums of money from operating their numbers businesses. Some, who included a number of black ministers, criticized them for making their money from the pennies of the poor who could least afford it. On one hand, the ministers were against what they felt was morally wrong with numbers gambling. However, they were keenly aware of what black numbers operators (who were considered community leaders and were a part of the black upper class) meant to the community. Due to this, they ensured that the community recognized they were not attacking black numbers operators per se, rather they were addressing what numbers gambling was perceived to be, a drain on the black community. Instead of criticizing the numbers operators who provided the opportunity to play numbers, numbers players were targeted. It was felt that easily led, “ignorant” blacks from the south were victims in need of protecting from themselves and numbers gambling. As more blacks migrated to the city and were forced to live in overcrowded black areas, whites near those areas feared falling property values. Again, numbers gambling, considered a black trait, was blamed. For years, numbers gambling had been foisted on blacks, and finally many blacks began to own numbers as being “theirs.” When numbers gambling was attacked, many blacks felt that it was a personal attack on them.

While many blacks in the community suffered economically, numbers operators’ wealth was obvious. Some were criticized by community leaders for gaining wealth from the poor, and were accused of being ashamed of the poor they profited from. Other numbers operators became sellers of hope during the depression, and insisted their numbers business was responsible for the

survival of many poor people. Because of this, number operators were highly praised by some in the community for their generosity, and looked upon with positive favor by the poor who supplied their lavish lifestyle. It can be argued that the numbers operators were supported by the community because of the charity they bestowed on the community which included gifts of money, food, and employment. “Gifts make people feel morally bound to one another because of the mutual expectations and obligations to return the gift that arise as a consequence” (Komter 2005:43). The gifts may have acted to create social and moral ties between the numbers operators and the community who received their generosity. For numbers operators, the gifts they provided to the community may have been because they felt a moral obligation, or may have had a strategic purpose. Giving to charity has been cited as an “example of benefiting another person while at the same time relieving our own conscience...contributing to another person’s welfare may serve one’s own self-interest at the same time (Komter 2005:46). The numbers operators’ charity may have acted as a means to relieve their conscience. The community’s gratitude may have served the numbers operators as well, by solidifying their place in the community. “Gift exchange and the concomitant feelings of gratitude are at the basis of a system of mutual obligations among people and , as such, function as the moral cement of human society and culture” (Komter 2005:67). At times, numbers operators felt their generosity was not received with gratitude by some, but continued to give anyway.

It is interesting to point out that numbers operators ensured the community knew of their generosity and in a sense created their community image. Mosley used his newspaper, which targeted black Detroiters, to frequently tell of his (and other numbers operators) many acts of generosity. With access to a news outlet, numbers operators were able to influence and control the message they wanted put out in the community. Even in death, Mosley’s newspaper ensured

the community knew they owed him for his charity, and expounded on his acts to uplift the black race. It even justified his involvement in numbers gambling and rationalized the playing of numbers by comparing numbers operators with Wall Street stockbrokers.

Finally, this chapter described how lucrative numbers games were, and how the income generated from it helped the community with basic survival during the Great Depression. When the formal economy failed the informal continued to succeed. It was noted that the legitimate white men of finance were viewed as dishonest, fools, manipulators, and cheats by the public. This was in contrast to the black numbers operators who were viewed by their community as being honest, trustworthy, and having a keen sense of business. Numbers operators were trusted more so than the government at this time. When the city of Detroit was unable to meet payroll for its employees they issued scrip in place of money. Employees showed their lack of faith in the city and their faith in the numbers men by exchanging their scrip with the men who had money. Not all numbers operators were viewed as trust worthy and honest. When white numbers operators entered into the numbers game, they were viewed by the black community as being dishonest for failing to pay on numbers, and were criticized for taking resources from the community without giving back. Numbers gambling, and not the Great Depression, was also blamed by legitimate businesses (who were in competition with numbers) for people not patronizing their businesses in order to play the numbers. With their accumulated wealth, black numbers operators were able to provide legitimate business opportunities in the community. As a result of numbers, black numbers operators were able to open insurance and financial institutions. This allowed the community to be able to purchase affordable insurance, and receive loans that were otherwise denied to them by mainstream financial institutions. As all of this was unfolding, Gustav Carlson, a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, was

conducting research on numbers gambling in Detroit. His completed dissertation has been cited in over 30 works and years later would be described as a “remarkable” study (Cook, Glickman, O’Malley 2009:150) and the best study on numbers (Rubinstein 1980:50). The next chapter will examine his work in-depth.

## CHAPTER 6 “GUSTAV G. CARLSON’S A STUDY OF A CULTURE COMPLEX”

Leslie White, an American anthropologist, is credited with helping revive evolutionary theory in American anthropology in the 1930s (Moore 2004:175). He was also credited with suggesting a scientific approach or model for the study of culture (Sidky 2004:202), and for establishing the University of Michigan’s anthropology department (Peace 2006:1). He was universally recognized as making the department “one of the foremost in the country” (Peace 2006:1), making his name “synonymous with Michigan anthropology...”(Peace 2006:9).

Leslie White first studied history, political science and psychology at Columbia University, receiving his bachelor and master’s degrees in 1923 and 1925 respectively (Peace 2004:10). In 1922, while at Columbia University, he became dissatisfied with the university, and “...in search of a scientific and radical methodology to change the world” began taking classes at the New School for Social Research in New York (Peace 2004:14). It was here that White would first take anthropology courses (Peace 2004:16). The New School for Social Research was established in the spring of 1919 by a group described as liberals, radical democrats, dissatisfied Columbia University intellectuals, and editors from the New Republic (Peace 2004:14). The founding group was disappointed with what they perceived as a lack of intellectual freedom on many college campuses. The school would go on to hire a number of people who were banned from teaching due to some act of “social or political nonconformity” (Peace 2004:15).

One such person hired to teach was William Isaac Thomas, a sociologist, who had been dismissed from the University of Chicago. Leslie White enjoyed the courses he took under Thomas and would grow close to him during his two years at the school (Peace 2004:16). Thomas’ work, *Source Book of Human Origins* was credited with being the starting point of

White's "...disinterested investigation of the origin and function of social institutions" (Peace 2004:16). Thomas' book "...was a sociological study of primitive society that viewed history as driven forward by the economic struggle existence, capitalist accumulation, and the division of labor" (Peace 2004:16). White in 1925 pursued his graduate degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago based partially on his deep respect for William I. Thomas (Peace 2004:18). The University of Chicago at that time "offered the best graduate program in sociology and anthropology in the United States" (Peace 2004:18). While at the New School for Social Research and at the University of Chicago, White was exposed to antievolutionism. American anthropologists at that time followed Franz Boas' historical particularism as the platform for training anthropologists. Boas rejected cultural evolution and the notion, "... that cultural practices were explicable only in reference to broad evolutionary stages, Boas argued that they were understandable only in specific cultural contexts" (Moore 2004:33-34). With this new thinking, Boas would become known as "...the most important single force in shaping American anthropology in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Stocking Jr. 1974:1). Boas and his disciples,

[...] established complete intellectual hegemony over the anthropological landscape. Their favorite theories and epistemological orientation defined the discipline during this time. It is unequivocal that Boas and his students stood together in their negative opinion of evolutionary theory in cultural anthropology and the possibility of a science of culture (Sidky 2004:200).

In 1927, White graduated from the University of Chicago with his PhD in anthropology, and took a position at the University of Buffalo. While teaching there White began to develop and express deep reservations for Boas' position on cultural evolution. "He began to view culture as the principal mechanism through which humans ensure their survival" (Barrett 1989:988). During the spring of 1929, White spent eight weeks in the Soviet Union. While

there, White studied the Russian Revolution and upon his return to the United States presented his findings (Shankman and Dino 2001:161). White called the Russian Revolution “the most significant event in modern history” (White 1931:14). In the same article, he criticized capitalism and blamed it for the Great Depression. According to White, “Capitalism cannot continue to exist. It has almost realized itself, and signs of disintegration are visible on all sides” (White 1931:16). White was convinced that “the Russian people, freed from the shackles of supernaturalism and economic exploitation, have the truly international point of view” (Bee 1929). His stance was not popular, and many considered him a radical and controversial figure. With these views White was hired to teach at the conservative University of Michigan in June of 1930 (Peace 2006:9). White, as the university’s only full time anthropologist, taught cultural evolution classes and throughout the 1930s significantly increased enrollment at the school’s anthropology department (Peace 2006:10). “White argued that most aspects of culture are epiphenomenal to a material substratum and that the forms that society and culture take are determined by the technology and economic institutions upon which they are based” (Barrett 1989:1). Although his classes attracted hundreds of students, his views on cultural determinism and evolution caused many conservative and upper-middle class parents and members of the church to often urge administrators at the university to censor White’s views (Peace 2006:12). It was during these early years that Gustav Gunnar Carlson became a graduate student of Leslie White’s.

Carlson was born to Swedish immigrants and raised in the United States where he received his A.B. degree in biology from Northern Michigan University in 1932 before earning his master’s degree in anthropology in 1934. Soon after earning his master’s degree he began studying numbers gambling in Detroit as a doctoral student (Goodman 2006:C12). Carlson

presented his dissertation in 1940 to obtain his PhD, and White's influence can be seen in his work.

In his study, Carlson utilized ethnographic methods to examine numbers gambling in Detroit, which he described as a "cultural complex." In explaining what a culture complex is, Carlson stated,

[...]number gambling does not exist as an isolated activity in the community. In the course of its development it has attracted to itself a number of other activities which have come to stand in a more or less parasitic relationship to it. Thus in speaking of number gambling we are actually referring to a complex of activities with the number games themselves, their organization, etc. constituting merely the core of this complex (Carlson 1940:4-5).

In the first part of Carlson's dissertation he provides the history of numbers gambling, a description of how the games are played, and an account of the organizational structure of the numbers gambling organizations in Detroit. Next, Carlson examined ways in which players try to "beat the numbers," and then analyzed what he termed parasitic activities involved in numbers gambling. These parasitic activities included religion, magic, and supernatural and lucky devices. People who profited by the exploitation of numbers players operated these activities.

Carlson found,

Number gambling does not exist as an isolated activity but rather as a number of closely integrated activities, i.e., as a culture complex. As such, we may regard it as a cultural expression of a psychological condition inherent in any activity involving chance. Any situation in which the luck or chance element is prominent naturally causes the individual faced with that situation to seek some means of control. To effect such control the individual may appeal to matter-of-fact aids or/and magical and supernatural ones. Since in number gambling, as in all forms of gambling, the element of chance is great it is inevitable that there should grow up around it many practices designed to control the outcome of the numbers (Carlson 1940:157).

Carlson was able to obtain first-hand knowledge of numbers gambling in Detroit because he was on "intimate terms" with numbers operators and writers (Carlson 1940: 66-67). Carlson



does not indicate how long he observed the activities of his research subjects, but it is clear that in addition to observing them he also participated in the business of numbers gambling. For example, one numbers operator whom Carlson was on “...rather intimate terms came to Ann Arbor with a view of getting number playing started on the University of Michigan campus. I arranged for Mr. \_\_\_\_ to meet with several students who had expressed their willingness to sell the numbers” (Carlson 1940:67).

Based on his research, Carlson argued that numbers gambling in 1929 had developed into a major form of organized vice that provided huge monetary benefits. Carlson used theory from White’s old friend and mentor, William I. Thomas, to support his argument. In 1937, Thomas released his book *Primitive Behavior*. The book was,

[...] presented as a study in culture history from the sociopsychological standpoint. Its general objective is an examination of the varieties of human response to the stimuli of various cultural situations and the exemplification of the degree of adaptability of the human organism as shown in individual and organizational behavior reactions and the resultant group habits and social codes (Thomas 1937:v).

Thomas further argued that theories concerning the degrees of intelligence or mental endowment among races have not been substantiated, and when differences do exist the differences have been insignificant in the development of behavior and culture (Thomas 1937:7). He believed that behavior found within a group is not inherent rather it is developed based upon experiences and habit systems. Social change does not occur because of biological reasons, rather it occurs due to migration, commerce and communication (Park 1937:288). Carlson suggested that numbers gambling in Detroit’s black communities changed the culture because of the Great Depression and this change can be seen in the use of numbers argot used in basic communications.

Thomas in *Primitive Behavior* explained a tendency in culture or what he calls “perseverative.” Carlson described this “as the tendency of people to step up an initial behavior pattern to a position of emotional and social significance in the group” (Carlson 1940:127). In other words, Thomas felt there is a tendency in human beings “to step up patterns to unanticipated extremes” (Thomas 1937:7). There is a tendency for people to define a situation, a tendency to persevere it, and a tendency to respond consistently to the defined situation. The effect is that different societies respond in diametrically different ways to the same situation (Thomas 1937:7). Carlson believed,

The idea of perseveration may serve as a starting point for a further analysis of number gambling. We may regard the present mania for playing the numbers as the stepping up of an initial gambling pattern. As we have already pointed out, number gambling has been in existence for a long time, dating back at least to the sixteenth century. In our discussion of the historical development of the games we observed that while at times they did achieve considerable importance among certain groups at no time did they reach the degree of development that they did in the United States subsequent to the year 1929. Thus while the number gambling pattern itself is rather old its present perseveration is unique (Carlson 1940:128).

Carlson believed that numbers gambling was predominantly an “urban negro activity” whose “perseveration is manifested in the negro community” (Carlson 1940:128). This perseveration, Carlson argued, could be found in its pervasiveness in daily conversations within the community, in the influence it had on language (due to the development of its own argot), in its folklore, in the amount of money generated, and in the number of printed articles on the subject (Carlson 1940:137). For example, Carlson found that wherever black people congregated (pool rooms, drug stores, and church) “number talk” could be heard. Carlson stated that instead of customary greetings (like Good morning or How do you do) black people greeted each other with “What was it?” To which the answer would be the winning number of the day (Carlson 1940:130). Carlson also noted that certain number’s vocabulary became synonymous

with actual numbers. An example can be found in the term “gig,” which in policy is a type of play involving three numbers. Carlson noticed that some people used the term “gig” instead of the number three. While at the “colored” Y.W.C.A in the city he heard the following, “How many muffins, sir? A gig will be plenty” (Carlson 1940:132). Finally, Carlson believed the general perseveration of numbers gambling since 1929 was further indicated by the number of newspapers articles dedicated to it. Carlson rationalized that newspapers reflect public interest, and by examining the number of articles dedicated to it, a rough index of its importance could be ascertained (Carlson 1940:130). Carlson stated that only four articles appeared in Detroit newspapers prior to 1929, and 60 articles appeared between 1929 and 1935 (Carlson 1940:130). “During this same period in Detroit and elsewhere there was scarcely an issue of any negro paper which did not contain some reference to number gambling” (Carlson 1940:130-131).

Carlson believed the primary reason numbers gambling became highly developed was due to,

[...]the fact that the rise and decline of number gambling on a large scale parallels very closely the period of economic depression. Taking the years 1929-1935 as the period of the depression we find that this is also the period during which number gambling reached its greatest development. The fact suggests that number gambling in its present state has its roots in the economic and social chaos of this period...The importance of the economic crisis as a causative factor is further demonstrated when we examine the motives for playing. Invariably we find that the primary motive in playing is an economic one. People rarely play the numbers for the thrill or sport which it affords. With most people number gambling is a serious business which is indulged in because the usual sources of income have been destroyed and the belief is that this is one way in which that income can be restored...These factors point rather clearly to the fact that number gambling is essentially a depression phenomenon (Carlson 1940:138-140).

In keeping in line with Thomas’ work, Carlson further stated:

[...] let us consider briefly the problem of the racial incidence of number gambling. Why is it that number gambling is so predominantly a negro activity? To answer this question there is no need to appeal to such stereotypes as racial temperament, innate disposition, love of adventure, and so on. There is no

scientific proof for the notion that the negro is temperamentally or instinctively more inclined to this kind of behavior than is any other racial group. The true answer, it seems to me must be in terms of the social and economic conditions under which the negro lives. If our earlier conclusion is correct, that the present development of number gambling is largely a result of the economic depression, then it follows logically that it should have its chief incidence among negroes. It is common knowledge that no group felt the depression more acutely than did the negro. Being a marginal employee and working as he does at the foot of the occupational ladder it is inevitable that this should be the case. In brief, the negro is addicted to number gambling not because of some hypothetical racial quality but because of his difficult economic position and because he regards this activity as a possible way of improving his condition. In this connection too it is important to point out that when white people take up number gambling it is principally those whites who most nearly approximate the negro in social and economic status (Carlson 1940:142-143).

In addition to the depression, Carlson also attributed the rise of numbers gambling to the repeal of Prohibition. He argued that when prohibition was repealed, it

[...]did much to promote number gambling. In fact, it is entirely possible that had the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment remained on the statute books, number gambling would never have reached its present status. The reason is quite obvious. With prohibition gone the whole underworld organization which had been built up for the illicit liquor traffic suddenly found itself with nothing to do. Consequently, the individuals engaged in this business began to look about for a worthy substitute which they found in the number racket (Carlson 1940:141).

Carlson further noted that the depression deprived a number of institutions, for example churches, welfare agencies, community enterprises, and organizations that depend upon public support of much needed financial support (Carlson 1940:147). “Thus the economic depression by depriving certain institutions of their regular means of support made it possible for number gambling to become established as a legitimate business in the community” (Carlson 1940:150). Carlson concluded “Number gambling may be viewed as a reaction of the negro community to the economic depression. It represents an attempt, however, futile, on the part of the community, to regain whatever income and security had existed during normal times” (Carlson 1940:156).

Finally, Carlson alleged that “negro” ministers and other moral leaders prior to the depression condemned numbers gambling. However,

With the coming of the economic depression this attitude was changed to one of acceptance by these same individuals, and in some instances they went so far as to defend it. This change is attributable to two factors. First, is the economic depression which destroyed the regular sources of income of such institutions as the Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A., and the church. In order to survive or at least continue with any degree of efficiency they were forced to accept support from the only available source – the gamblers. In accepting the gambler’s support they were compelled naturally to accept the practice which made this support possible. The second factor is the association of number gambling with certain prestige elements in the community. An activity like an individual is known by the company it keeps, and number gambling has kept good company. Many of Detroit’s most prominent gamblers are men of high prestige who before going into the number business had had a prominent place in legitimate business. Other people of prestige such as doctors, lawyers, and dentists have also done much to legitimize number gambling. With the whole community playing the numbers it was a matter of good business for these individuals to align themselves with it, or at least not to condemn it (Carlson 1940:158-159).

Leslie’s White’s influence can be seen in Carlson’s work. Early in White’s career, he wrote under the pseudonym John Steel, and his writing displayed his secret Marxist leaning, and this is shown in Carlson’s study. Carlson is critical of capitalism and the effect the Depression had on Detroit’s poor black community. The Depression was thought to be the reason numbers gambling developed. Carlson saw numbers gambling as the poor’s response to being shut out and denied economic resources from America’s economic structure.

While Carlson’s study is valuable in providing descriptions of how numbers were played, as well as the organizational structure in Detroit, his work contributed to the continued racialization of numbers gambling. There were also a number of shortcomings in his interpretations and conclusions. Carlson indicated the first “authentic information on the history of policy in Detroit goes back to 1884” (Carlson 1940:45). However, a newspaper article appearing in the Detroit Free Press on December 3, 1858 noted,

Dependent on the lotteries and more pernicious than they, is the policy business, which reaches the magnificent dimensions of about \$10,000 a day. The policy tickets vary in price from one cent to one hundred dollars, and find customers mostly among the poor, ignorant, and superstitious part of our population. With the downfall of lotteries, the policy business must cease to exist (1).

This shows that policy was around much earlier than Carlson believed, and was big business at that time. Just two years later, the United States Census of 1860 reported there were 45,619 citizens in Detroit, of which only 1,402 were black. This would lead one to believe that the majority of players were not black when this first recorded “pervasiveness” occurred. Carlson believed the general perseveration of numbers gambling since 1929, could be proven by looking at the number of newspaper articles dedicated to it. Carlson found that only four articles appeared in Detroit newspapers prior to 1929, and 60 articles appeared between 1929 and 1935 (Carlson 1940:130). However, fifty articles (46 more than what Carlson reported) concerning policy playing were found dating from 1858 to 1928 in only one of Detroit’s daily newspaper (the Detroit Free Press). Twenty-four percent of the articles were written between 1902 and 1903, when the Detroit Free Press reported that “Forty Policy Joints” were open in Detroit (Detroit Free Press 1902a:1). It was estimated that policy operations made profits of between \$50,000 and \$60,000 a year (Detroit Free Press 1902a:2). In 1902, there were 40 known policy operations versus just 35 in 1935 (Carlson 1940:47). By Carlson’s argument, the amount of money generated, as well as the numbers organizations would indicate this pervasiveness actually occurred in Detroit prior to 1929, and not after.

Carlson also purported that between 1929 and 1935 “...in Detroit and elsewhere there was scarcely an issue of any negro paper which did not contain some reference to number gambling” (Carlson 1940:130-131). A review of the black newspaper, the Detroit Tribune, from April of 1933 (when it first was published) to December of 1935 (138 papers) was conducted.

Of the 138 papers reviewed, only one paper (chronicling the funeral of numbers operator W. Mosley on June 1, 1935) contained a mention of policy or numbers gambling in it. In addition, a review of two additional black newspapers, the Chicago Defender, and the Pittsburgh Courier were conducted as well. These two weekly newspapers were sold in Detroit and frequently carried stories concerning Detroit events. A seven-year (1929 to 1935 or 364 papers) review of both newspapers revealed that the Chicago Defender had 63 papers (or 17%) that carried articles about numbers gambling and the Pittsburgh Courier had 70 (or 19 %). Of the 63 Chicago Defender articles, only three articles pertained to numbers gambling in Detroit, and the Pittsburgh Courier had just six articles concerning numbers gambling in Detroit. So Carlson's ascertain that there scarcely was an issue of any negro paper that did not contain a mention about numbers gambling is not accurate.

Carlson concluded that numbers gambling became pervasive in the negro community due to the depression and because of the repeal of prohibition. Carlson concluded that,

The importance of the economic depression as a causative factor in the perseveration of number gambling should not blind us to the importance of one other factor – namely the repeal of prohibition. This did much to promote number gambling. In fact, it is entirely possible that had the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment remained on the statue books, number gambling would never have reached its present status. The reason is quite obvious. With prohibition gone the whole underworld organization which had been built up for the illicit liquor traffic suddenly found itself with nothing to do. Consequently, the individuals engaged in this business began to look about for a worthy substitute which they found in the number rackets (Carlson 1940:141).

However, as previously stated, numbers gambling was introduced by John Roxborough in 1919 to an interested and appreciative audience, after a dormant phase. From that point on, Roxborough's numbers business grew. By 1927, both Roxborough and Everett Watson because of their numbers business were considered "successful business men" (Pittsburgh Courier 1927:9). In February of 1928, more than a year before the stock market crash (the symbol of the

beginning of the Depression), it was estimated that 31 policy houses in Detroit were responsible for \$20,000 being played daily on numbers gambling (Detroit News 1928:1). By December 1928, or 10 months prior to the start of the Depression, it was estimated that the daily policy play ranged from \$50,000 to 80,000 (Detroit News 1928:1). By this time numbers gambling was well organized and operating as successful businesses. Prohibition was not repealed until 1933, and it was reported that whites were opening numbers establishments in Detroit five years prior (in 1928) because of the profits to be made in the business (Chicago Defender 1928a:1). Therefore, Prohibition was not the reason that whites entered into the numbers business.

Lastly, Carlson purported that the “moral guardians” of Detroit’s attitude about numbers gambling underwent a drastic change due to the need for funding caused by the Depression (Carlson 1940:144). However this is not completely accurate. Some ministers and community leaders did speak out against the numbers game prior to 1929. For example, it was John Roxborough who enlisted some “store front ministers” in 1928 to sell numbers to their congregations (Carter 1970:48) while other ministers preached sermons against policy playing in the same year (Chicago Defender 1928c:1). Even after the Depression had hit the city in June of 1930, some Christian and moral societies made an attempt to make Detroit a “holy city” by eradicating policy (Pittsburgh Courier 1930:A8). So not all “moral guardians” of Detroit underwent a change in attitude as a result of the Depression. In addition to the change in attitude, Carlson felt that numbers operators had gained prestige because of their wealth. Again this was not entirely accurate. Roxborough was born into what was considered an elite family. With this came a prestige factor that he brought to numbers gambling and not the other way around. Carlson’s argument that numbers gambling was developed as a result of the Great Depression misses several important facts. It was prevalent before the Depression and as this



paper will show, successfully continued in both times of economic recession and prosperity. Carlson ignores the role race played in its development. Because of discrimination and denied opportunities, numbers gambling became a way for blacks to gain economic freedoms. These economic freedoms provided various and numerous opportunities, which advanced social relations in Detroit's black communities that Carlson failed to discuss.

After Carlson's work was presented in 1940, Detroit and the rest of the country were showing signs of recovery from the Depression and there were no signs that numbers gambling was waning. Although numbers gambling was still turning a robust profit, Detroit's founding numbers operators along with a number of government and police officials would be prosecuted for the illegal racket, and Carlson's work would be cited as one of the factors that exposed the corruption. The next chapter will focus on the incident that brought the city and numbers gambling operations to its knees.

## CHAPTER 7 “TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF THE NUMBERS MEN”

As numbers gambling continued through the Great Depression, the effort to put an end to it continued as well. In 1931, Wall Street refused to publish clearing house closings in an effort to prevent numbers operators from using the published numbers as the source of the winning number. This served to combat, “...a common notion that the various exchanges from which the winning numbers for certain games are obtained are part and parcel of the racket. Many believe that the quotations of the exchanges which appear in the newspapers are put there for the convenience of those who play the numbers” (Carlson 1940:73). The refusal to publish closing numbers not only distanced the clearing houses from any association with the numbers racket, but it curbed “considerable annoyance to the officials of these organizations” who received voluminous amounts of correspondence from gamblers asking for the winning numbers in advance (Carlson 1940:85). In response to Wall Street refusing to publish clearing house closings and a bloody numbers war in New York, major numbers operators from all over the United States formed the National Brotherhood of Policy Kings in 1933. The purpose was to pool power and offer protection to all members. John Roxborough was a prominent member. The organization would meet annually in Cleveland and in Hot Springs, Arkansas to discuss various issues (Thompson 2006:114-115). At one such meeting that took place in 1936, members gathered to discuss what consequences a United States court ruling would have on their operations. At this meeting a Detroit policy king, described as being powerful because of his connections, presided over the meeting (Chicago Defender 1936b:1). At this point it was estimated that numbers games in the United States generated \$1,000,000,000 a year (Mellen 1936:18). Meetings such as this helped ensure numbers gambling continued as a lucrative

business, and ensured the election of corrupt politicians who allowed numbers gambling to flourish.

One such politician was Richard “Little Dick” Reading Sr. Reading was called “Little Dick” because he was only five feet three inches. Reading was considered a self-made man, who rose quickly as a political force in Detroit. Born and educated in Detroit, Reading started his career as an apprentice printer for the Detroit News before managing several different departments with the Detroit Times. From the newspaper business Reading began purchasing properties in the city and selling them, before first obtaining a job as a city assessor. From this position he was promoted to city controller, and then decided to throw his hat into politics and was elected to the office of city clerk (Detroit Free Press Editorial Magazine 1942:1). By 1937, Reading, a Republican, decided to run for mayor of Detroit. Reading had big plans that included not only running the fourth largest city in America, but in profiting from his position of power. In June of 1937, he attended a Board of Commerce pleasure cruise with several police officials and the chairman of the Water Board, William Skrzycki. Reading and Skrzycki had been political associates and friends for more than 20 years. As the cruise ship passed by Marquette prison, the friends began to discuss Reading’s run for mayor. During the conversation Reading asked Skrzycki if he knew about the graft that was being paid to Detroit Police Department’s Fourth Precinct. Skrzycki like others had heard rumors that the Fourth Precinct was receiving \$5,000 a month in bribe money to allow gambling to run without police interference. Reading had estimated that other parts of the city, specifically the central district (which included downtown, the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley) would pay three times as much for police protection (Detroit News 1941h:1). With big plans, Reading was easily elected after running a contentious campaign in the fall of 1937. Several numbers men, including Walter Norwood, had

supported Reading. Walter Norwood was the owner of the Norwood Hotel, the Plantation Club, and the Manhattan Policy House. In 1937, Norwood contributed \$500 to Reading's campaign, and in exchange for that was told, "Thanks, I'll take care of you boys" (Detroit Free Press 1940p:1). Later Norwood was given a special phone number to city hall and was instructed to call it if he had any trouble as it pertained to the operation of his numbers organization (Detroit Free Press 1940p:10). Everett Watson also donated \$3,000 to Reading's campaign fund (Detroit News 1941f:4). "Little Dick" was known as being a likeable "showman" who was impulsive, and hated advice and rarely took it from anyone (Detroit Free Press Editorial Magazine 1942:1). After he was sworn in as the mayor of America's fourth largest city in 1938, he demanded a new limousine which would cost taxpayers \$6,000. When a delegate from the Common Council tried to persuade him to instead use the funds for much-needed police vehicles, Reading angrily refused stating, "Gentlemen, I intend to take this mayoring seriously and I need that car" (Detroit Free Press Editorial Magazine 1942:1). Reading also hired his "irresponsible" son, Richard Reading Jr., as his personal secretary at taxpayer expense (Detroit Free Press Editorial Magazine 1942:1). Reading insisted that he be assigned handsome, tall, and well-built policemen as his bodyguards, which allowed him to make an impressionable entrance at all functions (The Detroit Free Press Editorial Magazine 1942:1). One such function occurred in July of 1938, following Joe Louis' fight with Max Schmeling. A wine party was given at Small's Paradise by numbers operators/bankers Everett Watson and Thomas "Rooster" Hammonds. In attendance were various numbers bankers, celebrities, and politicians including Mayor Richard Reading Sr. (Chicago Defender 1938a:7).

With champagne flowing like water, Everett Watson and "Rooster" Hammonds two Detroiters named by police in connection with the policy racket in Detroit entertained Mayor Reading and his son, Richard, of that city and some twenty other persons at Small's Paradise the night of the Louis-Schmeling fight last June

22, Mayor Reading and his party, which was composed of one other person in addition to his son, entered the cabaret immediately after the fight and left for his suite of rooms in the Waldorf-Astoria about 4 a.m. the next morning (New York Amsterdam News 1938:1).



Detroit Mayor Richard "Little Dick" Reading in January 1938.



"Double Dip" Reading during his inauguration in 1938.



Joe Louis signing an agreement to fight Bob Pastor in Detroit on September 19, 1939. Detroit Mayor Richard Reading has his hand on Louis' shoulder, as John Roxborough stands nearby.

Shortly after being elected mayor for the city of Detroit, Richard Reading Sr. was approached by his campaign worker, Ulysses Boykin, on behalf of black numbers operators. Boykin was referred to as the “black mayor” in some black areas of the city because he had assisted in getting Reading Sr. elected (Detroit Free Press 1940u:12). Boykin was also a columnist for the black newspaper, the Detroit Tribune, which was owned and managed by Charles Mosley, the owner of the numbers house “The Michigan Policy Wheel” (Detroit Free Press 1940u:12). Boykin had been approached by Everett Watson for help in fixing payout odds to 500 to 1, and securing protection (Detroit Free Press 1940u:12). Numbers operators were forced by the police department to keep payout odds to 500 to 1. If an establishment refused, they would be raided numerous times until they lowered their odds in line with everyone else (Detroit Free Press 1940u:12). A white numbers operator, Louis Weisberg had increased his payout odds to 600 to 1, and this pushed other numbers operators to the verge of extinction

before Reading intervened on behalf of the black numbers operators (Detroit Free Press 1940k:1). Watson wanted to see a centralized racket squad formed, and the hiring and promoting of more black police officers. He felt that a special racket squad would “help the numbers operators by keeping them in mind” (Detroit Free Press 1940k:1). Boykin took this request to Reading and advised him that many black people depended on numbers for a living. Reading in response told him “the colored people had conducted themselves like gentlemen, and that the policy and mutuels were their games” (Detroit Free Press 1940k:4). Reading said he “hoped something could be done to prevent them from going out of business” (Detroit Free Press 1940k:4). Reading then formed the centralized racket squad (three weeks after Watson’s suggestion) and Watson and the other numbers operators agreed to take care of Reading Sr. by making graft payments to him (Detroit Free Press 1940k:1&4). In order to prove that they were “protected,” pickup men would carry a metal tag with a four cloverleaf engraved on it. This tag designated what numbers house they worked. If they happened to be stopped or arrested by police they were simply to flash the metal cloverleaf tag (Detroit Free Press 1940v:4). Boykin delivered payments to Reading from the number operators (which included Everett Watson, John Roxborough, Thomas Hammond, Irving Roane, and Walter Norwood) from September of 1938 until December of 1938, when Reading became dissatisfied with him. At this point Watson made the payments, which were \$4,000 a month, to Detroit Police Inspector Raymond Boettcher. Boettcher would then deliver \$2,000 to Mayor Reading at the Book-Cadillac Hotel. Elmer “Buff” Ryan, handbook operator and racing news service manager (who controlled the wire service that provided winning horse information) would receive \$1,000. Police superintendent Fred Frahm received \$800, and Boettcher would keep the remaining \$200 for himself. From

December of 1938 to August of 1939, Mayor Reading was paid \$18,000, Frahm \$7,200, Ryan \$9,000, and Boettcher \$1,800 (Detroit Free Press 1940s:1).

Mayor Reading would be visited by Roxborough and Watson a number of times in his office, whereby they used their political influence with him. On one occasion, Roxborough and Watson advised the mayor that mobsters from Cleveland were attempting to “muscle in on the numbers and policy games in Detroit” (Chicago Defender 1941c:9). Reading promised the men he would do something about the situation. On another occasion Reading was told that police Lieutenant Frank Dombecky was a “good friend of Negroes” (Chicago Defender 1941c:9). After being advised of this, Dombecky was promoted and placed over a police station on the city’s west side that had a large black population. Watson and Roxborough used their political influence with the mayor to get two black officers promoted to the rank of detective, and on one visit to the mayor they brought Joe Louis. On this visit, the emissaries successfully had Louis’ former bodyguard promoted to a detective sergeant (Chicago Defender 1941c:9).

By the fall of 1938, many Detroiters felt the numbers game had flourished openly in the city for several years.

One of the reason given for the clearing house racket carrying on unmolested for so long was that “every body played the numbers.” It was an open secret that even at the Wayne County building writers took the plays from the higher-ups as well as the low-downs and even the law, it is reported made no effort to curtail it. Just recently a ruling was passed that anyone seen writing in the county building was to be thrown out. As a result the writers moved on the corners and took the plays just the same...The policy and clearing house game has grown into a tremendous business here giving employment to hundreds of people. Many high school and college women and men were employed in the offices of the various companies. Sub-stations had sprung up in almost every section of the city. In the swankiest hotels and clubs, in the factories and shops, barber shops, pool rooms, restaurants, grocery stores, to say nothing of private homes, writers took their daily tool which amounted to tens of thousands of dollars. (Atlanta Daily World 1938: 6).



In September of 1938, state Senator Charles C. Diggs of Detroit presented the findings of a study he had conducted in Detroit's black neighborhoods. According to his report, blacks made up one-third of tuberculosis cases in Detroit, infant and maternity death rates were higher among blacks than whites, housing rent for blacks in black districts were much higher than in white districts because of the limited housing available, and housing, safety and health laws were not enforced. Finally, Diggs reported that numbers gambling plagued black neighborhoods and went untouched due to lack of police enforcement (Detroit Free Press 1938b:2). In his report Diggs also complained that numbers gambling was largely responsible for the crime and poverty in his district. "This report submitted just prior to the election held last Tuesday, brought down an avalanche of disgruntled protests from those who played the numbers, and an effort was immediately launched to defeat Diggs" (Cowans 1938:2). In response to Digg's allegation the Detroit Police Department declared war on policy/numbers playing and conducted a series of raids on those establishments. More than 200 police officers raided 11 numbers houses to include Roxborough's Big Four House, Watson's Yellow Dog, and George Cordell's Murphy House (Detroit Free Press 1938c:1). Cordell, a white numbers banker, was formerly a bootlegger and rumrunner. Eighty-one men and five women were arrested, and roughly \$2,200 seized. When police were questioned as to why so little money was found, they attributed it to conducting the raids too early in the day (Detroit Free Press 1938c:1). However during the raid on the Murphy House, an important document showing that the numbers bankers were in collusion and had come to a "fair trade agreement" was found. The document was titled, "Detroit Policy Racket's 'Fair Trade Code' and went into effect on August 27, 1938" (Detroit News 1938a:1). The first part of the document outlined the "rules of organization," which established the standard rate and basis for all number organizations. The three rules of

organization included paying odds of 500 to 1, paying writers twenty-five percent, and pick-up men ten percent. All Detroit numbers organizations agreed:

1. Not to proposition any other companies, writers, station or pick-up men.
2. If any of the pick-up men or station men want a change from one company to another, such a change cannot be made until former company is consulted.
3. If a writer, pick-up man, station man or other employee is discharged for dishonesty, such a person or persons are to be placed upon a permanent black list and not to be accepted by any other company.
4. If for a personal reason or misunderstanding an employee wishes to make a change, former employer and prospective employer shall get to-gether and affect an adjustment of the difficulty.
5. No station rents or fees are to be paid (this matter left open to discussion).
6. No short slips to be paid in part or otherwise.
7. Deadline for acceptance of business to be established the same for all companies, ten minutes before the off-time of the first and third races.
8. Each company to see that the agents and pick-up men do not give writers in stations more than twenty-five percent (25%) for the business (Detroit News 1938a:1).

The agreement was put together to ensure all numbers organizations operated under the same conditions and did not operate with an unfair advantage. The larger number organizations were concerned that smaller “fly-by-night” organizations were ruining the numbers racket’s reputation by not paying winners (Chicago Defender 1941a:1). Larger organizations agreed to abide by an agreement in an attempt to drive out these unscrupulous organizations, and to ensure they could survive. The numbers operators agreed to lower the payoff odds to 500 to 1 to cover the substantial graft payments that were being made to the prosecutor’s office and police officials (Chicago Defender 1941a:1). In addition, some numbers organizations were losing writers to other organizations that were paying commissions of 32% versus the standard 25%. When the agreement was made to pay all writers 25% commission, the writers who had to reduce their commission staged a strike. These writers eventually went back to work when they learned their commission would be 25% or nothing (Detroit News 1938b:4).

Another agreement was found later and showed the number houses that were in agreement included both black and white numbers organizations. The black number organizations included the Big Four Company (owned by John Roxborough), the Yellow Dog Company (owned by Everett Watson), the Michigan Company (owned by Charles Mosley), and the Daily News Company (owned by Brumal Penick). The white numbers organizations included the Murphy Company (owned by Joe Massie, Pete Corrado and George Cordell), Western Union Company (owned by Peter Kosiba), Mexico Villa Company (owned by Louis Weisburg), and the Great Lakes Company. Black number organizations believed that all of the police activity was specifically orchestrated to turn control of the numbers racket over to white mobsters (Detroit Tribune 1938c:1).



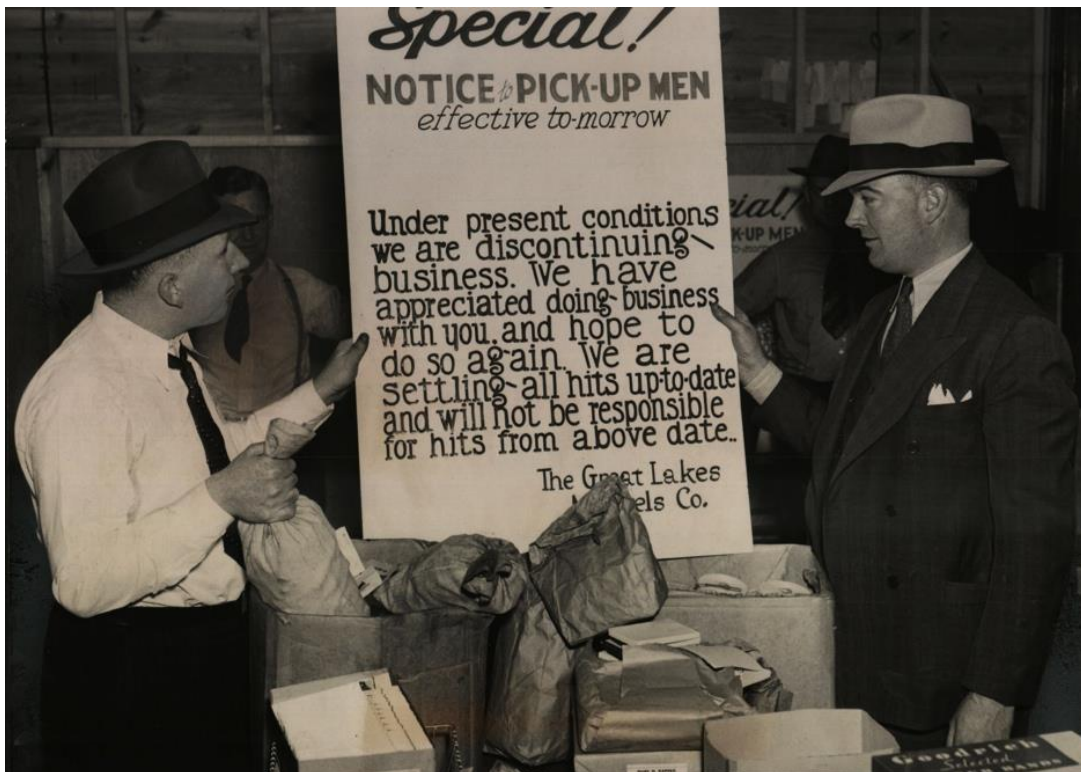
The police activity also revealed that people from all walks of life played the numbers. Numbers writers were observed taking numbers from people in the Wayne County building, at police headquarters, from a local high school, and from a number of wealthy homeowners (Detroit Free Press 1938a:3).

As part of the war on numbers gambling, Detroit Police Commissioner Heinrich Pickert warned the “thousands of Detroiters who consider themselves good citizens” against playing the numbers (Detroit News 1938c:1). He advised that by playing the numbers, decent citizens unwittingly contributed to crime, juvenile delinquency, rackets, gang feuds, and bloodshed. Pickert released the criminal records of the Murphy Company numbers operators, Massie, Cordell, and Corrado. Their criminal records showed the men had previously been arrested for armed robbery, carrying concealed weapons, rum running, bribery, and for multiple murder charges (Detroit News 1938c:15). These numbers operators’ characters were very different from Roxborough and Watson who were viewed as community businessmen and lacked such violent and extensive criminal records.



Gangster and Murphy Company numbers operators Joe Massie in 1933.

The so-called war on numbers gambling did have a temporary effect on numbers operations. The police raids caused the Great Lakes Company to temporarily cease operations. When the police raided the numbers headquarters on September 20, 1938, they confiscated 300,000 betting slips, which represented bets placed over a two day period. The Great Lakes Company had also posted a notice informing pick-up men that due to police enforcement they were discontinuing business (Detroit Free Press 1938d:5).



Sign confiscated during raid on Great Lakes Mutuels Company on September 20, 1938. Pictured to the right is Lieutenant John McCarthy.

During this raid commanded by Lieutenant John McCarthy, twenty-two people were arrested. Of those arrested were William McBride and Janet MacDonald, a bookkeeper for the Great Lakes Company. Although numerous arrests were made during these raids, none were convicted (Detroit News 1940g:14). The flurry of raids in August and September of 1938 were shams and served two purposes. It made the public believe there was in fact a war on gambling, and it also

allowed the protection rates that gambling operators had to pay police and other officials to be raised (Detroit News 1940g:14). The graft or payoffs that number houses had to pay to keep from being prosecuted went from \$150 to \$600 a month (Detroit News 1940f:2). In addition to the monthly payoffs, numbers operators like Everett Watson found themselves again contributing to the re-election of Mayor Reading. Watson donated \$1,000 to Reading's campaign in June of 1939. The money was used to supplement the operation of Reading's campaign headquarters. During this same campaign, Watson, Roxborough, and Norwood together would donate an additional \$3,600 to Reading's campaign efforts (Chicago Defender 1941c:9).

During this same time period in August of 1939, Janet MacDonald was a 36-year-old divorced mother of an 11 year old daughter named Pearl. MacDonald was born in England, and had recently become a United States citizen. MacDonald had been divorced for three years, and lived alone in a rooming house on Detroit's east side. Her daughter lived with MacDonald's sister.



Pictures of Janet MacDonald alone and with her daughter Pearl sometime in 1937 at St. Joseph, MI.

While working as a cashier at an eastside Detroit market in 1937, MacDonald met William McBride. Shortly after meeting him, McBride secured her a job at his numbers organization, the Great Lakes Company, and the two became romantically involved. Thirty-seven year old

McBride, like MacDonald, was divorced and had a ten-year-old son. He was born in Detroit (Corktown) and previously made his living as a bootlegger before being hired to manage the Great Lakes Company. As the manager of the Great Lakes Company, McBride was known as an extravagant spender and a generous tipper. He had previously been arrested nine times for various crimes to include possession of gambling equipment. Detroit Police officers also knew McBride in 1938 as "...the man who can get you made a sergeant for \$300" (Detroit News 1939g:1). He was able to do this because of a relationship with Richard Reading Jr. Reading Jr. was not only the son of the mayor, but served as the mayor's secretary as well (Detroit News 1939g:1). In July of 1939, McBride ended his romantic relationship with MacDonald. McBride urged her for her "own good" to find "some nice fellow" (Detroit Times 1939:1&2). In response to the breakup, MacDonald became distraught, and vowed McBride would have another woman over her dead body (Detroit Times 1939:1). On August 5, 1939, MacDonald picked her daughter up from her sister's house stating they would be going horseback riding. With her daughter dressed up in a pink taffeta dress, MacDonald drove around until her daughter fell asleep in the car. MacDonald then drove to a garage she had rented near her room. Once parked inside, MacDonald killed her daughter and committed suicide by running a hose from her vehicle's exhaust through the rear window, resulting in carbon monoxide poisoning (Detroit Times 1939:2).





William McBride on August 7, 1939 being questioned by police concerning the suicide and homicide of Janet and Pearl MacDonald.

Found near MacDonald's body were several letters and photographs. The letters were addressed to various officials including Police Commissioner Heinrich Pickert, the newspaper editors for Detroit's largest papers, Michigan's governor, and to the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigations for Detroit. In the letters MacDonald accused a number of police officials of being guilty of taking bribes from McBride and other numbers organizations (Detroit News 1939b:1). In one letter she wrote:

Dear Sirs:

On this night, a girl has ended her life because of the mental cruelty caused by racketeer William McBride, ex-Great Lakes Numbers House operator. McBride is the go-between man for Lieut. John McCarthy. He arranges the fix between our dutiful Lieut. and the Racketeers (Detroit News 1939b:1).

In the letter written to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) she wrote:

It seems there is a great deal of vice going on in Detroit, and as long as the police are a part of it, it seems perhaps the government should know something about it in order to do a bit of cleanup work...This McBride was a partner of the Great Lakes Number house in Oakland Avenue, which closed down July 1<sup>st</sup>. While the Great Lakes was in operation McBride took care of the bribe end. He paid Lieutenant McCarthy a neat sum monthly, also a large number of sergeants and officers got their portion each month. As long as a number house or handbook paid off it was allowed to run. At present McBride's position is that of a go-between man for this lieutenant and the racketeers. The houses pay the lieutenant through McBride and are therefore permitted to run. In the event a house has to be raided of course the lieutenant leads the raid and makes a beautiful bluff of it.

However, before a raid the lieutenant gets in touch with McBride and consequently McBride informs the house to be raided and the headmen clear out before the raid and take any important evidence with them. This is quite a profitable business for both the police officer and Racketeer McBride (Detroit Times 1939:1).

Anyone wishing to know why  
this happened please get  
in touch with  
Billy Mc Bride  
he may be reached through  
Mr Ryan 222 W. Lafayette St.  
Cigar Store front. 6 Clifford 1572.  
or through the Royal Palms Hotel  
Co. 8310. or at his mother's  
home 1061 Lansing Avenue.  
or through Lt. John Mc Cartty  
Chief of Rocket Squad. or  
through several number houses  
for whom he is a go between.

The letter to the Bureau of Investigation.

Dear Sirs  
First paragraph omitted.

It seems that is a great deal of racket  
going on in Det and as long as the Police  
force are a part of it, it seems perhaps  
the Government should know something  
about it in order to do a bit of clean up  
work.

I am privileged to know that the so  
called G. men are watching a certain  
Wm Mc Bride who is supposed to be  
at the Royal Palms Hotel, his home address  
is 1061 Lansing Ave.

This Mc Bride was a Partner of the  
great Lakes Number house at 9016 Oakland  
Ave, which closed down July 18th. While the  
great Lakes was in operation Mc Bride  
took care of the book end. He paid Lt. John  
Mc Cartty, Chief of Rocket Squad a neat  
sum monthly, also a large number of  
Sergeants and officers got their portion each  
month. As long as a Number House or  
Stand Book paid off, it was allowed to remain.

Copies of letters Janet MacDonald wrote to public officials, the media, and law enforcement officials including the FBI.

The suicide and murder of Janet MacDonald and her daughter Pearl caused an outrage in the city. Her letters illuminated the need to investigate not just numbers gambling organizations, but the police department as well. It was noted that a previous attempt to investigate the connection between police officials and gambling had occurred in 1936.

The apparently certain grand jury probe into the alleged connection between Detroit police officials and gambling interests, precipitated by the suicide notes of Mrs. Janet MacDonald, will not be the first "investigation" along those lines. Three years ago Gust G. Carlson, an instructor at the University of Michigan, wrote a thesis on crime. In it he charged that he had documentary evidence that gamblers were paying off friendly police officials, but refused to give names. In his article Carlson said that he had mingled with gamblers and "others in the rackets" to obtain his information. "These men did not know my true purpose or

name. They gradually accepted me as one of their crowd and imparted many facts pertaining to the operation of illegal pursuits." Carlson's writings recounted the fact that gamblers admitted to him that they could only operate on a profitable basis by paying police for protection. His charges were met with scornful denial by Police Commissioner Heinrich A. Pickert, who said: "Carlson's charges that gambling rackets are operating under police protection is downright silly" (Detroit Free Press 1939e:1).

However this time, Janet MacDonald's pleas for an investigation did not fall on deaf ears. Initially, Mayor Richard Reading indicated the police department would conduct a full investigation. When the higher ups in the police department were questioned about what steps they would take, their responses were evasive (Detroit News 1939a:1). Within one day of MacDonald's allegations against Lieutenant John McCarthy, he was cleared of all wrongdoing by the department. McBride met with McCarthy and in a face to face meeting denied knowing him. McBride maintained his affair with MacDonald was of minor importance to him. He further contended MacDonald's allegations were untrue, and swore he was only a "small time racket guy" who managed the Great Lakes Policy House for a mere \$48 a week (Detroit News 1939a:1).



William McBride, Lieutenant McCarthy, and Assistant Prosecutor William Dowling at meeting where McBride denies knowing McCarthy in August 1939.

The police department found that MacDonald had fabricated the story about McBride because he had ended their relationship, and lied on McCarthy because she had a grudge against him for arresting her previously. MacDonald was characterized as “very vindictive” (Detroit News 1940c:5). The investigating officer concluded, “There was not a semblance of truth in anything she wrote” (Detroit News 1939c:2). He also summed up MacDonald’s claims as, “Just the outburst of an emotionally unbalanced woman” (Detroit Free Press 1939e:2). Quickly thereafter Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea called off any investigation that was being conducted by his office due to lack of manpower (Detroit News 1939d:1). Police commissioner Heinrich Pickert on August 19, 1939 professed, “there is not a more honest policeman in Detroit than Lieut. McCarthy, and it is unfortunate he has suffered because of this fellow McBride, a tin horn gambler and alley rat” (Detroit News 1940g:14). Superintendent Fred Frahm concluded McCarthy was “a fine officer with a fine record” (Detroit News 1940c:5). In reality, McCarthy’s employment record was anything but stellar. He joined the police department in 1923, and a year later resigned under charges. He was then rehired a year later. He would eventually be promoted to the position of lieutenant in June of 1938, and then in September of 1938 was made the head of the newly formed racket squad (which Watson had requested). It was believed that McCarthy was handpicked and promoted by Mayor Reading on the advice of the mayor’s son Richard (Detroit News 1940g:14). The racket squad’s focus was on eradicating vice in the entire city, and operated independently of any direct supervision, and only reported to top ranking officials. McCarthy was placed in this unique position in spite of having no citations for exceptional work and three demerits for being absent from duty, sleeping on the job, and for spending several hours in a hotel with a woman of questionable character (Detroit News

1940g:14). McCarthy and the five police officers assigned to him all took graft payments from 12 numbers houses to ensure they conducted business unmolested (Detroit Free Press 1940u:12).



John McCarthy of the Detroit Police Department September 1939



Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea

These findings did not sit well with some citizens as Detroit's daily newspapers carried numerous stories about what was perceived as a whitewash of the graft allegations by the mayor, the police department, and county prosecutor. A pastor of a downtown Presbyterian Church devoted a sermon to the evils of gambling, and police graft, and demanded a probe be conducted (Detroit Free Press 1939b:2). In response to the outrage of the pastor and other citizens, the Detroit Common Council passed a resolution calling for an independent grand jury to investigate (Detroit News 1939f:2).



Detroit Councilman Philip Broitmeyer, left, tells Mayor Richard Reading of the council's petition for a grand jury probe of the Detroit Police Department on August 19, 1939.



Judge Homer Ferguson, right was chosen to convene a one-man grand jury of the Detroit Police Department and gambling activities. He chose Chester O'Hara, left, as Special Prosecutor on August 25, 1939.

All together four petitions were presented to Circuit Court demanding a grand jury investigate MacDonald's allegations. In response, the Wayne County Circuit Court appointed Judge Homer Ferguson to conduct a one-man grand jury into the allegations (Detroit News 1939f:2). As a result of the convening of a one-man grand jury, the major numbers organizations, the Big Four, the Murphy Company, the Yellow Dog, the Manhattan, and the Daily News closed for two weeks (Detroit Free Press 1939d:3). Another report indicated number houses declared a thirty-day holiday as a result of the "ceaseless activity of Lieut. John P. McCarthy of the racket squad who has been at the front of numerous raiding parties" (Michigan Chronicle 1939:1).



On August 19, 1939 in a show that they were not soft of gambling, the Detroit Police Department under the watchful eye of Detroit Police Commissioner Henrich Pickert, and led by Lieutenant John McCarthy raided ten gambling establishments and arrested 147 people. The above picture is of officers destroying gambling equipment at one such location.

One source estimated that as a result of the closing of the numbers organizations more than twenty thousand people were unemployed (Detroit Tribune 1939a:1). An unknown number of the unemployed however were eligible for state compensation because their numbers organizations paid state unemployment taxes for them, thus guaranteeing them unemployment benefits (Detroit Free Press 1940d:4). In addition, some numbers organizations also ensured their employees would be eligible for social security benefits by taking the appropriate deductions from their paychecks (People of the State of Michigan vs. Walter Norwood et al. 1940:165). At this time Everett Watson owned four numbers houses, which brought in approximately \$4,900 daily (Detroit Free Press 1941c:1). John Roxborough's Big Four House generated \$800,000 annually (Detroit Tribune 1941d:2).

Judge Ferguson and Special Prosecutor Chester O'Hara began their investigation by calling to testify before them Lieutenant John McCarthy. McCarthy refused to answer any of their questions and was put in jail for contempt of court (Detroit Free Press 1939a:1). William McBride, however, never made it to testify. McBride died of pneumonia in Florida in November of 1939 (Detroit News 1939a:1). McBride's former wife, Irene McBride would later claim she was suspicious of his death due to the suddenness of it (Detroit News 1939e:1).



Wife and son of William McBride in Detroit after his death in November of 1939.



During this same time period the voters of the city of Detroit voted overwhelmingly for a new mayor in Edward Jeffries. It was speculated Reading lost to Jeffries because of Janet MacDonald's allegations of citywide corruption (Detroit Free Press Editorial Magazine 1942:1).



Richard Reading getting poll results shortly before discovering he had lost to Edward Jeffries November 8, 1939.



Frank Eamon, left, being sworn in as new Detroit Police Commissioner in January 1940.

Jeffries as new mayor named a new police commissioner, Frank Eaman. Eaman wasted no time in making changes to reinstate the integrity of the police department. He did this by removing the superintendent of police, Fred Frahm for failing to properly investigate a case involving Dr. Martin B. Robinson (Detroit Free Press 1940n:15).

Dr. Robinson, a white Army Reserve Corps Lieutenant Colonel, was considered a minor political figure. He was a physician, druggist, and drug store owner in Detroit. In July of 1939, four men allegedly robbed him at gunpoint at his real estate office. Robinson's real estate firm, Great Lakes Development Company, had been legally dead for five years, and Robinson never had a real estate license (Detroit Free Press 1940n:15). Like other numbers organizations, the real estate firm was simply a front. Initially Dr. Robinson reported the robbery, but later decided he did not want to pursue the case when the men were arrested. Against department policy, Dr. Robinson was given back \$1,000 of the money recovered from the so-called robbers. In truth, Dr. Robinson owed a gambling debt from the loss of a horse bet to Detroit's Jewish Purple Gang. The four men who were members of the Purple Gang attempted to collect the debt (Detroit News 1939c:1). Robinson did not have the total amount owed and paid the men a partial payment. He then decided to report to police the four men had robbed him in an attempt to secure the remaining money via a fraudulent insurance claim. It later came to light that the upstanding Dr. Robinson had not only reported a fake robbery to cover a gambling debt, but had also provided financing to a number of numbers organizations including the Great Lakes Company (Detroit News 1939c:1). Dr. Robinson also owned a policy house in Detroit, and had used his influence as a Lieutenant Colonel to obtain the parole of a state prisoner who he had working in his policy house (Detroit Free Press 1940q:1&7).

In addition to removing Frahm from his position, several others were removed including Inspector Raymond Boettcher for trying to cover up the fake robbery of Dr. Robinson (Detroit Free Press 1940r:1&2). When Judge Ferguson learned of the involvement of the police department with the attempted cover-up of Dr. Robinson's robbery, he ordered a number of the officers involved to testify before him. One person called to testify included suspended Inspector Raymond Boettcher, who received \$1,800 for assisting Dr. Robinson in his staged robbery (Detroit Free Press 1940i:4). After a number of people testified before Judge Ferguson, including Raymond Boettcher, several high-ranking officials were indicted for taking graft from baseball pool operators, handbook operators, houses of prostitutions, and numbers organizations (Detroit Free Press 1940m:1).



Suspended Inspector Raymond Boettcher leaving court after being indicted in September 1940.



Raymond Boettcher (right) being told he is suspended by chief of detectives Robert McKenzie (right) as Judge Homer Ferguson (center) stands by in January 1940.

Those indicted included Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea, who refused to investigate the allegations made by Janet MacDonald in her suicide letters, McCrea's chief investigator Harry Colburn, and former Detroit police superintendent Fred Frahm (Detroit Free Press 1940m:4).



Former superintendent Fred Frahm, right, and others being indicted February 1940.



Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea leaving court after being indicted February 1940.

After Duncan was indicted, he refused to leave office and in a truly fantastical move had his aides and members of the Wayne County Sheriff's Department attempt to raid the office of Judge Ferguson. The purpose of the aborted raid was to seize any evidence against him. A battle ensued between members of Judge Ferguson's staff and McCrea's raiding party before police officers came and ended the ruckus (Detroit Free Press 1940g:1).



On May 3, 1940, a group of McCrea's aids and members of the sheriff's department attempted to raid and seize evidence from Judge Ferguson's office located in the National Bank Building.



The raid on the grand jury headquarters was aborted by Detroit Police March 1940.

On the same day a warrant was issued for the Sheriff of Wayne County, Thomas Wilcox, for conspiracy to accept bribes and allowing gambling and houses of prostitution to operate (Detroit Free Press 1940h:1). Sheriff Wilcox in 1930 had been hired by Mayor Charles Bowles to clean up vice in the city as Detroit's Police Commissioner, and was later elected sheriff of Wayne County in 1935. Wilcox's election to Wayne County Sheriff was helped by various gambling operators who contributed to his campaign (Detroit Free Press 1940t:11).



Thomas Wilcox being sworn in March 1940.



Sheriff Wilcox (center) arriving at court March 6, 1940.

McCrea and Wilcox required organizations throughout Wayne County to pay for protection either on an annual or monthly basis. Baseball pools had to pay \$22,500 a year to operate and had to make campaign gifts of \$500. Slot machine operators paid \$800 annually. Gambling establishments to include numbers organizations and houses of prostitution had to pay \$1,200 a month, and handbook operations paid a monthly fee of \$1,225. It was estimated on an annual basis that a total of \$52,900 was paid to McCrea and Wilcox (Detroit Free Press 1940j:19). For these payments the establishments would be forewarned of any planned raids on their establishments. This allowed the establishments to clear out money and other incriminating evidence. Once the raid was conducted, the establishments would reopen for business as usual (Detroit Free Press 1940t:1). Both Wilcox and McCrea were able to live lavishly from the graft payments they received. Both had primary homes located in the city, and large extravagant second homes located in Florida and Wisconsin.



Duncan McCrea in the window of his west side Detroit home after being served with a subpoena in May Of 1940.



Duncan McCrea's second home in Miami in 1940.



Part of Thomas Wilcox's estate in Pine Lake, Wisconsin in 1940.

The purpose of this chapter was to further explain how and why numbers organizations were able to operate successfully in the city. The numbers organizations ensured success by forming associations and establishing fair trade rules among themselves. These practices along with their business structure mirrored legitimate business. Like legitimate businesses in the formal economy, numbers gambling also dealt with labor issues plaguing the city. Numbers organizations ensured their employees had unemployment insurance and paid social security taxes. One organization even experienced a labor strike, and like Ford and other automotive companies used heavy-handed tactics to end it. The power of numbers gambling was also reflected in the city's politics. Numbers operators ensured success by influencing elections, politicians, government officials and the police through graft payments. Numbers players also showed their power when they unsuccessfully tried to influence the election of a black state representative who attacked the institution of numbers gambling. The next chapter tells what happened to the powerful men who controlled numbers in Detroit.



## CHAPTER 8 “DETROIT’S DREAM DEALERS GO ON TRIAL”

The number of people indicted by Judge Ferguson would continue to grow, and by April 24, 1940, former mayor Richard Reading and 134 others would join the indicted, accused of accepting graft in return for allowing the \$10,000,000 a year Detroit numbers racket to flourish (Detroit News 1940h:1). When indicted Reading declared, “It’s a lot of nonsense. It is ridiculous. I don’t even know what policy is. I don’t know what it is all about” (Detroit News 1940h:1).



Richard Reading leaving court after his indictment on April 24, 1940, and then being fingerprinted at the county jail.

Those indicted included Wayne County prosecutor McCrea, his chief investigator Harry Colburn, the former superintendent of police Fred Frahm, Lieutenant John McCarthy and 88 other police officers, John Roxborough, Everett Watson, and 41 other number operators and employees (Detroit News 1940h:1).



Harry Colburn, chief investigator for Duncan McCrea at his arraignment February 23, 1940.

Roxborough, smiling and smoking a cigar after being bonded out, stated, “I have been out of town and do not know what it is about, but maybe I ought to check up and see if I stubbed my toe” (Detroit News 1940h: 2). The day after Roxborough was indicted one of Detroit’s major newspaper ran an article boasting of Roxborough’s accomplishments. In the newspaper article Roxborough was credited with being the unseen brains behind the management of Joe Louis. He was credited with shrewdly guiding him to the heavyweight championship at a time when it was felt a black man would never hold the title again (Detroit Free Press 1940o:19&20). Roxborough was also credited with developing Joe Louis into not only a boxing champion, but into a gentleman and sportsman in and out of the boxing ring. The paper noted that Roxborough admitted to being in the numbers business at one point, but had divorced himself from it so he could develop and advise Louis’ boxing career. The article indicated Roxborough had made a great deal of money for which he invested in Detroit real estate, charitable activities and the

development of black youth (Detroit Free Press 1940o:19&20). The black papers across the country also came to Roxborough's defense after he was indicted, and voiced their opinion of the role of numbers gambling in society.

Roxborough is a smooth gentleman and an astute businessman who, in his personal deportment, culture, and in the handling of Joe Louis, reflected credit not only upon the Brown Bomber, but upon the race as a whole. I would regret seriously to see him measured for prison attire. Joe Louis has been for several years and still is the idol of his race, and regardless of how dirty Roxborough's hands might have gotten from his alleged manipulations in the numbers and policy racket, he has kept Joe and the fight game clean. This is to his credit, for it is common history that until the Alabama Embalmer appeared on the scene, the heavyweight business had sunk pretty low in the estimation of decent people—from the standpoint of sportsmanship, economics and performance. It took some time even for Joe and John to establish the fact that fight fans could attend a biff-and-bam session without holding their noses. But they finally drained off the sewage with clean knockouts and unimpeachable conduct outside the ring. Without his income from certain other sources, Roxborough could not have done this because American democracy is so imperfect that there is little chance for a man of color to accumulate a real stake before he passes the age of usefulness without resorting to such shady enterprises as numbers or some other racket. Many will point with pride to some of our few successful legitimate business enterprises in refutation, but these are so isolated in comparison with our per capita ratio to other races that my contention still holds true. Few of our race have made a killing on the stock market, few have built factories and trading houses where they can exploit both the public and their employees in the quick accumulation of wealth because the inner circles are closed to them. They have turned to the outlawed enterprises more from necessity than by choice...I hold no brief for policy barons, as such, because, for every good one who tries to put his ill-gotten gains to some profit, there are a dozen rats for whom hanging is much too good. The whole thing narrows down to a class problem and the gambling instinct in the human race. If it is all right for the rich to play the stock market, it should be all right for the poor to play the numbers. But that unfortunately, isn't the case. The poor do not make the laws—they only go to jail for breaking them. After all somebody has to go to jail. That's what jails are for (Matthews 1940:4).

Another black newspaper wrote about Roxborough,

[...]is a man to compel the admiration of men. I like the way he stood up to that Detroit indictment the other day...No whimpering. No mealy-mouthed hypocritical statements. Only his savage insistence that Joe Louis is not implicated...Whatever the courts may rule, I can't think any less of a man who has long been noted for his honesty and his generosity. He has keen insight into human nature but has never used it to undue advantage. He has his own code of

right and wrong and has practiced it in its broadest sense always with the good name of the race in view. There is a touch of the gambler in all of us and Roxborough is no different from the man in Wall Street or the man who stages his raffle in a church. The count against him is just another step in the age-old battle between tradition and changing social trends. Numbers banking may yet become an accepted practice. I have seen it happen with pari mutual betting and prohibition. In the meantime, I admire the way in which Roxborough faced the rap. His attitude is like a tonic to any self-respecting man. It makes it hard to play the role of a neutral and not root for him (Rouzeau 1940:18).

The third round of indictments caused a major blow to the police department, due to the loss of 89 police officers, which severely disrupted police operations. Officers were arrested while they walked beats, sat behind desks, and in patrol cars. Once arrested, the officers were relieved of duty and suspended. As the officers were fingerprinted, most officers displayed an air of bravado, and the scene was one of jovial jesting. The Detroit Free Press reported, “It was a blow to the entire numbers racket, which for more than 10 years has flourished in Detroit, particularly among the Negro population, and whose leaders have grown wealthy on the proceeds of the illegal enterprise” (Detroit Free Press 1940c:1). Of the 135 people indicted only 28 were black, including eight black police officers (Detroit Tribune 1940b:1).



Black police officers being fingerprinted on April 25, 1940.

Although available information in the indictment proved whites were just as involved as blacks, once again the media reported numbers gambling as a black activity. The court proceedings for the 135 defendants became a spectacle for the public and at times court watchers had to be turned away for lack of space.



Large crowds gathered to witness the hearings. In this picture taken May 6, 1940 in the Wayne County building, a hot dog salesman sells his wares to those waiting.



Crowd being turned away due to lack of room in May 1940.

There were so many defendants in the courtroom at times it was hard to keep the proceedings orderly. It was not uncommon for defendants to jeer at the prosecutor and to openly talk to witnesses while they were testifying. Eventually Judge Homer Ferguson in response to the circus like atmosphere, ordered all defendants to sit in permanent seats, banned them from placing their feet on tables, and banned the reading of newspapers in court (Detroit News 1940e:3).



Indicted defendants outside of courtrooms in June and July of 1940 smiling and laughing for the cameras.

It was still business as usual for numbers gambling and the numbers owners as indictments and legal proceedings were going on. In an ironic twist, some number operators that

were granted immunity from prosecution in exchange for their testimony against other numbers operators were still in business, and Duncan McCrea took the opportunity to silence and discredit the witnesses by arresting them (Detroit News 1940b:1). For example, Walter Norwood testified concerning the payoffs he made to both the prosecutor's office and to the mayor's office on May 9<sup>th</sup>. In that testimony he also testified against other numbers operators, including John Roxborough and Everett Watson, and accused the eight black police officers of taking graft. The following day someone put a stench bomb in the lobby of his hotel, and it was believed this was done in retaliation for his testimony (Chicago Defender 1940c:2). By May 23<sup>rd</sup> McCrea authorized Norwood's policy and numbers house to be raided, and issued arrest warrants for Norwood and ten of his employees. On the day Norwood's establishment was raided crowds cheered and applauded the police officers. A number of Norwood's patrons were upset with Norwood for failing for months to pay off on winning hits (Chicago Defender 1940a:5). The community had long felt that Norwood ran a crooked game. For example, sometime before Christmas in 1939 the number "437" fell. This number was heavily played by people because the number "437" corresponded with "Christmas" in some dream books. Dream books are dictionary like books that link dreams or other experiences to certain number combinations.

The actual dictionary consists of an alphabetical list of dream symbols, each followed by several numbers and often a verbal interpretation as well. Supplementary lists give numbers for special topics (names, initials, alphabet, national holidays, playing cards, animals, "hunches," human anatomy, birthstones). The verbal interpretations of dreams in these books are derived from traditional signs and dream signs, from nineteenth-century dream books, from the publisher's other titles, from plagiarism, and from the author's imagination. The numbers also come from imagination, other titles, and plagiarism, but also from numerology and from popular dream numbers, sometimes called "fancies" (Shafton 2002:74-75).

Because it was heavily played, this meant that numbers operators were set to take a huge loss. It is alleged that Norwood went to other numbers operators trying to convince them to delay paying

winners. Norwood also proposed that when the winners were paid, they should be paid only half of what they had won (Carter 1970:52). Between his failure to pay off on winning hits, and his perceived betrayal of the other numbers operators, the community turned against Norwood.

On April 29, 1940, Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McCrea and Sheriff Thomas Wilcox was found guilty for their part in taking graft to protect illegal gambling in Wayne County and sentenced to four and a half to five years in prison (Detroit Free Press 1941b:1).



Thomas Wilcox lights up a cigarette after being convicted in May 1941 in May 1941.

Even though those around them were being convicted and sentenced for their part in numbers gambling, both John Roxborough and Everett Watson continued with their various businesses and work in the community. Watson's legitimate businesses were being lauded for their rapid business growth and for their support of black citizens. Black Detroiters were proud that Watson's realty company was the only black owned realty company in the country, which was entirely operated by blacks. In spite of his legal troubles, Watson was praised for extending loans to blacks when no other lending institution would. It was said that because of Watson,



“Many thousands of colored citizens have been aided in establishing their homes, purchasing properties for income and business purposes” (Detroit Tribune 1940c:1).

On September 17, 1941, the numbers graft conspiracy trial for the former mayor and the numbers operators began. At the time this trial was considered to be one of the largest gambling criminal trials in the country and the largest in Michigan. In less than a month, an all-white jury of 10 women and four men were selected to preside over the 65 defendants. During jury selection 619 people were rejected as jurors (Detroit Free Press 1941a:1). The prosecutor, Chester O’Hara, rejected every black person and prevented any from serving on the jury. John R. Williams, a black editor of the Detroit edition of the Pittsburgh Courier asked O’Hara, “Mr. O’Hara, how does it happen that you have continually for days excused only the Negro jurors who have been called for service in this case when many of them are without question as qualified as any of the others who have been called?” (John W. Roxborough, Petitioner, v. the People of the State of Michigan 1944: 5). O’Hara answered, “The Roxborough-Watson interest are so wide that I prefer not to have any Negroes on the jury, and further practically every Negro in Detroit is a number or policy player anyhow, and as such is unfit to serve on a case involving such matters” (John W. Roxborough, Petitioner, v. the People of the State of Michigan 1944: 5). The prosecutor’s prejudiced view was not uncommon, and it did not help that an academic, Gustav Carlson, had written a dissertation about the pervasiveness in Detroit’s black community. A Detroit police officer, after witnessing a black man (who was an employed property owner with no criminal record) enter and exit a grocery store, concluded the man was a numbers writer (because he was black) and arrested him. When the case was brought before a judge, the judge asked the police officer how he could tell the man was a numbers writer. The police officer stated the man was arrested in a black neighborhood and because of this figured the man must be

a numbers writer. The judge threw the case out because the police officer had made an illegal arrest (Detroit Tribune 1942a:1). One month before the trial began, Kern's, a major department store in Detroit, ran a full page advertisement for a sale. The advertisement also perpetuated the stereotype and belief that blacks were gamblers and superstitious. The ad screamed "Don't Gamble! THIS is a 'Natural!'" under a picture of two young black males, eyes bucked, rolling dice. The dice were landing on seven, and a rabbit's foot and horse shoe were present (Detroit News 1941a:7). In response to the advertisement, the black weekly newspaper the Detroit Tribune, admonished Kern's and advertising men for the,

[...]insulting idea that by playing up the Negro in less complimentary aspects it will increase their sales among the whites...The picture speaks for itself. It links the modern schoolboy with 'craps.' There is the seven. There is the rabbit's foot, also the horseshoe, all carrying through the theme of gambling, superstition, and luck. Such pictures represent the Negro as being still the ignorant, superstitious, handicapped, grinning individual that prejudiced men and women would have him remain. This is not so. It is embarrassing and unfair (Detroit Tribune 1941b:1).

**"Don't Gamble!"**

**THIS is a "Natural!"**

Throw away your horseshoe . . . kiss your rabbit's foot good-bye . . . you won't need 'em! No-sir-ee . . . for KERN'S 58TH FOUNDERS SALE will be your good luck charm tomorrow—and for weeks to come! Ask any of the thousands of lucky shoppers who thrilled to the dramatic savings that greeted them yesterday—opening day of this great value-giving event. This most important store-wide sale of the year preaches thrift through spending—and let us not forget it was BENJAMIN FRANKLIN who first impressed upon our nation the virtue and importance of THRIFT. Since then it has become a deeply rooted tradition to which America owes much of its prosperity. THRIFT through wise spending has always been Kern's creed, but never has it been more forcibly demonstrated than in our Famous Founders Sales now in progress. The entire store from basement to-roof is literally packed with SAVINGS! So whether it's BACK-TO-SCHOOL CLOTHES FOR THE CHILDREN—furniture and furnishings for the home—fashions for yourself or family, rest assured you'll find them all, amazingly low priced in this grand store-wide carnival of value-giving. Come tomorrow and see!

**SHOP SATURDAY, THIRD GREAT DAY OF SAVINGS!**

**Kern's 58<sup>th</sup> Founders Sale**

THE ERNST KERN CO., WOODWARD AT GRATIOT . . . STORE HOURS: 9:30 to 9:00 . . . CHERRY 9300

Kern's ad appearing in Detroit News on August 29, 1941.

The selected jurors were forced to live at the Tuller Hotel away from family and friends for the duration of the trial. The jury was under guard, and their mail and phone calls were censored to ensure they were untainted. While under guarded supervision, jurors were only allowed to visit their family for 15 minutes twice a week (Detroit News 1941d:9). When the trial began, numbers operators Thomas "Rooster" Hammond and Irving Roane, owners of the Alabama and Georgia House and the New York and St. Louis Policy House, and Harvey Cox, operator of Mexico Villa pled guilty.



Irving Roane and Thomas "Rooster" Hammond in court after pleading guilty on September 30, 1941.

A number of witnesses were called to testify during the trial. One such witness, Claude Semus, formerly worked for Watson's Yellow Dog Policy House before being fired in 1939 by Watson for cheating or manipulating the numbers drawn from the policy wheel. Semus admitted he had in fact cheated, but insisted he was only following Watson's instructions. This claim went against Watson's reputation within the community for running a fair game, and after the testimony Watson denied Semus' assertion. Watson told reporters, "You will never make people on St. Antoine Street believe I did that" (Detroit News 1941e:9). A number of witnesses were loyal to Watson and refused to testify against him. One such loyal employee was 77-year-old Andrew Young. Young had been friends with Watson for 30 years. They had both been waiters together in 1916, and Young had hired Watson as a waiter on a Great Lakes Steamer in 1926. Watson returned the favor and hired him in 1934 for \$20 a week to accompany a woman as a collector. When Young was called to testify against Watson, he refused to answer questions and

displayed a selective memory. At one point the judge in the case threatened to jail Young for contempt of court. When this occurred Watson asked to speak with Young. Watson smiled at Young, and then urged his friend of 30 years to, "...go ahead and answer all the questions Mr. O'Hara asks you. You tell him the truth – all of the truth" (Detroit News 1941c:5). Young nodded his head and slowly walked away, "an old man who hated to talk about his friend" (Detroit News 1941c:5). Another Watson employee also refused to testify. When Watson advised him at a recess to "get back on that stand and tell the truth", he refused and was sentenced to 15 days in jail for contempt of court (Detroit News 1941b:24).

As the trial dragged on, witnesses from all walks of life testified. One police officer testified that the rumors that police officials were taking bribes were so rampant that he and other officers decided, "they might as well get in on the payoffs" (Chicago Defender 1941a:1). The trial also revealed that the numbers game was not a "black only" industry, but that a number of white numbers operators profited largely from running their own policy/ numbers houses in the city (Chicago Defender 1941a:1). Finally, after three months of testimony and the presenting of evidence, on December 13, 1941, the final jury of eight women (which included seven housewives and one clerk), and four men (which included a retiree, an assembler, a salesman, and a bricklayer) was given the case to decide the fate of the accused. The jury while locked up, and banned from having contact with anyone, deliberated for 18 and a half hours. When they emerged from deliberations they found 23 people guilty of conspiracy to protect the numbers racket, and found 18 others not guilty (Detroit Free Press 1941d:1). Those found guilty included former Mayor Richard Reading Sr., and numbers operators John Roxborough and Everett Watson who were both described as fight managers and prominent in politics (Detroit Free Press 1941d:1). Just like the trial, the rendering of the verdict was filled with drama, arrogance, and

laughter. Richard Reading's son Clarence upon hearing his father's guilty verdict angrily approached the prosecutor, Chester O'Hara, and said, "If you were 20 years younger I would tear you to pieces" (Detroit Free Press 1941d:1). O'Hara's guards stepped in between the two men as O'Hara tried to reach Clarence Reading. Richard Reading Sr. called his sons to his side, and as they exited the courtroom Reading Sr. declared, "This is the greatest injustice since the crucifixion of Christ. I will appeal the case" (Detroit Free Press 1941d:1). George Cordell operator of the Murphy House, playfully punched O'Hara on the shoulder and laughingly advised him to "take it easy" because Clarence Reading was "only a punk" (Detroit Free Press 1941d:1).



Richard Reading and his son Clarence Reading leaving court in 1941.

The black community felt the trial was unfair because O'Hara was racist. Blacks were offended by his exclusion of black jurors. O'Hara in response issued the following statement:

I am perfectly satisfied with the verdict rendered by the jury in the case relating to the policy and numbers conspiracy. I feel that the jury used good judgment in deciding who should or who should not be convicted. Some colored defendants were found guilty, but there were some, including all the colored policemen, acquitted by the jury or upon my recommendation. I feel that all the defendants

who were acquitted or dismissed will make splendid citizens from now on, and I trust that my conduct of the case throughout will once and for all tamp out the claim of prejudice against me. I brand as false the accusation of prejudice (Detroit Tribune 1941c:1&2).



Prosecutor Chester O'Hara in August 1939

Like many others Watson expected the verdict, but was disappointed. He vowed to “...fight it as long as I have any money left” (Detroit News 1941g:2). Just a few days after Roxborough was sentenced, a columnist mentioned his guilty verdict in an article. In the same article the columnist noted that although he was found guilty, Roxborough described as a “suavely college bred lawyer” had managed Joe Louis better than any other fighter had ever been managed (Washington Post 1941:19).

The guilty were sentenced on January 7, 1942. Reading was given four to five years in the state penitentiary. Roxborough and Watson were sentenced to two and one-half to five years. A few days after they were sentenced, a black newspaper ran a picture of both Roxborough and Watson on the front page with the caption, “They still have friends” (Detroit Tribune 1942b:1). Under Roxborough’s picture the following was printed,

John Roxborough, co-manager of champion Joe Louis, and prominent business man, who has filed for an appeal from the sentence imposed Wednesday in the local alleged policy graft case. Through his generous gifts to charity and investments in business enterprises, Mr. Roxborough has been a public benefactor (Detroit Tribune 1942b:1).

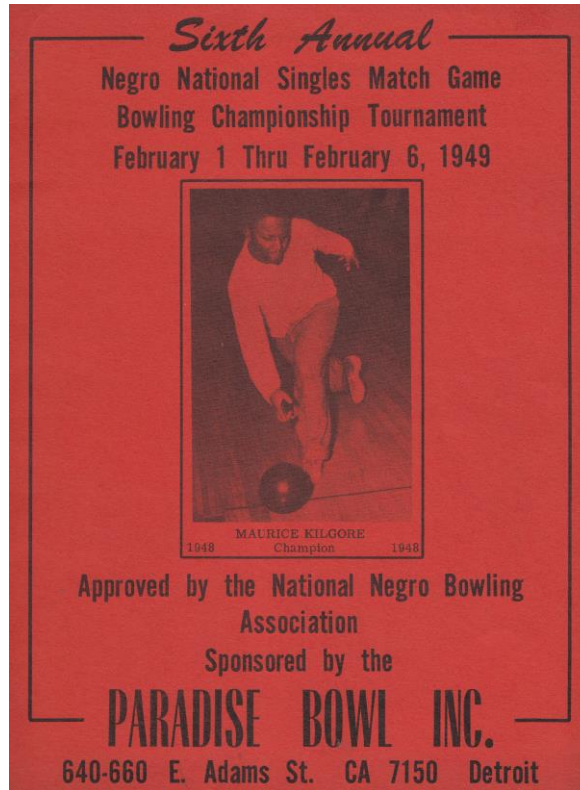
The statement under Watson's picture indicated,

Everett I. Watson, one of the principal defendants in the local grand jury trial conducted by Circuit Judge Homer Ferguson in connection with charges of graft in the policy numbers field. Watson has filed for an appeal to the higher courts. He is financially interested in many local business concerns, provided employment for many men and women of the race (Detroit Tribune 1942b:1).

Another black newspaper concerning Roxborough stated, "He was known as a man of varied interests in a business way, but he had only one interest in a personal way. That was the elevation of his race to a position of pride. He wanted it clean, admired, respected. He wanted it given its fair and honest chance in the American way (New Journal and Guide 1942:A11). Although both men were found guilty, the message to them and to the public at large was simple: they were supported. True to their word, both Roxborough and Watson appealed their sentences based on the fact that they were denied the opportunity to be judge by a jury of their peers when O'Hara excluded all blacks from serving on the jury. In their appeal, lawyers for the two argued that when O'Hara said that "...every Negro in Detroit is a number or policy player," had essentially tarnished a whole race (John W. Roxborough, Petitioner, v. the People of the State of Michigan 1944:15). Watson and Roxborough's legal team found that O'Hara's statement went beyond censuring an individual, but censured all 149,119 blacks who resided in Detroit. O'Hara had condemned blacks based on his assertion of "some supposed racial characteristic" (John W. Roxborough, Petitioner, v. the People of the State of Michigan 1944:15-16). As the appeals were being fought in court, both men remained free on bond. As Detroit was earning its nickname as the "Arsenal of Democracy" by building aircraft and other war equipment,



Roxborough continued to manage Joe Louis, and Watson's Insurance Agency became the second black company in the country to sell U.S. war bonds after the Treasury Department designated it an issuing agency (Detroit Tribune 1942c:1). Roxborough and Watson also entered into a venture to build a bowling alley in the heart of Paradise Valley for \$100,000, which again was a source of pride for Detroit's black community (Chicago Defender 1942:20).



Event booklet and matches advertising Paradise Bowl.

Even after their conviction, Roxborough and Watson were still considered community leaders. For example, in an advertisement for an attorney who was running for city council the advertisement declared, "Negro Leaders Acclaim Attorney Edward Simmons for Councilman,"

and was endorsed by various community leaders that included men of the church, attorneys, doctors, elected officials, and Roxborough and Watson (Detroit Tribune 1943b:2). In spite of his conviction, Watson continued to expand his business interests for both financial gain and to give back to the community. He purchased \$1.5 million worth of property on the west side of Detroit, and planned to build 326 new houses for blacks in an area to be called Watson Park. He hoped this would help alleviate the congested housing situation in Detroit for blacks. Whites living in the area objected to his proposed subdivision. In response, Watson bought 19 homes occupied by white homeowners for \$125,000 (Detroit Tribune 1944b:1). However, this did not end white opposition. A number of whites formed the South Detroit Community League to prevent the subdivision from being built. One member of the organization, a white police officer, paid a paroled convict \$85 to set fire to three of the homes (Chicago Defender 1944:1). Shortly after this setback, Watson and Roxborough learned they had exhausted all of the legal appeals when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear their case. As a result both men in December of 1944 began serving their sentence at Jackson State Prison. By this time blacks in Detroit controlled less than 50% of numbers operations (Boykin 1943:111).

M.		Name ROXBOROUGH, John	
Serial No. 59180-J		(9) 1	As Ao 8
Name John Roxborough	F. P. C.	1 R	00 11
Alias John Walter Roxborough			
Crime CONSPIRACY TO OBSTRUCT JUSTICE:			
Received 11-29-44	From WAYNE	Age 51	Eyes Mar.
Date of Sentence 11-29-44	Min. 2½ Max. 5 Rec. NO	Weight 176	Build Med. Stocky
Paroled 10-4-46	Ret'd from Parole	Height 5-8½	Hair B&K Grey, Bal
Dis. from Parole 4-4-48	Dis. on Max.	Comp. Copper	
Escaped	Ret'd from Escape	Nationality AMERICA	NEGRO
Paroled to Detroit, Mich.		Birthplace Plaquemine, La.	
Residence 235 Holbrook, Detroit, Michigan		2-21-93	Occupation Clerical (Gen. Bff)
Remarks:			

Serial No. 59149-J	Name WATSON, Everett I.		
Name Everett I. Watson	F. P. C. (18)	13	00 17
Alias Irving Watson:		2	00 14
Crime CONSPIRACY TO OBSTRUCT JUSTICE:			
Received 11-29-44	From WAYNE	Age 60	Eyes Mar.
Date of Sentence 11-29-44	Min. 2½ Max. 5	Weight 162	Build Stocky
Paroled 10-4-48	Ret'd from Parole	Height 6½	Hair B & K & Grey
Dis. from Parole 4-11-48	Dis. on Max.	Comp. Brown	
Escaped	Ret'd from Escape	Nationality AMERICAN NEGRO	
Paroled to Jackson (Grass Lake), Mich.		Birthplace Woodstown, N.J.	
Residence "Cherekee Farms" Grass Lake, Michigan		10-13-84	Occupation Real Estate
Remarks:			

*For Criminal Record See Other Side*

Michigan Department of Corrections inmate cards for Roxborough and Watson.

Both Roxborough and Watson were paroled approximately three years later from prison in 1947. Watson was paroled to his wife in Grass Lake, Michigan. He continued to run various businesses in Detroit, and in 1959 sold a large portion of his Grass Lake land to the state of Michigan (Cowan 1960:5). The land was used by the state for the building of an expressway, and a state park. Up until his death Watson would drive into Detroit to visit his various businesses, and to reminisce with his Paradise Valley friends (Michigan Chronicle 1954:7). Watson died in Detroit on January 23, 1960, at the age of 75. His wife Ida had died several years earlier. Watson was survived by a daughter and two grandsons (Cowan 1960:5). Watson is buried in an unmarked grave at the Detroit Memorial Park cemetery. Roxborough when paroled in 1946 was paroled to the custody of Joe Louis.



Joe Louis reunited with John Roxborough after he was paroled in October of 1946.

Roxborough would continue to manage Joe Louis, and entered into a business venture with Louis to sell a soft drink named “Joe Louis Punch.” Roxborough would end managing Louis by 1949, and settle-in as the president of Superior Life Insurance. Like numbers gambling, the insurance business was based on trust with its customers and dealt with risk as it pertained to its insurers. As with numbers gambling, Roxborough would operate a successful insurance company. By 1956, Roxborough’s second wife, Wilhelmina would divorce him and be awarded a divorce and \$83,000 for “repeated acts of extreme cruelty” (Chicago Defender 1956:8).

Mrs. Roxborough testified that “our greatest difficulties have come about because I have had no understanding of Mr. Roxborough’s financial background.” She said that between 1945 and 1950 he had “a large income from Joe Louis Enterprises” and complained he had made a \$10,000 loan from Joe Louis against her knowledge and will. Mrs. Roxborough said that during the last five years Roxborough had refused to take her out socially and that he was gone from their home most of the time and almost all week ends. “I would never live with him again under any circumstances,” she told the court (Chicago Defender 1956:8).

In 1970, Roxborough was honored by the Veterans Boxers Association as “the man who created the Joe Louis image that symbolized him as American as apple pie and ice cream” (Jet 1976:8). Roxborough died alone at the age of 83 on December 13, 1975. He never had any children of his own, and is buried in an unmarked grave in Detroit.

This chapter showed that in spite of the trials, numbers gambling continued. The prosecution of the numbers men did not cause the black community to shy away from Roxborough and the other numbers men. In fact, Roxborough was shown support. The black newspapers made sure to attest to his positive virtues, and defended his actions. They acknowledged his hands were dirtied by his role in numbers gambling, but excused this because he had cleaned up boxing and kept Joe Louis “clean.” His actions were justified because it was felt that American democracy had denied blacks the opportunity to gain riches in the formal economy (by having businesses whereby the poor are exploited by the rich), and forced blacks into the informal economy. The papers pointed out that the rich or the ruling class made the laws, and decided what the poor could and could not do. When the poor violated the rules, they were punished. The rich were allowed to gamble via the stock market, but the poor were denied the opportunity to gamble in the only way they could afford, the numbers.

The trials also brought to the forefront the discrimination blacks in Detroit faced. Blacks were denied the right to be a part of the legal process simply because of their race, and when the issue was pressed in the courts, the courts upheld the notion that numbers playing was a black trait. Although whites played the numbers, this did not prevent them from being a part of the legal process. Again the message was clear; there was no place for blacks in the formal economy or in the justice system. The next chapter will take a closer look at how numbers gambling and

John Roxborough helped create an American hero that would assist in the advancement of the black race.

## CHAPTER 9 “JOHN ROXBOROUGH: ENTREPRENEUR, PHILANTHROPIST, AND RACE MAN”

It was said that “Honest John” lived by the motto, “Play fair with me and I’ll play fair with you, otherwise I don’t want any dealings with you” (Gibson 1935:20). In 1934, he was described as a product of Detroit, and was

[...] considered one of the most popular young men in the city and a member of several leading social and civic clubs. He comes from a very prominent family of pioneers and holds entrée to the best homes in the city. While generally considered a social regisrite, he has always been acclaimed by the rank and file as a “jolly good fellow” and one who is always willing to help the fellow farthest down (Atlanta Daily World 1934:7).

Roxborough kept true to his promise to help blacks before his death in 1975. He contributed to the Urban League, the Young Negroes Progressive Association, sent at least 30 people through the University of Michigan, and helped numerous people by paying their rent and providing food and coal (Astor 1974:35). Roxborough also ensured neighborhood playgrounds had equipment for children to play on, and he frequently supported a number of sporting endeavors (Erenberg 2006:29). For example, he sponsored a championship amateur baseball team, the Big Four, which was named after his numbers operation (Detroit Tribune Independent 1935a:8). Roxborough also sponsored softball and basketball teams at Detroit’s Brewster Center and the Naval Armory, which gave underprivileged neighborhood children a chance at organized team sports (Detroit Free Press 1966:8). Roxborough was known for always making loans to those in need and helping the young. He is credited with giving employment to many young college men in the fields of accounting and business who would not have normally found work in their field (Cousins 1938:16).

Although Roxborough ran an illegal numbers business, his generosity and dignified image earned him respect in the community. He became a “race man” who used his money and

influence to advance his race. Former Tuskegee Airman Peter Cassey Jr., on April 5, 1983 recalled,

John was totally a businessman. He used to turn everything to his own advantage. He was a racketeer—in the numbers. He had the Superior Life Insurance Company. He was a quiet businessman, always looking to spend money that would benefit his brother. He financed education for others. There were no scholarships, especially for blacks. Everything was on a cash basis. He helped a lot of people because he had the cash. In the Depression, no one else had it....John Roxborough did good for other people. I don't remember him doing harm. Numbers were a means to survive and thrive (Hauke Collection n.d.).

Another person who knew Roxborough for twenty years in 1939 wrote,

[...]John was a very successful man – one of the wealthiest colored citizens of Detroit...John Roxborough is one of the most unselfish men I have ever known. No one knows how many people he has helped. No one will probably ever know how many Negro businesses he has saved from sinking. He has been good literally to everybody. Innumerable boys and girls struggling to make their way through school have been given financial assistance by him. He has given money to the Detroit Urban League to establish a scholarship fund for deserving boys and girls. He makes a gift of five hundred dollars annually to the Detroit Community Chest for human welfare. He gives liberally to the YMCA and YWCA, the NAACP and many churches and schools. I have no means to estimate the exact amount he gives away, but I am in a position to know that it runs into sizeable figures...He has never been known to forget a friend. He is never too busy to turn aside and recognize, with an enthusiastic and hearty handclasp, the most insignificant former acquaintance. He has gone out of his way to help set up his own employees in business when he saw some who were ambitious and promising and even when they have become competitors instead of trying to crush them he has shown them how it was possible to get further ahead through cooperation (Washington 1939:7).

The most famous person who Roxborough helped advance was Joe Louis.

An idea had been growing in Roxborough's mind ever since his graduation from college. It was the idea of one day finding a Negro boy with a particular gift—preferably an athletic gift—that would make him outstanding, and of molding this boy into a veritable ambassador of good will from the Negro race to the white race (Miller 1945:26).

Joe Louis in his autobiography remembered when he met John Roxborough in December of 1933. Louis recalled Roxborough was a very light skinned black man who was wealthy, stylish,



and had a reputation for assisting many people. Louis felt Roxborough's manner was gentle, "like a gentleman should be" (Louis 1978:28). Louis knew that Roxborough's real estate office was a front and that Roxborough was a "big-time numbers man" (Louis 1978:29).

Now, you have to think back some. In those days it was hard living if you were black, and it was harder still because the Depression was on. If you were smart enough to have your own numbers operation and you were kind and giving in the black neighborhoods, you got as much respect as a doctor or lawyer. It was a kind of charge to me to know a man like him was interested in me. His brother Charlie was a lawyer and politician and a big wheel in the Urban League and the Young Negro Progressive Association. So Mr. Roxborough was well encased in dignity and legitimacy" (Louis 1978:29).

Roxborough not only provided Louis with financial support, but guided his personal and professional career. Initially, Roxborough provided Joe Louis with money and clothes, and overtime their relationship evolved into that of a father and son. Roxborough invited Louis into his home first for dinners, and then later allowed him to move in with him as his "adopted" son (Louis 1978:30).



John Roxborough (left) and Joe Louis in 1937.



Roxborough (right) at Briggs Field (Detroit 1938) scouting fight location.

Roxborough ensured Louis received tutoring in academics, and was educated in the finer points of being a gentleman. He knew that Louis had to live down the negative racial connotations created by former black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson. Jack Johnson in 1908 had won the heavyweight championship, and held onto the title until 1915. During his reign as champion, Johnson refused to conform to racial mores of the times. He would frequently gloat over beating white men in the ring, had numerous public affairs with white women, and married two. Johnson at one point owned a cabaret in Chicago where whites and blacks socialized together, and frequently infuriated local police by driving his fancy automobiles too fast (Erenberg 2006:35). His behavior so bothered the white public that he was indicted under the Mann Act. The Mann Act was deliberately drafted to target his behavior by making it illegal for individuals to take women across state lines for immoral purposes (Erenberg 2006:35). Once Johnson was charged with the violation of the Mann Act, he was forced to flee

the United States (Erenberg 2006:33-35). No black person from the time Johnson had been champion had been allowed to fight for the heavyweight title. Roxborough was aware of this and knew it would be difficult. He remarked about Louis, “But he is a good boy. He was born that way. If we can only make white people believe it-if we can only make them *want* him to fight for the title-provided, of course, he gets good enough to” (Miller 1945:33). Roxborough told Louis,

To be a champion you’ve got to be a gentleman first. Your toughest fight might not be in the ring but out in public. We never, never say anything bad about an opponent. Before a fight you say how great you think he is, after a fight you say how great you thought he was. And for God’s sake, after you beat a white opponent, don’t smile...Joe, you’re going to get a lot of invitations to nightclubs. But you never go into one alone. And above all you must never have your picture taken with white women (Astor 1974:42).

Roxborough advised Louis, “Joe, a colored fighter has to be a gentleman at all times if he ever expects to win respect” (Louis 1947b:13). If Louis ever forgot this and allowed success to go to his head, he (Roxborough) would no longer manage him. Roxborough further stated, “If you make good and should get to the top, we’ll be no party to your letting your race down, for then you’d do your people a lot more harm than your success would be worth” (Van Every 1936:71). To this Louis promised, “I won’t let my people down” (Van Every 1936:72). Louis would comment in his autobiography that Roxborough talked about “Black Power” before it became popular in later years (Louis, Rust, & Rust 1978:32).

Joe Louis’ managers, in an effort to shape his image, issued the “Official Souvenir Scrap Book” about Joe Louis. The cost of the scrapbook was 35 cents and it was filled with pictures, sayings, and information about Joe Louis. For example, one page told the reader “Things You Ought To Know About Joe Louis” (Roxborough & Black 1939:1). These things included the fact he had earned \$1,250,000, his hobbies included golf, horseback riding, table tennis, motor

boating, and baseball (Roxborough & Black 1939:1). He was devoted to his mother, never drank intoxicating liquors, nor smoked. Louis never forgot a friend, had lots of pet charities, was easy for his manager to handle, had a keen wit and great sense of humor, and “never gambles – forgot there was a stock market”(Roxborough & Black 1939:1). Numerous articles were written about Joe Louis’ clean and devoted lifestyle. In one article, Joe Louis was described as a shy, “mamma’s boy” who was reared to fear God, and to be loyal and honest (Roxborough & Black 1939:1). The article described the love, respect, and devotion Louis had for his mother and for his boxing handlers, and ended with a promise that Louis would never do anything to forfeit the faith that the black race had in him (Walde 1935:7).



Newlyweds Joe Louis, his mother (Lillie) and wife (Marva) in 1935.



Joe Louis playing checkers against Johnny paycheck in 1940 prior to their scheduled March 29<sup>th</sup> fight. John Roxborough is standing next to Louis.

Although Roxborough tried to ensure Louis’ image was one of a clean-cut, wholesome black man, the white press initially was not buying it. At one point southern papers would not cover stories or print pictures of black fighters in their papers. However by 1935 a number of papers in the south carried stories concerning Louis, and even printed his picture in their papers (Cowan 1935a:17). It was in 1935 that a pastor of a church in the south wrote a letter to Louis which stated, “Some day I feel you will be the champion, and should this come to pass, try

always to be the champion of your people, so that when you are no longer the champion, the world will say of you-he was a black man outside, but a white man inside, most of all in his heart” (Miller 1945:37). Many articles were written about Louis in his early career, and they ranged from being unflattering to racist in content. Life Magazine in 1937 said, Joe Louis “rarely smiled, hated workouts and getting up” (Life 1934:21). In the same article Louis was described as

[...] a powerfully built Negro, 23 years old, 6ft 1 ¼ in. tall, 200 lb. in fighting trim. He has the most impassive face...He was a \$25-a-week unskilled laborer in the Ford plant in Detroit when Roxborough and Black took him in hand in 1934, made a professional fighter of him...In the ring, Louis is lithe, shuffling and stolid. Outside he is lethargic, uncommunicative, unimaginative (Life 1937:22).

By 1938, after he won the championship, Louis’ media image had improved greatly. Life magazine carried an article about Joe Louis winning ribbons in America’s first all-black horse show which occurred in Detroit. In this article, Louis was no longer seen as lazy and lethargic. According to the article,

Joe Louis Barrow, the placid heavyweight champion of the world, is a hero to his whole race. In Chicago’s Black Belt he is the most sought-after member of the well-to-do younger set. Equally removed from elderly religious Negroes who sing spirituals and the reefer-smoking jitter bugs of the South Side saloons, this society’s members play contract instead of craps, golf instead of gutter ball. Well-behaved Joe Louis generally dislikes parties, but has become an ardent horseman since his visit to a Negro dude ranch last November (Life 1938:45).

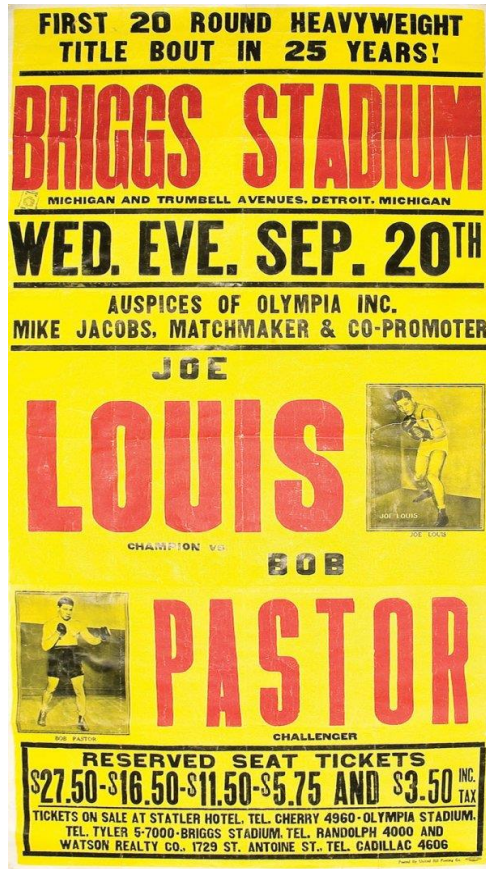
Louis’ image was carefully created to “offset white fears and break the color line” (Erenberg 2006:45). His management team, which included John Roxborough, were deemed his “Brain Trust” (Erenberg 2006:45). They were called this because they were intelligent men who would create his image as “a representative of racial progress” (Erenberg 2006:45). Having an all-black management team who were professional and efficient was a source of pride in the black community (Erenberg 2006:45). A letter, written to the Pittsburgh Courier in 1935, summed up

this sentiment. The writer wrote, “To my mind the finest thing about Joe Louis is the fact that he has a colored manager, and his whole working staff is made up of colored men...the colored man has the same ability as the white man” (Pittsburg Courier 1935:A4).

Joe Louis received a number of letters from both black and white fans that reminded him of his responsibility to race relations. For example, in 1935 Governor Frank D. Fitzgerald of Michigan wrote,

[...] I’m talking to you as a man more than twice your age just to give a little advice to a young fellow who has a real chance to do something for his people...Your race, at times in the past, has been misrepresented by others who thought they had reached the heights. Its people have been denied equal opportunity. Its obstacles and its handicaps have been such that it has been saved only by its own infinite patience and its ability to endure suffering without becoming poisoned by bitterness. The qualities which may soon make you a world champion should call to the attention of people the world over that the good in you can also be found in others of your race, and used for their own welfare, and the welfare of humanity at large. So Joe, you may soon have on your strong hands the job of representative-at-large of your people (Mead 1985:55-56).

On September 20, 1939, Joe Louis fought Bob Pastor at Briggs Stadium in Detroit. The announcer when introducing him said, “Weighing 200 pounds wearing the purple trunks, native son of Detroit, who proved himself to be a credit to his chosen profession and the race he represents, the current heavyweight king, Joe Louis” (Louis vs. Pastor:1939).



Shortly after the Janet MacDonald murder-suicide in 1939, Joe Louis fought Bob Pastor in Detroit. Tickets were available at Watson's realty company.

Joe Louis was so popular that presidential candidate Wendell Willkie solicited Louis' help while campaigning in 1940. Louis would make over 123 speeches for Willkie the last taking place in Detroit on November 3, 1940. On that date, Louis urged black voters to vote for Willkie because "...he has put things down in black and white that we're going to get jobs and not have to take welfare checks. I'm going to cast my vote Tuesday for Willkie for our next president" (Detroit Free Press 1940e:3). Louis would also appear in ads, which appeared in the Detroit Free Press urging voters to vote for Willkie. Willkie won the state of Michigan during the presidential election, but ultimately lost the presidency to Franklin D. Roosevelt.



1940 campaign button for Wendell Willkie

Just as Roxborough was responsible for creating Louis' image, he also protected his created image. In June of 1940, Earl Brown, a black writer wrote an eight page feature on Joe Louis in *Life* magazine. In the article, it was alleged that Brown

[...] wrote an intimate account of the life of Joe Louis for *Life* Magazine. Because the young man didn't sugar-coat his article with only superlatives dealing with the finer points of the world heavyweight champion and his handlers, a terrible howl was let up immediately creating a "smoke screen" over what to these eyes was might accurate and uncompromising view of Joe Louis and his entourage. Pressure was applied to the point that Earl Brown was fired from his editorial desk with the *Amsterdam News* and Atty. John Roxborough, co-manager of Louis and instigator of the trouble that regulated Brown to the ranks of the jobless, also wrote a burning letter to *LIFE*, denouncing the article by the newspaperman" (Jones 1940:5).

Roxborough wrote,

Your article on Joe Louis by Earl Brown was not only saturated with untrue and inaccurate statements but replete with insinuations and comments derogatory to Joe Louis, his trainer and management. Never has Joe been seen walking about in the house in his bare feet nor does he snore like a Mack truck. He does not overeat nor oversleep. He devotes much time to golf, horseback riding, baseball, trapshooting, and hunting, which keep him in good physical condition, enabling him to keep his weight at 199 or 200 pounds for all of his fights. All in all Joe Louis has done everything possible to win and retain the good will and respect of the American public (*Life* 1940:4 )

In 1941, Joe Louis was asked by the army and navy to fight a benefit fight. The decision was made to allow Louis to fight a benefit fight for the Navy and to donate all of his earning for the fight. At that time the U.S. Navy had a reputation for barring blacks from its service and



training centers (Carter 1941:1). Roxborough's decision was met with both praise and criticism.

Roxborough,

[...] emphasized again that the world heavyweight champion was only doing what he considered his patriotic duty and was seeking no glory for the gift of his entire purse to a navy relief society...Louis as well as his managerial staff is convinced that he could render no better service to his country in this time of extreme emergency. The champion, though there has been no assurance of such a change, hopes that his deed may serve to temper the navy's attitude toward colored seaman and pave the way for promotion and democratic induction into all branches of the country's naval forces"(Carter 1941:1).

Roxborough felt that if Louis had refused he would have been stigmatized as un-American.

Although Louis put his championship on the line against Buddy Baer and donated his entire winnings, Baer on the other hand did not. The decision for Louis to fight the charity bout was met with criticism by the black press, who stated,

I attack the proposed contest from the beginning, not as a personal slap at Louis, his co-managers John Roxborough and Julian Black, and Mike Jacobs, but purely on a basis of principle. It has been and still is my contention that Louis by making such a magnanimous gesture to benefit the Navy, even though its present role in the war concerns us all, is ill advised. The Navy's attitude toward Louis' people in war and in peace has been a constant reiteration of the age-old anti-Negro attitudes of the ante-bellum South and the horizon holds no immediate changes in this attitude insofar as persons more qualified than Louis, Black, Roxborough or Jacobs to predict can perceive. The humiliation Negroes are confronted with when they attempt to enlist as American citizens – not Negroes – to help defend their country on the seas has been felt throughout the length and breadth of the land. Pearl Harbor, it was believed, would somehow change the bleak Naval conception of who has a right to fight on the ships for this country. It didn't. Instead, the barriers against black volunteers were built higher and the disciples of racial intolerance were more adamant than ever in demonstrating their conceptions of democracy to those anxious to serve (Burley 1942:14).

Other media outlets however praised Louis.

Louis' generosity and patriotism were being widely heralded in the nation's newspapers and magazine. Roxborough, as usual, remained in the background. Louis was the symbol white people had come to admire. Louis was the man to keep in the spotlight. He, Roxborough, was content with the knowledge that this "ambassador" was in large part his own creation. He did not care if no one else understood his role in the making of Louis. In fact now he rather wanted to be

ignored. A case involving Roxborough was soon to be decided in a Michigan court, and he did not want people to associate it in any way with Louis (Miller 1945:159).

Before the fight, Wendell Willkie entered the boxing ring and made a speech. Willkie thanked Joe Louis, “in the name of the United States Navy and the American people. Thank you for your magnificent contribution and generosity in risking for nothing a title you have won through blood, sweat, and toil” (Miller 1945:160). Louis won the fight by knocking out Baer in the first round.

John Roxborough stood just below the apron of the ring, his head bowed and his eyes damp. This was a moment of which he had dreamed for many, many years. His “ambassador” had unquestionably become a reality...John Roxborough, in this moment of greatest triumph, was unable to conceal his emotion. He wept for Louis’ accomplishment and, in the same tears, for his own failure. Two days before he had been convicted of dealing in policy slips and sentenced to a term of two and one-half to five years in Michigan State Penitentiary (Miller 1945:161).

A few days after the fight in mid-January of 1942, sports writers honored Joe Louis at a dinner. The dinner was attended by sports writers, army and navy officers, the former postmaster general, J. Edgar Hoover, the former mayor of New York James Walker, and other dignitaries. Walker served as the speaker of the evening and said this,

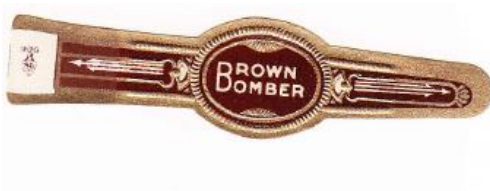
Joe, all the Negroes in the world are proud of you because you have given them reason to be proud. You never forgot your own people. You are an American gentleman. When you fought Buddy Baer and gave your purse to the Navy Relief Society, you took your title and your future and bet it all on patriotism and love of country. Joe Louis, that night you laid a rose on the grave of Abraham Lincoln (Miller:1945:165).

Joe Louis entered the United States Army in 1942 as heavyweight champion. Due to his status and popularity as a boxing champion, the Army used his image to recruit both black and white soldiers. The United States Office of Facts and Figures created the following poster in 1942 with Louis’ image.



Joe Louis – 1942

Another indication that Louis had broken color lines could be seen in the commercialization of his image to sell products. The National Coin Bank Company out of Detroit minted the “Official Joe Louis Lucky Coin,” and Nash-Underwood Incorporated (out of Chicago) used his likeness when making the jars that held Nash’s Prepared Mustard. Once the consumer consumed the mustard, the jar was available to be used as a “Lucky Joe Bank.” Joe Louis would endorse everything from boxing gloves to Chesterfield cigarettes at a time when a black man’s image was taboo. Roxborough’s plan to break down racial barriers had succeeded to some extent.



Joe Louis was so popular his name was used to sell cigars and he even had his own soft drink, Joe Louis Punch.

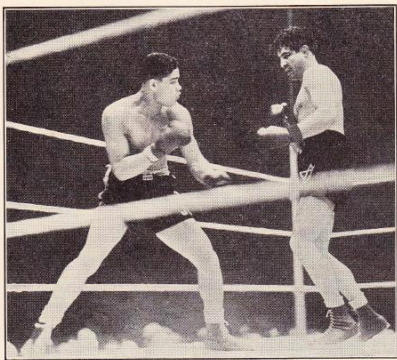


Joe Louis lucky coin with wishbone, rabbit's foot, horseshoe and four leaf clover.



Lucky Joe Bank

**A SENSATIONAL FIGHTER USES SENSATIONAL BOXING EQUIPMENT**  
**ROMAN SPORTING GOODS**



Joe Louis scores a knockout over former champion Max Baer.  
 Under date of April 4, 1935, John Roxborough writes:  
 "All our equipment is of your make, and we certainly appreciate doing business with your wonderful agent in Chicago. He is always courteous and considerate."  
 Joe Louis is a great admirer of your gloves and demands them whenever he fights.  
 You can be assured that we will call on you when we arrive in New York.

Sincerely Yours,  
 JOHN W. ROXBOROUGH.

**GET THE JOE LOUIS HABIT AND BE ROMAN-EQUIPPED**



**THE WINNER**

IN MY RESTAURANT IN NEW YORK  
 CHESTERFIELD IS BY FAR THE  
 LARGEST SELLING CIGARETTE

*Joe Louis*

Joe Louis advertising sporting goods and cigarettes.

The impact Joe Louis had on all people across the United States can be seen in just two of thousands of letters he received from all over the world (Roxborough 1954:75). One letter came from a white woman whose son was critically ill. She wrote that her son idolized Joe Louis, and was writing in the hope Louis would send her son an encouraging note. Louis did, and sent an autographed picture as well. The mother wrote a second letter to Louis and advised, “Jimmy put your picture beside his hospital cot, and looks at it a hundred times a day...And the doctor gives you credit for his improvement. He is doing fine now, and I’ll always feel deeply indebted to you and your race (Louis 1947a:110). The following letter was sent upon his retirement in 1948:

**AMERICAN METAL PRODUCTS, Inc.**

Wholesale

**ALUMINUM PRODUCTS**Alcoa - Pipe - Tubing - Extrusions  
Sheeting - Accessories3219 First Avenue South  
SEATTLE 4, WASHINGTON*Figure it in Aluminum*

June 25, 1948

Mr. Joe Louis  
Heavy Weight Champion  
20th Century Athletic Club  
New York, N. Y.

Dear Champ:

Congratulations and God bless you. Your splendid final fight against Joe Walcott and your promise to your mother to quit the fight game while you are still on top and not walking on your heels is received with the heartfelt blessing of all sports fans and ex-fighters.

You have been a credit to the boxing game and to all fellow Americans, regardless of race, creed or color. Your decision to hang up the gloves at the ripe "old" age of 34 makes the writer feel somewhat decrepit as I, too am 34 but up to this time didn't feel so old.

In any event you have always been noted for your cleanness, feathrightness and honesty so for the sake of your millions of admirers, both young and old please do not go back on your word and ever lace on the gloves professionally again.

We in the West, where men are also pretty rugged and forthright, wish you the best of success in any future venture you undertake (and hope it might be in behalf of Gov. Dewey this Fall) and put you down in our book as a Great American.

We also cherish the hope that we might have the pleasure of meeting you personally someday.

Cordially yours,  
American Metal Products, Inc.*Edw. C. Dorn*Edw. C. Dorn  
President

ECD/psb

*HOME ADDRESS - 1510 EA. BAY DRIVE  
OLYMPIA, WASH.**Figure it in Aluminum*

Joe Louis understood his role in the fight against racism because as a black man he experienced it in everyday activities, while serving in the United States Army, and during his boxing career. He wondered,

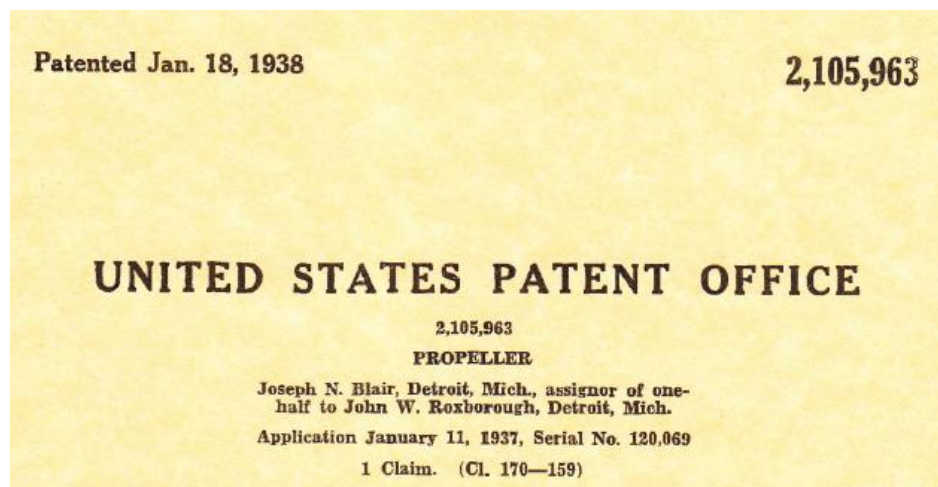
I've often wondered how many punches my chin can take from prejudice. And if someday I'll be able to counter with a KO punch myself. I know it's a hard fight. Hate just won't "take the count" overnight. But the toughest fights are the kind you like to win best. It's going to take a lot of punching. Jim Crow won't be easy to stop. But I think there are enough fair-thinking people in the fight. And enough ready to join, to help bring real democracy to America and the world. Prejudice is weakening. The good people are softening it up. So we can't stop punching now. We just have to punch faster and harder. That's the only way we can make America a better place for my little boy and girl and all the little girls and boys in our country. I'm going to do my part (Louis 1947a:16).

John Roxborough's "piloting" of Joe Louis to the heavyweight championship was viewed as a source of pride for blacks as well. One newspaper writer noted that what Roxborough had done to make Louis champion and earn nearly a million dollars in three years was an "unusual phenomenon on the American scene." He further encouraged black people to note and feel pride that black men who like them were forced to abide by the rules of prejudice in society were able to accomplish a great feat in spite of it. Blacks were urged to work cooperatively, and to emulate Louis' management team.

Roxborough and Black, who are also ardent race champions, are to be congratulated by the whole group; and so are Blackburn and, of course, Mr. Barrow himself. May they continue to stick together; and may they hold on to the money, and make it serve not only their personal ends, but the race at large, if in no other way than by keeping it in their possession, which adds prestige to the whole group (Calvin 1937:20).

In addition to his managing and promoting of Joe Louis, John Roxborough had several legal businesses that he operated in Detroit. One such business was the Superior Life Insurance Company, which was organized during the Depression in 1934 (Boykin 1943:108-109). Roxborough also invested in a number of businesses and owned several properties throughout

the city. In 1938, Roxborough entered into an agreement with an inventor, Joseph Blair, to provide funds that would aid in the development, patenting, and promoting of numerous inventions. Blair developed numerous mechanical contraptions to include a non-slip fan propeller, and designs for submarines, telescopic lens, and a dishwasher (Michigan Chronicle 1949b:3). Later, Blair would sue Roxborough in 1947 claiming Roxborough wrongfully took advantage of him through their contract. Blair claimed the agreement he entered in with Roxborough, "...was one-sided, unfair, inequitable, oppressive, lacking in mutuality, and inadequate as to consideration moving from the defendant to the plaintiff" (Michigan Chronicle 1949:3).



Patent application from 1937.

How Roxborough was viewed could be summed up best by this quote from a white writer,

[...] an American archetype machined by those attitudes that operated to exclude him from sharing in the decenter, larger prospects society offered to white men of half his talents, training and ambition. He was cunning, he was callous and he was involved in transactions that were shady....still he donated to his Race" (Astor 1974:36).

However not everyone respected Roxborough. Mary Taliaferro, who was the wife of a prominent Detroit lawyer and knew Roxborough, was one such person. When asked if Roxborough was a criminal, she replied,



Well, I don't know. Is DeLorean a criminal? See what I mean? John Roxborough wanted things and he had good taste. He liked the best things. And you see he had some good education, too, and so, he went for the getting of these things the way he could. And one of the things he could do—I don't know why he didn't do something else—it's not my thinking, not my business really—but one of the things he could do was get into these numbers because there was lots of money in it. Lots of money. He was sort of like DeLorean. He saw other people shut their doors and they won't lend me any money and I've got to see that these things are done that I'm trying to do. He was ambitious. There are just some things you shouldn't do...So this was the way with John and he knew enough people to still have a life. And such as it was... Well, there were lots of people that didn't respect him and he wanted respect... Because he was wheeling and dealing. It wasn't unknown what he was doing. He married nice women because he presented himself to them as a desirable man (Hauke Collection n.d.).

In this chapter I focused on just one black numbers operator from Detroit to illustrate how he advanced black communities and contributed to community pride and solidarity. Roxborough's managing of Joe Louis alone demonstrates how the wealth he accumulated, via the informal economy, was put to achieving more than just the winning of a boxing title. This in itself is ironic. Initially, the numbers game was purposely linked as a negative black activity. It was used to create boundaries between whites and blacks, by portraying blacks as ignorant, superstitious, and lazy people. Roxborough would take profits from this game to re-create positive images of blacks. Roxborough created an image of blacks as being hard-working, honest, and American. This created image flew in the face of past images. Roxborough however was not perfect. He operated an illegal enterprise, was accused of being cruel by his former wives, and was sued a number of times for unfair practices. In all, Roxborough was a flawed, complex man, who in spite of this achieved tremendous strides for blacks. The next chapter will focus on the memories of a man, Fuller Hit, who grew up during this time frame. Fuller had a close relative who was a numbers operator during this pivotal time period, and he recalled the influence his relative and other numbers operators had on Detroit's black communities.

## CHAPTER 10 “FULLER HIT’S STORY”

Fuller Hit likes to remind everyone that he has “seen a lot of life and lived a lot more.”<sup>8</sup> Fuller, at age 87, is small of stature, but possesses an abundance of charm. Some have described him as a knowledgeable historian, hence his nickname “Doctor”. With a keen sense of fashion, it is not uncommon to see the dapper statesman wearing an ascot or a derby on his graying, thinning hair. Like so many other transplants to Detroit, Fuller was not born in Detroit, but when he was a toddler his family relocated to the city from Canada. Fuller described his father as an educated professional who ran his own business in Detroit, and his mother as an educated housewife. His life was one of privilege. As a young child growing up during the Great Depression, he has no memories of personally going through hard times, but was aware of others who did. His family was fortunate and lived in a “nice brick house,” and he and his siblings attended Catholic schools. Church was very much a part of his upbringing and as a child Sundays represented attending church in the morning and going to the movies in the afternoon.

Some of Fuller’s earliest memories are of Paradise Valley and the Black Bottoms. Although his family did not reside in either, their business (which he declined to name) catered to its residents. Fuller stressed that Black Bottom was the “residential” part of black Detroit on the eastside, and Paradise Valley was the “business and entertainment” section. He described the area in the late 30s to early 50s as vibrant and full of life. In his words, “It was a true melting pot. You had people from all walks of life living, working and playing there. There were doctors and lawyers next to porters and factory works, who associated with street hustlers.” Street hustlers included prostitutes, peddlers, panhandlers, thieves, confidence men and women, and numbers runners or writers. Fuller equated the Black Bottom with poverty. For him it was a slum area where the poor lived (mainly blacks, but some whites as well). Paradise Valley was

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<sup>8</sup> Fuller Hit was interviewed on December 12, 2012 and December 17, 2012.

where every business imaginable for blacks was located. Paradise Valley offered nightclubs, bars, restaurants, hotels, a bowling alley, a skating rink, drug stores, theaters, grocery stores, cigar shops, tailors, poolrooms, laundries, coffee shops, and many other businesses that catered to blacks. Because blacks were restricted in where they could conduct business, Paradise Valley was always bustling with activity. Fuller still remembered being entertained simply by walking along the sidewalks and inhaling the smell of fish frying or barbeque on pits. As a teenager, Fuller recalled dancing at the Graystone Ballroom where singers and bands such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie would perform.

Fuller has intimate first-hand knowledge concerning numbers gambling because he grew up with it. A close relative of Fuller's, "Charles", was a major numbers banker, and was friends with a number of other numbers bankers including the Mosley family and Everett Watson, whose nickname was "Monk." Fuller grew up respecting these men and viewed them as surrogate uncles. He recalled that like Charles, Watson was a self-made man. Watson had earned his early wealth as a porter on the ships. With his savings he bought into the Waiters and Bellman's Club, which was a private club for blacks that served liquor and provided gambling. Watson had a natural head for business, but gained more knowledge by listening to and observing the business men that he served on the ships. According to Fuller, Charles was an educated man who was of average size and looks. As a young man Charles worked a number of jobs whereby he saved as much as he possibly could. When Prohibition hit the city, Charles took his savings and invested it in illegal whiskey. Charles would sell the whiskey to clubs and bars, and as his profits grew, he began to invest his money in a number of business ventures. One such venture was a poolroom, which provided illegal liquor to patrons, and a number of gambling games to include poker and blackjack. Charles' poolroom would later serve as the

headquarters for his numbers business. Charles had a reputation in the community for being a fair man, who employed a number of people in his poolroom and financed neighborhood parties. When he began his numbers business his reputation continued to grow. Not only did he continue to hire people in the neighborhood who needed jobs, but he was honest. He ensured hits were paid off timely (even when he was hit hard), and when his employees were arrested he promptly took care of their legal troubles. His numbers house was known to take care of everyone in the community. When someone died, he ensured flowers or food baskets were delivered. If someone had trouble paying for a burial all they had to do was to let him know. Charles ensured children and the elderly received medicine when they could not afford it, and many people's rent was paid by him. Charles took care of his community because his community took care of him. He knew that his success depended on the people that patronized his businesses, and knew all too well the struggle of everyday living in Detroit. Fuller said that people played with Charles and his other uncles because they were strong, trustworthy black men who took care of their race and their community.

According to Fuller, people of all races and economic status played the numbers in Detroit. Many poor people played the numbers because it was a chance for them to live a little easier if just for a moment (interview with author, December 17, 2012). A story that demonstrates how all races were involved is reflected in a story Fuller told. Fuller, like Sunnie Wilson in his memoirs, *Toast of the Town*, recalled hearing the story of a numbers operator who while taking a sack of money from his numbers operation to the bank was stopped by a Chinese man. The Chinese man asked the black numbers operator what was in the bag, to which the numbers operator responded, "I've got black folks' dreams" (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:67). Sometime later the numbers operator saw the same man holding his own bag of money. As they

passed the Chinese man told the numbers operator, "Chinese people got black dreams too" (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:67). Fuller recalled that people of all races played the numbers. At first when numbers operations were owned and operated by blacks, both whites and blacks patronized them. However, once whites began owning and operating numbers operations, black players tended to patronize black numbers organizations, and whites patronized white owned numbers houses. This patronizing of businesses reflected the segregation that was the norm in Detroit, and also reflected black solidarity in numbers.

As Charles' fortune grew he further invested his money into legal businesses. Charles purchased real estate throughout the county, and acted as a loan institution for a number of blacks that dreamed of running their own businesses in Detroit. Charles provided the seed money for grocery stores and restaurants, funeral homes, nightclubs, and hat shops in the city. He sponsored many young people's educational expenses at a number of local colleges, and made sure the neighborhood children had enough to eat and presents at Christmas. Charles was a source of pride for blacks in the city. Many praised him for his honesty, work ethic, sense of humor, and business savvy. His wealth was never envied because he gave back and was generous. In addition, Charles never flaunted his wealth. He was a plain dresser, who drove a functioning car, and lived in a nice, but modest brick house on the near eastside. Charles' wife did not work, and she too was modest in her appearance. Her time was spent working at the church and for a number of women's organizations that furthered a variety of black causes in the city. Although Charles was respected and liked by many, all did not accept him. Fuller recalled that many black people did not agree with how Charles had made his fortune because they did not agree with numbers gambling. For some it went against their religious beliefs while others found it cast all blacks in a negative light. A number of blacks did not want blacks playing the

numbers because it perpetuated the image of blacks being criminals, and “lazy gambling fools.” However, no one would inform on a numbers operator in the community. As Fuller explained, all blacks regardless of their income, education, or status were viewed by their race first and foremost by whites.

Racism at this time dictated where blacks lived, worked, played, learned, and shopped. Blacks were basically in the same boat, and were treated unequal and unfair as a whole. The segregated police department was anti-black, very cruel and brutal in their treatment of blacks. Blacks could only walk the beat and were not allowed into patrol cars until after World War II; when this occurred only one patrol car was allocated for black officers to use. This meant that for three shifts, only six black police officers for the day were allowed to patrol in a vehicle. There were quota systems put in place that restricted the hiring of blacks. In the 1950s blacks made up only three percent or 140 officers of the 4,200 Detroit Police Department (Conot 1974:413). Very few blacks held positions of authority or command. After former mayor, Richard “Double Dip Dick” Reading’s scandal was exposed in 1940, the city charter established a “merit system” for promotions. This new merit system was subjective in nature and allowed for discrimination against blacks (Conot 1974:414). A number of white Detroit police officers’ acts of harassment and brutality were responsible for numerous violent racial clashes from 1920 to 1950. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that many Detroit police officers were recruited from the south. For example, from 1924 to 1925, white policemen were responsible for killing more than 40 blacks (Littlejohn and Hobson 1987:20). In 1948, Ernest Goodman, a famous Detroit lawyer, summed up the plight of blacks in Detroit when he stated,

No white person who has not been intimately associated with at least a few of the numerous instances of discrimination against the Negro people can properly understand and appreciate the subtle and overt indignities under which Negro people live in our community. This prejudice manifests itself most sharply and in

its most brutal form when expressed by policemen. For the policeman, in his person, represents the symbol of authority by which discrimination is frequently maintained (Littlejohn and Hobson 1987:23).

Police officers were rarely prosecuted for their brutal attacks on blacks. By 1956, things were still bad for Detroit's black citizens and its black police officers. Black officers were still not allowed to ride in the same patrol car as whites, walked segregated beats, and were not allowed to arrest white criminals. Fred Williams, a black Detroit police officer, recalled that "In those days, the police force was like an occupying white army in the black community. It was domination and fear rather than respect" (Leen 1985:1A&10A). The police were hated and feared by Detroit's black communities, who expected white police officers to call them offensive names and manhandle them (Leen 1985:1A&10A).

No justice could be found in the court of law for blacks either. It was common for black lawyers, their clients, and witnesses while in court to be treated unfairly and shown disrespect by white judges and lawyers. Regardless of their age or title, white judges would commonly address all blacks by their first name or by a derogatory term. For example, on November 18, 1940, Judge Arthur Gordon while hearing a case against numbers operator Thomas Hammonds, referred to the 66 year old Hammonds as a "chap" and called him "Brother Hammonds" (The People vs Hammonds 1940:75 &116). So regardless of how they felt about numbers gambling, the thought of subjecting another black person to the disrespect of the justice system was more distasteful. The restrictions and racism forced blacks to have an "us versus them" attitude. This attitude meant that you may not agree with numbers gambling, but at the same time you protected the blacks who were involved in it because they were black, and faced unfair treatment by white Detroit.

Many of Detroit's black elite only tolerated Charles and the other numbers operators because they had wealth, and did give back to the community. Fuller thought that the only numbers operators in Detroit that were truly accepted by the black elite were those that were born into black elite families like John Roxborough, or were highly educated like Dr. Haley Bell (interview with author, December 17, 2012). Dr. Haley Bell was a prominent black dentist who had practices in Detroit and Hamtramck. Dr. Bell grew up in Savannah, Georgia where he attended private schools. He graduated from Meharry Medical College in Tennessee. In 1923, he came to Detroit and opened a dental practice. In addition to his dental practice for a while he was part of a numbers organization in Hamtramck. Like Everett Watson, Dr. Bell was indicted by Judge Homer Ferguson's one-man grand jury for providing payoffs to the mayor of Hamtramck. In return for these graft payments, numbers gambling was allowed to operate without police interference. Although indicted, the charges against Dr. Bell were later dismissed (Detroit Tribune 1944a:1). Dr. Bell years later would be one of the founders of the black cemetery, Detroit Memorial Park, and became the first black person to build and own a radio station (WCHB) in the United States in 1955. Dr. Bell was known for his charity work in the community, and was presented the key to the city of Detroit in 1958 for a lifetime of achievements to the city.



Dr. Haley Bell and his wife, Mary in 1973 being honored at the Cotillion Club.



Fuller was proud of Charles, and his pride was for a number of reasons. As a child, Fuller admitted he had no idea exactly what Charles did to get his wealth. It was not talked about openly. When relatives, friends and adults talked about Charles it was to call him a businessman, and his legitimate businesses were what were discussed. Fuller remembers people talking about what a great man Charles was, and ranting about him donating money, space, or food to churches, the Urban League, and a number of other causes that benefited the community. Charles attended church with his wife regularly, and was active in politics. Charles was not affiliated with any one political party, but instead used his resources to support whatever candidate he felt would help blacks. When one candidate he supported ran for office, Charles had his number writers deliver campaign literature as they wrote their numbers. Most people trusted Charles and their numbers writer, who usually were family, friends, or neighbors, and voted in line with them.

As Fuller grew older, he found himself listening in on private “adult” conversations. It was then that he learned Charles was a numbers banker. This knowledge did not diminish what Fuller felt for Charles; if anything, it increased his pride and respect for him. When Fuller discussed what he had learned about Charles with his friends, they were in awe. Numbers men were respected for their wealth. Their wealth was apparent in how they dressed, in their jewelry, the cars they drove and the houses they lived in. Charles was no longer just the “nice” businessman, but he was one of THE numbers men. When asked if any women were numbers operators during this time, Fuller laughed and said, “No, their role was to marry a numbers operator.” The women who were in the numbers business tended to have minor roles as either numbers writers or cashiers. These roles reflected the roles (clerical) that women had in the

formal economy. However, it is interesting to note numbers gambling did allow black women to have jobs outside of the usual domestic ones.

Fuller was approximately 12 years of age when Janet MacDonald murdered her daughter and committed suicide. He remember the shock everyone felt that she would kill her daughter. The fact she had earned her living from the numbers, but caused thousands to temporarily lose their livelihood was not lost on those affected by her actions. According to Fuller it was weeks before things were back to normal for the numbers men. The closure of their establishments meant not only a loss of income for them, but for the many that relied on the numbers as a source of income. The tragedy meant a loss for numbers employees and the players whose occasional winnings helped pay for life necessities. The tragedy was an overall loss for the community because fewer people were making purchases at restaurants and stores.

When the indictments from Judge Homer Ferguson's one man grand jury were coming down, Charles' family was worried that Charles would be named. However, he was not named as a defendant, and avoided being questioned. A number of Fuller's other "uncles", however were not so lucky. Fuller remembered that for Watson it was a wearisome time. Not only was he facing legal problems, but one of his sons was very ill, and would later die. At one point, some of the numbers men who were on trial were not worried. They felt that they would not be convicted; after all they had the support of their community, and political influence. While their trials were going on, many of the numbers operators' businesses continued to flourish. The black community felt as though the government was purposely attacking the black numbers operators in an effort to put them out of business. Sunnie Wilson in his autobiography noted the black community viewed the city's attempt to break up numbers gambling as a direct attack on them (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:72). When the black numbers operators were all convicted,

many blacks felt that their assumption of governmental personal attack against the black community was correct.

Fuller recalled only one other incident, which temporarily stopped the numbers from being played, the 1943 riot. On June 20, 1943, a hot night in the city, a rumor spread that white men had thrown a black woman and her baby off the Belle Isle Bridge. In the white community, a different rumor spread that black men had raped a white woman on Belle Isle. Neither rumor was true, nor the source of the rumors could ever be pinpointed, but the results were deadly. Rioting continued until June 22<sup>nd</sup> when federal troops arrived to restore order. By the end of the riot 34 people were killed, hundreds injured, and \$2 million in property destroyed (Lee and Humphrey 1943:86). Of the 34 people killed, 25 were black, and the police killed 12 of the 25 (Lee and Humphrey 1943:84-85). The riot would cause numbers playing to cease as people dealt with its devastating effects. Again, it was Charles and other numbers operators who stepped up to help rebuild the black community by providing resources for food, clothing, and shelter.



Scene from 1943 Detroit riot. Rioters overturn a car downtown.



Police officers look at the damage to a Hastings St. store as a result of the 1943 riot.



Fires burn during the 1943 riots.



One of several stores damaged in the Black Bottoms after the 1943 riots.

Shortly after the 1943 riots, Charles completely retired from operating a numbers organization. He sold his interest to another numbers operator, and slowly sold off his other real estate interests and business before eventually retiring to a farm where he died. Fuller at one point wanted to go into the numbers business like Charles, but was quickly discouraged from doing so by his mother and father, who let him know the expectation was for him to obtain an education. However, Charles was the one who ultimately swayed him away from the business. Charles told Fuller it would be a sin against God not to use the gifts given to him to simply chase a dollar. With the stern lecture from Charles, Fuller would go on to get a college degree and use “those God given talents.”

As for Fuller’s other “uncles”, all had different fates. Watson’s Yellow Dog Numbers House continued to operate while he was on trial, in prison, and after his release. He eventually sold his interest, and like Charles retired. Roxborough’s Big Four Numbers House continued to operate as well. Roxborough’s brother Claude and other partners continued running the business. In August of 1944, Claude was again arrested for operating a numbers house, and had

the highest bond on record at that time (\$10,000) placed on him (Detroit Sun 1944:2). Eventually the Roxborough's would sell and retire from the numbers business as well. Fuller's other "uncles" would purchase the largest black owned and operated hotel in Detroit called the Hotel Gotham in 1943. The Hotel Gotham would later become the headquarters or clearinghouse for most numbers operators in the city.

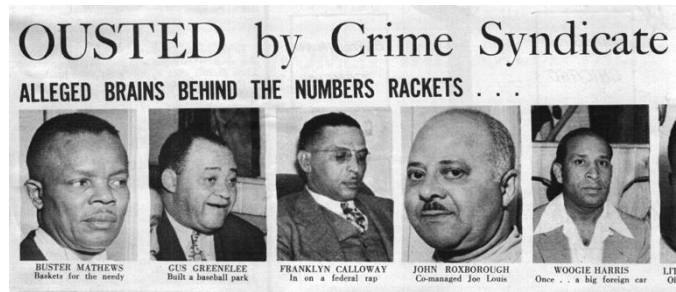
This chapter shows how Charles like the other numbers operators had to use the informal economy as an entrance into the formal economy. The formal economy was constructed to shut out blacks. This chapter also demonstrates the power of the informal economy. When numbers business was temporarily shut down, this stoppage of money flow impacted legitimate businesses. The next chapter will explore how numbers transitioned from black to white control when John Roxborough retired from the numbers business. With this retirement, a new face of numbers operators emerged just as urban renewal began to destroy black communities. As the game's leadership changed, so did the communities that patronized it.

## CHAPTER 11 “THE NUMBERS GAME EVOLVES – THE DESTRUCTION OF BLACK NUMBERS AND NEIGHBORHOODS”

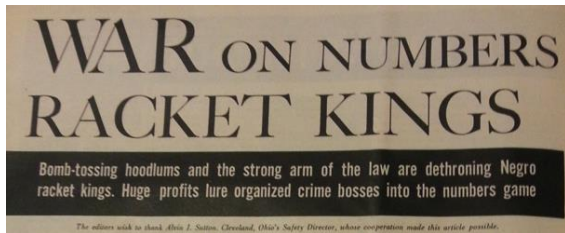
It was common knowledge that blacks were no longer in charge. The June 1951 edition of Color magazine covered this change in numbers gambling in a story, entitled “War on Number Racket Kings.”



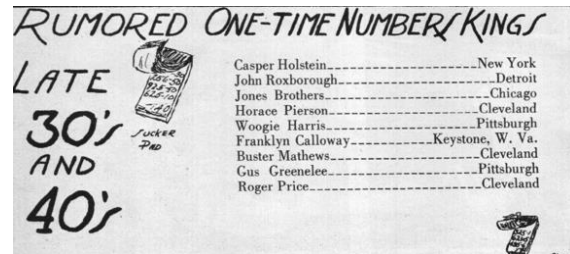
Cover of Color with article “War on Number Kings”



John Roxborough named as one of the alleged brains in article.



“Huge profits lure organized crime bosses into the numbers game.”



John Roxborough declared one time Numbers King.

More importantly, when Roxborough ceased operating his numbers business, he also relinquished control of the wire service to Detroit’s Italian mafia. Control of the wire service meant a loss of power for black numbers operators, because at that point blacks no longer chose the racetracks that the winning numbers were drawn from. Whoever controlled the wire service in a sense controlled the numbers racket; withholding the wire service from a numbers operator meant they could not operate their numbers business (Carter 1970:53-55). As blacks began to move outside of Black Bottom and into other neighborhoods, so did the numbers organizations

that patronized them. The Italian mafia was credited with expanding the numbers game in Detroit. For example, Peter Licavoli, a Grosse Pointe resident, and known as a Prohibition-era chieftain, diversified his business interests and entered into the numbers racket in Detroit.



Peter Licavoli being questioned about his numbers operation in 1946 (left) and leaving Detroit's federal courthouse after being arraigned for contempt of court due to his refusal to answer questions during a U.S. Senate Hearing on organized crime in 1951.

Peter Licavoli was born in 1902 to Sicilian immigrants. Though said to be highly intelligent, Licavoli had little formal education, but had a reputation for being the head of Detroit's mafia for a number of years. Licavoli provided hired hoodlums for union busting throughout the 1930s for the Ford Motor Company (Investigation of Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce 1951:67). It was alleged that Licavoli was involved in illegal liquor crimes, gambling, narcotics, prostitution, extortion, murder for hire, and a number of other rackets. Over his lifetime he was charged 38 times for crimes including armed robbery, murder, bootlegging, bribing a law enforcement officer, kidnapping, theft, extortion, income tax evasion, and contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions at a Senate rackets investigation. Senator Estes Kefauver, known for heading the Senate investigation of organized crime in the 1950s,



described Licavoli as, “one of the most cold blooded and contemptuous characters to appear before our committee” (Bird 1984:1). Men like Licavoli and the Italian mafia were starkly different from black numbers operators, who tended to be non-violent and accepted into the black middle class. By 1951, Licavoli owned at least two numbers businesses, the Mexico and Villa House, and the Chesterfield House, which was described as the largest in Detroit at the time. In addition, Licavoli also earned income from the printing of the Green Sheet, which was a tip sheet sold to numbers gamblers (Investigation of Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce 1951:63-65).

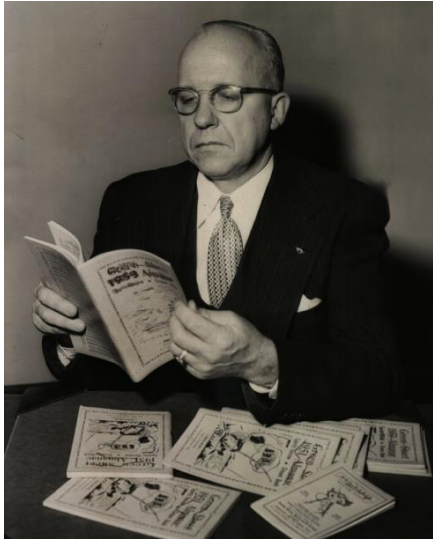
At one point the numbers racket was considered the only large scale organized gambling in the city, and was charged with preying on Wayne University students (Detroit News 1949:72).



Detroit Police Commissioner Toy tells Detroit City Council about gambling preying on Wayne State University students and what he is doing about it on September 28, 1949.

As numbers gambling began to spread throughout the city, the Detroit Police Department in response began to use new methods of investigation. Lieutenant Clayton Nowlin, the head of the vice squad, began using “movie cameras” and photography to capture violators in the act. At the time, this new technology allowed law enforcement to close down several numbers

organizations, which were earning a million dollars annually. The use of “movie cameras” and photography was credited with 1,500 people being arrested, \$275,650 being generated in court fines, 213 vehicles confiscated, and a quarter of a million dollars seized (Detroit Free Press Graphic Sunday 1951:4).



Lt. Nowlin with confiscated dream books in 1953.



Movie footage used to capture numbers gambling activity in 1951.

The relationship between numbers operators and the black community changed as more and more whites owned and operated illegal numbers businesses. White numbers operators did not live in the community where they conducted business, and did not give back to the community that patronized them. For example, the Polish Bank was a white numbers organization owned by Stanley Brynski, Henry Sobozak, and Edward Kowalski. Brynski owned Boat Center Inc., which sold, stored and repaired boats. The business was made up of several buildings that were located on East Jefferson in Detroit; however Brynski resided in New Baltimore, Michigan. For 13 months beginning in 1949, Brynski was observed by police officers that gathered evidence via “movie cameras.” According to evidence provided during his trial, Brynski’s legitimate business also served as the headquarters for his numbers operation. It was believed the Polish Bank grossed \$10 million dollars a year (People v. Brynski 1957). Although

the Polish Bank made millions of dollars in black communities, there is no evidence that the numbers operators were supportive of the community.



Members of the Polish Bank numbers syndicate in court on September 28, 1949



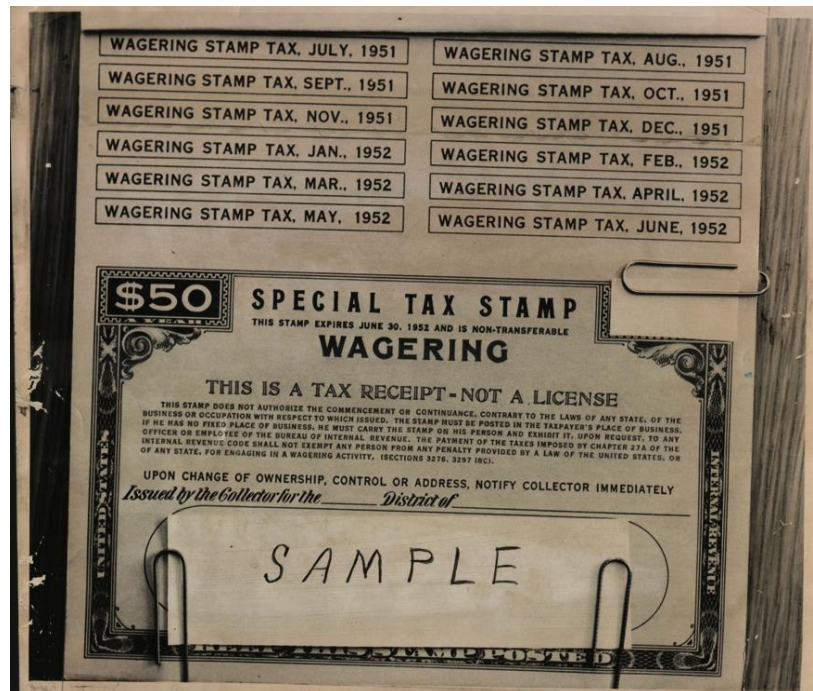
West Side Polish Bank location in 1946.



Interior of location

On November 1, 1951, the federal government took an active role in the numbers business. On this date a law went into effect requiring all numbers operators to file their names with the Bureau of Internal Revenue. In addition to filing their name, numbers operators were required to pay a \$50 fee and give ten percent of their daily take to the federal government. Once numbers operators filed their names and paid the fee, they were issued a federal gambling

stamp or license, and were required to hang the license in their establishment, or keep it on their person. Because of this new law, numbers operators in Detroit predicted they would go out of business; they felt after “paying commissions, hits, bonuses, and others for protection, we won’t have a horse to ride on” (Detroit Tribune 1951:1). One numbers operator predicted it would be cheaper for him to work for the government if he could be hired to supervise the numbers operation. Another numbers operator wondered how any numbers operators would be able to operate when their names and information would be available to police and prosecutors. As a result, some Detroit pick-up men advised players they would no longer be able to pick up their numbers due to the impending closure of their numbers organizations (Detroit Tribune 1951:1). Even though numbers operators feared the new federal law would end their business, this was not the case. Instead, in the law’s first year, 125 people registered as gambling operators in Michigan, and reported they had earned \$1,048,860, and paid \$104,886 in taxes (Chicago Defender 1953:5).



Special Tax Stamp for Wagering – Sample receipt from 1951

Although whites were increasingly taking over the larger numbers operations, a few black numbers operators like John White, still managed to hold on in the black community. John White, a middle child, was born in 1909 in Columbus, Ohio. After his mother died in 1916, a great-aunt raised White, his older brother, and younger sister. White first came to Detroit in 1925 as a teenager. Sometime in his early life, White contracted tuberculosis, and after he recovered from the bout of illness was given a job by John Roxborough (Borden 2003:25). White later moved to San Diego, California where he ran an illegal handbook for two years. While managing this illegal handbook, he had a reputation for not paying his customers or the owners he worked for in a timely manner (Chicago Defender 1938b:10). John White was hired to work for Thomas Hammonds in 1937. According to White, Hammonds owned a six-chair barbershop, two policy houses named the Alabama and Georgia and Reno and St. Louis (located on Detroit's black east side), and various real estate interests. At that time, White was paid \$100 a week for "secretarial work." This work included keeping the books, and paying the 31 office employees who worked for the Alabama and Georgia policy houses (The People vs. Thomas Hammonds 1940:84-92). By 1938, White had a reputation for being exceptional with calculating figures. It was reported, "Johnny White of Detroit, who is very smart on figures, never uses an adding machine to pay off his customers regardless of how long the line is (Chicago Defender 1938c:10)." In December of 1939, he was known as the "bookmaker" (Chicago Defender 1939:10). By 1940, White continued to work for Hammond and Irving Roane, who paid him \$200 a week (Chicago Defender 1940b:10). Both Hammond and Roane had been indicted by Judge Homer Ferguson in 1940, but pled guilty the day the trial began in October of 1941. As a result of their plea, the pair were fined \$1,500 and sentenced to two years of probation.

In November of 1943, three short years later, White went from earning \$200 a week to partnering with his employer (Roane) to purchase the Gotham Hotel for a quarter of a million dollars (Detroit Tribune 1943c:1). The nine-story, twin towered Gotham Hotel was located outside of Paradise Valley at 111 Orchestra Place, and at the time of its purchase was owned by a white businessman, Albert Hartz. When Hartz sold the hotel to Roane and White, blacks were not allowed nor welcomed as guests. The 200 room hotel was elegant, and when it was purchased by Roane and White, white guests still occupied it. Soon after the sale, white guests vacated the hotel, and it was open to blacks for occupancy.



The Gotham Hotel owned by Hartz.



The Gotham owned by Roane and White.

Local gossip contends that Hartz sold the hotel to John White not knowing White was a black man (Johnson 1964: B5). White was a fair skinned black man who was able to “pass” for white. It is purported that because of this trait, Irving Roane (who had the money) used White as a front man for the purchase of the hotel.

When Roane and White purchased the hotel, they did so planning to turn the hotel into a “social and business center” for blacks that were not allowed accommodations in white hotels (Detroit Tribune 1943a:5). Many viewed the purchase of the Gotham Hotel as a much-needed institution, and another example of blacks breaking the color barrier. The Gotham Hotel was advertised as being “A Monument to Our Race” (Detroit Tribune 1943a:5). The hotel was in an excellent location located approximately one mile outside of Paradise Valley in what many considered a “refined neighborhood” (Borden 2003:32). Its location meant guests had easy access to shopping establishments, and to attend a number of theaters, movie houses, nightclubs that offered the finest musical entertainment in the country at the time. With this in mind, Roane and White ensured the Gotham was a top-notch hotel that featured excellent lodgings and was known for its elegance, and its “charm and comfort” (Borden 2003:32). At a time when most black hotels were subpar and did not offer the comforts of their white counterparts, the Gotham boasted that it offered private bathrooms, telephones, televisions, radios, and air conditioning in every suite (Borden 2003:32). The Gotham had its own laundry services, a barbershop, valet shop, flower shop, drug store, haberdashery, and women’s gift shop (Borden 1947:11). The hotel featured the Ebony Room, a restaurant that was decorated at a cost of \$60,000. It was known for its African woodcarvings, which was the pride of the black community, and featured what was described as a “high class” famous chef (Borden 2003:10). Music was played via an auditory system in the hotel lobby, which was adorned with fresh flowers and hand painted oil portraits of famous black Detroiters. The portraits were of Congressman Charles Diggs Jr., Judge Wade McCree, middleweight boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson, and drug store owner Sidney Barthwell. Along with those prominent black Detroiters were portraits of the numbers men, John Roxborough, Everett Watson, and Thomas Hammonds (Borden 2003:38-39).

A number of famous black people like Sammy Davis Jr., Joe Louis, Dinah Washington, Cab Calloway, Billie Holliday, and Miles Davis stayed at the Gotham Hotel. Former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall said he “had traveled over 70,000 miles, but found the Gotham Hotel the most exquisite place to stay” (Borden 2003:26). It was said that people from all over the country came to Detroit just to stay at the Gotham. Actress Marla Gibbs who at one point worked as a switchboard operator recalled,

I realized now that we took a lot of things for granted back then. There were many black owned hotels back then but none with the elegance and social significance of the Gotham. Everyone with any celebrity, stature or social significance stayed at, met or dined at the Gotham...John White blazed a trail of class, integrity, elegance and style. He was respected by all who knew him. He is still unequaled today (Borden 2003:37).

Langston Hughes wrote an article about the Gotham Hotel in 1945. In the article he told of “a kind of minor miracle” occurring in Detroit whereby the elegant and well ran Gotham was owned, managed, and staffed by blacks (Hughes 1945:12). One guest of the Gotham indicated, “...the gentlemen running the Gotham deserve great credit for having furnished for the first time, real hotel service for Negroes” (Borden 1947:11).



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Ad from 1949

John White's employee and secretary from 1951 to 1955, Beatrice Buck, credited White with teaching her half of everything she knew (Moon 1994:188). White, like other numbers men before him, generously paid for Buck's tuition to attend college. According to Buck, White was a huge proponent of black pride. White required all employees to belong to the NAACP and to be registered voters (Moon 1994:188). In addition, White gave generously to NAACP. Judge Damon J. Keith, a black federal judge and civil rights activist credited White with keeping the Detroit chapter of the NAACP operating. Keith during the early 1950s was an attorney who did civil rights work for Detroit's NAACP which was described as "a financial mess" (Hammer &

Coleman 2014:60). “There wasn't enough money to pay the operating expenses or the staff. Even keeping the lights on was a struggle. Fighting for civil rights was a noble endeavor, but not a profitable one. The national NAACP was under severe financial strain and had nothing to offer its Detroit operation (Hammer & Coleman 2014:60). According to Keith, numbers operator John White would step in to help.

Enter a man name Johnny White. In many ways, he was like a character out of a Damon Runyan story. He "looked white," as Keith remembers, and he moved in all the right circles as the owner of the Gotham Hotel, one of the finest hotels in America to serve black patrons. In the 1950s, blacks were still shut out of all major hotels in downtown Detroit. But Johnny White made sure his place had the best accommodations...In addition to his legitimate work with the hotel, Johnny White ran a major numbers racket. There was big money in it. Fortunately for the NAACP, White had as much passion for equal rights as he did for the gambling business. Employing a touch of urban Robin Hood, White and his business partner, Eddie Cummings, would come by the NAACP offices at Vernor Highway every Friday and give Keith and Johnson enough money to pay salaries, utilities, and any other bills. He did that in cash, Keith would recall. Johnny White may have looked white, but he was a man totally committed to the struggle emancipation of black people. He literally kept the branch together, because times were tough. He was the wind under the wings of the NAACP (Hammer & Coleman 2014:60-61).

John Dancy, executive director of the Detroit Urban League from 1918 to 1960, recalled that White was highly esteemed in the black community. Dancy found White to be a,

[...] generous and thoughtful man who could always be relied upon to support a worthy cause. Once a year he would send around \$100 or \$200 to each of the big churches. He gave me a considerable amount of money for the Urban League. I didn't ask where it came from (Dancy 1966:115-116).

Although Dancy took money from White and other numbers men, they were barred from the Urban League's grounds (Dancy 1966:114). When Dancy was called to testify before Judge Homer Ferguson during his one-man grand jury investigation in 1940, he recalled being asked by Ferguson if he had solicited the numbers men for donations, and confirmed he had. “I solicited them for the United Foundation and they gave handsomely to the cause” (Dancy 1966:116).

When asked if he had questioned where the numbers men got their money from, Dancy indicated he did not ask. Dancy's personal view concerning numbers gambling was,

[...] that the numbers and other forms of gambling were silly; that you were almost certain to lose in the long run. But I never felt it my duty to make a public crusade out of the matter. As I saw it the gambling situation was only one of the little troubles affecting the Negro community. I considered it my duty to concentrate on the big ones (Dancy 1966:116).

The Gotham was a source of pride for blacks across the nation, and in addition to providing superior accommodations; it also had a hidden purpose. The Gotham served as the headquarters for a number of black numbers operators in the city. John White had a history of being involved with numbers gambling. He had worked as an office manager/ bookkeeper for Thomas Hammond and Irving Roane's policy houses in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1940, he had testified before Judge Homer Ferguson's one-man grand jury, and managed to avoid being prosecuted for his numbers activities. By March of 1954, another scandal involving numbers gambling and city corruption hit the city of Detroit, and John White again found himself being called to testify before Judge John O'Hara's one-man grand jury.



Judge John O'Hara as one man grand jury in 1954.

In this scandal, more than 65 police officers were accused of associating or taking bribes from a small, newly formed numbers operation. Judge O'Hara subpoenaed John White, but he refused to answer any of the 41 questions posed to him concerning his possible involvement and knowledge of numbers gambling in Detroit unless his attorney was present. As a result of his refusal to answer any questions, White was found in contempt of court by Judge O'Hara and sentenced to 90 days in jail and a \$250 fine (Detroit Tribune 1954b:1). White eventually appealed his sentence all the way to the United States' Supreme Court on the grounds that Judge O'Hara sitting as a grand juror did not have the right to both cite and try him, and deny him counsel. Eventually, 18 police officers were indicted for corruption, but charges were dropped when witnesses refused to testify. A number of police officers however were fired or disciplined, and eleven numbers operators were convicted (Detroit Tribune 1954a:1).

As time marched on, houses, buildings and other structures began to deteriorate throughout the city. These aging structures were devastating to a city already dealing with overcrowding and housing shortages. People moved from downtown Detroit to other parts of the city and to the suburbs in a desire to obtain better housing. Most factories in Detroit were built before 1929, and as technology improved and the demand for goods increased, the need for land to update and expand these factories increased. Factories, like the city's residents, began to flee the city in favor of the open suburbs. By the 1940s, one-third of the structures in the central or downtown areas were considered blighted (Conot 1974:401). In an effort to address this blight, Detroit Mayor Edward Jefferies in 1946 unveiled his "Detroit Plan." The Detroit Plan proposed that the city of Detroit act as a real estate broker for commercial entities. The city earmarked several areas in the city as redevelopment zones. Structures and land located in these redevelopment areas would be condemned, acquired, demolished and sold by the city to land

developers. The city's goal was to compete with the suburbs and attract developers back into the city (Conot 1974:401). The Detroit Plan was also supposed to eradicate overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in densely populated black neighborhoods like Paradise Valley and the lower east side. New modern high-rise projects, hospitals, and other civic institutions would replace the torn and destroyed neighborhoods (Sugrue 1996:49).



Black Bottom declared slum area.



Model of Detroit luxury high-rise - 1300 Lafayette.

The once vibrant Paradise Valley had begun to feel the stress of aging and overcrowding because of neglect. In 1940, there were approximately 87,000 black residents in Paradise Valley; by 1950 the population had ballooned to about 140,000 (Conot 1974:402). No new construction or renovation was undertaken in Paradise Valley once the Detroit Plan revealed the area was being targeted for urban renewal, which also meant owners could not sell the property. This precipitated Paradise Valley and the surrounding area being declared the worst slum in the area (Conot 1974:402). With the construction of the Chrysler, Lodge, and Ford freeways, Black

Bottom and Paradise Valley were further destroyed, and its residents sent scattering for hard to find housing in other parts of the city. In order for just three miles of the Lodge freeway to be constructed in 1950, 473 residences, 109 businesses, 22 manufacturing plants, and 93 vacant lots were consumed. By 1958, 2,222 buildings were sacrificed for the Lodge freeway (Sugrue 1996:47-48). The city began to proclaim its urban renewal projects as, “Detroit’s success story” (City of Detroit 1958:1). Mayor Jerome Cavanagh in a brochure wrote, “We are witnessing the growth of a magnificent, new inner city...The greatest beneficiaries are the thousands of families that have been relocated from slum housing to decent, clean surroundings” (City of Detroit 1958:1). Exasperated black Detroit homeowners who vehemently disagreed with the mayor began to refer to urban renewal as “nigger removal” (Detroit Scope Magazine 1969b:1). While blacks were dealing with the destruction of their communities, they also had to deal with issues surrounding the economic decline in Detroit; namely, high unemployment rates. One in five Detroit adults in 1950 either did not work at all or worked in the informal economy. This number would continue to grow into the 1960s (Sugrue 1996:261-262). Again numbers gambling would provide a sense of hope to those needing to survive.



“Slum” areas cleared for Detroit freeways.

John White’s Gotham Hotel just outside of Paradise Valley became a victim of urban renewal and integration. Hotels owned by whites slowly began to integrate and allowed black lodgers, and as a result, blacks began to patronize those hotels instead of the Gotham (Moon 1994:188). The Detroit Medical Center had plans to expand, and the Gotham’s location fell within its path. In September of 1962, the hotel was officially closed to make room for this new project (Cowan 1962:1). Although the hotel was officially closed for occupancy, this did not mean it was closed to its secondary function of being a numbers factory.

In 1961, Jerome Cavanagh was elected as Detroit’s mayor, and when he took office in 1962, he appointed George Edwards as Detroit Police Commissioner.



George Edwards being sworn in as Detroit Police Commissioner in 1962.



George Edwards testifying before Congress concerning gambling in Detroit in 1964.

Edwards was an attorney who had previously been a Wayne County and Michigan Supreme Court judge. George Edwards had the reputation of being a liberal. He believed in the importance of ensuring everyone was afforded equal civil rights regardless of race. Many blacks supported his attitudes towards race relations; however many whites resented his views. Some of Edwards' strongest critics came from Detroit Police officers. Many had the attitude that Edwards was pro-black, which meant any advance for blacks was a loss for whites. They also felt that because he had a record of being a staunch civil rights advocate this proved he was anti-law enforcement. Edwards believed that improving race relations would essentially improve overall community relations, and he wanted "to maintain vigorous law enforcement while implementing reforms geared towards racial justice" (Stolberg 1998:146). Edward implemented his "3-Point Police Program, which was posted in every police precinct and stated,



The police Department of the City of Detroit seeks more law enforcement and more vigorous law enforcement. Secondly, it seeks equal protection of the law for all law-abiding citizens and equal enforcement of the law against all violators. And third it seeks the cooperation of all law abiding citizens in the city, in our efforts on behalf of law enforcement (Stolberg 1998:146).

Edwards made it clear he did not believe that crime was a racial problem, rather “the existence of suspicion and distrust between law enforcement officials and the Negro community certainly is” (Stolberg 164). Further he wanted to promote and safeguard the notion that the law was for everyone regardless of race. These views only added to the distrust that some members of the white community and police department had concerning Edwards, and fueled outright mutiny within the department’s ranks. For example, a number of command officers within the police department made it their mission to discredit him and undermine all of his efforts at police reform in Detroit (Stolberg 1998:125).

In an effort to gain the trust of blacks, Edwards attended a number of meetings with black civic and religious groups. At these meetings he repeatedly received complaints concerning gambling in neighborhoods. At one such meeting a man came to complain, and what he said struck a chord with Edwards. The unknown man asked Edwards, “How can I teach my children to support law enforcement when the Gotham stands there in full operation and in plain view” (Stolberg 1998:204)? Edwards learned that in addition to the Gotham being an upscale hotel, John White rented space to numbers operators. With this knowledge, Edwards believed that “stopping gambling at the Gotham was mandatory for the reputation of the city and the police department and, for that matter, of the police commissioner” (Stolberg 1998:204). Edwards assumed that by closing the Gotham, members of the black community would see that the police department was serious about eradicating vice from their neighborhoods (Stolberg 1998:204).

Edwards' opportunity to take down the Gotham came with the help of Detroit's urban renewal project. Once John White had exhausted all of his appeals to the city in an effort to prevent the Gotham from being demolished, residents of the hotel were forced to vacate. The Gotham's last official day hosting guests was September 8, 1962. On that day a farewell party was hosted for John White. White was presented with a plaque by City Councilman William Patrick, and praised for his charitable deeds over the years. Patrick noted, "The closing of the hotel is the end of an era" (Cowan 1962:1). A month after it was closed, on November 9, 1962, the Gotham Hotel was raided by 112 members of the Detroit Police Department, the Michigan State Police, and agents from the Internal Revenue Service in what federal agents called the largest and most successful gambling raid at the time (Kennedy 1963:12). It was so successful that a year after its execution it was still being talked about when Attorney General Robert Kennedy in a statement given on September 25, 1963 to the Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Government Operations Committee felt that the Gotham's raid was an example of "dedicated, honest and courageous police action" (Kennedy 1963:11).

On the day of the planned raid there was some concern that John White would be notified of the impending raid on the Gotham, so most of the law enforcement officers had no idea what their assignment was for the day. The various law enforcement officers arrived at "The Fortress" at 5:00 p.m. (at a time the numbers workers would be counting receipts) on Detroit Street Railway buses. The Gotham was considered immune from police activity and was known as "The Fortress" in the law enforcement community because of the difficulty officers had in obtaining warrants to halt the illegal gambling activities that took place within its walls (Edwards 1963:69). The Gotham's security measures were considered daunting. Lookouts were placed throughout the hotel to sound an alarm if police officers entered the hotel. A closed television

circuit was in the lobby to again alert of police activity, and as an added measure numbers offices were frequently moved within the hotel (Edwards 1963:68-69).

On the day of the raid, an undercover federal agent was placed inside of the hotel to prevent the lookouts from sounding the buzzer to the alarm system. Although the federal agent was able to prevent the buzzer from being sounded, a hotel employee managed to shut down the elevator in an attempt to give White and the other occupants a chance to lockup or destroy evidence. Once the law enforcement agents were inside of the Gotham, they proceeded to open every door in the hotel with an ax. John White and two other infamous numbers operators were arrested. However, Eddie Wingate, another well-known numbers operator whose numbers headquarters was located in the Gotham, was not present and avoided arrest (Edwards 1963:71). In total, 41 people were arrested. White was arrested on the top floor in his penthouse suite. He, along with a number of other gamblers, was gathered around a billiard table that contained \$3,500 in cash shooting dice. Raiding officers found at least one numbers office on every floor of the Gotham. These offices contained workstations equipped with adding machines, and the windows were covered to prevent anyone from observing what was occurring in the room. The linen closets did not contain linen; rather, they contained copious boxes of coin wrappers. The Gotham gave the appearance of being a numbers factory (Edwards 1963:68). The search of the Gotham took 24 hours to complete and upon its completion 160,000 bet slips, \$60,000 in cash, various records, 33 adding machines, 11 safes, and other gambling paraphernalia (playing cards and dice) were seized (Edwards 1963:71-72). Examination of the seized records revealed the Gotham grossed \$15 million a year and an investigation of the playing cards and dice revealed the playing cards were marked and the dice crooked. Information was also found on site that

exposed that “the winning numbers were frequently fixed to avoid heavily played numbers on which there would be high pay-offs” (Edwards 1963:72).

John White, after being released on a \$10,000 bond, went to black newspapers to tell his side of the story. White, upset over the raid, stated it was, “a needless and uncalled for binge” and showed no evidence of numbers operations because “No one was caught in the actual operation of numbers” (Michigan Chronicle 1962a:1). White said the law enforcement officers broke into his hotel “like members of the Notre Dame football team armed with sledge hammers and axes and broke down every door in the hotel” (Michigan Chronicle 1962a:1). White alleged the law enforcement officers, while in his hotel for 24 hours, “...drank up all of my personal whisky, soda pop, food and even some milk that I had” (Michigan Chronicle 1962a:4). White was upset with one particular black Internal Revenue Agent, named Brown, who was integral in the hotel being raided. White commented, “I feel that a lot of the damage was done by the Treasury agents who were bucking for promotion...If anyone deserves credit out of this thing, then it should go to him” (Michigan Chronicle 1962a:4). It is of some interest to note that numbers gambling had an unintentional benefit for blacks in law enforcement. In order to build cases against black numbers operators, black officers and agents were needed to go undercover to secure needed intelligence and evidence. Due to this need, agencies like the Internal Revenue Service, which for years had been closed to blacks, had to hire them. For black agents this would be bittersweet. As one of the first black agents in the Internal Revenue Service noted, the attitude was if you were black, you knew everything you needed to about numbers gambling, and for many this was not the case (Owens 2011:150). The black agents, like the white agents, were highly educated, and had worked hard for the opportunity and expected assignments similar to their white counterparts. Instead, these black agents were often placed on assignment alone

without any support. One such agent became bitter with his assignment and noted, "...he had worked hard in college, made the dean's list and graduated. He was a well-respected professional, only to be returned to ghettos, live in roach-infested hotel rooms, eating in 'greasy spoon' restaurants, and living the most miserable and dangerous life one can imagine" (Owens 2011:150).

When White complained about the damage done to his hotel, he was told the damage was of no concern to him because the building was being taken over by the Medical Center. In spite of this claim, White was still the owner of the hotel, and had not received any money from the Medical Center for its purchase (Michigan Chronicle 1962a:4). As to the charges concerning crooked cards and dice, White upset with Police Commissioner Edwards stated,

Making all that show about crooked cards and dice over the television and employing a professional card manipulator to show how things were done was might cheap and dramatic for a man of the Commissioner's stature. After all the Pen House was a state chartered private club. The games were closed to private members and was at no time opened to the public. If we were cheating we were cheating ourselves. But we know nothing about those cards Edwards claims were confiscated in the raid. If they were marked cards, they must have been switched by whoever produced them (Michigan Chronicle 1962b:1).

White refused to comment when asked if he was affiliated with the syndicate. Law enforcement concluded he was because Anthony Giacalone and Peter Licavoli, known mafia members, were found in White's Gotham Hotel office. White also refused to comment on having any knowledge concerning the "fixing" of numbers (Michigan Chronicle 1962b:4).



Anthony Giacalone in July of 1966.

The year following the raid on the Gotham Hotel, Police Commissioner George Edwards testified before a Senate hearing on organized crime that Peter Licavoli was one of five mafia heads "...who headed illegal enterprises that grossed a total of \$150 million a year" (Bird 1984:1). Anthony Giacalone, the enforcer for the Detroit mafia, worked for Licavoli. Like Licavoli, Giacalone had an extensive arrest record. He was arrested for stealing a car, rape, armed robbery, assault, illegal gambling, and bribery of a police officer, income tax evasion, loan sharking, and fraud. At one point, Giacalone was suspected in the infamous disappearance of former Teamsters president James Hoffa (Filkins 2001:1).

While awaiting trial, John White procured a suite at the Mark Twain hotel to continue operating his numbers business. Hotel owner Sunnie Wilson recalled seeing white operators coming to see White and giving him money. In July of 1963, the Gotham was demolished. On the day it was torn down, Wilson drove White to the site so he could witness the wreckage, and

the scene brought White to tears (Wilson & Cohassey 1998:163). As the hotel was being demolished, The Detroit News interviewed the original owner of the 39-year-old hotel, A.B. Hartz under the headline “Harmony, Discord Echo No More at Gotham Hotel.” She recalled that when her husband first had the hotel built in its infancy it offered quiet residential accommodations to the city’s leading artists and musicians, namely members of the Arts & Crafts Society of Detroit and the symphony orchestra. Hartz indicated after 19 years her husband had to sell the hotel because of other business interests, and shortly after the hotel became known as a gambling mecca. Like White, for Hartz the demolition was emotional, and she indicated she “could hardly watch them tear it down” (Falbaum 1963:3A).



Site of demolished Gotham Hotel in 1963.

Others in the black community felt the destroying of the Gotham was a personal attack on the black community. For example, William Hines recalled,

I remember the destroying of the Gotham Hotel, which surpassed all black-owned businesses at the time as the number one hotel in America, even superseding New York's. This was entirely Class A. Harper Hospital fought us over getting a liquor license so we could have a beautiful lounge. They did everything to stop us. Sure, every black was aware that that was the resting place for the numbers. That's when the officials discovered how much money was in the black community, and they proceeded to destroy it when they discovered it (Moon 1994:78).

A year later, while still awaiting trial, John White died at the age of 55 of a heart ailment. At his funeral hundreds paid their respect to a man who was credited with being a "benefactor of many worthy causes" and with financing the education of many Detroit's youths (Saunders 1964:B1). At his funeral it was suggested that the trouble John White was in, helped expedite his death. Reverend Otis Saunders made the following remarks concerning White, "a man who has a lot of people 'searching themselves' and if they do a thorough job, they may (and I'm sure they will) find something that could have kept John White on this earth" (Johnson 1964:B5). In a popular newspaper column read by many black Detroiters, White was commended for bringing about a new community for blacks when he bought the Gotham. He was praised as,

[...] a man who couldn't say no to anyone who needed a helping hand; a man who, regardless of his prolonged illness, took time out to shelter others; a man who decided to go 'upstairs' to lighten the load of a few cowards who turned their backs on him when he needed them most...John White was one who loved to wager. They called him a gambler. We all are in a world of chance, but I would like to set the record straight. John was honest and had he been the type of man whom an Ohio judge and few others would have you believe, he would have been twice a millionaire (Johnson 1964:B5).

The Gotham Hotel was such a source of pride for blacks in the United States, currently, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit has a small exhibit featuring it. Years after his death, in 2009, numbers operators John White and Irving Roane were featured in Detroit's Paradise Valley Park. The memorial park was erected as a way to pay tribute to the



once thriving black entertainment district that catered to blacks who were shut out of white establishments.



Paradise Valley Park



Irving Roane & John White's monument

The destruction of the Gotham did not end numbers gambling in the city. Several black numbers operators were not arrested on that fateful day; namely, Eddie Wingate. Eddie Wingate born in 1919 was the oldest of seven children, from Moultrie, Georgia. When Wingate was in

the eighth grade his father became ill, and he dropped out of school in order to financially care for his family. By the 1930s, Wingate was lured to Detroit by the promise of better days. His better days began at the Ford Motor Company. While at Ford, he saved his money and began to branch out into other ventures. Wingate first owned and operated his own cleaners, barbershop, and the Wingate restaurant (Wingate 2006:2). He would eventually co-own City Cab, and at one point was the owner and executive director of Standard Theatrical Enterprises. Standard Theatrical Enterprises was a sort of talent agency whose motto was “The House that Builds Stars” (Pittsburgh Courier 1957:7). Sometime along the way, Wingate became a numbers operator. Exactly when he became engaged in the numbers business is unknown, but he may have become involved by 1958. In July of that year, Jet magazine in a gossip column, reported about Wingate’s romance with Joanne Bratton, the wife of Johnny Bratton, a world champion boxer. According to the news blurb, Wingate was Detroit’s “new numbers banker” who spent “money like crazy” (Jet 1958:43).

Unlike the other numbers operators, there are few stories of Wingate being benevolent; however, it is known that he used his wealth to bet on and purchase racehorses, and to expand into various businesses throughout the city. By 1962, Wingate was considered one of Detroit’s top numbers operators when the Gotham Hotel was raided. In that same year, Wingate would form and operate Golden World Records, a record label that operated on the west side of Detroit. Wingate hoped to cash in on the recording industry after witnessing the success of Motown Records. Soon enough, Eddie Wingate’s Golden World Records would be competition for Motown, and eventually Berry Gordy, founder of Motown Records in 1966 bought Golden World Records from Wingate (Kempton 2005:232). In that same year, Wingate, described as a Detroit sportsman-businessman, opened the Twenty Grand Motel in Detroit. A number of

musicians who worked for Golden World Records described Eddie Wingate as a big and friendly man, who was affectionately called “Uncle Ed.” Others who knew Wingate as the numbers operator, described him as a vengeful, menacing man whose numbers business was connected to Detroit’s Italian Mafia. In 1963, it was reported in Detroit,

For the first time in 40 years, the numbers racket here, conducted for the most part by Negroes, and which at one time grossed more than \$21 million dollars in annual business went “completely dead” for four days last week. Why the sudden shutdown? There were reports that the La Cosa Nostra crime syndicate, which reportedly had moved in to finance the numbers operation with big money, had ordered the clamp down because of pressure from law enforcement agencies. (Atlanta Daily World 1963:2A).

Yet others remembered Wingate as their employer and as the man who paid them for the hit of a lifetime.

This chapter shows numbers gambling did not follow the Chicago School of sociology’s “ethnic succession” theory. If this theory were to hold true for Detroit, Italians or another minority group more fortunate than blacks would have first controlled numbers gambling before blacks. However the opposite is true. In this case blacks in Detroit first controlled policy and numbers gambling in the city, and as it gained popularity and showed profitability a more fortunate minority group (in this case Italians) then entered the game before finally taking control. The Detroit Italians had already gained social and economic status prior to taking control of the numbers racket; therefore the theory of ethnic succession does not apply to this study. In addition, the new white numbers operators did not live in nor did they invest in the black community. Some blacks viewed the change in control as a personal attack on their race. The feeling of being attacked would extend to the federal government when the federal gambling stamp tax law passed. As all of this was occurring urban renewal was breaking up communities and scattering black residents across the city. The final blow to black numbers operators

occurred when John White's Gotham Hotel was raided and destroyed. White was famous for owning and operating the Gotham Hotel, a source of black pride throughout the country. In addition, White like past black numbers operators used his wealth to further black causes. Once again the informal economy, numbers gambling, was used to fill the needs of the black community when the formal economy failed to do so. With the demolition of the Gotham Hotel, blacks again felt their community was attacked, and the structure of the numbers games changed once more. The next chapter will discuss how numbers organizations became smaller, and extended to other areas of the city as blacks were displaced. Women like Francis Childress began taking on leading roles as numbers operators.

**CHAPTER 12 “WHAT ABOUT WOMEN? FRANCIS CHILDRESS’ STORY”**

“A friend to many”, “kind”, “generous”, “intelligent”, and “classy” were adjectives used over and over again to describe “Francis Childress”. Francis was born the ninth of ten children sometime in 1928 in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1946, Francis at 18 and a high school graduate, married James White and would eventually have five children. In 1955, like many other blacks, Francis and her husband made the migration north to Detroit, Michigan, dreaming of relief from the South’s Jim Crow laws, and praying for a better life, which would include a good paying job in one of Detroit’s many factories. General Motors would indeed hire James White, and his family would settle on the west side of Detroit. At that time, more and more middle-class blacks were moving to the west side, also called “the best side” by many west side blacks. Blacks who managed to escape to the west side considered it an oasis because of its well-kept homes and landscaped yards. Two parent homes were the norm on the west side of Detroit and offered better housing and schools for children. Mothers tended to be respectable homemakers and fathers were the sole breadwinners. Suesetta McCree felt that the families of the west side had similar values. She explained black families shared a belief in God, in following the law, having a strong work ethic, and valuing education (The Westsiders 1997:85). The west side for many blacks became symbolic of finally having arrived in middle class America.

While Francis Childress’ husband worked on the assembly line at a General Motors plant, she was a homemaker who reflected what it meant to be a respectable middle class black woman. However Francis was more than this, she worked on the side as a numbers writer. Francis had played the numbers in Nashville, and had a brother who was a numbers pick-up man. When she came to Detroit, numbers gambling was nothing new to her, and she started, like most, as a numbers writer who turned in the numbers she wrote to a numbers operator. For her efforts,

Francis was paid the standard percentage for the numbers she wrote, and at one point wrote numbers for Eddie Wingate. According to Francis' daughter, "Crystal White", it is unclear how her mother met or began working for Wingate, but it is thought Francis may have met Wingate through her brother.<sup>9</sup> Francis' brother was a horse trainer who had dealings with Wingate because of Wingate's love of horse racing. At the time Francis worked for Wingate, he was one of the biggest numbers operators in Detroit. Wingate was known as being very wealthy, and had the ability to stay one step ahead of law enforcement, which allowed him to avoid imprisonment. In the black community, Wingate had a nasty reputation and many were afraid of the consequences for not paying him, which could include a missing appendage. While working for Wingate, Francis who by all accounts was considered lucky because she hit the numbers often, put a nice sum of money on a number, and won a substantial amount of money from him. This windfall allowed her to purchase a home (part of her American dream) for her family, but more importantly allowed her to no longer write numbers for Wingate. According to Francis' daughter, her mother bought a house,

[...] to live on the Northwest side of Detroit before white flight made it an obvious choice. Despite the fact that a black middle-class neighborhood existed, she wanted to be where white folks lived because she knew that was where amenities would be. She wanted good public schools, a decent grocery store, regular trash pick-up, street lights that came on at dusk. My mother's homes were decorated in exquisite furnishings, always bursting with food, and with an open-door policy for others.

With her windfall Francis became a numbers operator by the late 1950s. It was during this time period that a new Negro society emerged. "But with the emergence of the new Negro "society," playing the "numbers" has become respectable. This is not strange, since some members of "society" derive their incomes from the "numbers" (Frazier 1957:211). In other words, playing

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<sup>9</sup> Crystal White was interviewed concerning her mother Francis on February 25, 2013, March 1, 2013, May 8, 2013, May 29, 2013, and June 17, 2013. White wrote some of her answers.

the numbers was no longer considered the pastime of lower-class gamblers. During this same time period Francis went into the numbers business.

When she began her business in the late 50's, she'd just escaped the Jim Crow south for Detroit, and she'd seen how her own father – a man in business for himself – had been treated by white folks. She was CLEAR that the only way she'd have anything beyond what this country intended for her was to work for herself in a business she controlled that depended on black clientele. The numbers business was a good match for her – it suited her skill-set, her personality, her lifestyle (a stay-at-home mother with no babysitters), and her interests. I never heard her express an ounce of desire to work for white folks, or to be part of the black bourgeoisie. She wasn't aspirational in that way. To her, that was about putting on airs. But she believed in beauty. And the numbers allowed her the resources to indulge *that* passion... She traveled, she dressed beautifully, she gave her children good educations, trips, creature comforts, a feeling of being cared for and safe, and most of all -- a sense of entitlement. She preached self-worth.

Francis was happy to no longer work for Wingate, and felt that being the “middle-man” as a numbers writer would never allow her to partake in the real profits of the numbers business. She knew that running her own numbers business meant taking on risk, but was willing to take the risk. After all, Francis had figured out the key to running a successful numbers business “was to be lucky enough to not get hit for a certain amount of time; after that, for the most part your customers will pay for each other’s hits.” Francis ran her business from her home; either in the dining room, kitchen, den, or bedroom. By 1960 or 1961, her business was thriving. At the height of her business, she had 10 to 15 people who wrote numbers for her. The number of people that the writers took numbers from varied. Francis also took numbers directly from special customers. These customers she received via word of mouth from friends of friends, and they sought her because she had a reputation for being honest, fair, likeable, and had integrity. Her numbers organization was known for being reliable, organized and very well managed. She was seen as being successful, and some interpreted that as her being a lucky person. People wanted to be around her success in hopes that her luck and success would somehow rub off on

them. Francis would only do business with customers who were “friends of friends” and who were recommended. She took customers’ numbers at the same time every day, collected from her writers at the same time each week, and paid off winnings immediately. She never accepted or required a “tip” from people who had a winning number, and was known to let people play on credit.

Her business was mainly a family business where her husband and children worked and were paid. Francis’ five children had varying roles in the family business; some wrote numbers from customers who called via telephone, or called customers to report the winning numbers. Others created the records that showed what customers owed minus their hits, and the two oldest had customers of their own who they wrote numbers for. Francis’ spouse at one point collected money from customers, and paid out their hits; however Francis was always in charge. Concerning her father’s role in her mother’s business, Crystal recalled,

I think in the early days, he helped collect tickets, and definitely went around collecting folks' money because those were the riskier elements of the business. Either you could be caught by police, or robbed of cash. He had absolutely no problem, far as I know, with her running her own business. It was the family's livelihood, especially after he became disabled and only had as income disability and social security payments. My mother remarried in 1969, and my stepfather was the same – seemingly unfazed by her line of work, and supportive. To be clear, *she* ran the business and her husbands helped her, as employees so to speak. Of course, they benefited from the revenue too.

Only once did Francis get in trouble with law enforcement, and when this occurred, her husband confessed and took the blame. James “got caught with some numbers and did quick time.” James White felt that as a man, it was his job to “do the time” because jail was no place for a woman.

Although Francis owned her own business, she had a relationship with a black Detroit numbers operator named “Mr. Taylor.” Mr. Taylor was a large numbers operator and would act



as her cover bank. In other words, he would take over her business or cover winning bets if she got too many winning hits. When this occurred, Francis would draw on a percentage of her business, until she could build her capital up, and then again independently run her business. Francis found relationships and networking necessary in her line of business. In addition to Mr. Taylor, Francis had relationships with bank managers and a check-cashing establishment. These relationships were necessary because they ensured she could deposit third-party checks from customers without difficulty, and afforded her a line of credit for cash she could borrow to pay off hits if necessary. Crystal remembered,

Based on what I saw when I went to the bank with her, she had one bank she patronized, with one particular teller and/or bank manager – always an African-American banker. She'd often have a medley of personal and government checks that had been signed over to her, and cash. She needed someone who wouldn't ask too many questions. But she also had impeccable banking habits (no bounced checks) with healthy balances. She was a good customer. She also used a check-cashing business regularly. Its husband-wife owners were friends of hers. In fact, she and the wife became best friends; what was so great about that relationship is that my mother could go to “Miss Lula” and get large sums of cash needed to pay off a hit. Miss Lula knew my mother would quickly return it within days or a couple weeks. They trusted one another. That is a very helpful asset – reliable access to cash – for a numbers runner. It's all about cash-flow.

Francis' numbers business ensured her family the chance at the American Dream. This is why she migrated to Detroit from the south, it is why she launched her own business, and worked so hard. Numbers gambling allowed Francis, over the course of 35 years, to purchase two homes, raise five children and a grandson, and send four of them through college (two to private colleges). The numbers allowed for her to purchase rental property, new cars for her and her children, and it supported what some considered a lavish lifestyle at the time. Francis was able to travel extensively, buy expensive clothing, furniture and jewelry, and help establish her adult children financially.

Plus, the numbers enabled her to help all kinds of people in ways she never would've been able to otherwise help. And she helped a LOT of people -- not just her kids and her husbands, but friends and extended family and beyond. My mother gave money to everyone from incarcerated men, to college students, to churches, to young folks "trying to get on their feet." She was a philanthropist. And she employed a handful of young men in her business too. These were men with few other options.

Francis was also able to support her friends and her community because of her numbers business.

It was not uncommon for her to pay for trips to Las Vegas and Miami Beach for friends or to feed and clothe the needy. She paid for the college education of her daughter-in-law and grandson, and gave generously to the church. Crystal stated,

My mother knew the Bible pretty well; she went to church periodically, and loved a good sermon. She had NO USE for so-called prophets (like Prophet Jones) and charlatans and pimp-like ministers who drove fancy cars and lived high off of poor folks' donations. She was loyal for many years to the pastor of Unity Baptist, because he was a man truly devout, selfless, and with integrity; and so one year she led the committee for his anniversary celebration. She raised more money than had ever been raised (she had a nice big customer-base to draw on) and that pleased her to have done that for a man she admired, who was, as she said "truly called." Otherwise, her giving came in the form of very generous donations placed in the donation basket during a service. But she wasn't an "active" church member, beholden to church rules or worried about sinning. She fundamentally believed that "God helps those who help themselves", so she felt no contradiction between her livelihood and her love of God. She would have NEVER discussed her livelihood with her pastor and members of the church. If it was an open secret, folks knew not to ask her about it. This was true for everyone who wasn't a customer or friend. People talked, sure, but my mother did not discuss her business with outsiders. She trained all her children to do likewise.

Francis would take the neighborhood children to the circus and amusement parks. Because she ran her business from home, Francis would babysit young mothers' children so they could work or attend school, and when she saw a young person in need of money, would generously give it to them without them asking or without expecting to be repaid.

Although numbers gambling provided a solid middle class existence for Francis and her family, there were downsides to the business. She found it a hard business to be in because at times she had to deal with people who resented her success. At times customers did not want to pay what they owed, or had unreasonable expectations as it pertained to her availability. When a winning number was heavily played or someone hit for a large sum of money operating the business could be especially stressful because Francis had to ensure she had the money to cover the winnings. Crystal never heard her mother discuss the challenges of being a woman in the numbers business.

I never heard her talk about the challenge of being a woman in the business per se. She liked the fact that she was in charge, and could spend the money she earned the way she wanted. She spoke of the business itself being hard because you were always worried about large pay-outs, people trying to cheat you, and as she put it, "thinking they own your time 'cause they play their numbers with you." Rather, she sometimes talked about the stress of being the breadwinner – or certainly the principal breadwinner – and how much pressure that was. I think people – many people, men and women – looked up to her because of many reasons. Yes, those who knew about her numbers business (it was a secret remember) definitely respected her for being a woman doing what she was doing. I could feel it – people's awe of her. It was tough, because you couldn't survive in the business unless folks respected you, knew they couldn't take advantage of you. So she had to command respect. She used to say, "Nobody is gonna just walk all over me." Yet people admired her a lot because she wasn't just successful but fair and generous and supportive. She liked to see other people do well too. Unfortunately, folks were also jealous of her – I'm thinking of a couple "girlfriends" in particular. Looking back, I recall that she had good relationships with the big numbers men (Mr. Taylor, Wingate), and I think that's because they respected her as a woman in business. She had no trouble commanding respect. She was so above-board; she paid her hits on time; she was a married woman uninterested in other men; she didn't smoke or drink or gamble or bet ridiculous money on the numbers; she didn't even drive an ostentatious luxury car. (She never owned a Cadillac, for instance, didn't like them. She liked Rivas). And she carried a gun. Yes, she did. And folks knew it. Everyone I've spoken to about her has talked about how extraordinary it was for her to do what she did as a woman, and yes, as a black woman. But she never talked about it.

Although these things were hard to deal with at times, she never wished she had done anything else or ever expressed regrets because she knew that operating her own numbers business was the best she could do at that time due to her education level, gender, and race. Francis never felt as if she were taking advantage of the people who played numbers with her. Crystal indicated,

My mother NEVER felt bad about folks playing numbers with her. Think about it: that's like the party store owner feeling bad about selling you a lottery ticket, or the blackjack dealer at a casino feeling bad about taking your chips, or a racetrack ticket operator feeling bad about taking your bet on a horse. For her, it was a legitimate business that happened to be illegal. She used to tell the story of Joseph Kennedy, who supposedly got his start as a bootlegger. No one cared that he got his seed money that way for the fortune he built. She'd say, "Why was it okay for him? Because he was a white man? Hell, liquor became legal anyway." My mother felt she was helping folks get a shot at making the kind of money their jobs would never pay; she felt she was giving them hope; and to be clear, she often paid out big sums of money, so she wasn't just on the receiving end. She was a customer herself. She too played the numbers, sometimes for big sums. Playing the numbers and hitting had given her the means to buy her own home. My mother was the opposite of cynical about the numbers business. She said it allowed her and a lot of other black folks the means to "make a way out of no way." If there were folks who owed her their whole check by the end of the month, then I suspect they had other sources of income -- a "side hustle". In other words, she'd never let someone play with her who was unable to pay their bills, who wasn't buying food or caring for others as they should. She got to know her customers, was friendly if not friends with many of them, so she would've refused to take numbers from someone if it seemed they couldn't afford to pay; she was not cutthroat, nor desperate for a dollar by any means; that is a cliché of gamblers and numbers runners. She was an ethical businesswoman who believed that the odds were in her favor, but that the chances were good enough for a customer to feel it worth their while to play. If they didn't hit, she made money; if they hit, she paid it out with no grudges. "People play numbers to hit, so you can't be mad when they do," she said. To her, it was an above-the-board arrangement, with risks and potential gains on both sides. She also understood that her risks were higher, so her potential gain should be higher. Personally, I never saw any one of her customers, in the 25 years I watched her do business, who looked like a victim. Playing numbers gave folks JOY. Sometimes it can be a strange dynamic at play; I did hear her speak of the rare folks who'd choose to stop turning in their numbers to her because they felt like she was doing too well – as if she'd made her money off of them – and other folks who turned in with her specifically because she was doing well; some people, she explained, liked to know you were doing well, because it made them feel you were lucky, and luck attracts luck.

For 35 years Francis Childress successfully managed her numbers business. Francis did this during a time period when women were expected to be homemakers and not business leaders. In the numbers business, the norm was for women to be numbers writers or collectors, not operators. Francis overcame not just being a woman, but being a black woman who successfully managed her own numbers business. Francis continued to successfully manage her numbers business even after the state legalized the lottery in 1972. The state of Michigan's legalization of the lottery managed to only change the method as to how the winning number was chosen for her and other numbers operators. Francis was a numbers operator until her death.

Her daughter Crystal on a final note stated,

I want to be clear: "the pursuit of Happiness" is something she took seriously in the Declaration of Independence; she was a black woman born in 1928; she was clear-eyed about her American right to have the same opportunities and resources as any white person, AND the racist tactics and policies used to keep those things from her. She absolutely understood that money was the key to that right. And she was happier when money was flowing – because it gave her the freedom to do what she loved: live well and share the wealth. We all learned, thanks to her, that we deserved – that we were entitled to – the American Dream too.

Francis' story illustrated, how a woman operated a numbers business at a time when women were not normally business owners. Although smaller than the larger known numbers operators, Francis still managed to obtain a solid middle class life for her family, and contributed to the community she lived in and served. Francis' husband had a job in the automotive industry, which was assumed to be a vehicle to the middle class, but it was her numbers business that actually allowed this to occur. Numbers gambling allowed Francis to obtain resources and opportunities available to whites and denied to blacks. Francis' story shows that even in the informal economy, there were boundaries in acceptance for what was acceptable for white males versus black females. Finally, this chapter allowed insight as to how numbers players were viewed by an operator. Francis' numbers players were never viewed as victims, nor did she feel

she took advantage of them. Rather she offered a service (which was in demand), which she viewed as a legitimate business. The next chapter will chronicle the role the legalization of lottery played on numbers gambling in Detroit, and how the media rewrote how it portrayed numbers gambling once the lottery became legal.

**CHAPTER 13 “THE LEGAL NUMBERS MAN: THE STATE OF MICHIGAN”**

For many years prior to the lottery being legalized in Michigan, the public, the media and even legislators, raised the question of legalization. In 1937, a state legislator, John Hamilton, introduced two bills. One proposed to legalize all types of gambling, and the other proposed licensing bookmakers and operators of sports pools. Neither bill was passed into law, and Hamilton again presented a bill to legalize gambling in 1939 with negative results (Hamilton 1940:6). In 1939, the black weekly, the Michigan Chronicle asked a Wayne County deputy sheriff, Petry Fisher, “Should the Numbers Racket Be Legalized?” The former newspaper editor indicated he thought it should be legalized; after all, if you did not legalize it you would have to put half of the population in jail for playing the numbers. His thinking was that man has been motivated to gamble for pleasure or profit from the beginning of time. He further argued it was common knowledge that numbers gambling occurred in all large cities and the police could not prevent people from playing the numbers, just as they could not prevent people from drinking during Prohibition. The legalization of numbers gambling would serve to end police and government corruption, the stigma that number bankers faced, and would generate tax revenue (Fisher 1939:5). A year later, because of Judge Homer Ferguson’s one-man grand jury, the Detroit Free Press polled Detroiters to see if they favored legalizing gambling. Their poll showed that 57% of Detroiters approved legalization (Humphreys 1940:6). People interviewed gave a variety of reasons for legalizing it. One person indicated, “People are going to gamble no matter what...so you might as well make it legal and let the state get some money” (Humphreys 1940:6). Another person remarked, “Gambling is human nature so why not recognize it” (Humphreys 1940:6). Once again in 1949, the Michigan Chronicle posed the question of legalizing numbers to its readers. It simply asked, “Should the Numbers Game Be Legalized?”

(Michigan Chronicle 1949a: 4). Letters poured into the paper in response. One such letter indicated if the numbers game was legalized, the government should be obligated to the numbers men who had built the game from a simple pastime into a major business. The writer predicted if the numbers was legalized it would,

[...] be a boon to our people because they know the business inside and out and it would mean bringing one of our means of livelihood out of the racket class into the realm of business also on the side of the law where it rightfully belongs also too long the numbers and the people running them have been a source of sordid display for politicians seeking office (Michigan Chronicle 1949a:4).

Another reader felt that numbers should be legalized to allow those who worked for the illegal numbers an opportunity to finally use their business skills without guilt and remorse (Michigan Chronicle 1949a:4). Yet others felt the legalization of the numbers would provide employment for the unemployed and revenue for the state, while ending corruption in the police department (Michigan Chronicle 1949a:4).

Three years after the Chronicle posed the question of legalization to its readers, Representative Charlene White of Detroit introduced a bill to legalize numbers gambling to the state legislature. Representative White was the only black woman in the state legislature at the time, and proposed the bill under the guise that the revenue from it would curtail the state's deficit, balance the budget, increase revenue for senior citizen benefits, and strengthen the school fund. Her plan called for numbers operators to pay a \$2,500 fee for a license and be required to pay five percent of their monthly gross to the state (Ackles 1952:7). With her proposed bill, a number of people in Detroit's black community had strong opinions. An attorney for the NAACP felt that numbers should not be legalized because it was a vice and it "...shattered the moral fibers of our civilization for profit" from poor people who could least afford to gamble (Turner 1952: 2). Another black Detroit attorney, however, felt that the numbers should be



legalized because it was in the best interest of society; after all, he felt that people were going to gamble anyway and legalization would at least mean government control (Jordan 1952:3). Representative White's dream of legalization of the numbers game would not come into fruition. At Michigan's 1961 Constitutional Convention another attempt was made by lawmakers to legalize lottery, but all proposals put forth for the legalization were vetoed.

By 1969, it was reported that the Detroit mafia had taken over numbers gambling in the city (Detroit Scope Magazine 1969:10).

One of the most important, but infrequently mentioned, factors behind the vicious circle of poverty in urban ghettos is organized crime, which siphons off an estimated 30% of all the money earned or otherwise received by ghetto dwellers. The Mafia derives a great deal of its profits from the numbers rackets, gambling, prostitution and narcotics in the inner city. Organized crime, it is estimated, has taken more money out of the ghetto than all government assistance programs combined have put into it. The Mafia benefits from the continuation of poverty and racial oppression, because poor, uneducated, economically weak people are the easiest prey for its vicious activities, which in turn help keep its victims enslaved in poverty. Throughout the last decade, the Mafia has operated to an increasing extent as an equal opportunity employer, hiring black hoodlums and permitting blacks to run numbers and bookie operations. But, like many organizations in the world of legitimate businesses, the Mafia does not permit blacks into upper echelon executive positions – mostly because that is a matter of family and nationality (Detroit Scope Magazine 1969:10).

On May 11, 1970, law enforcement would surpass the raid conducted on the Gotham and stage the largest gambling raid in American history (at that time) in Detroit when 300 FBI agents arrested 58 people at 36 locations. The 58 people arrested were considered to be middle-level to upper-level managers of the numbers racket. With the raid and arrests, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI declared that the mafia-controlled numbers racket had been eradicated in Detroit, and this meant that 12,000 to 14,000 people who worked for numbers operators were unemployed. The FBI had shut down numbers operations that they believed took \$94 million a year in bets by putting wiretaps on the operations telephones (Carlisle 1970b:1A). Law enforcement realized

the telephone had changed how numbers operations ran, and in response to this, changed their tactics by eavesdropping on telephone calls made to and from numbers establishments. By listening to telephone conversations of those involved, law enforcement learned that the numbers were in fact rigged to ensure that heavily played numbers did not fall. The FBI reported that the Detroit Italian mafia made \$18,000 a month from simply supplying the winning numbers to independent numbers operators in the city, and an additional \$10,000 a month for protection. Those named in profiting from this were Anthony Giacalone and Louis “Rip” Koury (Carlisle 1970b:12A).



Louis Koury (left) and Anthony Giacalone (right) in court in February 1969.

In 1970 it was estimated that 30,000 Detroiters played the numbers, and when including the Detroit suburbs estimates reached 150,000 (Carlisle 1970a:6C). It was thought that most bets were for one dollar, but many players played \$10 to \$20 a bet (Carlisle 1970a:6C). Although the FBI touted they had eradicated numbers gambling in Detroit, it was reported their big bust was in fact a “bust”, because the next day after their raids the numbers game was back in operation in

Detroit (Jet 1970:43). The Afro-American reported that the raid was an “unsuccessful attempt to smash the Mafia dominated numbers racket in the Detroit area... (Afro-American 1970:18).

Twenty-nine of the 36 numbers houses were operated by blacks. Tuesday morning after the raid James E. Ritchie director of the federal task force against organized crime, said: “We’ve got it stopped cold now.” But Wednesday it was learned that the massive FBI raids did not prevent the numbers operation from circulating thousands of bet slips in Detroit area factories, bars, poolrooms, and other locations. A top police officer in Detroit said Thursday that a winning “Detroit number” was circulated to numbers operators, their collectors and runners late Tuesday, a little more than 24 hours after the federal raids (Afro-American 1970:18).

Just two years later, law enforcement would again stage raids and arrest numbers operators. Detroit Judge George Crockett Jr., would eventually release 27 of the black defendants arrested, and declared “There seems to be a tendency for the law to work one way for the poor and the Black and another for the wealthy and the white” (Jet 1972b:55).

After defense attorneys produced a writ of habeas corpus (a motion questioning the lawfulness of an arrest) and the prosecutor “could not make up his mind what he wanted to charge these people with,” Crockett told JET, “I ordered them released. I also told the prosecutor not to bring in any more cases like that to my court unless he was prepared to go to the suburbs and arrest the people who really profit from this numbers game (the numbers bankers).” (Jet 1972b:55)

Judge Crockett further indicated he was pleased that the Michigan state legislature had passed a proposal that would allow voters to determine if they wanted a state lottery, and stated, “Maybe this will get rid of the numbers business and make gambling a state monopoly; then the proceeds, hopefully, will be to underwrite projects for social change, such as hospitals, schools and recreational facilities” (Jet 1972b:55). Many argued that the black numbers operators of the past had did just what Crockett hoped a state run lottery would do. The black numbers operators had financed social projects by sending a number of people to college, funding parks, and other programs in the community.

A little more than a week before voters would cast their vote, the Detroit Free Press ran a three-day piece on numbers runners selling dreams to the poor. The author, Tom Ricke, indicated he spent over a month with numbers runners to gather information for his three-part article. At this point, in 1972, the Detroit Police Department estimated that about 100,000 people or one in 15 Detroiters played the numbers every day. Of this number, again it was hypothesized that most of the players were black (Ricke 1972a:1A).

Many of the people who play the numbers are black. It's always been that way. It started in the ghetto and is still there. It is the only way for many to get a sum of money and it is a habit for many others that started when they bought dreams to help them through empty days. The price? Whatever a person can scrape together each day. For that money, he buys a thousand-to-one chance of getting 500 times the amount he bet. But it's more than that. He has purchased a thought – the right to think all day long about what he is going to do with the money if he wins. And that makes it easier to get through each day. Just the thought of it (Ricke 1972a:1A).



A woman plays the illegal numbers at a location in Detroit in 1972.

The overall message was that numbers playing had existed for years, and had fleeced many. Numbers gambling was portrayed as an evil whereby the player would never come out on top because of not just the odds, but due to dishonesty of the local mafia, which controlled it (Ricke 1972a:1A). Old black numbers runners lambasted the new numbers game. According to them, the numbers game was no longer ran by black men who were considered community leaders, but by the dishonest Italian mafia who ensured no one could surmount the impossible odds and win.

The black numbers men started to call syndicate men “the Dagos” and they still do. “Well, the Dagos came in and took over the business from the Negroes,” replied a man named James who has been working in numbers for more than 20 years, by offering the writer and pick-up man a percentage of the house’s profit...The Dagos offered 25 percent of the profits at the end of the month plus \$50 a week expense money (Ricke 1972b:8A).

In other words, black numbers writers were essentially lured away from black numbers organizations for the enticement of more money. This negatively impacted black numbers operations. “Some of the black numbers operators kept their operations going...but they ended up sharing their profits 50-50 with the syndicate” (Ricke 1972b:8A).

Then on Oct.25, 1963 Joe Zerilli, the top man in the Detroit area Mafia, ordered his organization out of the business of daily collecting of numbers bets. But the syndicate still controlled the number. After 1963 the syndicate sold the number to the independent black numbers operators for a percentage of the monthly profits. The syndicate introduced the numbers game that is now used in Detroit and the system provided four winning numbers daily. Two of the numbers are called “Detroit numbers” and two are called “Pontiac numbers.” The Pontiac numbers are considered fairly honest and follow the results of the races accurately, but the Detroit numbers are said to be fixed by the syndicate and are taken from thin air. The syndicate calls the numbers houses each day and fixes the Detroit number to make it one that would pay bettors the least amount (Ricke 1972b:8A).

Many years later, it was revealed this was true, and mafia member Rip Koury was responsible for choosing the Detroit number.

So the Detroit outfit decreed that Rip would “make the number” everyday. The “bank” operators would call in each evening to report the numbers that were heavily bet and to say how much they stood to lose if those numbers won. Rip

would sort out all information and select the three digits that wouldn't break the banks. "We gotta have winners," Rip said, "or people don't play. We just don't gotta have *big* winners" (Waldmeir 1990:1C).

Black numbers men were critical of the syndicate ran numbers game, which they believed changed the neighborhood. "The numbers man is no longer a community leader. He and the minister used to hold the respect of their neighborhoods. Families on welfare who placed their nickel bets with the numbers man everyday got free turkeys on Thanksgiving if they couldn't afford them" (Ricke 1972b:8A). The numbers game served as the common thread, which caused people to gather, visit, drink, and talk about their numbers and dreams. In Sam Morgan's home he grew up witnessing his parents collecting numbers bets. He claimed his home

[...] was the gathering place for the neighborhood , he recalled. "People would come in and have a drink and talk about their dreams and decided what numbers to play, if they didn't place a bet, they would come by anyway just to visit with the other neighbors. "But that's over now. The dope house have taken over the neighborhoods and people aren't as friendly as they used to be and neither are the numbers" (Ricke 1972b:8A).

James, ran numbers for than 30 years, and during that time had been taken to police headquarters more than 200 times for numbers running. In 1972, he reported it was harder for him and other old-time numbers writers, "because there isn't much room for men at the bottom in the numbers business anymore Ricke 1972c:1A). He felt that part of the problem occurred because of the telephone. According to him, numbers men no longer went door to door because people simply called in their numbers. This spelled the death for many numbers writers. One numbers man, Society Slim, "was a big pickup man in the days when numbers was "the way" to make money in the inner city – when children saw the numbers man in his fancy car and wanted to grow up just like him" (Ricke 1972b:1A). Slim recalled, "During the 40's and '50s, numbers writers went from house to house in the inner city. They were as regular as milkmen on their daily routes. From door to door, block to block, and even if they didn't know people in a certain

house, chances were someone who lived there would want to play a number” (Ricke 1972b:1A). For those who did go door to door in 1972, their role as a writer changed. Many also acted as the pickup man.

“I bet there’s only one in 10 or 20 of us today,” James said. “Most of the business is done over the telephone or by credit, and there isn’t enough for us to do. It used to be door-to-door and then to the pick-up man. Today, no one goes from door to door anymore. The junkies or the police will get them. Dope houses, they have ruined the street. People who really want to make quick money sell dope now. They don’t fool with numbers. No young people fool with numbers either. If they want to make money, they sell dope. If they want to bet, they play cards or got to the track” (Ricke 1972c:1A).

James had a routine for collecting his numbers bets. The first thing he did each day was to stop at two convalescent homes. “Young people ain’t playing unless they got a lot of money to blow, so I go to where the older folks are” (Ricke 1972c:2A). James also picked up numbers at the home of a few old friends before going to his biggest pickups, phone stops. “More than 60 percent of today’s numbers business is done over the phone, on credit. You call a recorded message and leave what numbers and amounts you want to bet. A secretary transcribes the message and gives it to a man like James who comes by every day. He collects from the players who use the phone service once a week instead of everyday” (Ricke 1972c:2A).

“Some even send me checks in the mail,” he said, “like they were paying their rent. Now a lot of welfare mothers and ADC mothers and poor people still like to play,” he said, “but my biggest paying customers are people who got money to blow. I stop by a couple of dope houses,” he said, “and on Friday or Saturday night if they are high and are making money. I might get \$600 or \$700 from one house.” He also checks after-hours places to collect bets from card players and owners. “And I got four women who are boosters (professional shoplifters) and they each play about \$10 a day,” James said. James also makes one stop at a factory where he has a man who works there to take the bets from his co-workers (Ricke 1972c:2A)

The biggest change and problem with the numbers was seen by James as the Italian mafia; who took the numbers business from blacks, and ran what was widely believed to be a fixed game

whereby it was simply impossible to win. The fix was in for two reasons; it ensured the mafia generated the largest profit possible for them, and kept out any independent numbers operator from running their business. It was not uncommon for the Italian mafia to change a number and ensure that their people hit big with independent numbers operators. This in turn would bankrupt the independent numbers operators who could not afford to pay off the winning number (Ricke 1972c:2A). “The Dagos (the numbers men’s term for the Mafia) screwed it all up,” James said. “They are back in it now like they used to be. They fix the number so no one trusts it and they get a lot of the business themselves because they got the best phone systems” (Ricke 1972c:2A). According to a man known as “Joe” the syndicate got back into the numbers business in 1968. He claimed,

They would have men in the neighborhood load up on the number (Detroit number) they planned to pick for the next day to bust us. “On July 19, 1968, they picked 788 as the Detroit number and I had to pay \$20,000 to one of their men who hit it. In September of 1968 they planted three big bets like that and they broke me – 824 cost me \$28,000 that month. What made me the maddest was in July of 1970 they changed a number on me that I hit. I bet \$40 with them on 747 and it hit. I called the racetrack and they gave me the amounts of win, place, and show for all the races, and I figured it out, 747 hit.” According to Joe, somewhere between the end of the race and the publication of results, the figures were changed slightly, so 747 didn’t win. “I learned you can’t fight them. So now I do a small business and they don’t bother me.”

The Free Press reported,

Although young people don’t believe in the numbers and most of the business is not on the streets, the people at the top are making just as much money as they always did, according to police and numbers men interviewed by the Free Press. The houses will take bets up to \$10 on the Pontiac number because they don’t believe it’s fixed, but they don’t trust large bets on the Detroit number because they fear a plant by the syndicate which picks the Detroit’s number each day. The business of selling dreams of having money to people who don’t have any money has become very sophisticated. But the business of being poor hasn’t changed. Men and women are still buying dream books and looking up their dreams to see what number to bet. Special lucky incense and magic oils and candles are still sold in Detroit, all because there are many poor people in Detroit who have no other hope of getting fast, easy money than to try their luck through the numbers.



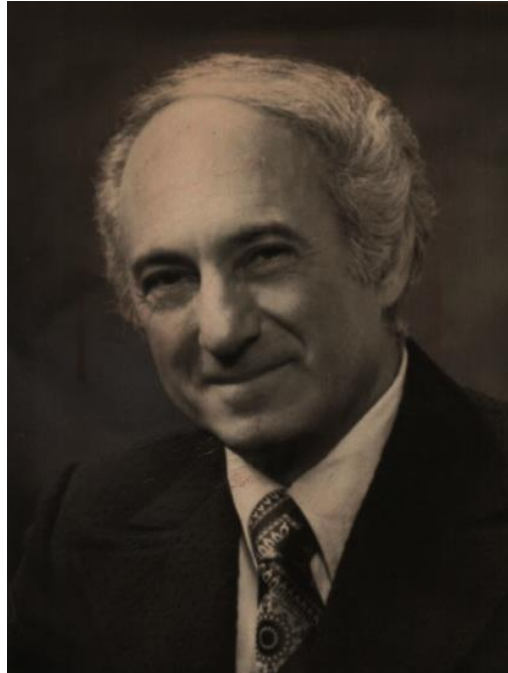
“I thought that when they started to fix the number and everyone knew business would drop off,” James said. “but it didn’t. People have got to have something to hope for (Ricke 1972c:2A).

While the old black numbers people viewed the numbers era as fading, the voters of Michigan overwhelmingly voiced their desire to legalize lottery when they voted by a three to one margin to amend the state constitution on May 16, 1972. This vote ended the 137-year ban on lotteries, which was put in place in 1835, and for some blacks was seen as the “ultimate white takeover” (Shafton 2002:65). Richard McGowan would argue that for voters’ the “ethics of tolerance” won over the “ethics of sacrifice” (McGowan 1994:44). The ethics of sacrifice is described as doing what is best for society, or the notion that “lotteries and gambling prey on the poor” and therefore it is best they be outlawed for the greater good (McGowan 1994:43). In other words, even if lotteries and gambling benefits the rest of society it is not worth sacrificing those who are harmed by it. The ethics of tolerance operates under the assumption that no person should sacrifice their freedom to play the lottery or gamble in order to achieve a greater accomplishment for society (McGowan 1994:46). Approximately 80% of blue-collar Detroit suburbs, which were mostly white, voted for the creation of a state lottery, as did a large number of both white and black Detroiters (Dewey 1972:1A). Almost every county in the state voted to legalize lottery including rural counties, which were expected to vote against lifting of the lottery ban. This flew in the face of the stereotype, which would have one believe that only poor blacks played the numbers. Following the passing of the ban, a bill was proposed to create a state lottery and to allocate \$1.5 million in seed money (Dewey 1972:5A).

When the lottery was first set up, it was modeled after the state of New Jersey’s lottery. The director of New Jersey’s lottery stated, “Our goals were to make the tickets readily available and affordable – and to set up a prize structure that would substantially alter the average person’s

mode of living while including a scattering of small prizes” (Sander 1972:3A & 18A). New Jersey’s lottery had been in operation for 16 months, and in one year had brought \$69 million in new revenue for the state, with weekly ticket sells of about \$2 million. The state of Michigan had estimated they would bring in as high as \$60 million a year in new revenue (Dewey 1972:5A). Like New Jersey’s lottery, the state of Michigan planned to sell lottery tickets for 50 cents apiece through retail agents throughout the state. The drawings for the winning prizes were held weekly, with first prize being \$50,000 (Oppedahl and Lane 1972:3A).

By August 1, 1972, Governor William Milliken signed the McCauley-Traxler-Law-Bowman-McNeely Lottery Act, or Act 239 of 1972, into law. The act mandated several things as it pertained to the lottery. It created the bureau of the state lottery, and created the position of lottery commissioner. Per the act, the lottery commissioner would be appointed by the governor of Michigan and would report directly to him. The purpose of this was to ensure accountability and integrity of the office. The role of the commissioner was to initiate, establish, and operate the state lottery. The commissioner had the power to decide what games would be offered to the public, and the cost associated with playing (State of Michigan 1972:1-2). On the day the governor signed the act into law, he appointed Gus Harrison as the first lottery commissioner. The lottery’s intent was to “produce the maximum amount of net revenues for the state consonant with the general welfare of the people” (State of Michigan 1972:2). The lottery act also mandated, when practicable, that at least 45% of the total annual revenue from the sale of lottery tickets or shares be paid out in prizes. Finally, money generated from the Michigan state lottery was to be used for paying out winnings, operating costs, and the remaining amount deposited in the state school fund (State of Michigan 1972:3).



Gus Harrison – Michigan's first lottery commissioner

One month before the lottery was to officially operate; the illegal numbers was still functioning. Forty-two state and local law enforcement officials on October 27th conducted a raid at the Twenty Grand Motel in Detroit. Eddie Wingate owned the Twenty Grand Motel, and the state police alleged it functioned as the headquarters for a nine million dollar a year numbers operation. During the raid, seven men and five women were arrested, and \$3,000 was confiscated, along with guns, narcotics, six cars, adding machines, bet slips, and gambling records. The gambling records would reveal that only five percent of the money was returned to gamblers in winnings because the numbers were fixed (Detroit News 1972:2b). Just a few short weeks later the Michigan state lottery was up and running.

Roughly 7,800 agents, or numbers writers, were granted the right to sell lottery tickets for the state in 1972. According to the state's annual report for 1972, virtually everyone who was a "licensable" business or organization and who submitted an application for license was granted a license to avoid charges of favoritism (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:1). In

order to show their diversity, the state ensured they reported that the first agents to receive their license were “a Detroit bar owner, a black Lansing businessman, a Grand Rapids chain store operator, and a Bay City business proprietor” (Schuster 1972b: 5A). When granted a license to become an agent, the agent had to pay an annual licensing fee of \$10, and received a five percent sales commission or 2.5 cents per ticket sold. In addition the agents received a bonus ranging from \$50 to \$5,000 based upon the selling of a major prize ticket (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:2).



One of Michigan's first lottery agents.



One lottery agent advertised as “The Legal Number Man” in Detroit.

The first fifty cent green game lottery ticket for the “World’s Richest Lottery” went on sale November 13, 1972 for the first drawing held on November 24, 1972 (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:4). Buyers of the fifty cent ticket could not choose their lottery number; rather their number was assigned with the purchase of the ticket. The Michigan Lottery decided to use the slogan the “World’s Richest Lottery” because Michigan’s lottery would award 4,004 prizes per million tickets, which was twice as many as other lotteries (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:4). This meant the vast majority of prizes were small, but on the

other hand it increased the number of ticket buyers who could win (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:4). This allowed the Michigan Lottery to create more winners in a shorter period of time similar to what John Roxborough did during the Great Depression with ticket buyers. Before the first drawing it was noted the state ran lottery was a better bet for players because the state returned more money to players as opposed to illegal numbers. It was also stressed that the state ran lottery was “above board” and players knew the odds; in comparison to numbers rackets where, “...the profits go to support organized crime, and the return to the bettors usually is no more than 50 percent. But there’s a 10 percent commission to the numbers runner, and the winning number often is rigged” (Neubacher 1972: 1A&2A).

The first drawing was filled with pomp and circumstance, and the selection of the winning numbers was elaborate. The decision was made for the first drawing to take place at Cobo Arena in Detroit in conjunction with the Detroit Auto Show. The drawing was open to the public and was free of charge, and a number of state officials which included the governor participated (Schuster 1972b:1A). A few weeks prior to the first drawing, Lottery Commissioner Gus Harrison announced that the drawing would have a circus like atmosphere with entertainers, clowns, short-skirted girls, and other celebrities present. The purpose of the atmosphere was “...to give the people a good feeling about the drawing” (Lane 1972:1A). With new cars as the backdrop, pretty “lottery ladies” in elegant dresses were used to select the winning numbers. Lottery ladies first mixed 1,000 large colored balls, each with a three digit number ranging from 000 to 999 printed on it, in a giant drum by turning a wheel attached to the drum. Once the balls were mixed, the drum was tipped over to allow ten random balls to fall into 10 numbered cups. Next, the lottery ladies stepped to a clear globe containing 10 envelopes. Each envelope contained a number from one to 10, which corresponded with the winning positions of horse

races ran in Michigan tracks on a particular day (Lane 1972:1A-2A). It is worth noting that the state was dictated by federal regulation to tie the selection of the winning numbers to horse racing to avoid paying a 10% federal tax on all proceedings (Lane 1972:2A). Once the envelopes were mixed, one envelope was selected and opened. Once the number inside was revealed, the lottery ladies went to the cup matching the number from the envelope and revealed the number of the ball inside of the cup. For example, if an envelope was drawn and once opened it contained the number three, the cup with the number three on it would be opened and the ball inside placed on a stand (Schuster 1972b:1A6A). On November 24th, 4,000 people witnessed the first ball selected from the cup which was number 130. The process was repeated with a second envelope and the second number of 544 was revealed from the selected cup. The winning numbers were 130 and 544. Winners included people who had either 130 as the first three digits of their six-digit number or 544 as the last three.

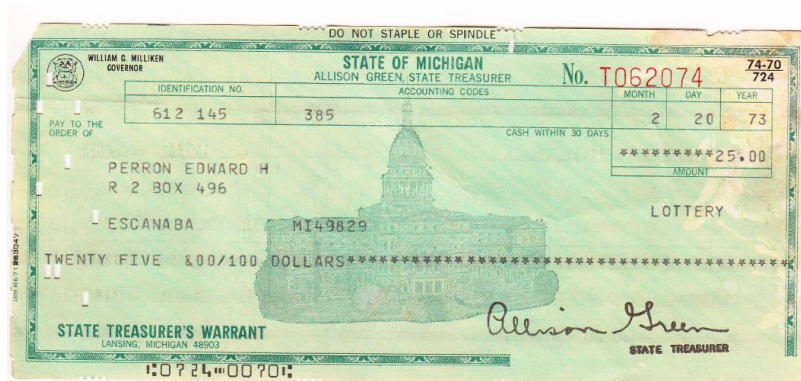


The first issued Michigan Lottery ticket.



The State of Michigan's first lottery drawing on November 24, 1972.

A total of 23,612 winners won \$25 each, and a chance in the state's million-dollar grand prize (after 30 million tickets were sold). Eleven people won the chance to enter into the state's "superprize" drawing. First prize for the "superprize" was \$200,000, second prize was \$50,000, and third prize was \$10,000. Unlike the illegal numbers where winners were paid in cash immediately, the winners of the \$25 prize had to wait for payment. Winners first had to go to the Secretary of State and present their winning ticket for verification. The Secretary of State office then sent the winners' information to the Bureau of State Lottery in Lansing, and then two weeks later, the winner received a check in the mail. The state of Michigan proclaimed the first drawing a success. In one week's time frame, 5,886,191 fifty-cent tickets were sold grossing \$2,843,096. Of that amount, the state netted \$1,510,189 and \$1,324,393 was paid in prizes (Schuster 1972a:1A&8A).



Winning lottery check

The state lottery claimed, "Every ticket has an equal chance to win, whether it is purchased in Dollar Bay, Dansville, Dowagiac or Detroit" (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:6). This claim was made because many outside of the Detroit area felt that the majority of the winners came from the tri-county area. What they did not understand was most tickets were sold to residents of this area, thus accounting for the large number of winners from those counties. In order to overcome this perception, the Michigan Lottery ensured the first year

that weekly drawings took place in every area of the state, which also gave the public the chance to observe the honesty of the drawing (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:6). Ironically, years later, residents of Detroit would feel that the majority of winning tickets came from suburbs and rural areas.



The Michigan Lottery ensured stories of all its winners were published to prove the lottery was fair and to encourage ticket sales. Each winner had their story featured. Herman Millsaps (holding check) was Michigan's first million dollar lottery winner, and was described as "an excellent winner." He worked for Chrysler and his first purchase was a Chrysler. Pictured with Millsaps is his wife, the Gus Harrison, lottery commissioner and the store owner who sold Millsaps the winning ticket. The store owner is being presented with a \$5,000 bonus check for selling the ticket. Greek immigrant Christeen Ferizis (right) at 47 years of age became Michigan's second million dollar winner. Ferizis spoke no English and had been in the U.S. for eight years with her husband. They had come to the U.S. to "get rich."

In its first year of operation, the state lottery indicated it was successful despite advertising limitations. Federal laws prohibited the lottery from using the U.S. Mails for distribution of advertisements or promotional materials. The Federal Communications Commission also banned advertising or promoting lotteries on radio and television. These laws had previously been put in place to prevent illegal numbers games from operating, and ironically curtailed the state sanctioned legal lottery. The state found the laws to be antiquated and unfair for their modern-day, honest lottery (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:6-7).



By the end of the first year, experts claimed the Michigan Lottery, at that time, was the most successful of all state lotteries, partly because it was allowed to operate as a business with “integrity and dignity” (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:8-9). Michigan newspapers were also credited with helping the lottery achieve success because of their unprecedented coverage and support of the lottery. Another key to the lottery’s success were the winners themselves, who the general public were able to identify with (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:7-9). By the end of the first year the Michigan Lottery had sold 271,380,471 tickets, which represented \$135,690,235 in gross sales. Strong sales took place all over the state including rural counties like Berrien, Ingham, Jackson, Kent, Monroe, Saginaw, St. Clair, Washtenaw with the strongest ticket sales coming from the more populated counties of Wayne, Macomb, Oakland, and Genesee (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:14-15). However, even with these strong numbers, the state claimed,

We do not believe the weekly lottery has provided competition for organized crime. Our game is so dissimilar from the daily, quick action “numbers racket” that it cannot compete. The Bureau continues to analyze the possibility of a daily lottery operation which might, as was hoped by some when we began operations, provide direct competition for illegal gambling, but the Lottery’s primary objective is revenue (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1973:9).

It would take five more years before the Michigan Lottery would offer a daily lottery operation like the illegal numbers operations that allowed players the opportunity to actively choose the numbers they wanted to play.

On June 6, 1977, Michigan’s newest lottery game called the “Daily” went on sale at 300 computerized sales terminals, all within a 90-mile radius of Detroit. The Daily was almost a carbon copy of the illegal numbers gambling game. A player at this point was able to finally select their own three-digit number and numbers were drawn Monday through Saturday. Being able to choose your own number made the lottery identical to the numbers game at this point.

This appealed to numbers players who liked the freedom of playing their own special numbers. Unlike the illegal numbers game which allowed players to play for as little as a nickel, the state sanctioned Daily required gamblers to wager from 50 cents to six dollars on their three digit number. The Daily like the illegal numbers allowed wagers to play straight and box bets. In order to win with a straight wager the number had to be played exactly as it was drawn; however boxing a number allowed for several chances to win as long as the three numbers chosen were drawn. The payout odds were 500 to 1, with a straight wager for fifty cents netting the winner \$250. The Daily also took a page from illegal numbers and allowed for winners to cash in the same day their number fell for winnings up to \$550 at a number of Daily sales locations. Winners who won over \$550 were required to complete a claim form and once processed, their winnings were mailed to them. The winning number was broadcast live on WWJ-TV, Channel 4, a television station in Detroit, and released to additional news outlets throughout the state for publication (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1977:4). The Michigan Lottery heavily promoted its new Daily game in newspapers. It advised players, "Now, you pick your own 3-digit number. Play your birthdate, telephone number, bowling score or street address. It's your choice" (Detroit Free Press 1977:20A).

# PICK YOUR OWN NUMBER AND PLAY

**A NEW KIND OF LOTTERY GAME.**  
Now, you pick your own 3-digit number. Play your birthdate, telephone number, bowling score or street address. It's your choice.

**PLAY IT STRAIGHT.**  
If you match the winning number exactly, you win \$500 on a \$1 wager.

**OR BOX YOUR NUMBER.**  
If any combination of the three digits you select (there are six possible combinations) matches the winning number exactly, you win \$83 for a \$1 wager. Some numbers (like 122, 331, 988) with two identical digits pay \$166 for a \$1 "boxed" wager, because there are three combinations.



**PLAY TODAY, CASH TONIGHT.**  
Play up to 10 minutes before the drawing. If you win you can collect up to \$550 that same night from any "Daily" Agent.

**BUY YOUR TICKETS**  
up to six days in advance. Tickets on sale every day. Drawings every night but Sunday.

**WINNING NUMBER DRAWINGS**  
originate live from WWJ-TV, Channel 4 Detroit, every night (except Sunday).

## EVERY DAY'S A PLAY DAY!

Ad used to advertise the Daily 3 in Detroit Free Press on June 9, 1977.



**THE MSL Daily LOTTERY GAME**

STRAIGHT	BOX	NO. OF DRAWINGS	AMOUNT
	312	1	\$ 1.00
DRAWING DATE		ENDING DATE	TOTAL AMOUNT
07/19/77		07/19/77	\$ 1.00
200010431580 0261			

**TO CLAIM YOUR PRIZE**  
Present this ticket to any "Daily Game" lottery agent. Winning tickets up to \$550 are eligible for INSTANT PAYOFF. Winning tickets over \$550 will be paid by check by the Lottery Bureau after a claim is filed. After 30 days winning tickets must be taken to the Bureau's Lansing or Regional offices.

Signature of Claimant \_\_\_\_\_

**RULES**  
This ticket only valid for date(s) shown. Winners must claim prize within one year of the drawing. All tickets, transactions, and winners are subject to Directives of the Commissioner of the Bureau of State Lottery and laws of State of Michigan, and tickets are only offered for sale in accordance with same. Tickets are void and will not be paid if stolen, unissued, illegible, mutilated, altered, counterfeit in whole or part, miscut, misregistered, reconstituted, defective, printed or produced in error, or if ticket fails any of Lottery's other confidential validation tests. Liability for such void tickets, if any, limited to replacement of ticket with an unplayed ticket or refund of retail sales price. This ticket is a bearer instrument, so treat it as if it were cash. PERSONS ALTERING TICKETS SUBJECT TO 5 YEARS IN PRISON.

001789358

The Daily Three Lottery Ticket.

By the second day of the new Daily game, the state understood what it was like for numbers operators who were hit hard when a number was heavily played. On June 7, 1977, “137” was drawn, after a sales agent advised a newspaper that was the number he was playing, and 2,236 people played it with him and won (Hennessy 1977:3A). People liked playing the number “317” and boxing it because it translated to March 17th, or Saint Patrick’s Day. The 2,236 people played “137” for \$216,219, and caused the state to payout \$242,166 in winnings, which left the state with a net loss of \$25,947. The payoff was 112%, and would be the highest one for the year. The Michigan Lottery took the loss in stride and a spokesman stated, “There are going to be days when popular numbers will come up and the customers will come out ahead, a little or a lot. And there will be days when unpopular numbers come up and we’ll come out ahead, a little or a lot” (Hennessy 1977:3A). Overall the Michigan Lottery estimated it would average a profit of 40% (Hennessy 1977:3A).

During its first year, the Daily averaged sales of \$1.3 million a week, and the average payoff for winnings was 45%, and the state continued to expand sales terminals throughout the year, eventually covering the whole state (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1977:4). A year later, the Daily weekly sales increased to \$3.4 million and produced 41% of the Michigan Lottery’s total sales. The Michigan Lottery soon began crediting the Daily with creating hundreds of new jobs because of the need for agents across the state (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 1978:4). Lottery players soon became loyal to the Daily and certain establishments. The Chene Trombley Market located on the eastside of Detroit, and one of the first to be licensed by the state, soon gained a following and a reputation with hardcore players for selling winning tickets. At this time, the Daily was known as the state sanctioned version of the numbers racket. One player noted, “This place is a winner man. I play 30 bucks a week”

(Rubenstein 1979:13). The amount he played amounted to 10 percent of his weekly paycheck, but he like thousands of others from all over was convinced that the store was lucky and was where winners purchased their lottery tickets. Another reason that the Chene Trombley Market was popular was its location. It was near the expressway and suburbanites who were too embarrassed to play at their neighborhood stores found the location beneficial. It was far enough away from where they lived, but easily accessible because of the expressway (Rubenstein 1979:32). In 1979, roughly 6,000 people played at the store, and it sold about a million dollars' worth of lottery tickets, and paid out \$868,922. The sales generated \$50,000 for the storeowner or numbers writer (Rubenstein 1979:15). On October 5, 1981, the Michigan lottery introduced the "Daily 4" which required the selection of a four-digit number.



Customers buying lottery tickets at Chene Trombley Market in 1979.



Customers lined up to buy lottery tickets in 1981.

It is impossible to tell exactly how much the state sanctioned lottery took business away from the illegal numbers. Just five years after the Daily was introduced in 1982, law enforcement officers again raided a large numbers operation. Twenty-one locations in Detroit and the suburbs were found to be part of a \$60 to \$80 million a year numbers organization owned and operated by the Detroit mafia (Flanigan 1982:3A). The Michigan Lottery has done a lot to generate sales and to make it convenient for players to play with them. Advertising for the lottery was found everywhere, and lottery agents were situated in a number of locations to include stores, gas stations, airports, and vending machines. Between the deterioration of neighborhoods, urban renewal projects, and the Michigan Lottery, the need and number of illegal numbers operators decreased in the city.



Lottery vending machine at Detroit Metro Airport.



Solicitation taped to gas pump in Detroit.

In this chapter I covered the legalization of the lottery in Michigan and its effect on illegal numbers gambling. Prior to the legalization, there occurred a change in who controlled numbers gambling in Detroit. Italians, who lived outside of the city, and who had the reputation

in the black community as being dishonest took control of the numbers racket. Discrimination continued to be shown in the prosecution of numbers gamblers. It was noted that the law operated one way for the poor and blacks, and differently for the affluent suburban operators who profited most from the game. A large portion of numbers gambling no longer took place as a neighborhood activity, rather the use of the telephone eliminated this social aspect. When the state legalized the “World’s Richest Lottery”, it changed the narrative or perception concerning numbers gambling. No longer was numbers gambling a fraudulent evil played by black, ignorant, people; rather, it became legitimate entertainment for everyday people and operated with integrity and dignity. Again, some blacks viewed the legalization of the lottery as an attack on blacks and the ultimate takeover of what they considered a black game. Although the lottery was legalized and illegal numbers operators decreased, by no means did they become extinct. Instead, many kept loyal customers, had a distinct customer base. In Detroit, in August of 1989, it was reported,

A corner pay telephone bears a note, “Not for calling numbers.” Nearby, an old man sits holding a wallet sized scratch pad with a sheet of carbon paper between the pages. It’s his book...It’s only 4:30 p.m...It ends at about 7:00 p.m. – just before the day’s winning three-digit Michigan State Lottery number is flashed on TV. This is the Numbers, a multimillion dollar daily underground betting game. The decades old, illegal games of chance not only have survived the Michigan State Lottery, they’ve flourished since the daily legal wagering began in April 1973. “People in the Numbers use the lottery’s number for the daily *street* number,” said a father of 14 who has played Numbers for 40 years. “You know when you win because you can watch it on TV with everyone else.” State lottery officials say they’ve discussed the problem and concluded they’re powerless to stop it. “We’ve talked about it but nobody has figured out what to do,” said Laurie Kipp Klecha a lottery spokeswoman. “We can’t walk up to a bookie and say ‘how’s business?’ It’s big in the plants where there are number runners, and popular in urban areas. There’s nothing I could say that would have any impact (on stopping play on illegal numbers.)” Illegal numbers games in Detroit and Wayne County operate in offices, factories, neighborhood stores and homes, and cut across racial, ethnic and geographic lines, said Patrick J. Foley, the assistant prosecutor who heads the Wayne County Organized Crime Task Force (Bailey & Ankeny 1989:1B)

The legalized lottery in some ways helped the illegal numbers game. The drawn numbers assured players the winning number could not be tampered with and could be viewed and obtained instantly. In addition, “Wayne County Prosecutor John D. O’Hair said the legal lottery may have diminished public perception that playing the Numbers is wrong” (Bailey & Ankeny 1989:2B). Numbers players indicated they continued to play the illegal numbers for several reasons.

- Winners get paid off at rates that are 6 to 1 or even 7 to 1 compared to the state lottery scale of 5 to 1.
- Numbers runners offer credit to the trustworthy who have little ready cash. Players – whose small pension or welfare checks may be days or weeks away – can place bets and pay at the end of the week or the month. Winnings can be used to settle debts.
- Players can bet as little as a nickel – not likely a strain for anyone’s pocketbook.
- With state lottery numbers to rely on street numbers players are assured that Numbers kingpins can’t cheat.
- Winnings are unreported and tax-free. A \$2 bet on a straight three number can net a winner \$1,000 or more under the table. And the money comes the next day (Bailey & Ankeny 1989: 2B).

Finally, there is a social component to playing the numbers, which played a role in its longevity.

Besides the gambling, playing Numbers means socializing. At one house, beer and hard liquor is flowing. A refrigerator has a lock on it to keep out intruders. In the kitchen, women are cooking food. At a card table, men swap old stories. They slap thighs and laugh. “This (Numbers) goes from here (Detroit) to Flint and Bay City.” A bettor said. “People are used to playing Numbers and they don’t see any advantages to playing or winning the regular lottery. They feel shut out of the regular economy anyway. So they play underground” (Bailey & Ankeny 1998:2B).

Illegal numbers can still be found in a number of automotive plants where there is a captive audience. The next chapter will explore illegal numbers gambling’s history and popularity in Detroit area automotive plants, and will tell how these locations have kept numbers gambling alive in their work communities. In addition, the next chapter will give the personal experiences



of a major numbers writer/runner in a large Detroit area plant. His experience further explains why the illegal numbers exist, and how they have helped him achieve his American Dream.

## CHAPTER 14 “NUMBERS GAMBLING, THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY AND BIG WILL”

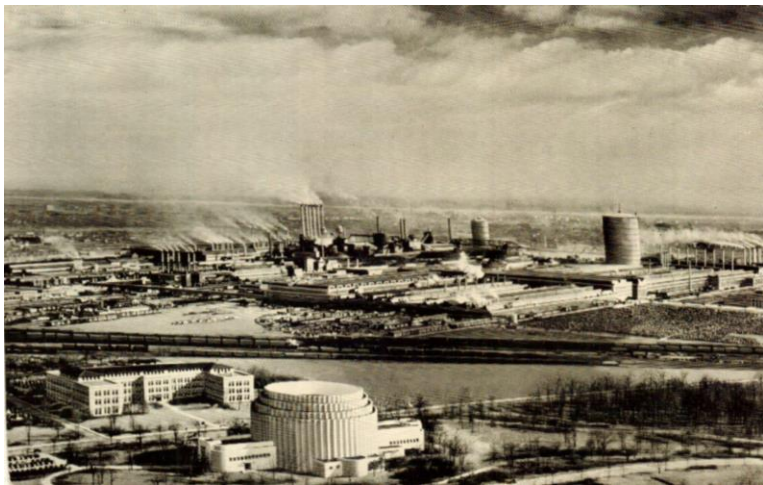
Numbers gambling has been prevalent in Detroit neighborhoods for years, so it is no wonder that it could be found where people worked. The most pervasive locations for numbers gambling were the automotive plants. Plants are a reflection of society, and its employees bring their beliefs into its walls. Like neighborhoods, automotive plants are communities. Because of the long work hours, people who work at plants tend to spend more time with each other than with family, and the plant community offers as many amenities within its confines as can be found outside of it.

One of the most notorious plants where numbers gambling was prominent was Ford Motor's Rouge plant. In 1942, a raid on a Detroit neighborhood revealed that numbers gambling was taking place within the plant. Numbers writers were Ford employees who on the side wrote numbers for neighborhood numbers organizations (Detroit Free Press 1944:1). By the end of World War II in 1945, investigations looking into numbers gambling in 10 war plants, to include the Ford Rouge plant, determined employees were wagering \$25,000 a day. The investigation revealed that the numbers organization drew its customers exclusively from the plants, and employed hundreds of numbers writers in each plant (Detroit Free Press 1945:1). In spite of the investigation, which resulted in arrests, numbers gambling continued in the plants. Ford Motor's Rouge plant continued to have problems with numbers gambling in 1947 and after a yearlong investigation fired 23 employees who were part of a \$15,000 a day numbers gambling ring (Los Angeles Times 1947:1). Ford Motor Company opened the investigation after a number of wives complained that their husbands were losing money from betting and bringing home reduced pay (Detroit Free Press 1947:1).

A survey was conducted in 1948 of gambling in seven factories across the United States, including Detroit. The survey revealed that of the \$75 million a year spent on gambling in Detroit, \$20 million a year came from auto plants (Business Week 1948:94). According to its finds there were few plants in Detroit employing 100 or more people that did not have some form of gambling, and plants with 1,000 or more employees tended to have at least three or four numbers writers (Business Week 1948:95). In addition, just as many whites played the numbers as black employees (Business Week 1948:94). Number writers wrote numbers for both the Detroit mafia and independent numbers operators both inside and outside plants. The number writers tended to have a designated time and location where people could come to play their numbers. Pickup men collected the bets during plant hours in different ways. Some employees - for example, truck drivers who had scheduled access to the plant- also did double duty as collectors, while some numbers writers would simply wrap the numbers slips and money in packages and drop them from plant windows to the collector who waited outside the plant on the sidewalk (Business Week 1948:94). Management at the plants generally did not approve of gambling, but did not invite law enforcement to investigate or arrest employees on its premises. If an employee was found gambling at the plant, they were usually fired. In spite of management's views, local police departments generally arrested one to two people per week at large plants (Business Week 1948:94-95).

The same year that the survey was completed, it was estimated that approximately 25 numbers rings including the Murphy and Alabama and Georgia Houses, with 250 numbers writers, operated within the Ford Rouge plant (Business Week 1948:96). These numbers operations generated between \$5,000,000 and \$10,000,000 a year (Business Week 1948:95). One black numbers operator, Edward Hester, who was also a Ford employee and United

Autoworker committee man, decided to seek police protection for numbers gambling at the Ford Rouge plant (Chicago Daily Tribune 1948:10). Hester had hoped that police, in addition to offering him protection, would arrest his competitors. Hester after giving the chief of police \$100 at a meeting stated, "It's worth \$50,000 a year to me to have the mayor, police chief, and Vice Squad let me run in the Rouge plant" (Detroit Free Press 1948:1). Hester's plan was to pay \$2,000 to \$5,000 a month to city officials in Dearborn to run his numbers organization, Beason House, unmolested (Detroit Free Press 1948:1). At the time, approximately 69,000 people were employed at the plant. The Ford Rouge plant was 1,212 acres and had within its boundaries a bus system that operated on 26 miles of roadway, 106 miles of railroad track, and over one mile in docks to handle boat shipments. Ninety-nine buildings in excess of 15,000,000 square feet of floor space housed 120 miles of conveyors. During a regular 24-hour time period a total of 49,000 vehicles, 148,000 people, and 468 trains passed through the Ford Rouge's gates (Investigation of Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce 1951:203-204).



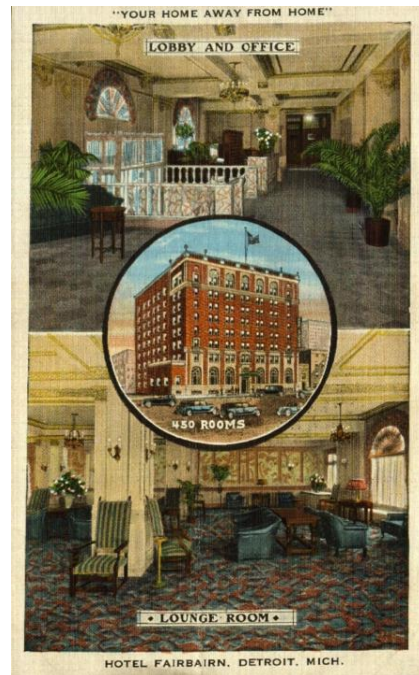
The Ford Rouge Plant

Within this huge and busy plant, gambling took place virtually everywhere. Numbers writers would take numbers out of closets or rooms, and the employees who had counters would openly take bets at their counters. Crane operators would roll their cranes between buildings and

allow bettors to place their bets and money inside the lowered attached bucket (Investigation of Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce 1951:211). Hester, as a union committeeman, unlike most employees at the plant, had full access to the entire plant. His job as a union committeeman was to represent other employees if they violated company policies or had grievances. Because of this, he was not tied down to one location, could move about freely visiting various employees. On one occasion while meeting with Labor Relations, Hester turned in seven rival numbers writers. Ford's Labor Relations representative turned the information over to local law enforcement, which then promptly investigated and arrested the men (Investigation of Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce 1951:212). It was shortly after Hester turned in his rivals, that he attempted to bribe the chief of police, and subsequently was arrested. Upon further investigation it was learned that Hester had 180 numbers writers working for him, and his headquarters was located in the Fairbairn Hotel, formerly owned by Walter Norwood, and located in Detroit's Black Bottom (Detroit Tribune 1948b:1).



Edward Hester testifying (Senate Hearings) in 1951 concerning numbers gambling in the Ford Rouge plant.



Hotel Fairbairn where Hester's Beason Number House was headquartered.

Gambling was not just confined to Ford Motor Company, and it was not confined to men. For example, in 1955, seven women who worked at General Motors were convicted and sentenced to six months' probation and assessed a \$75 fine each for operating a numbers ring.



General Motors' employees arrested in a police raid on a restaurant near the plant on Fort St. in Detroit. The Michigan State Police had received a tip concerning their numbers ring in 1955.

After the lottery was legalized and the Daily was introduced, numbers gambling in the plant continued. One of the most infamous cases of illegal numbers gambling in an automotive plant came out of the Ford Rouge plant in 1996 when Ed Martin, a Ford electrician was investigated by authorities for his relationship with student athletes out of the University of Michigan. During a federal investigation into his activities, it was learned that Martin had operated an illegal numbers gambling ring from 1988 to 1999, out of his home in Detroit and at the Ford Rouge plant. Martin and his family would take bets from people at the Ford Rouge plant, as well as from all over the country, with the Ford plant being his primary source of bettors (University of Michigan 2002: 1-2).

Ed Martin was born sometime in the early 1930s, and grew up in Georgia. In 1953, Martin moved to Detroit and landed a job with Ford as an apprentice electrician. In 1983, he was injured on the job, and received disability compensation until he officially retired in 1998 from Ford. It is unclear as to when Martin began running his numbers operation, but it is known he, with the help of his wife, son, and a friend, successfully ran it for numerous years at various Ford plants in metro Detroit. In addition to working at Ford and running a numbers operation, Martin or “Big Money Ed” as he was known, considered himself a “basketball fanatic” who wanted to be a part of college and professional basketball (University of Michigan 2002: 1-5). As such, it was not uncommon for Martin to attend middle school and high school basketball games throughout the Detroit area. While attending the games, if Martin found a youth that he felt had talent, he would befriend the youth and the youth’s family. Martin, as part of the established relationship, would bestow gifts and at times financial assistance to the student and/or their family. When Martin provided what he considered a large sum of money to a student or their family, it was with the understanding the money was a loan that was to be repaid once the student became a professional basketball player. This served two purposes for Martin; it allowed him to launder illegal numbers gambling money, and it served as a pension or “social security system” for him in later years (University of Michigan 2002: 1-6). With the proceeds generated from his illegal numbers operation, Martin, from 1992 until 1999, loaned four University of Michigan student athletes or their families about \$616,000 (University of Michigan 2002: 1-6).

These athletes would in fact later become professional athletes, and one did in fact repay part of the money loaned to him by Martin (University of Michigan 2002: 1-6). However, Martin’s loaning of money to the student athletes and their families violated rules and regulations for college basketball. As a result, the University of Michigan was sanctioned for their

relationship with Martin. As the story unfolded in the media, Martin was depicted as a predator who took advantage of talented students and their families. Martin's perspective was different; he felt he was a friend to those involved and had generously tried to help them. At the time, Martin felt the friendship went both ways; however he later felt that the students and their families took advantage of his friendship and generosity (University of Michigan 2002:1-6). Others however felt that Martin was a generous man who simply provided financial assistance to those in need. Martin was eventually charged federally, and pled guilty to conspiracy to launder money. While awaiting sentencing in 2003, Martin died of a blood clot at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. His wife Hilda, who helped run the numbers operation, was originally charged with her husband; however as part of Ed Martin's plea agreement, charges against her were dropped. Hilda Martin died five months after her husband. Carl Martin, Ed and Hilda's son, pled guilty for his role in the numbers business, and served 15 months in prison.

Illegal numbers operating at automotive plants would not end with Ed Martin. Others successfully ran their numbers operations out of other plants before and after Martin, primarily because the plant run numbers was more lucrative to a player. At one Ford plant in the Detroit area, a numbers runner provided me with the rules of his plant:

- Winning numbers paid 600 to 1, which was more than the 500 to 1 paid by the Michigan Lottery.
- Bet amounts for the three-digit ranged from a nickel up to \$20.00, the Michigan Lottery would not accept such small wagers as a nickel. Their minimum bet is fifty cents. In addition their maximum payout is \$500.
- Bet amounts for the four-digit ranged from a nickel up to \$10.00; again the Michigan Lottery would not accept such small wagers as a nickel. Their minimum bet is one dollar, and their maximum payout is \$5,000.
- At this plant, certain numbers (for example 1010, 1028) could not be played. These were fancies that tended to be heavily played and the numbers operator did not want to take bets for these numbers.



- Players could conveniently play weekly or daily.
- Players could play numbers drawn from the Michigan or the Ohio State Lottery. This was important to some players who felt one lottery was better for their number than the other.
- Players could play on credit, if they hit, the numbers writer would automatically take 10% and what the player owed from their winnings (Anonymous letter to author, August 6, 2012).

Although there are some benefits for playing the illegal numbers, there are also some disadvantages. Namely the inability to play certain numbers like “1010”, which accounted for one of the highest payouts in Michigan’s lottery history on January 29, 2010, when it fell. The payout for the number was \$21,660,452 which amounted to 3,371.4% of the amount wagered that day (State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery 2010:3).

Big Will retired from a metro Detroit General Motors plant, where he worked as a sweeper, and for years he ran his numbers business on the side at the plant as well. When he retired from his formal job as a sweeper, he also retired from his numbers business. These days, he spends his time doing what he loves most, playing golf with a number of lifelong friends. Big Will enjoys golf because it “makes you think all the time” and it does not hurt that he has a good golf game. The golf course is where he feels most at ease, and it is there he told his story to me, and the real reason he is called Big Will.<sup>10</sup> Once you meet “Big Will” it is obvious where his name derives from. Big Will is a quiet giant who is both tall and wide; he lumbers when he walks as a result of walking for many years on a concrete floor. Just looking at him, he appears intimidating, but once he begins to talk, you are struck by his easy manner. He possesses an unassuming intelligence that shines through in his description of his many life experiences.

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<sup>10</sup> Big Will was interviewed on September 27, 2012.

Big Will was born in and raised in South Carolina. It was there as a child that he developed his love for golf. Big Will's fondest memories are of caddying and then playing around on a South Carolina golf course. As an adult seeking employment in 1964, Big Will left the south behind and headed to Detroit. He described himself as a country boy who arrived in the big city that was alive and full of excitement. He fell in love with Detroit because there was always something to do. He loved the restaurants, shopping and entertainment. "At that time Detroit was a place you wanted to live in." His first year in Detroit was spent becoming familiar with a new city, and he worked in a now closed plant for one year before going to work for General Motors in 1965. He would work 42 years in various assignments before retiring. In 1966, Big Will married his childhood girlfriend, and in 2012 they celebrated their 46th wedding anniversary. Out of their marriage, they had a son and a daughter.

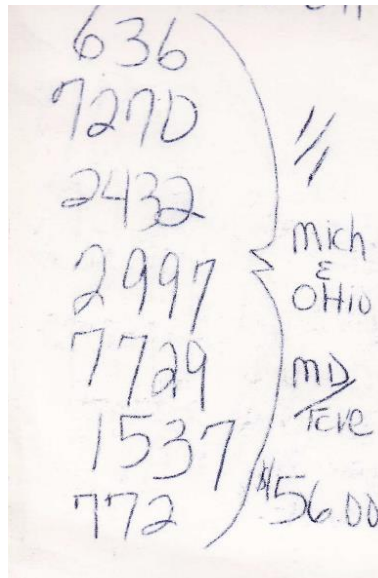
Big Will first became involved in what he called "street numbers" as a source of extra income in 1969. He became involved a few years after the Ford Motor Company disclosed that a numbers organization took \$4 million dollars a year from its workers at just one of its plants. The investigation also revealed that employees, who were making \$100 a week from Ford, were making up to \$1,000 a week as numbers runners in the plant (Detroit Scope Magazine 1969a:11). Like those at the Ford plant, Big Will would make more money running numbers than what he was paid by General Motors. Big Will knew people who were numbers writers and pickup men. As he saw it, there was no hard work in writing or picking up numbers and the extra money would go a long way. The first person he wrote and turned in numbers for was Ed Wingate, and he recalled taking one cent, two cent, nickel and dime bets, which added up to big money. Once he became involved in writing and picking up numbers, he found the work was in fact not hard, but that it was stressful. The stress came from getting people who he allowed to play on credit to

pay. Big Will learned the ins and outs of the business, and broke away from Wingate. He then became a hybrid numbers man whereby he had his own clients who he wrote numbers for, and was a pickup man for a big numbers operator who he never met. Big Will only knew that “Joe” was white. Big Will was able to write numbers for Joe because another pickup man vouched for him. Every weekend, Joe would send someone to Big Will to pick up his money, or to give Big Will the payout money. When Big Will’s numbers operation began to turn a profit, he no longer cashed his paycheck from General Motors. Instead, his wife would take his check and hers and put it in a savings account. He began to invest in savings bonds with the profits from his numbers business in 1969, and once hit the numbers for a large sum. Big Will viewed the checks and savings bonds as the key to his retirement; his dream was to be able to retire and not have to work for anyone.

According to Big Will, everyone at his large plant knew him, and knew that he ran a numbers operation. Some of his regular customers were management and employees from the Labor Relations department. The people who played the numbers with him were black and white, hourly workers and management, educated and uneducated, old and young - in other words, there was no “type.” However, he found that most of his customers were white, and they were motivated to play illegal numbers to avoid paying taxes on winnings. Blacks, he felt, played the numbers because it was the thing to do; after all, most blacks who he knew grew up with street numbers as a part of their life. Although numbers operators took money from the neighborhoods, they put it back in a number of ways, and this brought acceptance with blacks and this translated to the blacks that played with him.

When a person placed a bet with Big Will, they put their number on a piece of paper, explained how they were playing it and signed their name or code. Although Big Will took

numbers bets personally from people in the plant, he also had 12 books or 12 people who wrote numbers for him. In other words each book or person had their own clients that they took bets from. Big Will would pay his numbers writers, who were black and white, the standard 25%, and if the numbers writer's client hit, they would deduct 10% of their winnings. Big Will only deducted 10% for his clients who played on credit; otherwise, he did not take any percentage of the winnings. Like in the old days, Big Will provided his numbers writers with books where they recorded their clients' bets, and then were required to turn the slips into him.



Numbers pad used by numbers writer in plant.

Cut off time was 6:30 pm, which allowed Big Will to call in the numbers to a woman who worked for him. In addition, his cut off time allowed him the ability to purchase lottery tickets from the Michigan Lottery if a number was heavily played. At one time Big Will was considered the biggest numbers man in the area where his plant was located, this and his size is why he is nicknamed Big Will.

His freedom as a sweeper allowed him access to not only collect numbers, but also to call them in. Calling in the numbers at times posed a dilemma because he needed access to an office

for privacy and a telephone. At times, he would use what he thought were empty offices on the plant floor, and on one such occasion he ran into a supervisor, Tony, who he later befriended. As Big Will recalled it, he was sitting inside of Tony's locked office with his feet on the desk talking on the phone. As a sweeper or maintenance worker, Big Will literally had keys to most of the plant. Tony inquired who he was and why he was in his office. Their first meeting did not go well, and Big Will walked away thinking Tony was "mean," and would perhaps be a problem. However, after talking to him a few times, he realized Tony was simply a hardworking man who was about business. They would later learn they both had a love for golf, and played at the same course with the same people. Big Will respected Tony for being a fair foreman, and Tony respected how Big Will took care of people within the plant. Yes, Tony knew Big Will was the numbers man, but as long as Big Will did his job, there was never a problem. Tony played a few numbers with Big Will, and Big Will remembered Tony's number because like other numbers players, he played his favorite number. Tony was not a regular player, and Big Will would frequently ask, but Tony "sho' was tight." Tony was typical of most of management and the union; they knew of the numbers gambling at the plant and tolerated it. After all, it had been around for years and was a part of plant life.

Big Will felt that his success as a numbers man came because he was honest, people trusted him, and he paid out a lot of money. He credits his father with instilling in him as a young man the importance of trust and never stealing. Big Will told of one customer who hit for \$15,000 with him. When Big Will realized the man hit the numbers and won, he attempted to contact him numerous times before discovering the man was on vacation for two weeks. He spoke with the man and offered to bring him his money, but the man advised him he trusted him and would wait upon his return to work to be paid. Big Will insisted his numbers writers also be

trustworthy. Once, one of his numbers writers forgot to turn in a number for a customer who played the same number daily for years. Unfortunately for the writer, the day he did not turn in the number, it fell and the woman won. He at first refused to pay her because he had not turned in her number. She then went to Big Will and told him what had occurred. Big Will paid the woman her winnings, and took the money out of his writer's profits. In addition to being trustworthy, Big Will had the reputation of being compassionate and helped a lot of people over the years. For example, once someone owed him \$30 for numbers played for the week, but could not pay. The customer told Big Will he was having some family and money problems, and was going to get his lights turned off. Big Will told him to keep the \$30, and then gave him the money he needed for his light bill. Big Will acted as the unofficial mayor of the plant, quashing conflicts along the way. As a sweeper, he had access to a lot of information from both management and the union, and like a town crier, he acted as the "plant crier" spreading information and news.

Big Will also credited the success he had in numbers with a few other rules and advice he received when he first started out. Someone told him to never take a bet on more than he could pay out because as Big Will indicated, a numbers man "can get tapped out especially on favorites and with the four-digits." Because of this rule, the most he would allow anyone to bet on a four-digit number was \$3.00 and \$30 for a three digit number. The payout for hitting a three-digit straight for \$30 or a four-digit straight for \$3.00 was \$15,000. Big Will made his cut off \$15,000 because he knew that if Joe reneged on paying the winning number, \$15,000 was an amount he (Big Will) could easily afford to pay from his own money. The second piece of advice he received from a Jewish numbers man who told him to avoid certain fancies or favorites. Specifically, he told Big Will to never accept a bet for "123, no kind of way, 567, no kind of

way, 962 no kind of way.” When Big Will asked him why, the Jewish numbers man stated, “Black people dream too much!” Big Will found that a number of black people’s favorite numbers to play were 123, 456, 567, and 962, which did not fall much, but when they did, the payouts were massive. He credits his aunt, Big Minnie, who died at 99 ½ years of age, with teaching him how to remember numbers and what the numbers meant in dream books. Numbers writing was a family affair; Big Minnie wrote numbers at the Dodge Main plant for over 30 years. His aunt memorized her dream books and had the ability to recall what dreams, or rows, corresponded to certain numbers. For example, 123 was called the car and water row, and 976 was the death row. Because of Big Minnie’s ability to memorize numbers and what numbers played for, it was common for people to consult her about their dreams. Big Will has found over the years mainly “old folks” use dream books, and they, like his aunt, tend to memorize its contents.

Big Will recalled two incidents where he feared legal action. The first incident occurred in 1997. For more than a year, a law enforcement officer worked undercover at his plant as an hourly employee, and even played numbers with him. One day as Big Will was coming to work, he noticed law enforcement officers were arresting people at the plant. He later learned that a raid of the plant had taken place. The undercover law enforcement officer had been placed in the plant to investigate widespread drug dealing, and eventually more than 20 people were arrested for dealing drugs. Although Big Will had worried that he would be targeted for his numbers gambling activities, he was ignored by law enforcement. He later realized the officer played numbers with him to “fit in” with the other employees. Big Will never had a desire to get involved with illegal narcotics. He had friends who went in for the “fast money” connected with drugs and their stories all ended with death or imprisonment.

The second incident occurred when a white man who occasionally played the numbers with him began to play cards. The man would lose his whole paycheck every week to the men he played with, but told his wife he was losing his money playing the numbers. His wife became upset, and called the plant to complain that her husband was losing his whole paycheck to the “numbers man.” Big Will was questioned by management, who told him they had heard he was the “big numbers man in the plant” and because of him people were not bringing their paycheck home. He denied he was a big numbers operator, and consequently, management called in the local police. Big Will was not arrested, but instead was given a summons to appear in court. When he received the summons, he met with everyone that played numbers with him and told them to give him all of their losing Michigan Lottery tickets to include scratch offs. When he appeared in court with his infamous high-powered attorney, Big Will brought two plastic grocery bags filled with the losing Michigan Lottery tickets. When his case was called his attorney stepped up and introduced his argument; Big Will was in fact a bookie in the plant, but he had a massive gambling problem himself. His attorney presented the two plastic filled grocery bags containing over \$280,000 in losing State of Michigan Lottery tickets as evidence. He told the judge that every penny Big Will earned or won was gambled and lost with the state of Michigan’s lottery, and the \$280,000 in lottery tickets represented his loses for the year. Upon hearing this, the judge slammed his gavel and dismissed the case. As he dismissed the case Big Will recalled the judge said, “I don’t ever want to see this man down here for no bookie charge no more!” Big Will’s take on the dismissal was that the judge had no other choice but to dismiss. If not, in his mind, the Michigan Lottery would have owed him \$280,000 for being a legal bookie. Big Will stated, “Because he knew if he had charged me with that they would have had to pay me, the state owed me \$280,000 cash dollars. Cause they were losing tickets. Case



dropped.” According to him, just by thinking, he was able to come up with a defense that kept him out of jail.

Big Will has found that “numbers have been good to me over the years.” Not only did Big Will earn a fortune from writing numbers and from having writers work for him, but he has won a significant amount of money as well. Big Will one day dropped some laundry off at the cleaners. His laundry claim ticket was “5816”. He played this number straight on a hunch, and won \$85,000. With his winnings he purchased land for his father in South Carolina, and invested and purchased land for himself. He believed when he was young if he had saved his money over the years he would have \$10 million dollars in the bank. However when he was young, he found he spent money excessively on card games, where you had to buy your way in for \$5,000 to \$10,000 a game. In one ten-year period, Big Will estimated he wasted about a million dollars. In spite of this, with age came wisdom for Big Will, and he was able to save and prosper. Big Will credited numbers gambling with allowing him to “make it,” and not his legitimate work at GM. He is proud to note that he started out in an apartment, and today he has savings, property, land, a home, and his family (to include his children) are financially stable.

Over the years Big Will has seen a change in both the city of Detroit and the numbers business. He feels that the Michigan Lottery has in fact taken away a lot of business that he and other numbers men enjoyed for years. Young people, he feels, are more likely to gamble at the casino than play the numbers. He feels the city has changed for the worse and is wild. The once lively and vibrant city is dying and offers very little to do as it pertains to shopping and entertainment. The young no longer respect their elders, and for this reason he is looking to relocate to South Carolina. Although he has experienced and witnessed ups and downs over the

years, he has no regrets for doing what he considered the key to his American Dream: street numbers.

Having covered the history of numbers gambling in Detroit and the metro Detroit area, its effects on various communities (including Detroit area automotive plants), and the motivation for why people participate in numbers gambling, the next chapter will explore who and why people play the numbers.

## CHAPTER 15 “312 PLAYS FOR PLAYING THE NUMBERS”

Who plays the numbers is simple. Anyone. This contradicts what many believed. As previously discussed, it has been suggested that only blacks, the poor, or the uneducated played the numbers. For example, in 1903, it was reported that “There has never been more than a very brief time in the modern history of Detroit that the game of policy has not been open to those within her gates who wanted to squander their substance in this one-sided form of gambling...It is largely the gambling field of the ignorant, superstitious, and the poor...” (Detroit Free Press 1903b:4). The article went on to explain that the poor played because they needed the money “at home for the necessities of life.” In 1936, it was reported that,

[...] 99 per cent of all the lottery bets come from the people who can least afford to gamble. By the same token, they are the people who are most tempted to gamble, because their lives are the most drab and the thrill and hope of long-shot gambling is the one release from that drabness available to them ...The numbers is a Negro game. To build it into the big money class you have to get the white people to playing it (Ator 1936:E10).

In the same year, *Easy Money*, a white magazine whose sole purpose was to publish stories about how easy money was made and lost in an attempt to quench people’s fascination with the lure of easy money, featured an in-depth story about the numbers racket. In the story, it was stressed that numbers gambling was “within the reach of everyone from a school boy to a grandmother, a beggar to a millionaire, and they all play it...Play on the policy and the numbers is not confined to any race or class” (Mellen 1936:19&94). Tired of and in a response to the white belief that only blacks played the numbers, a columnist wrote a piece called “Numbers and Negroes.” He stated,

Don’t get me wrong. I’m calling this one Numbers and Negroes because so many policemen and white people would have you believe that ONLY Negroes gamble this way. The fact is that Americans white and black, gamble hard and heavy. It is a part of our way of life...But people WILL gamble. How can they dismiss the get rich quick idea in a nation where so many of the guys and gals whose names

appear in the SOCIAL REGISTER are themselves, or are the offspring of, pirates, thugs, thieves and gamblers...If Negroes play numbers, and they do, it is the modern way of trying to get ahead like the white and black forefathers did in yesteryears with another, similar method. The whites whose economic status is like ours, and many others, are doing the same thing to accumulate a little more easy change...Numbers and Negroes might be titled Numbers and people, because after all when people, regardless of race, are confronted with the struggle for existence as it hits you in this country you need to play or fight something (Slade 1949:8).

In support of this belief, a study in 1958 found that the numbers racket was an economic rather than a race problem. “It appeals to low income groups because it gives them a chance to share in the age old mania for gambling without risking large sums at any one time” (Gold 1958:A3). In spite of this study, the belief was still that only the black, poor, and uneducated played the numbers. One report stated,

The poor odds in the numbers racket is a reflection of the poor educational background of the people who play the numbers. The better educated middleclass and the wealthy do not generally play the numbers...But the vast majority of blacks waste much of their meager income playing this generally hopeless game. Many justify their loses with the argument that it’s worth foregoing a necessity for the chance of gaining a luxury (Detroit Scope Magazine 1969a:11).

A few years later in 1972, journalists were still reporting that, “Most of the people who play numbers are black. It’s always been that way. It started in the ghetto and is still there” (Ricke 1972b:1A).

The above statements have been the widespread belief for many years, but it is a narrow belief that is untrue. Yes, numbers gambling was prevalent in many black communities across the nation, and in Detroit it was an ingrained institution in some respects. However, to pin the vice on one particular group, be they poor or black is unfair, and fails to accurately tell the true story. Today, studies show that those who engage in the lottery come from all walks of life. For example, in 2000, the Michigan Lottery found that 75% of adults in Michigan purchased some form of lottery ticket (State of Michigan 2000). In 2009, the Michigan Lottery compiled a

demographic study of lottery players in the state and its results showed players were neither low income nor uneducated. The State of Michigan Bureau of State Lottery found that in 2009, 49% of men and 51% of women comprised Michigan Lottery players, with most players ranging in age from 45 to 64. Forty percent of the state's lottery players completed college, and most players' (38%) annual income was from \$50,000 to \$100,000. Finally, 85% of Michigan Lottery players were white and blacks made up 11% of its players (Bureau of State Lottery 2011:55). Their findings were consistent with "Janice Markovich's" story.<sup>11</sup>

Janice, a black woman, whose youthful beauty belies the fact she is in her early 60s, was born in Pontiac, Michigan. At the age of 10, her family moved to the west side of Detroit where she grew up. Her mother was a day worker, and her father like so many others worked in the plant and neither played the numbers. Janice's father was very strict, and would frequently say he ruled his home like "Hitler ruled Germany." In her household she was expected to help care for her six brothers and sisters, which she did. Janice graduated from high school, married, had two children, and eventually obtained her bachelor's degree. She became a widow at an early age, and found herself working at a General Motors plant because it paid well. While at GM, she had a number of jobs from working on the line, to supervising, and finally driving trucks because it gave her freedom. She would not play her first number until 1979, and as luck would have it, her number 497, was a winner. With that win, she became a numbers player.

For her, playing the numbers is a habit - so much so she gave up smoking so she could afford to play the numbers. When asked why she enjoys playing the numbers, Janice said a group leader that worked for her years ago summed it up best. "It is the only place, only thing you can do to get some money and you do not have to fill out a long application and be rejected if you are lucky enough." She liked the challenge of trying to figure out what number would fall,

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<sup>11</sup> Janice Markovich was interviewed on July 25, 2012.

was fascinated by what numbers in dream books symbolized, and believed there was a spiritual side to them. Janice believed that in order to play the numbers you have to be focused and have a strategy to play, and this was another aspect she liked. Janice, who believes in God and regularly goes to church, found that playing the numbers at times was relaxing, yet could be worse than having a drug habit. As she said, “At least with dope you got a high, if you don’t hit, you ain’t got shit. Numbers can be your biggest pimp, baby. It can pimp man or woman.”

For Valerie Kaczor, a white woman, her lottery addiction changed her life. In 1985, Kaczor, 32 years old and a former nurse, was a married mother of two living the American Dream as a housewife in suburban Detroit. Kaczor grew up in Detroit, and at age 15 graduated from a Detroit public high school before receiving a full scholarship for nursing. For three years, Kaczor was a nurse at Grace Hospital in Detroit before getting married and having two children. She and her family lived in a suburban tri-level house equipped with the latest appliances and entertainment systems. For her, “the numbers game changed her from a loving mother and responsible housewife to a suicidal felon” (Katz 1985:1E). Kaczor claimed that her family became burdened with \$30,000 in medical bills as a result of her deceased mother-in-law’s illness. Kaczor did not want her husband to worry about the outstanding debt, and instead turned to the Michigan State Lottery for financial help. Kaczor, an educated woman, said the pressure of the debt made her think about the lottery after hearing her neighbors talking about it. She decided if the lottery could help her neighbors, maybe it was her answer and would help her as well. Initially, she invested \$100 in lottery tickets and won \$1,000. In less than a month’s time, Kaczor was spending \$700 a day with the state lottery on numbers gambling, hoping to “hit the big one” (Katz 1985:1E). At one point, Kaczor was wagering \$1,000 a day with the state lottery. To finance her lottery habit, she wrote approximately \$500,000 in bad checks and altered money

orders. For a while this worked, and she bragged that she several times managed to only be \$15,000 in the hole. The end came when she began to be investigated. Kaczor felt being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other local police departments was embarrassing, and she wanted to pay the money back. However she was arrested, and in order to be released on a \$55,000 cash bond, her family had to “sacrifice” their snowmobiles, cars, trailers, children’s coin collections and wedding rings. After being arrested, Kaczor admitted herself into a hospital for treatment and was diagnosed by doctors as being “hooked on the numbers” (Katz 1985:4E). After being release from the hospital Kaczor said, “I don’t intend to go back to that lifestyle, no matter how broke I get” (Katz 1985:4E). In spite of this, Kaczor was convicted on several felony counts for fraud and forgery for her nine-month lottery spree, and sentenced to four consecutive three to 14 year prison terms (Freedman 1986:4B).

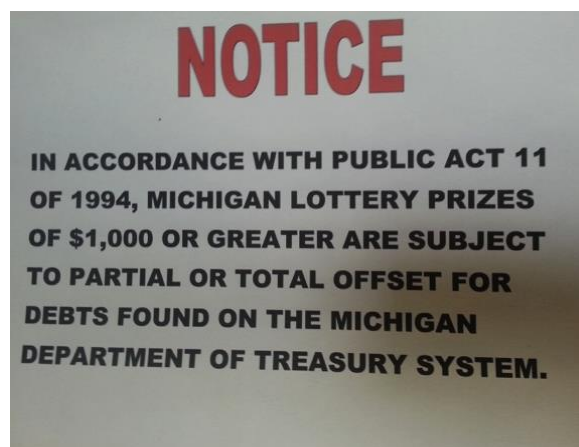


Valerie Kaczor in 1985 with piles of lottery tickets.

Unlike Valerie Kaczor, Janice’s solution for her habit was to become a numbers writer, which allowed her to play numbers, and maintain her lifestyle for her and her children. While writing numbers she met people from all walks of life, and found that race, education, socio-economic status, religion, or upbringing did not influence whether a person played the numbers or not. Janice found that she also loved writing numbers. For her it allowed her to escape the

problems of everyday life. She indicated, “You had to have a brain to write numbers, you had to be focused.” Numbers writing allowed her to put everything else out of her mind in order to accomplish all the tasks it took to successfully write the numbers. It also allowed her to meet fascinating people and gave her a chance to live a colorful life.

Janice has hit the numbers many times; the most was for \$3,000. She found it impossible to tell how many times she has won. She recalled at times she has hit or won every week for a period of time. These wins were three digit bets that she boxed. She feels she hits often, but not for much money. Janice also knows that she has lost more than she has won over the years. When she wins she always buys something that she wants, and gives 10% of her winnings to God. Janice found that when she worked in the plant, about 75% to 80% of the people in the plant played the numbers. They played because if they hit, the winnings tended to allow them to buy little things outside of what their paycheck would allow them. Most play illegal numbers because the payout is higher, and it allowed them to avoid taxes and other financial obligations such as court order default judgments and child support. Janice sees the illegal numbers as a dying art, and she hates to see it come to an end.



Notice posted in Michigan Lottery office.



Janice's story shows not just who plays the numbers, but illustrates why people play. It is assumed that people simply play numbers to win money. "Simplistic answers are frequently offered in public debate, answers that disparage gamblers and suggest that gambling has no true positive value. It may be suggested that gambling is driven by a culturally degenerate craving for superficial entrainment, greed and materialism, a vain hope of getting rich without effort, irrational and distorted beliefs about the chances of winning, subclinical gambling addiction, and massive amounts of aggressive and deceptive advertising from gambling companies (Binde 2013:81). Social anthropologist Per Binde believes people have five motives for gambling. They are the dream of hitting the jackpot<sup>12</sup>, for social rewards<sup>13</sup>, intellectual challenge<sup>14</sup>, mood change<sup>15</sup>, or the chance of winning<sup>16</sup> (Binde 2013:84). I found that lottery players played for these reasons and for some it became a habit as well.

Historically playing the numbers "...gave pleasure to bettors, and from time to time it returned profits to the black community" (Fabian 1990:136). In addition, Janice felt it is human nature to anticipate the future, control fate and influence chance, and numbers gambling is one vehicle that allows the opportunity to engage in these practices. Lenore Lawson noted,

The flourishing 'numbers' business played an important role in the neighborhood because 'playing the numbers' was one of the ways neighborhood people tried to beat the odds. Many pennies, nickels and dimes were gambled in hopes of making a killing on a number of numbers. We all knew the 'numbers' man and often shielded him from the police because we considered the numbers man a friend if not a neighbor (Wylie 2008:26).

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<sup>12</sup> Binde found, "The dream of hitting the jackpot is the main motive for participating in lotteries and other games in which a small stake gives the chance to win huge sums of money" (2013:84). The player finds pleasure in fantasizing about hitting it big and becoming rich.

<sup>13</sup> Social rewards allow people the opportunity to get together and socialize, compete, or be ostentatious (Binde 2013:85).

<sup>14</sup> Some gambler may increase their knowledge or skill for whatever game they play in an effort to increase their chances of winning (Binde 2013:86).

<sup>15</sup> Gambling has the power to change the affective and emotional mood of players. Players can experience excitement, become relaxed, or experience pleasure (Binde 2013:86).

<sup>16</sup> Binde found the chance of winning was the core reason people gambled and is found in all forms of gambling. The dream of hitting the jackpot, social rewards, intellectual challenge, and mood change are optional motives.

At 63 years of age, “Harriet” a lifelong Detroit, hailing from the east side plays numbers because it is a mood changer or gives her pleasure.<sup>17</sup> She enjoys following a hunch or life event, connecting it with a number and playing it. For example, on the day Harriet told her story to me, she had just attended a funeral of a young woman who grew up with her son. Coincidentally, the deceased woman shared the same birthday, November 21st with her son. To her, this was a sign and on a hunch she played the number “1121.” Harriet began playing numbers in her twenties, and soon began writing them, like Janice, as a way to pay for playing them. She has always preferred the illegal or street numbers because they allow you to wager as little as a penny, nickel, dime or quarter. In the mid-seventies, it was not unusual for Harriet to write \$40 to \$50 a day in numbers from customers at her job at the Board of Education. The most Harriet has ever hit for was \$2,500, and in early 2000 she stopped playing the illegal numbers after her car was impounded by police for making four dollars’ worth of bets for an aunt. As she told it, for years, customers had been making numbers bets at a neighborhood restaurant. At one time the restaurant had been a social staple of the community. In addition to being a front for numbers gambling, it sold candy to the neighborhood children, and was a gathering spot for the seniors for morning coffee, reading of newspapers, and gossiping. The restaurant was known for its delicious Sunday breakfast, but like other areas of the city, by 2000 it had fallen on hard times, and simply served as a meeting spot for the seniors. When the seniors met they would frequently discuss times past, and often conversation would turn to the prejudice they all had to face from a variety of sources. Many of the seniors refused to play the state sanctioned lottery because they felt as if the lottery belonged to black people who for years ran and patronized the illegal numbers. It was the illegal numbers that had offered entertainment and a chance at hitting it big, long before the state decided numbers was not illegal or immoral. It was the illegal

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<sup>17</sup> Harriet was interviewed August 29, 2012.

numbers that supported the neighborhoods; unlike the state lottery which they felt did nothing. The police for years had never bothered the patrons who played numbers, because as Harriet remembered, a lot of the officers played numbers for a nickel and hit for \$25. For many, the \$25 meant food on the table. A new police officer, without any ties to the community decided to end the activity at the restaurant, and it was then Harriet's car was impounded. Laughing, she said, "that four dollar bet cost me \$1,100," the cost to get her car out of impound. From that day on, Harriet only played the state sanctioned lottery.

The "Corporal" at 52 years of age has been in law enforcement for 30 years. He has played the numbers for 31 years. The first year he played illegal numbers, but once he got into law enforcement, he only played the legal lottery. The Corporal was enticed into playing the numbers by family and friends. He, like Harriet, plays because it is fun, but it has also become a habit for him. He plays every day, preferring the three-digit, and plays \$10 a day (interview with author, September 9, 2012). "Shelly" who moved to Detroit in 1971, plays the numbers for the pleasure it brings her, social rewards, for the chance of winning, and because it has become a habit. She began playing the illegal numbers in the early 80s because it allowed her to play for just a nickel if she wanted, and paid out more than the state lottery. Shelly played dime bets every day from a neighbor who lived across the street. She trusted her neighbor and in addition to playing her numbers looked forward to the neighborhood gossip her numbers writer would bring. Because she played dime bets, a hit for her meant \$50, and she often hit every other week. Shelly played the street numbers with her neighbor up until the neighbor died, thus forcing her to play the state lottery. Since playing with the state lottery, Shelly indicated she does not hit for \$50, rather, her hits are just for \$41, and does not come as often. In other words, street numbers paid more than the state sanctioned lottery, and Shelley felt she hit more often with street

numbers than with the state. She hit more often with the street lottery because she could place more bets. For example, Shelly could make five bets for fifty cents on the street, but could only make one fifty cent bet with the legal state lottery. For her, her neighbor's death meant the end of a valued friendship and neighborhood institution (interview with author, August 30, 2012).

For "Grandma" who moved to Detroit as a teenager in 1951 to live with her aunt, numbers holds a special place in her heart. Grandma's aunt played and wrote numbers, as did a man who later became the godfather to her son, and became her son's namesake. Grandma as part of neighborhood life (social rewards) played the numbers with neighbors and friends. One day in 1959, her aunt asked her to pick up her numbers for her because she was busy preparing dinner for her husband. Grandma had done this in the past and knew where to go in the neighborhood and what to do. At one location she went to pick up the bet from a woman, and the woman was out. In her place was her son who had just returned from the Army. Grandma remembered he was shaving, and became taken with her. From that day on, whenever Grandma would pick up the numbers from his mother, he would meet her at the door and tell her he was going to marry her. They began to date, and did in fact get married that year. Grandma likes to say she played the numbers for many years and won often, but her biggest prize was her husband (interview with author, November 16, 2012).

Who plays the numbers? Anyone. This chapter shows that numbers gambling goes beyond race, education, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, or upbringing. It is not a black activity. People are motivated to gamble for five different reasons, and are not mindless participants in playing. Numbers gambling allows people to socialize, experience pleasure, excitement, and even stimulates them intellectually. As Valerie Kaczor's story shows, there is a down side to numbers gambling as well. Kaczor's tale demonstrates a huge difference in illegal

numbers gambling and the state's legal lottery. The state lottery is not constructed to know the people who play its games. As such, people like Kaczor cannot be prevented from overindulgence. Not to say that all illegal numbers operators would have prevented her destruction, but according to Big Will and Francis Childress, they knew their customers. This intimate knowledge of their customers would have prevented them from accepting bets that would have caused their players to be unable to meet their financial responsibilities. Again this reflected numbers gambling's social bond with its players.

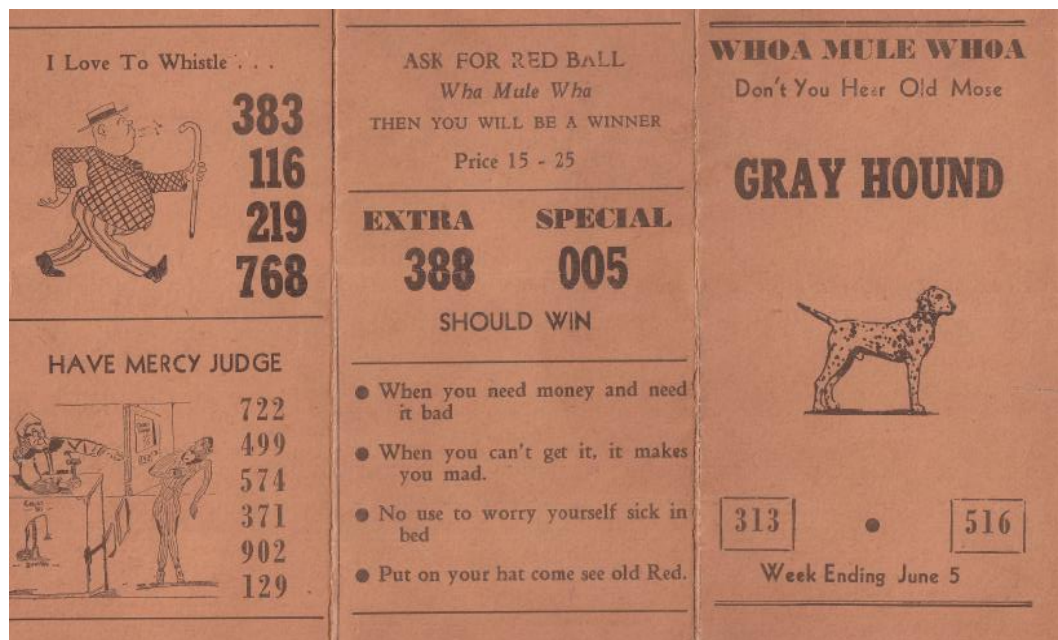
## CHAPTER 16 “CHOOSING YOUR NUMBER: SCIENCE VERSUS THE SUPERNATURAL”

How people choose the numbers they wager, in itself, is interesting, at times simple and other times complex. Some players let chance determine their numbers, others rely on scientific methods, and finally some turn to the supernatural. This chapter will focus on how people determine what numbers they play, and what meaning (if any) these numbers have to them.


For some people the numbers they play hold no significance. These numbers can be computer-generated. For example, one Detroit woman let the computer pick her numbers.

“How do those balls they use know when your birthday is or what your telephone number is?”, she said while waiting in line for a ticket. But when she got to the front of the line she let three people go ahead of her until it was 9:35 a.m. She always lets the computer pick her at exactly 9:35 a.m. “That’s when I was born. It worked once” (Lopez 1989:2C).

Another random method includes the use of tip sheets. Tip sheets are sheets listing various numbers, which the publisher generated and recommends the players play.



The front of the Gray Hound Tip Sheet from the 1940s.

Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
762	<b>721</b>	495	763 4		9 362	881	<b>452</b>	824
683	<b>561</b>	128	847 0		5 034	306	<b>299</b>	591
094		239	541 2		7 791	115		026

Folks, you can find more to say I told you so.


After you are kicked by a so-called lame horse.

They tell you in a minute he won't hurt you if you feed him sugar. But when he kicks hell out of you They have an excuse by saying you didn't hold it right

They knew in front that the horse was a bad actor.

You got what they wanted you to get—a good swift kick.

**Don't Balk - Long Overdue**

107		831
462		085
782		249
609		421
761	916	809 974

**1 - 2 - 3 Races**


394	<b>458</b>	742
583	<b>104</b>	569
316		250

**3 - 5 - 7 Races**

432	<b>079</b>	744
132	<b>723</b>	189
465		077

The back of the Gray Hound Tip Sheet from the 1940s.

**HYENA**  
LOOK IN YOUR GREEN SHEET REMANAC. PAGE 37. FOR COIN NUMBERS.




**Look!**


7 4 0  
9 6 2

**Today Is The Day**

515  
012  
328  
493



**329  
820**




**The Gold Pot**

639

**ALL FOR YOU**

632  
564  
867



**Birthday Specials**

April 17 -- 660  
April 18 -- 700  
April 20 -- 736  
April 21 -- 068  
April 22 -- 499  
April 23 -- 340

**777 300**

**489 566 837**

**BUY BONDS BUY BONDS**

Tip Sheets from 1950s.

“Hunch players will take anything with a number written on it as a source of inspiration” (Carlisle 1970a:6C). Hunch players live by the credo, “take a hunch and bet a bunch.” During

Let us have both that right makes might and in that both let us to the end close to do our duty as we understand it.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

**NUMEROLOGY**

668 712 352

**SPORTS REVIEW POLICY**  
This paper was compiled and published for owners must only and NOT as an endorsement or aid in gambling.

**SPORTS REVIEW**  
WEEKLY GREEN SHEET 15c

NO. 17 WEEK ENDING APRIL 23, 1953 ESTABLISHED 1936

**TITLE FIGHT SITE STAYS, SAYS WELLS**

New York—Rocky Marciano is going to fight in Chicago May 18 and if Jersey Joe doesn't want another crack at the heavyweight title he better be on hand.

That's the word from Al Wells, Marciano's manager, who said that if Jersey Joe doesn't want to show up, Rocky is willing to take on Roland La Starza at Eastern Chatham.

Wells also declared:

1. "The fight ain't moving out of Chicago."
2. "Rocky definitely is going to fight May 18."
3. "It'll be a sellout, maybe \$700,000 gross."
4. "Rocky is getting 20 per cent of everything — television, movies and those new three-colored dimension pictures."

Wells said he just wanted to "get the champions until he died."

**Baseball Special**

933

**WHIRLWAY HAD COLOR AND THAT MADE HIM A FAVORITE OF ALL RACING FANS**

New York — Whirlway is gone but it will be a long, long time before "Mr. Longtail" is forgotten.

For Whirlway was a horse of the people, such a one as Max O'War, Entomologist and Comet Fleet. Such a one as Native Dancer currently promises to become.

He had glamour.

That's an indelible something, which works in horses, just as it does in men. Who sees like this should see dozens of their rightful glory because of a racing track and quiet nature, which for lack of better words, is set down as "holistic."

**OFFICIAL WEEKLY RESULTS**

Date	3-4-5 Race	6-7-8 Race
APRIL 10	976	624
APRIL 11	384	485
APRIL 13	950	098
APRIL 14	140	086
APRIL 15	433	315
APRIL 16	382	277

Watch For The Sports Review Every Week

**MONTHLY SPECIALS**

823 ☆ 219

**MONTHLY SPECIALS**

300 ☆ 638

**643**

**Astrology Specials**

107  
833

APRIL 1953						
S	A	M	W	T	F	S
-	-	-	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-

the 1930s, it was not uncommon for black numbers players to play Joe Louis' weight. It was discovered that at one time the telephone numbers that were broadcast on the popular Amos 'n Andy radio show were heavily played as well. As previously told, Big Will won \$85,000 when he played the number that was printed on his laundry ticket on a hunch. Hunches can be found anywhere from license plate numbers, to traffic tickets, or change owed at a cash register. "Playing the numbers each day means thinking about numbers all the time. The number on a dry cleaning slip. A bill from a restaurant. The number of pages in a book. Things that people who don't play the numbers take for granted are very important to people who play" (Ricke 1972a:7A). Hunch players can take an unusual event, which occurred to them, look it up in a dream book and play it. For example, Harriet told of a time when a neighborhood couple had a loud fight. She went to her trusty dream book, looked up the number that corresponded with fighting, and played it.

## GOT A HUNCH?



**Play the Daily**

**MICHIGAN STATE  LOTTERY**

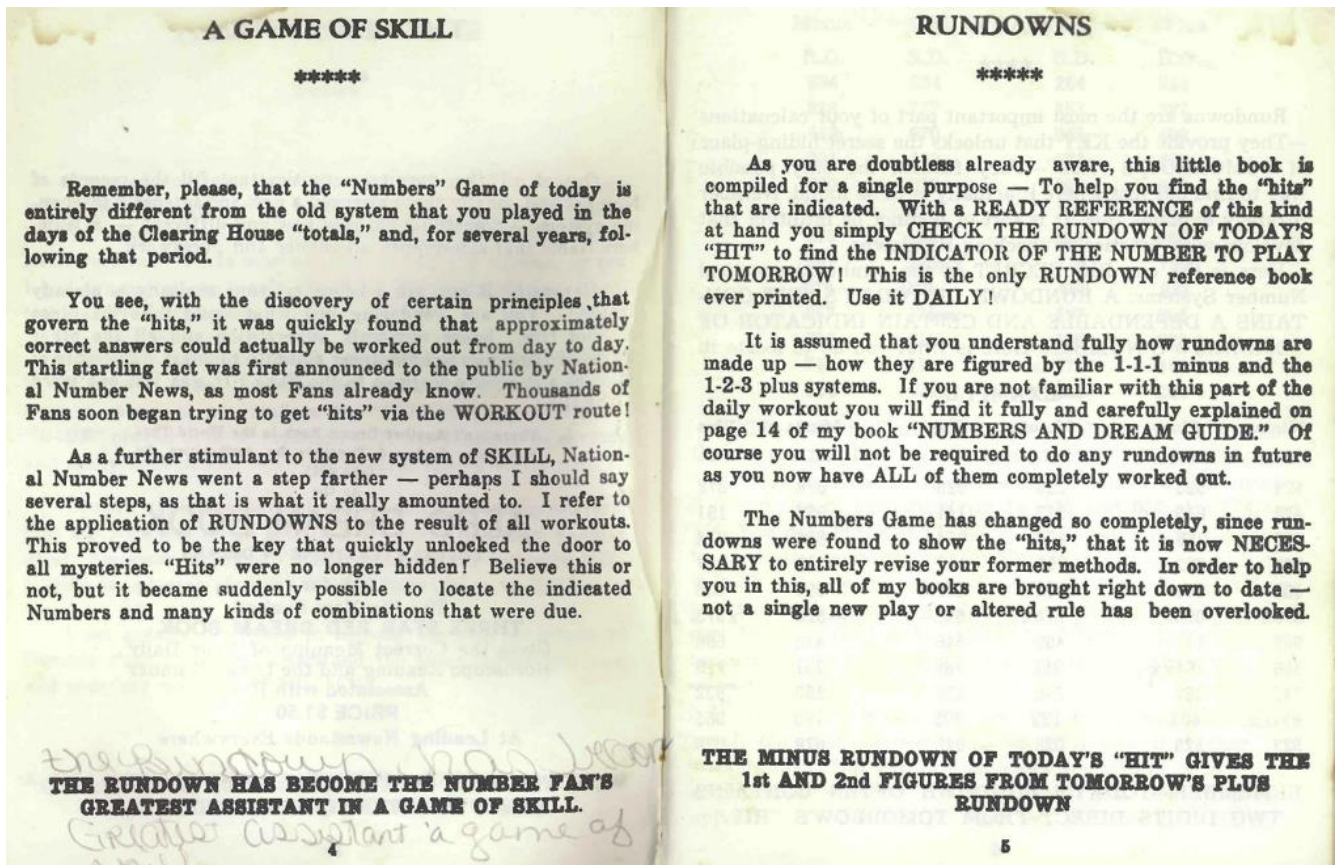
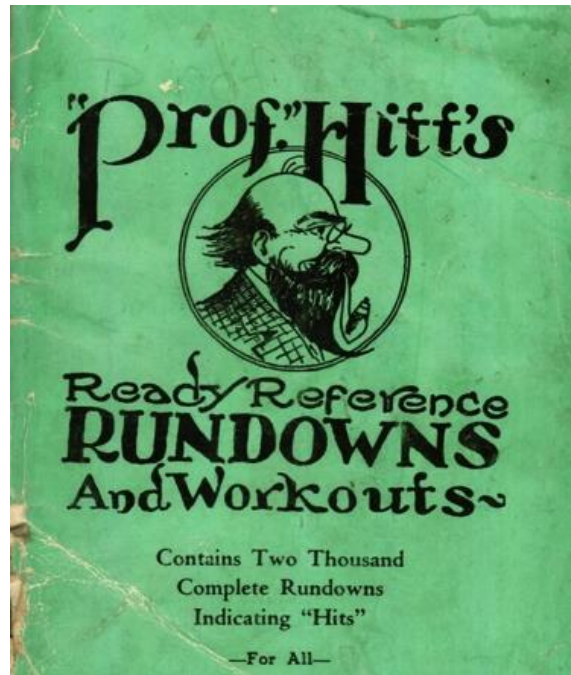
Ad used by the Michigan State Lottery in 1977.



Some players play “special numbers.” Special numbers can be any number that has special significance to the player. It could be a birth date, death date, birth weight, graduation, or anniversary date. These special meaning numbers are commonly played for years. “Numbers and combinations of numbers derived from lucky situations are much more powerful, have more of what the anthropologists call mana, than ordinary run-of-the-mill, garden-variety numbers” (Drake and Cayton 1945:474). For one player, the “Commander,” a retired Detroit Police officer, who played the numbers to keep his mind occupied, his special numbers told who he was. Over the years those special numbers have always been his first badge number, the day he graduated from the police academy, his children’s birthdays and his birthday (interview with author, November 18, 2012). The Commander believes that constantly playing his special number is the best way to play versus frequently playing different numbers. He does not expect to ever “hit it big” because he knows it is a game of chance, but he ensures he plays his numbers every day. After all, he never wants to miss his special number “falling.”

A number of players have what they call scientific systems for picking their numbers. Some track winning numbers over periods of time (usually a year), and look for patterns. Others follow various people’s so-called scientific, tried and true systems for predicting winning numbers. By studying these patterns, they feel they can predict when numbers are due to fall. A popular system was devised by “Prof. Hitt” during the 1970s. According to Prof. Hitt’s rundowns and workouts system, his method was foolproof and took all of the chance and guesswork out of playing the numbers. He was able to develop his system by studying the law of averages, and “certain principles that govern hits” (Prof Hitt n.d.:4). His system was based on the “1-1-1 minus and the 1-2-3 plus system” (Prof Hitt n.d.:5). In other words, whatever number hit on a given day, the next day the winning number would often be two digits different than the

day before. If a winning number one day was "523" and the minus system used, a player should then play "412." If a player chooses the plus system, they would instead play "646."



**STRATEGY**

\*\*\*\*

Rundowns are the most important part of your calculations —They provide the KEY that unlocks the secret hiding-place of TOMORROW'S "HIT"—They furnish the only possible way to find out just where it actually is to be found. Number Strategy explains this. It is sort of instinct or intuition that develops with practice in checking Rundowns.

Here is the one BIG SECRET of the combined practical Number Systems: A RUNDOWN OF TODAY'S "HIT CONTAINS A DEPENDABLE AND CERTAIN INDICATOR OF TOMORROW'S NUMBER. Here is what you do to locate it.

—EXAMPLE—

Minus	Plus	Minus	Plus	Minus	Plus
R.D.	R.D.	R.D.	R.D.	R.D.	R.D.
523	523	028	028	078	078
412	646	917	141	967	191
301	769	806	264	856	214
290	882	795	387	745	337
189	905	684	400	634	450
078x	028x	573x	523	—523	x573
967	141	462	646	412	696
856	264xx	351	769	201	719
745	387	240	882	290	832
634xx	400	139	905	189	955
523	523	028	028	078	078

REMEMBER—TODAY'S RUNDOWN OFTEN CONTAINS TWO DIGITS DIRECT FROM TOMORROW'S "HIT."

6

Minus	Plus	Minus	Plus
R.D.	R.D.	R.D.	R.D.
634	634	264	264
523	757	153	387
412	870	042	400
301	993	931c	523
290	016	820	646
189	139c	719	769
078	252	608	882
967	375xx	719	769
078	252	608	882
967	375xx	597	905
856	498	486	028
745	511	xx375	141
634	634	264	264

NOTE—523 "hit" in 357 Races on March 1, to find the next days plays you check the 523 in both rundowns to locate the indicators. Indicators are numbers which contain 2 like digits in each rundown i.e. 078 and 028 also 634 and 264. You now check the 078 and 028 through both rundowns to locate the numbers that appear alike in them, in this case it is 573. You do the same with 634 and 264 and find 375 appears in both rundowns. Results the correct "hit" the next day March 2, 1950 was 375. Special note—when there are more than one pair of indicators to start with you use both of them for best results.

However in this case the results were almost alike in as much one was in combinations (573) and the other one straight (375.) But still in some cases you will have to rely on combination numbers for your plays if a straight doesn't appear i.e. 139-c and 931-c. Now lets get some nice "HITS"!!

7

The Corporal claimed to use a research system for how he played his numbers, but declined to explain exactly what system he used. Whatever system he used, he felt worked, and it with luck was the reason he won often. The Corporal did not realize the contradiction of how he chose his numbers. On the one hand he felt that a scientific system and research guided him to his winning numbers, but then he credited luck with also having a hand in his fortune.

The odds in correctly choosing the lottery's three-digit number are 1,000 to 1. With these steep odds, some relied on a higher power like religion or luck to help them. The belief is that by relying on the supernatural (religion or luck) one can influence their gambling fortune. Bronsilaw Malinowski in his study of Trobriand deep-sea fishers found that they, like some numbers gamblers, used elaborate magical ritual to ensure safety and good fishing results. Based on this Malinowski believed there was a relationship between magic and uncertainty.

We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range. We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes...magic supplies primitive man with a firm belief in his power of succeeding; it provides him also with a definite mental and pragmatic technique wherever his ordinary means fail him (Malinowski 1926:82).

Tied into magic is the notion of luck. Anthropologists Richard Felson and George Gmelch found, “people believe that unknown forces – “good luck” and “bad luck” – play a role in the outcome of events and that these forces can be manipulated by magic (1979:587).

It is believed that the word “luck” originated as a gambling term. Luck can be described as a power that brings good fortune or favor (Eidinow 2011:4). Luck is “...the force at the core of the cosmos that governs chance events, that can be sometimes conjured but never coerced” (Lears 2003:7). Although some like to classify luck as evidence of being irrational, superstitious, or ignorant, it has been noted it actually “operates to overcome the uncertainty of the gambling situation” (Reith 1999:12). Historically, the notion of luck flies in the face of the Protestant work ethic, the notion that success comes from effort and talent. This notion is one that Americans have prided themselves on. Jackson Lears found that America has two very different narratives as it pertains to luck and they are at odds with one another. The first notion was that America was founded by “speculative confidence” men who as heroes took chances to successfully establish the country (Lears 2003:3). In this instance luck matters and “net worth” has nothing to do with “moral worth” (Lears 2003:3). The second narrative paints the hero as a self-made man, who becomes successful through hard work and discipline. In this narrative the assumption is our world is one where “earthly rewards match ethical merits” and there is no need for luck (Lears 2003:3).

Luck and numbers gambling tend to go hand in hand. When Janice fell into a losing streak, she felt she was “unlucky” and had to do something to regain her luck. Her remedy was to burn candles that patronized her lucky saints, Saint Michael to ward off evil, and Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. Hermus Millsap, the Michigan Lottery’s first million-dollar winner in 1973, credited his lucky rabbit’s foot for his winning the jackpot.



Hermus Millsap on February 22, 1973 holding his lucky rabbit’s foot.

Numbers can also come from fortune cookies, candles, incense, or oils. For years these products and services have gone hand in hand with numbers gambling. For 43 years, LaMaar McQueen made a living selling lucky incense, oils, candles and dream books in Detroit. In 1929, he opened his first store, McQueen Novelty Company, selling his wares “on Hastings, in the heart of Detroit’s first black ghetto. He moved to Brush street in 1934 and had been on one corner or another there ever since (Ricke 1972a:7A). In 1949, he was arrested on the charges of possession of gambling paraphernalia and the publication and distribution of gambling information. With his arrest the Detroit police seized \$40,000 worth of merchandise to include

2,700 candles, 168 bottle of Chinese wash, 1375 small bottles of oil, 5,521 boxes of incense, 1,420 dream books, 301 candlesticks, 7,825 mutuel tip sheets, and 1780 mutuel tip cards (Afro American 1949:9). In spite of this arrest and seizure of his merchandise, he was still operating his store more than 20 years later. His store in 1972 sold 30 kinds of special candles, 35 lucky skin oils, and about 45 incenses that were supposed to bring luck to numbers players (Ricke 1972a:7A).

In 1963, George McCall discussed this reliance on a higher power to help players' chose their numbers. McCall found that players in the numbers racket frequently relied on Hoodoo for guidance.<sup>18</sup> He noted,

[...] hoodoo has been assimilated to the bewildering variety of store-front spiritualist churches in its truly religious aspects, leaving a heavy residue of sorcery and fetishism as the remaining native elements. As with sorcery among other peoples, the major foci of hoodoo sorcery lie in the realms of health, love, economic success, and interpersonal power. In all these cases, hoodoo doctors – after careful spiritual “reading” of the client – prescribe courses of action (which always include some hoodoo ritual) and gladly sell him the charms, potions, and amulets the ritual requires...All of these artifacts (among others) are associated with attempts to secure simple good luck in gambling. Another set is employed in the more interesting and important process of *divination* – specifically, in the attempt to supernaturally divine the specific three-digit number that will prove to be the winning combination on a given day (McCall 1963:365-366).

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<sup>18</sup> “Hoodoo represents the syncretistic blend of Christian and Nigritic religious traditions in the United States, corresponding to *vodun* (“voodoo”) and *obeah* in Haiti, *shango* in Trinidad, *candomble* and *macumba* in Brazil, *santeria* in Cuba, and *cumina* in Jamaica. In twentieth century hoodoo, however, Catholic elements are less prominent than in the other variants, and Nigritic collective rituals have largely disappeared” (McCall 1963:364-365).



Anthropologist Per Binde noted, “It is argued that gambling and religion have certain elements in common: notions of the unknown, mystery, and fate, as well as imagery of suddenly receiving something of great value that changes life for the better” (Binde 2007:145).

For some people, playing the numbers is taken on the trappings, and to a degree the feeling of religion, a mercenary kind of faith that breeds an odd kind of ritual...But there are many more places to find help in picking a number, and one of the most important is church. Whenever a minister selects a Bible verse to contemplate or read aloud, he is also inadvertently providing a number – Matthew, Chapter 5, Verse 17...517. Whenever he hangs a hymn number on the wall, he is doing the same thing. A Detroit Baptist minister spoke from the pulpit years ago about all that, and his words are now folklore: “I know some of you are taking the numbers of our hymns and betting on them,” he intoned. “I’m not saying whether I approve or not, but if you play them...be sure and box’em” (Ricke 1972a:7A).

Self-proclaimed prophets, mediums, and spiritualists would advertise in black newspapers a variety of services to include numerology. Spiritualists were doing brisk business in 1928 one paper reported,

Almost every week there springs up in a different street a spiritualist who sells numbers to policy players that are sure to ‘come out’ in one to five days. The purchasers dare not, under penalty of losing their luck, show them to anyone but the policy writer. The prospective buyer is asked to “cut” a deck of cards; if a red card is turned up, the luck is bad, and no numbers will be sold him that day. They go in droves sometimes waiting in line, two and three deep. The law is evaded under guise of giving spiritual advice free, as no charge is made for the numbers, but each customer must toss a quarter over his left shoulder as he passes out. This of course, adds to the customer’s luck and to the spiritual adviser’s wealth (Pittsburgh Courier 1928:12).

Due to its association with the numbers racket it was estimated in 1940 that millions were being made in Detroit and other northern black areas from such businesses (McCall 1963:365).

Detroit Bishop Wallace Robinson, of the Alpha and Omega Spiritualist Church in July of 1948 gave the number “711” to listeners on his radio program. Robinson came to Detroit when he was 14 years old and founded the church with his wife in 1932. In 1939, he became the first Detroit minister to broadcast services over the air, and became the city’s top church program



(Atlanta Daily World 1952:4). He later advised an undercover police officer that for \$10 he would give him “a bit of luck with them evil numbers” (Detroit Tribune 1948a:1). The undercover officer stood in a long line at Bishop’s church located at 446 Holbrook on Detroit’s east side to get his number. The officer was number 15 in line with other “anxious numbers players seeking cures for their “bad luck,” and a tip on the next day’s number” (Afro- American 1948:A2). By pure coincidence, “711” did fall, numbers operations were hit hard, and the all-seeing and knowing bishop was promptly arrested and jailed for a numbers charge (Detroit Tribune 1948a:1). Ten years later, a woman cashed her welfare check and went to see Prophet Ernest Swain, a five foot one, 120 pound, goateed, fortune teller. Upon meeting him she promptly paid a \$25 consultation fee. Once paid, the prophet rubbed his beard and told the woman he could not give her a number to play, but advised her to instead consult her Bible (the book of Psalms, the third Psalm, first chapter, fifth verse) (Detroit Tribune 1958:1). In other words, he advised her to play “315.” She did and failed to win. In spite of this, she returned to the prophet who told her she lost because she was not “penitent” and not in the correct spiritual mood. He gave her a second number, “978” from the ninth Psalm, seventh chapter, and eighth verse to play. Again she played the number and lost; frustrated she turned him in to police and like Bishop Robinson, he was promptly arrested (Detroit Tribune 1958:1). Janice like the above-described woman told of a time she went to a prophet who gave her a number to play. Like the woman she had no luck with the number given, and never returned to a prophet or spiritualist for divine inspiration when it came to selecting her lucky numbers.

In Detroit there were many prophets and ministers who sold numbers to their parishioners, but Prophet James Jones arguably was the richest and best known. Prophet Jones was from Alabama, and claimed as a six-year-old boy to have been called to preach by God.

Jones came to Detroit an unknown in 1938, but within six years gained popularity. He would go on to be the head of Triumph, the Church and Kingdom, and later the Dominion Ruler of the Church of the Universal Triumph (Boykin 1944:1). Jones, who was tall and slim in the 1940s and 1950s, was known for his gold tooth, elaborate wardrobe of 200 suits, \$12,000 white mink coat, and over the top jewelry, which included an enormous Topaz earring he wore in his left ear. Prophet Jones wore a robe valued at \$20,000 while preaching to his flock, for which he bestowed royal titles such as “lady”, “lord”, “sir”, “princess”, and “prince” (Boykin 1944:2). He lived in two mansions that he called his castles in the most affluent parts of Detroit. Prophet Jones was able to live such an ostentatious lifestyle because members of his church were generous and regularly bestowed monetary gifts upon him for his so-called healing powers and life changing prophecies (Boykin 1944:2). Prophet Jones charged people to receive advice, blessings, and special numbers to play in the illegal numbers game. The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit has an exhibit featuring a barbershop from Detroit’s Black Bottom. The exhibit tells visitors of Prophet Jones’ advice and numbers lines. Patrons could get into Jones’ \$5 line for 30 seconds, \$10 line for one minute or in the \$20 line to receive numbers or advice. Jones had a radio program, which aired on Sunday mornings and evenings and boasted 100,000 listeners. Jones’ radio sermons usually stressed patriotism, and every show was begun with the singing of the Star Spangled Banner and Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag (Boykin 1944:2). He told his followers if they obeyed his decrees, all men would become immortal in 2000 ending illness and death. His decrees mainly centered on popular held beliefs of the time that focused on issues of morality, health and cleanliness (Wylie 2008:76). In spite of these decrees, Prophet Jones sold numbers for numbers players to play. Prophet Jones’ wealth and over the top beliefs were featured in *Jet*, *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Saturday Evening*

Post. Not everyone was taken in by Prophet Jones, and many of Detroit's elite found him to be a shyster who took advantage of the poor and superstitious. Prophet Jones was no stranger to law enforcement either. He was charged with gross indecency for allegedly attempting to engage a young male (who was really an undercover police officer) in a sexual act in 1956, and later in 1958 for possession of 860 numbers slips (Johnson 1958:A6). In spite of his troubles, many believed Jones could foresee the future and there are numerous tales of people hitting the numbers after receiving their lucky number from him.



Prophet Jones at his "castle" wearing his famous white mink coat in 1953.



The Rt. Rev. Dr. James (Prophet) Jones Dominion Ruler of the Church of the Universal Triumph in his throne at his Church in 1952.



Prophet Jones with follower giving blessing in 1961.

However, as late as 1989, it was reported by players that some Detroit pastors,

[...] at some neighborhood churches encourage members of their congregations to play the numbers as they make church contributions...preachers offering tips on numbers has been going on for years. So what? It's not illegal to suggest playing certain numbers on our legal state lottery is it? That could be considered contributing to the welfare of our schools (Bailey & Ankeny 1989:2B).

Some religions have denounced gambling as being sinful and goes against some religious doctrines. It has also been suggested that gambling competes with religion, and "cannot be tolerated because it provides a similar alternative to Christianity" (Fuller 1974:67). This could be seen when, Elder Charles Beck (Church of God) declared "war on numbers racketeer

preachers in Detroit” and declared that he was not “carrying on an illegal occupation by hiding behind the church as a screen” (Pittsburgh Courier 1953:3). Beck stated,

I don't give or sell numbers; I give no readings; I tell no fortunes, nor do I burn incense for so-called luck...I have only one thing to offer. That is success through the medium of prayer. It is the worst thing a preacher can do to lead people to the art of gambling, by selling them so-called lucky numbers or charms (Pittsburgh Courier 1953:3).

Some numbers players, while awake, hope to be successful in hitting the numbers and look to their unconscious dreams as a means to fulfill these wishes. Some numbers players believe that their dreams have meaning that can be translated with a dream book. Dream books serve “...as a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning, in accordance with a fixed key” (Strachey 1965:130). The Pharoah's Dream Book told its users that dreams were uniquely individual and personal. It advised, “The more vivid a dream is, the harder your subconscious brain is working on an idea and trying to tell you about it (Pharoah 1972:3). Users of the Pharoah dream book were further informed that doctors, psychiatrists and other scientists have found that emotions centering around love, sex, and hate are what mainly influences dreams, and are what the subconscious works on telling us through our dreams. By understanding themselves and with the successful interpretation of their dreams, readers were guaranteed a life full of money, power, and friendship (Pharoah 1972:6). Other numbers players believe their dreams have religious connotations and are a sign or message from God, given to them to help guide them in gaining riches or a blessing. “...gamblers participate in a long western tradition originating in the classical world in which numbers were perceived as the intermediary through which earthly and divine, or mortal and immortal, communicated with each other” (Cassirer 1953:144). When discussing dreams a woman noted they are “a divine source of information. It's God talking to you...our subconsciouses are attached to something

greater (Shafton 2002:102). People have faith in their dreams, and based on this faith will play numbers that correspond to their dreams.

Tied to dreams are dream books. Dream books in the United States date back to 1862, and were first popular among whites from Eastern Europe (Shafton 2002:74). Anthony Comstock, a reformer found in 1883 that policy houses were fodder for the superstitious. He noted, “The negro dreams a dream, the Irishman or woman has a ‘presintiment,’ and the German a vision, and each rushes to the ‘dream-book,’ kept in every policy-den, to see what number the dream or vision calls for” (Comstock 1883:77). Once again, dream books like numbers gambling, were used to paint minorities as ignorant and superstitious. By the early 1900s, dream books marketed for blacks, like “Old Aunt Dinah’s” and “Aunt Sally’s Policy Players” began to appear on the market. The cover of these books featured old and wise looking black women advertising the washwoman’s row or “4-11-44.”



Dream Books from the early 1900s.

As one white magazine writer wrote, “Dreams are very popular among Negro players as a means of determining the number to be bet on and books interpreting dreams in terms of figures are best sellers in darky districts” (Mellen 1936:21). The books were simple to use; a player merely looked up a key word that corresponded with their dream or other significant event in their life. For example, if a person dreamt of dogs, in policy playing the number that corresponded to dog in Old Aunt Dinah’s dream book was “73.” However, in “The Original Three Wise Men Dream Book” dog corresponded to “616.” Every dream book was different, thus numbers assigned were commonly not the same. This inconsistency in dream books did not faze users. One user noted, “Well honey, some books works good fo’ some people, ‘n others works good fo’ other ones. You jus’ needs advice about which one’ll work fo’ you” (McCall 1963:366). The number in dream books were so popular that a number of songs about playing the numbers used the numbers in their lyrics. For example, Arthur “Blind” Blake in 1930 wrote and sang a blues song called *Playing Policy Blues*. In the song he talks of dreaming and playing the numbers that correspond to his dream.

Numbers, numbers 'bout to drive me mad  
 Numbers, numbers 'bout to drive me mad  
 Thinking about the money that I should have had  
 I dreamed last night the woman I loved was dead  
 I dreamed last night the woman I loved was dead  
 If I'd have played the Dead Row I'd have come out ahead  
 I acted the fool and played on 3, 6, 9  
 I acted the fool and played on 3, 6, 9  
 Lost my money and that gal of mine  
 I played on Clearing-House, couldn't make the grade  
 I played on Clearing-House, couldn't make the grade  
 Lord, thinking of the money that I should have made  
 I begged my baby to let me in her door  
 I begged my baby let me in her door  
 Wanted to put my 25, 50, 75 in her 7, 17, 24  
 I want 15, 50, and 51  
 I want 15, 50, and 51  
 I'm gonna keep playing policy 'til some good luck come

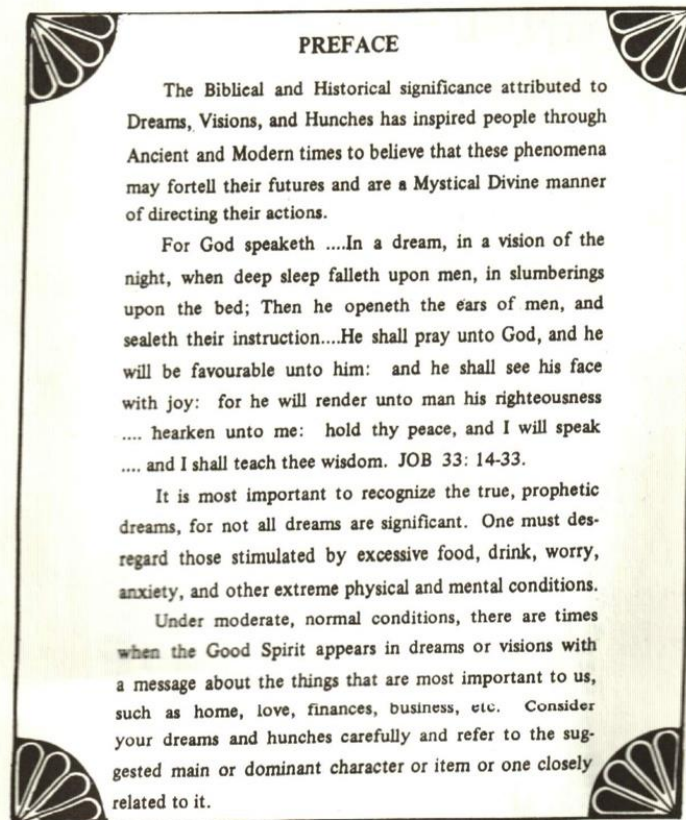
Blake also cleverly inserts numbers in place of words. He uses a sexual double entendre when he says he wants to put his “25, 50, 75 in her 7, 17, 24.” Depending on the dream book he could be saying he wants to put his phallic symbol into the woman’s yonic symbol, or that he simply wants to wash his underwear in the river or washtub. When he says he wants “15, 50, and 51,” in one dream book this could mean he wants to have sex with a colored woman in bed, or that he wants to make noise, sing, and dance (Yronwode n.d.).

It is not clear where the source of numbers from dream books were derived, although some authors claimed Biblical inspiration. Dream books tended to be authored by people who had sage or scientific names. For example, “The Original Three Wise Men Dream Book” was penned under the pseudonym Professor Zonite. In actuality, Zonite was Detroitier Mallory F. Banks. Banks copyrighted his dream book in 1933, and in the beginning of his dream book stated,

Since the beginning of time the human race has placed much importance and significance in dreams. Those of us who are familiar with Biblical History will recall the many events that were rendered in deference to dreams. The fact cannot be overlooked that dreams have always been a deciding factor for good or evil in the World’s History (Zonite 1940:1).

In addition to selling his dream books, Banks sold “Iramir Hit Perfume with free numbers,” and Jacob’s Ladder Incenses (Zonite 1940:1). In 1938, he sued eight numbers operators, to include John Roxborough, Everett Watson, Otis Sanders, Pete Kelley, Louis Weisberg, H.L. Bolar, Delbert Lee, and a John Doe in federal court for copyright infringement (Detroit Tribune 1940a:1). Banks had previously sent letters to each of the defendants warning them to cease plagiarizing the contents of his copyrighted book; however they refused (Afro-American 1938:2). H.L. Bolar was the owner of the Boar Publishing Company, Delbert Lee was a printer and Otis Sanders a jobber or small time wholesaler (Afro-American 1938:1). Banks claimed that

Sanders had been employed by the numbers men to print his book for free distribution to numbers players. Sanders had previously been a columnist for a Detroit newspaper (*Afro-American* 1938:2). The defendants admitted they had copied and distributed the dream book without permission, but argued that because the dream book was used for illegal numbers gambling they were exempt from paying Banks. This defense did not hold up in court, and two years later the eight defendants settled the lawsuit with Banks (*Detroit Tribune* 1940a:1).



From Skippy's Lucky Lottery Dream Book (1990)



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By Prof. Zonite

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Now try the Best.**

An Old Proverb Says  
That First You Don't Succeed, Try, Try Again.

This Fragrant Incense Will Make a Hit With You.  
Free Numbers by **Malene X**  
**PRICE 25 CENTS**  
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Will Not Send C.O.D.  
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THE ORIGINAL  
**THREE WISE MEN**  
— A REAL —  
**DREAM BOOK**  
1940 EDITION



By Prof. ZONITE

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**A Combination Dream Book**

**[YOUR HOROSCOPE GIVEN]**  
**ASTRO - NUMEROLOGY**

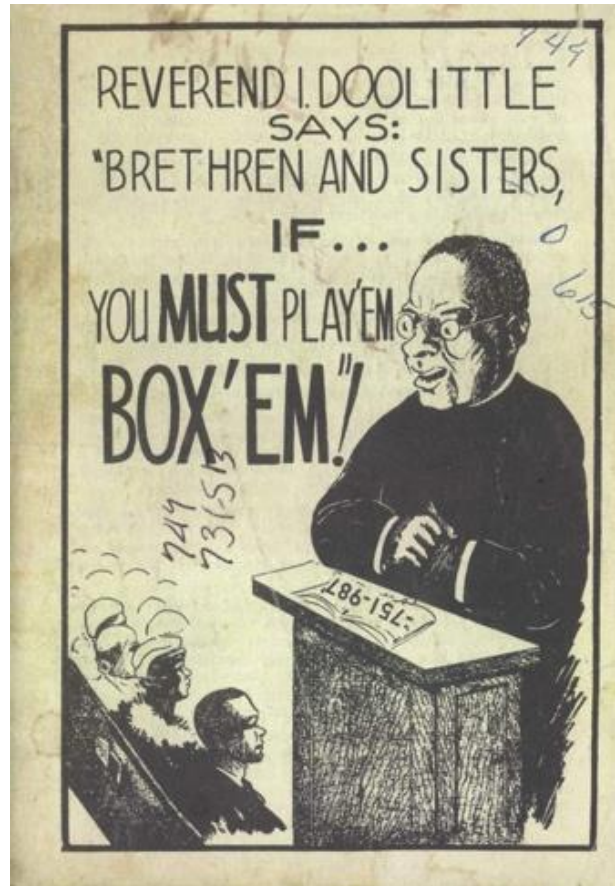
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25c to  
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Three Wise Men Dream Book from 1940.

The Kansas City Kitty Dream Book” advised its users on page 2,

What study could be more profitable than the science of Numerology? It is the key which unlocks many mysteries, and for thousands of years its influence has been well known. It is pure mathematics, there is no guesswork about it, and its work descended on us from a period so ancient as to be prehistoric. The word astrologer, is mentioned five times in the BIBLE-Hebrews found the art old in Egypt, when they began their sojourn there. We make our own destiny-what we sow, we reap-there is cause for every effect...Many numbers have been considered mystic and lucky, such as 3-7-9-11 etc., and of course 13 was rated ‘unlucky’, because there were thirteen people present on the occasion of the Last Supper. So read further through this book, to take advantage of facts which will influence YOUR future (Reverend I Doolittle, n.d:2).



Like Mallory Banks, dream book authors tended to offer multiple services to its users. H.G. Parris of New York, writing under the name of Professor Konje, in his “Lucky Star Dream Book,” told users, “When Luck comes your way make a sound investment in A Home for you and your family. Before purchasing, see me at once. I have real bargains, in private houses and apartment buildings in and out of the city” (Parris 1928:4).

Many of the dream books that were used in the early 1900s can still be found reprinted on the market today. Some have reprinted the books exactly as they were, but others have updated the books to reflect modern times. For example, you will not find references to cell phones in old dream books because at the time they were originally published they did not exist. Older dream books tend to capture what was going on at the time they were published. A dream book from 1940 provided numbers for various kinds of automobiles of the time. A number of the

automobiles are no longer manufactured like Nash, Packard, Pierce Arrow, Studebaker, Auburn, DeSoto, Hudson, and LaSalle. LaMaar McQueen carried almost every dream book published in his store in 1972. He noted, “Sure people still buy them...People been buying these for 40 years and they never change ‘em. They just put a new date on the cover” (Ricke 1972a:7A).

Pat Theodore, a middle-aged black man, in 1972 reported he had bet on the numbers everyday for 25 years. He along with his sister was a numbers runner in the sixties. He said, “I put more money into the numbers, than I got out of it, but I used to hit once in a while. The people who collect numbers are the heaviest players themselves because they have the money and they see people hitting everyday” (Ricke 1972a:1A). He reportedly won \$7,500 after having a dream about eggs.

I dreamed I was hungry and I went to the icebox and it was full of nothing but eggs. Eggs falling out all over the place. I looked up the number for eggs in the Three Wise Men and put \$15 on it and it hit. I couldn’t believe it. I had \$7,500. I went out and bought a new Pontiac car for cash. It had everything on it. Then I just kept the rest at home. A big stack of \$100 bills. Every time I wanted to party I’d take one or two of them and take off. I partied it away and lost my job while doing it, but I sure had a good time (Ricke 1972A:7A).

All informants interviewed for this project admitted to using dream books, and Janice indicated she felt some dream books reflected certain Bible verses. For Janice, it is only logical that dreams would be connected to numbers because she sees spirituality in both. As for the success of dream books, all informants reported varying degrees of success, but still use them to this day for guidance.

This chapter explored how players choose what numbers to play. It examined the importance of players’ beliefs in the supernatural and their attempt to construct scientific methods to predict winning numbers. For players, playing numbers and the methods they chose to pick them were rational. The methods they chose reflected their attempt to control or

manipulate the outcome. Supernatural means were used many years ago by primitive man, and are still being used as a viable strategy to manage uncertainty. The final chapter will discuss the gathered data via a number of theoretical frameworks.

## CHAPTER 17 “CONCLUSION”

*Aim Number One: To describe the history and formation of numbers gambling in neighborhoods on Detroit's east and west sides. The goal is to describe the organizational structure, daily routines, and activities of numbers gambling organizations.*

The history of numbers gambling in Detroit does not support the theory of ethnic succession. In his New York study, Ianni found that blacks took control of numbers gambling from Italians and the takeover was a form of social and economic mobility (1974:313-314). This economic mobility occurred in response to structural disadvantages that minorities in waves faced in which first the Irish, Jews, Italians, and finally blacks progressed in sequence. However this project has found that like Steffensmeir and Ulmer's 2006 sociological study, black numbers operators historically were the first and main numbers operators in Detroit after 1920. After 1940, blacks steadily lost control to white numbers operators. Conversely, blacks relinquishing control to whites occurred earlier in Detroit than in Steffensmeir and Ulmer's study. Their study traced this loss of control to the 1970s, but in Detroit it occurred in the mid-1940s. This study goes beyond the question of ethnic succession. It explores how historically numbers gambling was used to define what it meant to be black. In 1880 the Detroit press began associating numbers gambling with blacks and attributed it as a black activity. This occurred in spite of the fact that blacks made up a small portion of the population. This characterization of blacks in Detroit was not unusual at the time. Black Detroiters were already battling various forms of discrimination. To be black meant you played policy, and therefore were ignorant, superstitious, lowly, vicious, heathen, had no self-control, and lacked thriftiness. Numbers gambling was viewed by the ruling class as a way for the underserving to get something without the benefit of hard work. This was the attitude in Detroit when John Roxborough brought policy, and later numbers gambling, to the city after a dormant phase in 1920. As a black man in Detroit,

opportunities for Roxborough and other blacks were severely limited. However, Roxborough had resources that most blacks in Detroit at that time lacked; he came from a well-educated, middle class, prestigious black family. Although he was afforded the opportunity to go to college, he chose to use his talents in another way. Unlike other blacks, and even some whites, Roxborough, before becoming a numbers operator, had a “good government” job working at the United States Post Office Department and was not disadvantaged. This alone afforded him opportunities that the average poor black person never had; however, this opportunity did not allow him to use his education. Nor was it a viable way to achieve financial success. Roxborough viewed numbers gambling as an opportunity to help enrich himself and his race. In order to do this, Roxborough understood he would have to use an informal economic means to gain entrance into the formal economy. Roxborough had financial, social, and cultural capital, which helped him build numbers gambling in Detroit. He obtained cultural capital from the various numbers operators who taught him how to establish and operate his numbers organization.<sup>20</sup> These black number operators eventually established a network, the National Brotherhood of Policy Kings in 1933. The purpose was to pool power, offer protection and advice to all members on strategically running a numbers organization. This organization was based on other legal business associations and is another example of how the informal economy borrowed from the formal economy. John Roxborough was a prominent member, and the organization met annually in Cleveland, Ohio and Hot Springs, Arkansas, to ensure numbers gambling continued as a lucrative business. Roxborough’s social capital came from the fact he was a member of Detroit’s black elite, and came from a family that included a brother who had

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<sup>20</sup> Cultural capital has been defined as “stocks of relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and competencies that can serve as a “tool kit” for social action in a field” (Steffensmeier & Ulmer 2006:126).

political clout.<sup>21</sup> This added to his ability to operate without interference, and allowed for acceptance by the black community.

In contradiction to Ianni's study, Roxborough, Watson, and other black numbers operators had the resources to corrupt political and law enforcement officials. Because Roxborough's clients perceived him as being honest, they were loyal to him, and this loyalty led to a prosperous business. With his connections, Roxborough was able to build, grow, and maintain both his illicit business (numbers gambling) and his legitimate business (the founding of insurance companies and the managing of Joe Louis). In other words, money from numbers gambling in Detroit fueled the city's formal economy as well.

With the suicide of Janet MacDonald, increased scrutiny from law enforcement occurred resulting in Homer Ferguson's one-man grand jury and later the conviction of the two main black numbers operators in the city, Roxborough and Everett Watson, and a significant number of police and governmental officials. The sentencing of Roxborough and Watson to prison marked the beginning of the end of black control for the numbers game in Detroit. More importantly, their conviction revealed how some black Detroiters viewed numbers gambling and the men who operated the game. Many felt that although numbers gambling was illegal, it offered the poor the same chance to gamble as did the stock market for the rich, and it allowed blacks an opportunity at financial success in spite of discrimination. As time passed, blacks in Detroit further lost their foothold in numbers due to the aging of numbers operators who died or retired. When John White died in 1964, it marked the end of the celebrated and larger-than-life black numbers men in Detroit. This is when the Italian mafia took control of the numbers game. No longer did numbers operators live in or serve their customer's communities. A change in

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<sup>21</sup> Social capital has been defined as "the arrangement of human resources to improve flows of future income" (Ostrom 1994:227).

business structure and operations due to technological advances, coupled with the breakdown of neighborhoods caused by urban renewal, also eroded black operators' position in the numbers game. At one time numbers writers went door to door, but because of technology, numbers writers were able to take numbers over the phone and pickup men were able to use phones and later fax machines to conduct their business. What was once a very intimate relationship between a numbers writer and their clients, which took place over the exchange of pleasantries and gossip, began to be reduced to simply an impersonal business relationship conducted quickly via telephone. When the state legalized the lottery, it changed the perception concerning numbers gambling. No longer was numbers gambling a fraudulent evil played by black, ignorant, people; rather, it became a legitimate commodity. The narrative surrounding playing the numbers had to be changed, and the state of Michigan did just that appealing to non-black suburbanites, and ensuring lottery agents were strategically selected. At this point the lottery or the legal numbers was not about blackness. Competition from the legal numbers man or the state lottery was felt by many blacks to be the ultimate white take-over. When the state introduced first the three-digit and later the four-digit daily, this further spelled doom for black numbers operators in Detroit. However, once this occurred it by no means rendered the illegal numbers extinct. Instead, many black numbers operators kept loyal customers, and had a distinct customer base. For example, numbers gambling maintained a stronghold in Detroit area automotive plants due to the convenience and loyalty of players.

While Steffensmeir and Ulmer's 2006 study shares a number of similarities with this project, there are some differences. As previously stated, their study found the change from black control to white control occurred later in Detroit. The Steffensmeir and Ulmer study also found that black bettors did not display loyalty to black owned numbers operators. Blacks in



Detroit were different. At one point there were only black numbers operators, but when whites entered the numbers racket, they chose to continue to patronize blacks because they trusted them, and because the black operators were known as benefactors to the community. This was evident when Everett Watson was accused of running a dishonest numbers operation and he confidently told reporters the people on St. Antoine Street, his loyal customers, would not believe the allegations. John Roxborough was so respected and trusted, numbers players would play based on the word that “John Roxborough is banking this” (Cousins 1938:16). For example, Roxborough’s name was so trustworthy others in Port Huron, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario, instantly became successful numbers operators by telling customers that Roxborough was supporting their operations. Roxborough’s loyal customers felt safe playing with him and did not have to worry about having their winnings stolen. This loyalty eliminated competition from others. The loyalty to black numbers operators extended for many years even after the lottery was legalized because black Detroiters felt a sense of ownership. In an ironic twist, numbers gambling, which had originally been linked to blacks negatively was eventually embraced by blacks due to its positive economic and social benefits. The feeling was that for years it was a black game, operated by blacks who lived, worked, and built up black communities. An example of this was illustrated when “Shelly” told of the relationship she had with her trusted neighbor and numbers writer. Shelly played the numbers for dime bets with her neighbor until her neighbor died, forcing her to play with the state lottery. She trusted her numbers writer and patronized her because she was black and lived in her community. Big Will also had loyal customers and recalled the importance of having them. According to him he had many customers who played their numbers with him for over 30 years. It was the black numbers operators who provided not just entertainment, and employment, but a chance to win. Many

black Detroiters were loyal because they did not think it fair that at one point the state persecuted and vilified numbers operators, but years later legalized and legitimized the lottery for the benefit of the state. In doing this, some felt blacks were once again being wronged by white America.

*Aim Number Two: To determine why and how numbers gambling bonded and solidified neighborhoods in Detroit. The aim is to explore both the economic and social function of numbers gambling. The goal is to determine how numbers gambling as a form of economic exchange solidified social relationships.*

At the peak of numbers gambling, the city of Detroit was experiencing rapid change and turmoil. For blacks, issues of race were a reality that ruled their world. It did not matter how much money a person made, what church they attended, or their education level; what mattered was their skin color. By virtue of this alone, blacks were lumped together as a single entity and denied basic rights and privileges. Being black meant you had to live in certain areas, were open game for harassment by police, were guaranteed the right to be treated less than human, and to be mistreated by any white person who felt the need to put you in your place. Discrimination and racism created an environment that made it conducive for numbers gambling to operate and flourish. The city was ruled by the “us versus them” mentality. When blacks were denied professional opportunities in the work force, it was numbers gambling that provided employment opportunities for blacks. Numbers gambling acted as the financial institution for blacks that were denied access to mainstream financial institutions. It was the black numbers operators who offered a chance at the “American Dream” for blacks who were otherwise denied it. The American Dream was more than just financial success and comforts. It was about the dream of having opportunity. At times numbers operators provided for the communities’ basic needs of food, shelter, and hope that was needed to survive, especially during the Great Depression. Numbers operators used their political influence to ensure that blacks were represented on the Detroit Police Department. Everett Watson took his wealth from numbers gambling and

provided loans and new housing for blacks who otherwise would have never been afforded the opportunity. Numbers gambling became a means to address economic and social injustices. The conflict caused by racism, and numbers gambling's role in righting it, caused people in the affected neighborhoods to rally behind it, and to protect the numbers operators and their employees. As Fuller Hit recalled, no one would inform on a numbers operator in the community because blacks regardless of their status did not want to see another black jailed. As early as 1928, black ministers in Detroit were conflicted concerning their values and opinions as it pertained to numbers gambling. On the one hand they wanted to end it, but did not want to target the black numbers operators who were part of their community. Later, civil rights organizations like the Urban League did not view numbers gambling as a case of moral turpitude; however, they would not let numbers operators within their walls, but gladly accepted their financial support. Poor living conditions, limited resources, and racism caused the community to rally around the created institution of numbers gambling for entertainment, as a source of pride, for basic financial needs, and as a means to combat oppressive racism. In other words, numbers gambling acted as a means to not only provide denied economic resources, but it brought people within the community together by acting as an instrument for community solidarity, and became a norm for the time. As one black Detroit woman who grew up on the near east side remembered,

In those days, gambling was so personal that the numbers people brought your winnings to your house...Everybody in the 'hood played the numbers daily...The numbers game was a blessing for many...When the numbers 'hit' it made everyone in the 'hood happy and there were joyful celebrations. The numbers men and women embodied high society, affluence and prominence. Many were well respected. In lean times, families were able to survive and raise their children by hitting the numbers and hosting pay the rent parties...Truly the 'hood was the village that is so often spoken of today...Still, something was lost when the numbers people crumpled up their pay-off envelopes and betting slips and many shut down (DeRamus 1999:1C).

Another reason why the community supported numbers gambling can be traced to Marcel Mauss' notion of exchange. As Mauss was writing *The Gift* in 1925, his theory was being played out in Detroit's numbers gambling. Numbers gambling was a concrete expression that revealed how all other institutions, to include relationships, class structure, community, and politics were linked. This study found that numbers gambling, like gift giving, was a form of economic exchange, which acted as a system of "total services" (Mauss 1990:70). Numbers gambling established relationships and bonds within the community because it served as a means to circulate and redistribute resources in the community.

The money made by the numbers benefited the black community; it might circulate for weeks before it left the black folks' neighborhood. Someone would win a dollar and it would go to the bar; the bar owner might spend it at a restaurant and then that dollar would go to the grocery store and so on. The longer that dollar stayed in the neighborhood, the better the economic situation. This kind of economic turnover can make a city boom...The numbers games were essential for the progress of black folks in the city of Detroit economically and politically. Blacks used this money to build housing. They founded insurance companies, loan offices, newspapers, and real estate firms...Numbers money also helped create scholarships for young people to attend school and served as housing down payments (Wilson and Cohassey 1998:66-67).

The numbers operators sold hope in the form of a number via gambling to the community. This hope at times translated to a monetary windfall, which allowed for the purchase of needed resources. Other times, the selling of the number was simply the selling of faith and hope. In either event, numbers operators were enriched by their patrons who trusted them, and as such some were obligated to return their goodwill to the communities they served. There was power in numbers gambling, which compelled some gambling operators to perform a form of reciprocity with the communities and people who supported their operations. The numbers operators showed reciprocity by giving gifts to children at Christmas, feeding the poor during holidays and during the Depression, by providing funding to parks and youth activities,

and by funding civic organizations like the Urban League and the NAACP. Their generosity in the community solidified their reputation as respected and revered race men. For example, John Roxborough was known as “the Colored man’s Santa Claus” by members of Detroit’s numerous black communities because of his generosity (Gibson 1935:20). In 1934, W.C. Woodson, who served as the executive secretary of the colored Y.M.C.A. wrote concerning the numbers operators:

Hundreds of Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets are distributed by these men. One in particular confines all of his charitable work to the distribution of over a thousand baskets at Christmas. These men have a deep sense of appreciation of the need among their group and it is rare that they refuse requests for help. The system of giving is not sound social work procedure, but they sustain the reputation of helping their supporters and friends who are in need (Carlson 1940:148-149).

The reciprocity displayed by the numbers operators solidified their place and status in their respective neighborhoods and communities. The attitude concerning the black numbers operators by members of the community was, “It’s gambling all right, but there’s nothing wrong with it because if there was, men like Mosley, Roxborough, and Watson wouldn’t have anything to do with it” (Carlson 1940:154). Like Bronislaw Malinowski’s finding with the Kula, the black community was proud of the wealth that its numbers men had acquired (Malinowski 1922:499). Numbers operators were a source of pride for blacks in the city because they invested in the community by purchasing real estate, and acted as a loan institution for a number of blacks that dreamed of running their own businesses, which included grocery stores, restaurants, funeral homes, nightclubs, and hat shops in the city. They sponsored many young people’s educational expenses at a number of local colleges, and made sure the neighborhood children did not go hungry. In other words, when the formal economy failed the community and

its people, the informal economy stepped in to fill the void. Money from the informal economy was used to sustain the needs of the formal economy.

Reciprocity was found throughout numbers gambling. In addition to the community, numbers operators gave campaign gifts to various politicians, who in return provided political favors. Reciprocity can be seen in numbers writers' relationships with their customers. At times numbers players would play with a numbers writer as a way to support them financially. However, whenever a player won, it was customary for them to pay a gift of 10% (of their winnings) to their numbers writer. This exchange acted to further solidify the relationship between the numbers writer and their customer. Ministers, prophets and churches would receive gifts from followers whenever they were blessed with a win. Numbers gambling was an exchange system which individuals used to fulfill each other's needs.

*Aim Number Three: To determine why and how individuals played the numbers in Detroit. The goal is to explore what motivated people to play the numbers and what strategies they used (including luck, dreams, religion, etc.) in playing the numbers.*

Roger Caillois described games of chance or Alea as those

[...] based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. More properly, destiny is the sole artesian of victory, and where there is rivalry, what is meant is that the winner has been more favored by fortune than the loser...Here, not only does one refrain from trying to eliminate the injustice of chance, but rather it is the very capriciousness of chance that constitutes the unique appeal of the game. Alea signifies and reveals the favor of destiny. The player is entirely passive; he does not deploy his resources, skill, muscles, or intelligence. All he need do is await, in hope and trembling, the cast of the die. He risks his stake. Fair play, also sought but now taking place under ideal conditions, lies in being compensated exactly in proportion to the risk involved. Every device intended to equalize the competitors' chances is here employed to scrupulously equate risk and profit...It grants the lucky player infinitely more than he could procure by a lifetime of labor, discipline, and fatigue...he counts on everything, even the vaguest sign, the slightest outside occurrence, which he immediately takes to be an omen or token – in short, he depends on everything except himself...Alea does not have the function of causing the more intelligent to win money, but tends rather to abolish natural or

acquired individual differences, so that all can be placed on an absolutely equal footing to await the blind verdict of chance (Caillois 1962:17-18).

In other words, games of chance such as numbers are attractive to players because it puts all players on the same playing field. Even though society may deny players equality in other areas of life, numbers give players the exact same chances of winning (Caillois 1962:19). Janice best described this sentiment when she summed up why she liked to play the numbers. According to her, playing the numbers was “the only place, only thing you can do to get some money and you do not have to fill out a long application and be rejected if you are lucky enough.”

Based on informant interviews and research, I found that people play the numbers for a variety of reasons. During the Depression a Detroit resident remembered,

One of the largest businesses among blacks is the numbers business...everyone played either the numbers...or policy or both...It offered its players daily chances to pick up on a few quick bucks without any questions asked. It was very popular...because it was inexpensive and convenient; and perhaps because as it grew, it employed many blacks as runner and clerks who could not find more socially acceptable employment elsewhere (Bridges 1975:6).

Years later, people still play for the hope of winning cash, as the interviews with Janice, Shelly, the Corporal, Harriet and Grandma demonstrate. Those interviews also revealed that profit was/is not the only motivating factor of why people play the numbers. They play for intellectual stimulation, pleasure, for social rewards, and because it becomes a habit. When comparing Clifford Geertz’s work in “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” there is little similarity in what Geertz described with the Balinese cockfighting and numbers gambling in Detroit. However, like Geertz’s use of interpretative anthropology, numbers gambling for individuals was more than just wagering money against irrational and steep odds. Rather, it was a communal activity and a means for people to show their faith in their number and a higher power, which for them was rational. By placing a wager on their number with odds as high as

1000 to 1, bettors were showing they had faith and believed they could beat the odds. By wagering their faith through their number, they were betting on the assumption that God or a higher power destined them to win. Even if their number did not fall, numbers players still benefited from the social support that the numbers institution provided. This decision to trust and support numbers gambling was rational. Numbers players trusted numbers operators to support the community, and chose to put not only their trust, but their money behind them. Detroit spiritualist, Father Hurley (concerning numbers gambling) noted, "Gambling is a God-sent blessing to the poor" (Wolcott 1997:61). By betting on their dreams "...urban African Americans used personal knowledge for financial gain in a way that directly contradicted the supposed rationality of the informal economy" (Wolcott 1997:58). In addition, playing the numbers "...was to entertain fleeting utopian visions of an economic world where dreams came true" (Fabian 1990:113). Finally, numbers for many held special meaning. Numbers players identified with the numbers they played because they represented a birthday, anniversary, or translated into something that was unique or special to them. Numbers players used both supernatural and scientific methods in an effort to pick winning numbers. For players, playing numbers and the methods they chose to pick them were rational. When their numbers fell it proved they were lucky and destined to win.

### Summary and Future Directions

Finally, this study, as a historical anthropological work, found that numbers gambling not only solidified neighborhoods in Detroit that no longer exist, but also contributed to the survival of many people because of the hope it provided, and its impact on race relations. Without the power and capital generated by numbers gambling, John Roxborough would not have been able to craft Joe Louis into the man who in turn helped knock down racial stereotypes and open doors



that were once closed to blacks. After all, part of why Roxborough wanted to get into the numbers business was to enrich himself and help his race, and he did. Joe Louis was seen and accepted not just as a black hero, but also as an American hero. In America it can be argued this was one of the first positive images of blacks that changed some attitudes concerning the race. John White's purchase of the Gotham Hotel again was a source of racial pride in black communities all over America. Nationally, the Gotham Hotel was known as one of the first hotels for blacks that offered top-notch accommodations. At the time, this in itself was a huge step in progress for blacks who for years were denied adequate accommodations because of their race. The Gotham and other black owned businesses for middle-class blacks was viewed, "...as evidence of racial progress, whether or not they were backed by profits gained from the informal economy. Working-class African Americans were hopeful that these businesses would hire black workers, thus freeing them from being dependent on white employers" (Wolcott 1997:56). Numbers operators made it possible for Detroit to have black newspapers, which carried news and information that benefited the community. They established multiple forms of entertainment, and ensured blacks had access to insurance at affordable rates. Everett Watson ensured that blacks were hired and promoted on Detroit's police department in an effort to guarantee black representation on the force. On a smaller scale, because of numbers gambling, Francis Childress was able to ensure her children were educated at some of the best private colleges in the country. With this education and the lifestyle Francis provided her children, they were able to live a solid middle class lifestyle. Big Will also took the earnings from numbers to improve his family's life. However, Detroit's numbers operators' largest contributions can never be truly measured. That would be the hope of a brighter future people felt when for a few pennies, they placed their dreams on a number. Or on the "blessing" that some felt when they

did hit the number and was able to catch up their rent, pay a bill, or simply eat for another month. These contributions can never truly be measured.

This study also provided a look at who and how the informal economy operated alone and in conjunction with the formal economy. Numbers gambling in Detroit has operated during times of economic prosperity, as well as economic recessions. For the most part, it was able to exist because of tolerant communities. Numbers gambling was operated by men and women, both black and white, which did not fit what most think of when they envision people that operate in the informal economy. Many were educated and prestigious citizens like John Roxborough, Dr. Martin Robinson, Dr. Haley Bell, and John White. Others like Francis, Big Will, and Ed Martin had access to a solid-middle class existence (via the formal economy), but chose to combine income from both the formal and informal economies for increased wealth. At times, the informal economy and those who operated it were more trusted and reliable than the formal economy. Perhaps future studies can further examine the informal economy in an effort to ascertain what it says about capitalism.

Finally, this study touched on anthropology's four subfields: archeology, cultural, linguistic, and physical. The material culture used helped recreate how numbers gambling was played and showed its importance over time. This study was able to explore how numbers gambling was wrongly viewed and projected to society as an innate racial trait. It demonstrated how numbers gambling influenced language and how people thought about and perceived numbers. The study was filled with issues of race, politics, and economics. *Numbers and Neighborhoods* is the story of a time and place in Detroit that is no longer in existence, and revealed how numbers gambling influenced these bygone communities.

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1902c Policy Writers at Work. May 16: 1.

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1903b Policy Playing Continues. March 30: 4.

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1908b Former Counterfeiter Accused of Conducting a Policy Game. August 22: 12.

1908c Lawyer Roxborough Dead. August 19: 6.

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1938b Open Gaming Found in City. September 3: 2.

1938c Police Seize 86 in Policy Raids upon 11 Houses. September 9: 1.

1938d \$2,000 is Seized in Policy Raid. September 21: 5.

1938e Weisberg Held in Policy Raid. September 13: 1 & 4.

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1939b Pastor Echoes Probe Demand. August 21: 2.

1939c Police Renew Quiz After Racket Diary Vanishes Strangely. August 9: 1 & 5.

1939d Six are Jailed in Policy Raid. August 23: 3.

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- 1940d Idle Gamblers Paid State Aid. January 28: 4.
- 1940e Joe Louis Flies Home for 123rd Willkie Speech. November 4: 3.
- 1940f McCrea and Aide Got \$80,000 Graft, Ferguson Charges. April 17: 1&7).
- 1940g McCrea's Raiders Try to Invade Jury Room; Driven Off as O'Hara Calls Riot Squads. March 5: 1&10.
- 1940h Ouster of Wilcox Will Be Sought on Grand Jury Charges of Graft. March 6: 1&10.
- 1940i Quitting Job Today, Farris Blurts Out in Tantrum at Jail. January 30: 1&4.
- 1940j Raids Died Out After '35, McCrea's Aide Declares. April 5: 1&19.
- 1940k Reading Gave Aid to Racket Ferguson Told. May 7: 1&4.
- 1940l Records Show McCrea-Block Deal for \$5,000. April 12: 1&13.
- 1940m Report Accuses Prosecutor of Collecting Vice Payoffs. February 24: 1&4.
- 1940n Robinson Case to be Delayed. January 26: 15.
- 1940o Roxborough the Brains of Joe Louis Management. April 25: 19&20.
- 1940p Ryan Gives Up to Grand Jury Ending Search. May 10: 1&10.
- 1940q State Investigation of Paroles is Sought in Robinson Expose. January 24: 1&7.
- 1940r Supt. Fred Frahm Resigns After Suspension by Eaman. January 14: 1&2.
- 1940s Suspended Police Inspector Says Reading Took \$18,000 in Nine Months as Share of Graft from Policy Houses. May 5: 1&4.
- 1940t Wilcox and Aides Split up \$121,000 Graft, Court Told. April 7: 1&11.
- 1940u Witnesses Get Guards to Halt Alleged Spying. May 8: 1&12.
- 1940v Witness Gone; Quiz Cut Short. June 16: 4.

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1941b McCrea, Wilcox, Garska and Staebler Guilty with 20 Others on Vice-Graft Plot Charges.

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1930a Emmons' Vice Charge is Denied by Mayor. May 26: 1, 2, &38).

1930b Idle Protest to the Mayor. October 25: 3.

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1931 Welfare Limit is 7 Million. July 7: 1&2.

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1935 Jobs Scarce for Negroes. April 27: 15.

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1936a McCrea in Black Legion? He Was Just a Joiner Then. May 26:1.

1936b Several Names Found on Lists. May 28: 1.

## Detroit News

1938a Gangsters Linked in Policy Racket. September 9: 1&2.

1938b 'Numbers' Rise Told by Gambler. September 12: 1&4.

1938c Policy Evil is Assailed by Pickert. September 11: 1&15.

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1939b Death Notes Charge Police Bribery. August 7: 1.

1939c FBI Calls Robinson in McBride Quiz. August 9: 1&2.

1939d Graft Quiz Called Off by McCrea. August 10: 1.

1939e M'Bride Catches Face hunt for Clues in Graft Inquiry. November 25: 1.

1939f Police Graft Inquiry Put in Their Hands. August 21: 2.

1939g Reading's Son Named in Graft Quiz. November 18: 1.

Detroit News

1940a Ex-Officer is Granted Immunity. May 4: 1&2.

1940b Graft Case Point Won for Reading. May 7: 1&25.

1940c Graft Storm Unabated on Anniversary of McDonald Suicide. August 4: 5.

1940d McCarthy Suspended From Racket Squad After Woman's Suicide Note Told of Graft. April 24: 1&14.

1940e O'Hara Booed by Defendants. June 19: 3.

1940f Paid Reading \$18,000, Frahm \$7,200, Boettcher Asserts at Graft Hearing. May 5: 1&2.

1940g Policy a Game for Poor Man. April 24: 1&14.

1940h Reading Indicted in Policy Graft Quiz. April 24: 1&2.

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1941a Don't Gamble! August 29: 7.

1941b Graft Witness Quiz Ordered. October 30: 24.

1941c Judge Prods Slow Memory. October 28: 5.

1941d Mail and Phones Censored in Jury's Private Hotel Wing. October 15: 9.

1941e Policy Fraud Told in Court. October 11: 9.

1941f Reading Gave Vague Pledge. November 6: 4.

1941g Reading, 22 Others Guilty. December 16: 1&2.

1941h Skrzycki Tells of Reading Graft Talk. November 7: 1.

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1949 Toy Reports on Gambling. September 29: 72.

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1935c 2,000 Attend Connolly Services. May 27: 3.

Detroit Times

1939 She Kills Self, Child After Bribe Note. August 7: 1&2.

Detroit Tribune

1933a Great Lakes Insurance Company Keeps Ahead of the Times. April 14: 1&2.

1933b Greetings to the Public. April 14: 8.

1933c Moseley to Serve Free Xmas Meals. December 23: 2.

1933d Welcome to Our City. April 14:6.

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1934a On Vacation. August 25: 2.

1934b On Vacation Tour. March 17: 6.

1934c Plays Santa to 2,000 Kiddies. December 22: 2.

Detroit Tribune

1937 Everett Watson Promotes Financial Corporation. February 20: 1.

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1938a Roxborough Escapes Fidelity Crash. December 24: 1.

1938b Roxborough Robbed. December 10: 1.

1938c Will White Mobsters Dominate 'Numbers'?. September 24: 1.

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1939a Number Houses Close Doors. August 26: 1.

1939b Watson Enterprises Made Steady Progress Last Year. January 28: 3.

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1940a Dream Book Editor Wins Suit. December 7: 1.

1940b Eight Policemen Named in Warrant Wednesday. April 27: 1.

1940c Three Watson Enterprises Show Rapid Growth in Business During the Past  
Several Years. June 15: 1.

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1941a History of Paradise Valley Distributing Company. September 6: 8.

1941b An Objectionable New Trend in White Advertising. September 6: 1.

1941c Reading, Watson, Roxborough Guilty; Court Frees Eleven. December 20: 1&2.

1941d Walter Norwood Names Police Graft Takers. November 8: 1&2.

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1942a Officer Arrests Northend Resident on Policy Charge Because He's Negro. August 18: 1.

1942b Roxy and Watson Appeal Sentence. January 10: 1&2.

1942c Watson Insurance Agency Becomes Second Negro Company to Sell Bonds. October  
10:1.

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1943a A Monument to Our Race. November 20: 5.

1943b Negro Leaders Acclaim Attorney Edward Simmons for Councilman. September 18: 2.

1943c Negro Syndicate Buys \$250,000 Gotham Hotel. October 23: 1.

Detroit Tribune

1944a Charges of Vice Dropped Against Dr. Haley Bell. January 22: 1.

1944b Mystery Fire Destroys House in Watson's New \$2,000,000 Project. October 7: 1.

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1948a Bishop's Tip on 711 Breaks Policy Houses. June 26: 1.

1948b Crackdown on Numbers at Ford's Places Hester on \$3,000 Bond. July 10: 1.

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1954a Eleven Cronies Face Jail Terms. December 11: 1.

1954b J. White Gets 90 Days, Fine. June 5: 1.

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**ABSTRACT****NUMBERS AND NEIGHBORHOODS:  
SEEKING AND SELLING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN DETROIT  
ONE BET AT A TIME**

by

**FELICIA GEORGE****August 2015****Advisor:** Dr. Todd Meyers**Major:** Anthropology**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

The study of numbers gambling in Detroit offers an important perspective on the concept and performance of community cohesion within the urban fabric of the United States. Research is limited concerning the role numbers gambling has played in community cohesion. This dissertation expands the knowledge and understanding of numbers gambling in Detroit by determining how numbers gambling (as an underground economic activity) was formed and operated, not only as a form of illegal activity, but as a way to understand community and local enterprise. This project not only looked at the legal issues surrounding numbers gambling in Detroit, but incorporated issues concerning community, race, kinship, history, economics, and politics. This dissertation determined why and how numbers gambling bonded and solidified neighborhoods in Detroit, and explored both the economic and social function of numbers gambling. Finally, this project explored why and how individuals played the numbers in Detroit.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

I am a proud Detroitier. I graduated from Cass Technical High School before obtaining degrees from Wayne State University as both a “Tartar” and a “Warrior.” I graduated in 1994 with a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology. While working on my degree, I was fortunate enough to conduct psychopharmacology research for two years. In 2000, I obtained my Master of Interdisciplinary Studies degree, and completed my thesis on the war on drugs and its effect on African-American males.

I have worked in the law enforcement field for approximately 20 years. I am the proud mother of Jasmine, and have been married to my wonderful husband, Anthony, for 22 years.