



LETTER FROM OHIO

Jim Traficant Was Our Kind of Crook

A Youngstown tribute.

By VINCE GUERRIERI | September 27, 2014

Nobody believed the stories I told about Youngstown until Jim Traficant was indicted – for the second time.

My tales – about a judge who got disbarred, ran for mayor and won; a prosecutor who was the subject of an attempted assassination and his predecessor, who did time for corruption; a group of gangsters who incorporated their own municipality for the express purposes of hiding a brazenly-operated illegal gambling casino from local law enforcement – were too far-fetched to anyone who'd never lived in the steel town on the Ohio/Pennsylvania border.

But James A. Traficant Jr., a man who once had his salary garnished by the Internal Revenue Service for failing to report a bribe by organized crime figures on his income tax – was the living embodiment of every yarn spun about the region and its residents. He was the Congressman you'd call from central casting – if Quentin Tarantino was directing the movie.

Traficant died Saturday at the age of 73 following a tractor accident at a family farm in the hinterlands of Mahoning County. Shy of him actually being “beamed up” after a Congressional speech – a phrase he was fond of using when the world had become too strange even for him – this is how it had to end. The farm had proven his undoing once already.

When Traficant was indicted for a second time in 2002 by a federal grand jury, the allegations included getting local contractors and staff members to do work for him on the farm. Traficant pleaded not guilty “by reason of sanity” – a local political enemy tried to have him declared legally insane in the 1980s, and it didn’t take, leading him to declare himself sane ever since – and once again swore to defend himself in court.

It had worked in the 1980s. By then, Traficant was a folk hero. There are two paths to immortality in the Mahoning Valley: Success in sports or involvement in organized crime. Traficant had done both. He led Cardinal Mooney to victory over Ursuline in the first installment of the rivalry that lasts to this day, more than 55 years later, and played quarterback at Pitt. He was drafted by the Steelers in the NFL draft and the Raiders in the AFL draft, but eschewed them both to return home.

Youngstown in the 1960s was still a relatively prosperous place. The population of the city itself was started to ebb from its prewar peak of 160,000, but the county’s population continued to grow as people moved out to the suburbs. Traficant worked for a local community action group and served as a counselor (he styled himself as the son of a truck driver, but did have a master’s degree in counseling – just one more example of how the American Dream still worked in Youngstown at that point).

At that point, the Youngstown area was represented by Michael Kirwan, a different kind of American success story. Kirwan was a third-grade dropout and onetime “breaker boy” in Eastern Pennsylvania coal country. He spent more than 30 years in Congress as a behind-the-scenes power broker. As head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, he was regarded as second only to longtime speaker Sam Rayburn as the most powerful Democrat in the House.

By 1980, when Traficant was elected sheriff, it was an entirely different place. Sept. 19, 1977, is still referred to as “Black Monday” in the area. The Lykes Corporation,

which a decade earlier had bought Youngstown Sheet and Tube, the area's largest employer and at one point the largest corporation in Ohio, announced that the Campbell Works would close at the end of the week. There were no workplace protections requiring notice be given, and the dominoes started falling. Within five years, Sheet and Tube would be no more, and an entire way of life would vanish.

Among Traficant's duties as sheriff was to serve eviction notices. Traficant refused to do so, saying he couldn't fault steelworkers for being unable, through no fault of their own, to pay their mortgages. He served time for contempt of court.

And then he was indicted for taking bribes from organized crime figures. He defended himself in court, admitting that he took the money, saying it was part of "the most unorthodox sting operation in the history of Ohio politics." Even though the money was never impounded, Traficant walked. And because the money was never impounded, Traficant's salary was garnished by the IRS for refusing to pay taxes on it.

In 1984, he was elected to Congress, as a Democrat from the highest concentration of Democrats in the state. His antics in the House made him a godsend for editorial cartoonists and journalists who were looking for an appropriately ridiculous quote. But the substance of his messages was surprisingly apt.

He weighed against foreign steel dumping, seeing what it had done to the U.S. market, and the government who sat idly by and watched it happen. He decried the United States doing business with China – happily – despite its human rights violations. And he weighed in against the virtual omnipotence of the federal government, particularly the IRS, which had become his Inspector Javert.

The great irony is that Traficant – a man who would wear bell-bottoms into the 2000s – was ahead of his time to be appreciated. With his concerns about taxation and government overreach, combined with his chip-on-the-shoulder populism and entreaties to buy American, he was the proto-Tea Partier.

But Traficant couldn't walk a second time. He was found guilty on 10 counts, and still refused to resign his seat in Congress, forcing the House to expel him by a vote of

420-1 (the one dissent? Gary Condit). That November, he still received nearly 20 percent of the vote for Congress, from a federal prison cell where he would ultimately serve seven years.

There are probably people who will write Traficant's name in at the polls in November as a protest. The people of Youngstown watched Jimmy Carter refuse to guarantee loans for an employee purchase of the Sheet and Tube mills – and then rescue Chrysler from bankruptcy. Traficant just demonstrated what everyone in the Mahoning Valley learned the hard way: There's no point playing by the rules in a rigged game.

There are people who believe that Traficant's only crime was getting caught, and he was targeted for refusing to play ball. And when you watched Traficant get stripped of his committee assignments for voting for Republican Dennis Hastert for Speaker of the House, and then see Joe Lieberman welcomed into the Democratic caucus with open arms after speaking at the Republican National Convention, it's not hard to believe.

While I was a newspaper reporter in suburban Pittsburgh, I met John Murtha, then the dean of the state's Congressional delegation. Because he's a politician, he steered the conversation toward me, asking where I was from. I told him Youngstown. "Traficant," he said. "He's a whore." He then proceeded to tell me about Traficant's entreaties to join the House Ways and Means Committee, which were blocked by the chairman, Dan Rostenkowski.

Murtha was an unindicted co-conspirator in Abscam. Rostenkowski, like Traficant, ended up doing federal time. Jimbo was a crook, but he wasn't their kind of a crook.

He was our kind of crook – and that's something nobody outside of the Mahoning Valley really understood.

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