

## ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

# Case Five – Police Corruption and Drug Traffic

## *The County Has a Serious Problem – The Sheriff*

State Trooper John Wilkins suspected that Harry Watts and Sheriff Bryant were involved in criminal activities that went beyond the petty stuff he had already been exposed to during the first seven months he had been assigned to the patrol division in Dade County. He already knew that the sheriff tolerated small-time bootlegging in the county and often used intimidation to remain the undisputed power in the county. He also was aware that Sheriff Bryant was a "business" associate of Harry Watts, a local rancher. Today's meeting with Watts and Bryant was not unlike the numerous other calls Wilkins had received in recent weeks. Several times he had been summoned to the sheriff's office like an errant child to have a "chat," wherein the sheriff would alternately use solicitation and intimidation as a means of vying to get Wilkins acclimated to the "Bryant Method" of law enforcement. Trooper Wilkins decided it was time to visit Agent Bill Morgan of the State Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) and see if he had any ideas about what was going on between Watts and Sheriff Bryant.

Agent Bill Morgan held a very different opinion of Sheriff Bryant than some of the citizens of Dade County. He had suspected for a long time that Bryant was a corrupt sheriff, but lacked sufficient hard evidence against him that could be used to seek a warrant for his arrest. Nevertheless he had directly experienced Bryant's arrogance and abusive treatment of officers from other agencies. On a number of occasions Sheriff Bryant had told him off in front of the local citizens. The Sheriff would also call Agent Morgan when he had gotten word that a CIB agent passed through town, or had been in the county. "I understand that your boys came through Monday morning about 10:00 a.m.," he would say. "You should stop by when you're in Dade. You state boys need to learn some manners," he would say. Sheriff Bryant also never let Morgan forget that he was an "outsider" to Dade County even though Agent Morgan grew up in Twin Pines that was less than 60 miles from Dade.

As Trooper Wilkins and Agent Morgan talked, Morgan indicated that the closest he had come to getting something concrete on Sheriff Bryant involved an incident in which a woman from Dade County had called to report her suspicion that the Sheriff was running a protection racket in which he took kickbacks from drug dealers in order to make Dade County "safe" for drug trafficking. Agent Morgan recalled that when he interviewed the woman at her home, a good twelve miles out from the sheriff's station in the county, she was so fearful of Bryant that she whispered throughout the entire interview. After the initial interview, the woman suddenly became terrified of Sheriff Bryant and refused to provide any further cooperation. Without collaborating evidence, Agent Morgan lacked probable cause to move on either the sheriff or the alleged drug dealers. Although he cursed Agent Morgan up and down when he was told there was no basis to pursue the investigation, Sheriff Bryant looked surprisingly relieved as Morgan prepared to leave the county.

Agent Morgan and Trooper Wilkins agreed that they should immediately seek state authorization to open an investigation of Sheriff Bryant and Harry Watts. The authorization was received several days later and the air surveillance of Harry Watts' ranch yielded some very interesting results. About six hundred yards from an old logging road between a deep ravine and several hundred acres of woods, state agents discovered one and a half acres of highly cultivated marijuana growing on Watts' ranch. This permitted state agents to begin concentrated surveillance of the crop in order to link the marijuana to its actual owners. Realizing that Sheriff Bryant probably would not enter the field himself, Trooper Wilkins agreed to be "wired" with a hidden tape recorder and to indicate a willingness to learn the "Bryant Method" of law enforcement.

The field surveillance took well over a year to complete. During the first summer of surveillance CIB agents staked out the marijuana field from 10:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Unfortunately, the entire field was harvested not long after surveillance had begun late one evening and the agents were not able to gather sufficient evidence for an indictment. During their second season on the site, agents literally camped out 24 hours a day and, in time, were able to take pictures of several hired hands working the crop. The big catch was a number of pictures of Harry Watts fertilizing and cultivating his marijuana plants.

The major evidence against Sheriff Earl Bryant was obtained through the use of the listening device carried by Trooper Wilkins. Wilkins had no difficulty securing the sheriff's confidence since the sheriff couldn't imagine that anyone wouldn't want a part of his action.

In the tapes of conversations between Sheriff Bryant, Trooper Wilkins, and others, Bryant spoke openly and frequently of his intention to cash in on the marijuana crop growing at Harry Watts' ranch. He once told Wilkins "A man has got to make money while he can. I intend to retire in another year or so and I aim to have a nice little nest egg. If I can't buy a little grass shack in Hawaii, then I'll just have to get a condo in Miami! Two things you need to know, boy: don't you ever let the people see you living better than they do, and you always pay your taxes on everything you earn. The Feds are not interested in how you earn your money; they just want their cut of the action."

Evidence gathering against Sheriff Bryant and Watts reached a climax when CIB agents harvested the marijuana. On a September evening while Bryant and Watts were hosting a cookout for a local political candidate, state agents filled five dump trucks with over 3,000 pounds of freshly cut marijuana. The crop had a street value of approximately \$600,000. Harry Watts' jaw dropped to the ground the next morning when he paid a visit to an empty field. He sped back to the courthouse to call an emergency meeting of all the players involved in the conspiracy. Trooper Wilkins and his tape recorder were also invited to witness Sheriff Earl Bryant lose his cool disposition.

## EPILOGUE

There was considerable interest in prosecution evidence as Earl Bryant, Harry Watts, and three other defendants in the Dade County drug case gathered in the office of Sam Clayton, Sheriff Bryant's attorney. Having already previewed the cassette tapes that had been released on discovery from the district attorney's office, Clayton found little justification for lightheartedness.

As Clayton started the tape recorder he exclaimed, "You asked for it, boys, and now you've got it." The tape began with a conversation between Sheriff Bryant, Harry Watts, two sheriff's deputies, and Trooper Wilkins that occurred the same morning that Watts had discovered his bare marijuana field. The relevant portion of the tape was a raging outburst by Sheriff Bryant.

We've got a serious problem here! I mean to tell you, . . . we've got a serious problem here! That's my marijuana and I plan to get it back. Somebody sent their boys out there to cut that crop knowing dam good and well that we wouldn't be there last night. I'll kill them! I've spent 30 years doing this county's dirty work for wages less than you'd pay a shoeshine boy. I'm not going to see my retirement money go in some other low life's pocket. I figure \$350,000 of that marijuana is mine. I'm going to get it back, or some poor fool's going to pay the price!"

Sheriff Bryant's words reverberated in his head as he sank deeper into the couch. It was that state trooper Wilkins, he thought to himself, and they had him wired all along. Bryant pondered his own fate as he realized that his empire and everything upon which it had been built was slipping from his grasp. Years of hard work, some of it even honest work, were all for naught. A sense of humiliation that he had never known before seized him with gut wrenching force.

Later that week Sheriff Earl Bryant was found dead. He had told a deputy that he was going to investigate a moonshine still said to be located on top of Lone Pine Ridge. The next day the sheriff's body was found at the bottom of a 300-foot ravine. Most citizens in Dade County thought he jumped, some believed he fell accidentally, still others feel he was murdered by "the mob;" a few people even believe it wasn't his body that was found. The case of State v. Bryant was scratched from the court docket of the state superior court. Shortly thereafter, the sheriff's widow received \$75,000 from the Peace Officer's Widow and Orphan Fund. The Fund was established to aid the survivors of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – Use a separate sheet of paper to answer the following questions.  
WRITE THE QUESTION – FULLY EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWERS.**

1. What are some of the types of crimes identified in this case?
2. What do you think was meant by the “Bryant Method” of law enforcement?
3. Describe Sheriff Bryant's relationship with the citizens of Dade County in general.
4. What factors do you think would contribute to a sheriff becoming a corrupt public servant?
5. Describe what was found and where it was found on Harry Watts's ranch by state investigators?
6. Describe Sheriff Bryant's reaction when he learned of the fate of his marijuana crop.
7. Describe the relationship between the Dade Sheriff's Office and other state-level law enforcement agencies.
8. What accounts for the prolonged inability of state agents to obtain evidence on Sheriff Bryant's illegal activities in Dade until trooper Wilkins came forward?
9. How can we explain the relative success of Trooper Wilkins in resisting Bryant's offer to engage in crime and corruption?
10. Criminal investigators and most of the citizens of Dade County believe that Sheriff Bryant committed suicide. Why do you think the Sheriff took his own life?