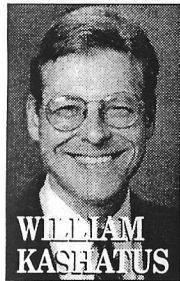


**W**hen John White Jr. endorsed Sam Katz for mayor recently, he might well have opened the door for the city's first Republican mayor in a half-century.

There was a time when the elephant dominated Philadelphia. We're not talking about Connie Mack's Athletics, either. We're talking about the powerful Republican machine of Boies Penrose and Bill Vare, both of whom perfected the art of "backroom deals," "election fixing" and the "spoils system." That was Philadelphia politics in

its purest form!

Penrose was the penultimate party boss, dominating City Hall from 1897 to the 1920s. Disdainful of the Quaker merchant aristocracy from which he came, Pen-

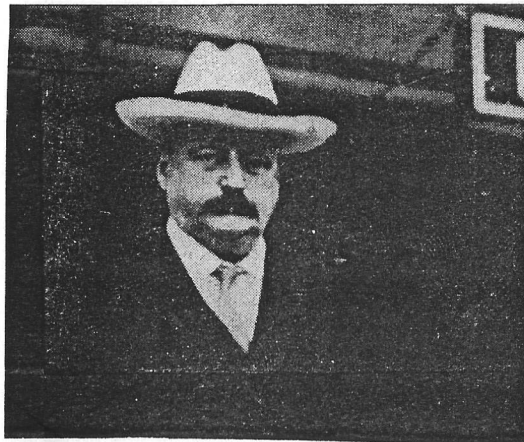


rose, a U.S. senator, was independently wealthy and sought no personal graft. But his appetite for power spurred him to serve the industrial tycoons of his era faithfully.

Vare's power base, on the other hand, existed among the ethnically defined slum wards of the downtown and the crowded rowhouse neighborhoods, shipyards, docks and factories of South Philadelphia. A congressman with a charismatic personality, Vare possessed a unique understanding of ward leadership and how to use it to his own advantage.

Controlling each ward through patronage, false voter registration and purchasing votes, Vare strengthened his authority by wielding a hefty war chest that he increased through lucrative contracts won by his own construction company.

So complete was the Republican hegemony of Philadelphia that even the chairman of the city's Democratic Party, as well as the



# When GOP meant a Grip On Philly

rest of City Council, yielded to the wishes of the machine. All attempts at reform were effectively negated by the city charter of 1919, which gave primary authority to Council at the expense of the mayor. Since the voters continued to elect the same politicians to Council, mayoral campaigns were merely the substitution of one Republican nominee for another.

But the Republicans truly outdid themselves during Prohibition, earning Philadelphia a national reputation for obstructing the enforcement of liquor laws. Rum-runners were given free rein because of City Council's refusal to increase the police force. Bootlegging as well as alcohol-related gangsterism became popular industries, as profits ran into the tens of thousands.

Forced to act against the rampant lawlessness, Mayor W. Freeland Kendrick, in 1924, hired a Marine Corps general, Smedley D. Butler, as head of the Police Department to clean up the city. What had been "staged" raids in the past were now the real thing. Butler's strong-arm tactics did not go over well with the magistrate courts since he was cutting into their share of the take.

After repeated raids on Republican-funded speakeasies, he was relieved of his duties.

The beginning of the end for the Republicans came in 1935 when John B. Kelly, a turncoat, ran on the Democratic ticket for mayor. Unlike his Republican opponent, S. Davis Wilson, a controversial but colorful city controller who had defected from the Democrats, Kelly orchestrated an issues-oriented campaign.

With a failing economy and high unemployment, Kelly promised to apply for federal assistance, making Roosevelt's New Deal policies a

critical part of his campaign. He also promised to end the corruption in City Hall by removing unnecessary municipal employees, eliminating kickbacks in graft and putting an end to wasteful public projects.

Kelly lost the '35 election by a mere 31,000 votes. But he also forced the Republican machine to clean up its act. The next three mayoral elections were even closer. Finally, in 1951, the Democrats prevailed, sending Joseph Clark to City Hall. Aside from three slim Republican victories, the Democrats have controlled City Hall ever since. ■

William Kashatus is a Philadelphia historian.

For years, the GOP, led by Boies Penrose (far left) and Bill Vare (left) controlled the city. But its days were numbered when John B. Kelly (above) ran an anti-graft campaign.



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**Opinion**