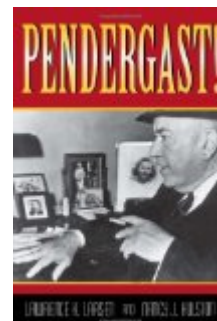


Lawrence H. Larsen, Nancy J. Hulston. *Pendergast!*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997. xii + 237 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1145-3.



Reviewed by Roger Biles

Published on H-Urban (June, 1998)

The literature on big city bosses and political machines is voluminous, and Kansas City's Tom Pendergast has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention. William M. Reddig, a journalist for the *Kansas City Star*, and Maurice Milligan, the U.S. Attorney who helped send Pendergast to prison, wrote popular books shortly after the boss's demise that recounted his machine's inglorious past. Historian Lyle Dorsett's *The Pendergast Machine* (1968), a volume in Oxford University Press's Urban Life in America Series, thoroughly dissected the operation of the infamous Kansas City Democratic organization; in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses* (1977), Dorsett devoted a chapter to Pendergast that reiterated many of the major themes developed in his earlier work. Now comes *Pendergast!*, a volume in the Missouri Biography Series written by Lawrence H. Larsen, a historian at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and Nancy J. Hulston, Director of Archives at the University of Kansas Medical Center.[1]

What distinguishes *Pendergast!* from these earlier books on the Kansas City boss? Larsen and Hulston have mined several new sources, most

notably recently released prison records and family correspondence, that provide a fuller picture of Pendergast's political career and personal life. This volume presents a more complete discussion than anything previously published of the criminal activity that landed Pendergast in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary and more closely describes the role played in the machine's operation by other family members (especially Tom's nephew, Jim Pendergast). In ways that earlier writers had failed to do, Larsen and Hulston vividly portray the obsessive gambling that resulted in the boss's loss of millions of dollars annually in off-track betting. They also show how J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI both participated in the effort to ensnare the boss and scrambled to receive the credit for his arrest. In short, as a consequence of the new primary source material available to them, the authors have presented a more compelling--if no more flattering--picture of the unsavory boss.

In at least one noteworthy case, Larsen and Hulston disagree with an interpretation prominently posited by Dorsett in his writings on the

Pendergast machine. Dorsett argued that Franklin D. Roosevelt, once a friend and avid supporter of the boss, became disenchanted with the Kansas City machine by the late 1930s. Influenced by the sensational disclosure of the rampant corruption in Pendergast's domain, the President participated in the government's successful attempt to convict the boss on charges of income tax evasion. Accordingly, Roosevelt shifted allegiances from the beleaguered Kansas City organization to Governor Lloyd Stark and his supporters. Larsen and Hulston view these changes in Missouri politics somewhat differently and attribute Pendergast's fall to the singular efforts of Stark and a coterie of aggressive prosecutors. According to their reading of the Internal Revenue Service files, Roosevelt declined to become involved in the machinations against a powerful and trusted state Democratic machine that had provided valuable electoral support for him in the 1932 and 1936 presidential elections.

Larsen and Hulston have given us the most detailed portrait yet of Tom Pendergast, a venal, ruthless politician whose success in the rough-and-tumble politics of Kansas City allowed him to exert considerable influence in state and national Democratic party affairs. Running the city as his own personal fiefdom, Pendergast abused power and made a mockery of democracy; in the 1930s, he garnered annually an estimated \$30 million from gambling, prostitution, and assorted other vice operations. His sordid political career calls into question the comparatively benign revisionist view of urban bosses as practical (if rough-edged) men whose disciplined political machines brought stability to cities at a time of rapid growth and disorder. Pendergast reveled in his ill-gotten wealth, lived like a king, and openly cooperated with organized crime before being incarcerated for criminal activities. His mark on Kansas City was indelible, yet it would be hard to argue that the city profited much from his leadership. This biography is fair-minded and struggles at all times to be objective, but it inevitably tells a

sad tale of the Pendergast machine's legacy of corruption. Although the authors are hesitant to make the connection, this legacy is arguably at least partially responsible for the dispiriting crisis of urban decay that is evident today in Kansas City.

Note

[1]. William M. Reddig, *Tom's Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1947); Maurice M. Milligan, *Missouri Waltz: The Inside Story of the Pendergast Machine by the Man Who Smashed It* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948); Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Lyle W. Dorsett, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Roger Biles. Review of Larsen, Lawrence H.; Hulston, Nancy J. *Pendergast!*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2153>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.