For nearly a year, the city of Spokane was caught in the thick of a scandal. This one was about the firing of a profane police chief who’d been accused by a city spokeswoman of sexual harassment. The accusation, at the spokeswoman's request, had been covered up by the mayor and his staff. She received a raise and a transfer. It was only after the mayor’s re-election that the city released public records revealing the truth.

The fallout was financial, with lawsuits and an independent investigation costing the city more than $600,000. But the fallout was also psychological, leaving the mayor and the city council drained from all the fighting, distrust, and accusations that followed.


From its very founding, the city has been dogged by scandal, and long stretches of its history have been consumed by one scandal or another. Spokane spent a decade drowning in the scandals and conspiracies surrounding the convoluted River Park Square parking garage deal — and as soon as it emerged for a gasp of fresh air, it was immediately dragged back under the murky waters of a mayoral sex scandal, then a police abuse scandal.

From today's vantage point, of course, the scandals of the past can seem quaint and overblown — or more outrageous than ever. What was taboo becomes commonplace, and what was commonplace becomes taboo.

We’ve taken a few of the biggest scandals in Spokane’s tempestuous history, and scrutinized them through modern eyes.

— DANIEL WALTERS, Scandal! editor
1909: MUCKRAKING GAL TOSSED INTO THE CLINK, EXPOSES SPOKANE JAIL DEPRAVITIES AND ABUSE

A free speech battle in Spokane was just the beginning for the woman who'd eventually help found the American Civil Liberties Union (in 1920), and become leader of the U.S. Communist Party (in 1961). The famous and fiery Elizabeth Gurley Flynn began traveling around the U.S. in 1907 as an organizer for the socialist group Industrial Workers of the World, passionately imploring the oppressed working class to join her in the fight for their due rights.

Soon after, Flynn's calling would bring her to Spokane, where she would not only lead the charge of protest, but help uncover unjust treatment and behavior by the city's law enforcement.

In 1909, life in the young city of Spokane was tough for many; perhaps especially so for the town's "floaters," transient laborers who went from job to job just to get by.

What was even worse for the floaters? The "sharks" who preyed upon them under the guise of a job. These Spokane-based labor agencies would find you one, yes, but you'd have to pay a hefty price first — up to a dollar (that's more than $25 today). Even so, many workers found no work when they showed up to a job site, or were dismissed days later. Then the whole process would start all over again.

When word of this cyclical scam was picked up by the Chicago-based IWW, colloquially known as the Wobblies, Flynn and her fellow activists declared war. IWW members orated on the streets to working class crowds, protesting the ills foisted upon them by the employment agencies.

The sharks bit back, though, successfully urging the city of Spokane to pass an ordinance banning any public speaking on downtown streets — except by the Salvation Army — a decision that was a clear violation of the First Amendment’s right to free speech.

On Nov. 2, 1909, Spokane IWW members organized a peaceful protest of the ordinance by speaking atop soap boxes, with the intent of being arrested and thus overfilling the jail. What they experienced in the slammer was yet another outrage.

Conditions and the treatment of prisoners was despicable. More than 20 protesters were packed into 6-foot-by-8-foot cells, called “sweat boxes,” where they often passed out or became feverish from the heat. “Human Bedlam in the City Bastille” proclaimed the front page of the Nov. 4 Spokane Press. Men and women — and even a few boys who ended up being arrested for their IWW associations — were beaten and nearly starved by police.

Not long after arriving in the city to aid the movement, Spokane police arrested the 19-year-old Flynn on charges of conspiracy for inciting violations of the city’s public speaking ban. The Wobbly leader spent one night inside the jail, in a shared cell with two other women arrested on separate charges. Though the women were kind to Flynn, herself a feminist, she was shocked that one of them was escorted in the middle of the night by jail staff to visit men on a floor below. Flynn very publicly accused the jail of being a “municipal brothel” for the police in the Dec. 10 edition of the Wobbles’ Spokane-based newspaper, the Industrial Worker.

The cops cracked down, attempting to seize and destroy all copies of that issue before distribution. Reportedly, only eight copies of the issue were saved, and no apparent record of that edition’s contents have been recovered.

While Flynn’s accusations of a jail-run brothel were never proved nor disproved, the animosity between the free speech protesters — and the IWW in general — and local law enforcement ran deep. In the following week’s Industrial Worker issue on Dec. 15, Flynn recounted her horror in a furious manifesto, “Story of My Arrest and Imprisonment”:

“The whole performance bore the earmarks to me of a putrid state of morals inside the county jail of Spokane. Taking a woman prisoner out of her cell at the dead hours of night several times to visit sweethearts looked to me as if she were practicing her profession inside of jail as well as out!” she wrote.

The Wobbles eventually prevailed in their hard-won free speech fight, when in March of 1910, the city overturned the free speech ban. Not long after, the city also told the labor sharks to get out of town. (CHEY SCOTT)
**HISTORY’S BIGGEST SCANDALS**

**1911: SPOKANE’S DIRTY TOP COP ASSASSINATED**

John T. Sullivan had a slow and steady rise through the Spokane police ranks — his ascension abruptly ended by corruption charges and an assassin’s bullet less than two years after being named the city’s top cop.

Sullivan was a friend to Spokane’s elite, a supportive mayor and the Spokesman-Review, but his thuggish tactics made him many enemies, including the Industrial Workers of the World and labor-promoting Spokane Press. Mere months after becoming chief, he was locked in a high-profile battle with the IWW, thanks to their campaign against Spokane’s anti-public-gathering laws. The Wobblies’ Industrial Worker newspaper regularly lambasted Sullivan and promoted his alleged involvement in all manner of corruption — including being in cahoots with a prostitution ring — while also proclaiming a distaste for Sullivan as a person.

“Chief of Police Sullivan,” reads an article in the Nov. 10, 1909, issue, “a long, lean, rank, fishy-eyed individual, whose personality can best be likened to that of a gila monster, and who is alike despised by all men and women, and by even the fat-jowled men that serve under him.”

Sullivan eventually resigned his post under pressure from the Wobblies and the Spokane City Council after repeated accusations of corruption and misconduct, but remained a captain in the department until he was shot on Jan. 5, 1911.

He survived for a couple of days, reportedly saying from his hospital bed that he believed labor agitators from the Spokane Press were behind the shooting. Investigators believed it was a professional hitman, based on the bullet used. But his brother thought Sullivan was killed by some of Spokane’s power players, as Sullivan was to talk about graft and corruption among city officials to a grand jury convened a few weeks before the assassination.

The case remains unsolved. (DAN NAILEN)

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**1925-1927: COMMISSIONER BRIBED INTO IGNORING JOINTS**

When Charles Hedger took over as Spokane’s public safety commissioner in 1925, he was intent on protecting the people — particularly, their God-given right to drink booze.

The only problem? Booze was illegal at the time. Law enforcement, during Prohibition, was supposed to make sure that people had no access to alcohol.

Hedger made sure the opposite was true. Soon after Hedger was put in charge of the police department, citizens noticed that the police were taking it easy on liquor establishments. Newspapers at the time questioned why feds and the sheriff’s office — but not the city police — were willing to raid speakeasies.

In January 1926, within a year of Hedger being named commissioner, thousands of citizens signed a petition calling for him to be recalled, to no avail.

“He was well-connected and he had a lot of friends,” says local historian and former Pend Oreille County Sheriff Tony Bamonte.

But as soon as Spokane County Sheriff Floyd Brower started asking questions, Hedger’s days as police commissioner were numbered.

The sheriff’s office discovered that Spokane establishments were linked to a gambling circuit that extended to Seattle and Portland. The sheriff and county prosecutor also found that Spokane police officers had been ordered to “lay off” liquor taverns. One officer said that he had been told to keep order on the streets, but that their “duties ended there.”

Spokane officers who actually wanted to do their jobs were punished by being given undesirable assignments. As one prosecutor stated at the time, “Officers have stood in this room and told me that they had been treated in a shabby manner because they insisted on enforcing the law.”

There was a simple explanation for why police gave liquor taverns a pass: They were bribing the cops to look the other way. Over the course of 18 months, establishments had paid a sum of $100,000 for protection — mostly in monthly installments of between $75 and $200.

By contrast, Sheriff Brower could not be so easily bought. At one point, according to an account in Police Files: The Spokane Experience, Brower arrested two men who were transporting a coal car containing $10,000 worth of liquor. One of the men offered the sheriff a $500 bribe to ignore the crime, but Brower declined.

By January 1927, before the news broke about speakeasies paying for protection, Hedger had resigned, declaring that he no longer wanted to embarrass the city council. However, he wasn’t ready to leave a position of power entirely. Being a reasonable man, Hedger proposed a compromise: He would humbly step down as commissioner and assume the role of mayor, trading positions with then-mayor Charles Fleming.

The city council approved a motion for Fleming to become public safety commissioner, but Hedger didn’t get to become mayor. Instead, he was made commissioner of public utilities.

Hedger would later be indicted on “maintenance of public nuisance” and 11 different counts of conspiracy, sales, possession, manufacturing or transportation of liquor. Others were indicted as well, including a bootlegger, a cigar man, a barber, a hotel operator and a liquor dealer.

But in the end, Hedger and the rest of the cops who were charged got off scot-free. (WILSON CRISCIONE)
1935: Spokane’s Oldest Orphanage Is a Hotbed for Molestation

The trouble began when a few teenage girls ran away from the Spokane Children’s Home. Picked up by a police officer, the girls begged and pleaded not to go back. Eventually they admitted that they didn’t feel safe. The home’s superintendent, Fred Hunter, was not only physically abusive to many of the children, he was having “improper relations” with some of the boys.

The public was so outraged that the case quickly went to court, and each man, who tearfully confessed his crimes of raping boys, received 10 years in prison.

One year later, the orphanage wanted to make the public forget the scandal. Under new management, their solution was simple; the Spokane Children’s Home board (made up mostly of Ladies Benevolent Society members) unanimously voted to remove the African American and Native American children housed at the facility, even though they had nothing to do with the molestation case.

At the time, there was no public outrage. No one seemed to mind, it was only two orphans who were affected, after all.

One of those kids, Carl Maxey, was just 11 years old at the time. Maxey, described in his New York Times obituary as “a scrappy civil rights lawyer credited with virtually single-handedly desegregating much of the Island Northwest,” cried that terrible time in his life as giving him the fire to succeed.

(Laura Johnson)

1944: Maverick Cops Raid Gambling Den, Sparking Chief’s Resignation

Our plainclothes patrolmen walked into Al Morse’s establishment in the middle of the afternoon. It was a Friday in late summer 1944. They walked out with tables, chairs, cash boxes, playing cards and 52 men in handcuffs. The gamblers were charged with misdemeanors. Harry Shulman, the joint’s manager, was charged with running a gambling club – a felony.

The raid of the illegal gambling den in downtown Spokane grabbed hold of the public’s attention and sucked up several days’ worth of front-page ink in the daily papers. It would cost three of the officers about two weeks’ pay, and almost ended the career of the fourth.

Almost.

Instead, the raid was the downfall of Spokane’s longest tenured police chief, Ira A. Martin, who joined the Spokane Police Department in 1917 and resigned nearly a month after the raid, ending 27 years with the department.

Martin’s decision to suspend the officers who led the raid turned the police department on itself, pitting some of the rank and file against their commanding officers. The decision also con-founded some members of the public, who wanted to rid their town of the apparently well-known, yet tacitly condoned, gambling dens.

“I always have, in my 27 years of service, lived and worked under the civil service rules and police manual,” Martin told the Spokane Daily Chronicle after his resignation. “And if they want to tear out a few sheets, I don’t feel that I want to serve any longer.”

Here’s what happened:

Patrolman William Schueler led the four-man crew into the club at 425 West Main St. around 2 pm, but didn’t tell his bosses. By 4 pm, according to news reports at the time, all four rogue cops had turned in their badges and guns. Three of the four were suspended for 15 days. Schueler, the ringleader, was charged with insubordination and conduct unbecoming, and given a “permanent suspension.” Police brass also accused him of shaking down known proprietors of other known gambling establishments, and even doing a little betting himself while on duty.

Schuessler appealed the sanction, and the public was outraged. News reports show an “overflowing” Civil Service Commission hearing in the council chambers at City Hall. Church organizations even wrote letters to Schuessler and then-Public Safety Commissioner A.B. Colburn in protest, demanding that the public shall be fully informed concerning the background of recent happenings in your department.”

To Schuessler, the church groups wrote: “We feel that you are perhaps the one man in this city who can throw light on the background of all that is happening.”

Similar to a more contemporary charge of insubordination at the SPD involving the unauthorized movement of office furniture, the public pointed to the obvious: Why punish this cop for doing what he thought needed to be done?

During Schuessler’s appeal hearings, he asserted that his bosses knew of the gambling around town, but were doing nothing to stop it. He said that’s why he didn’t tell them; Schuessler claimed he was trying to “clean up the city.”

But the rules, Martin and Colburn argued, were the cornerstone of an effective police department – the only line between order and chaos.

Schuessler’s permanent suspension was eventually overturned, and Martin resigned, forgoing his monthly salary of $125 for $125 a month in pension pay.

As for the gamblers? A handful were either acquitted or the charges against them were dropped, and 31 men initially failed either acquitted or the charges against them were dropped, and 31 men initially failed. Eventually they all were.

Gamblers were found guilty, and each were sentenced to 30 days in jail. Each of the gamblers were fined $6.50 – about $90 today.

(Mitch Rylas)
1969: Gonzaga, Spokane Police Give Pedophile Priest a Free Pass

In 1960, John P. Leary, a Catholic priest and member of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) became president of Gonzaga University. Seen as a visionary leader in the realm of educational theory, Leary was beloved at the university and oversaw the school during a period of growth.

But in 1969, Leary left Spokane abruptly. A regional Jesuit leader told the community that Leary had resigned for health reasons, and the priest was reassigned to other posts in the western United States. The university released a similar statement.

Thirty-seven years later, the real reason for Leary’s departure became public — the priest was a pedophile who’d molested several young boys and at least one Gonzaga student, the order later admitted. Back in 1969, Spokane police, fully aware of Leary’s monstrous behavior, didn’t arrest the priest. Instead, they gave him the opportunity to leave Spokane within 24 hours.

Leary went on to continue working in education, eventually founding the New College of California, a progressive university in San Francisco that was unaffiliated with the church, which eventually folded in 2008. He also launched innovative educational endeavors throughout California and was widely regarded as a pedagogical guru.

The Society of Jesus made the public aware of Leary’s misdeeds, the order settled with two of Leary’s victims for an undisclosed amount. Attorneys for those men said that one of them was abused as a Gonzaga freshman while serving as the priest’s driver in 1965. The other was a then-12-year-old boy who Leary found riding a bike in the neighborhood. The priest lured him to his office, where the boy was molested, attorneys say.

After the Society of Jesus made the public aware of Leary’s misdeeds, the order settled with two of Leary’s victims for an undisclosed amount. Attorneys for those men said that one of them was abused as a Gonzaga freshman while serving as the priest’s driver in 1965. The other was a then-12-year-old boy who Leary found riding a bike in the neighborhood. The priest lured him to his office, where the boy was molested, attorneys say. Gonzaga officials told the boy not to tell his parents about the incident.

When the news was revealed in 2006, Gonzaga sent out more than 55,000 letters to alumni describing Leary’s actions and encouraging any other victims to come forward. A decade later, you’ll find all the university’s past presidents listed on the Gonzaga website, with a corresponding photo popping up if you hover your cursor over a name. No photo comes up for Leary’s name, though.

Once upon a time, the very fate of an entire city seemed to hinge on a Nordstrom deal.

It was the mid-’90s. Downtown Spokane was dying, as stores like J.C. Penney had already fled. If Nordstrom, the sole anchor tenant of the struggling downtown core, left as well? That sort of blow could be fatal.

The Cowles family — owners of the Spokesman-Review and one of the city’s most prominent and wealthiest families — presented the promise of urban salvation: Convince Nordstrom to stay, and use that as the foundation to turn River Park Square into a gleaming, $110 million modern shopping mall.

The city of Spokane was more than willing to help, borrowing $23 million in HUD-backed federal loans to help with the mall’s construction, and selling $31.5 million in bonds to build the parking garage attached the facility.

If the garage lost money, the city would pay the difference.

As early as 1996, the Inlander had reported on multiple experts raising major red flags about relying on the parking consultant’s study used to justify the deal.

Indeed, the study turned out to be deliriously over-optimistic. The moment the ribbon was cut at River Park Square, the garage — and therefore, the city of Spokane — started hemorrhaging huge amounts of cash.

Feeling cheated, the Spokane City Council refused to pay part of what the deal said the city owed.

“I think people went into panic mode,” says Cooley. “The minute it didn’t work exactly as planned, we did the unthinkable. We didn’t pay our bonds.”

Defaulting on their loans, Cooley suggests, may have taken a big mistake and turned into a huge one. The
**2005: MAYOR JIM WEST’S INTERNET HISTORY BECOMES VERY PUBLIC**

It wasn’t just that the anti-gay mayor was attracted to men. Though that was a lot of it.

There had long been rumors. But the Spokesman-Review went to incredible, tabloidy lengths to prove them. The newspaper hired a consultant (code name: Moto-Brock) to pretend to be a 17-year-old boy and flirt — in explicit detail — with the anonymous account on Gay.com that Spokesman reporters believed was Spokane Mayor Jim West (pictured). It was only when Moto-Brock pretended to turn 18 that West agreed to meet him in person. The newspaper was there, secretly photographing the mayor.

The newspaper had everything it needed to show that the mayor had offered internships and volunteer appointments to the young men he’d met online. But it went even further, alleging that West may have molested boys in the mid-1970s.

The paper never could prove that element of the story, but it scarcely mattered: Social liberals saw a hypocrite, while social conservatives saw a pervert.

West was defiant. He refused to resign.

So the city rose up against him, recalling the once-popular mayor in a landslide. West died less than eight months later, due to complications following cancer surgery.

It’s impossible to know how the scandal would have unfolded differently in today’s landscape. On the one hand, a middle-aged mayor using city internships to lure teens he’s sexually interested in? Still scandalous.

But public opinion on few issues has changed as swiftly as it has regarding gay rights. A decade later, gay marriage was legalized in all 50 states. Today, West may still have hidden his attraction to men behind the wall of internet anonymity.

Or perhaps he wouldn’t have felt the need to. (DANIEL WALTERS)
2006–2012: SPOKANE COPS LIE ABOUT THE BEATING OF DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED JANITOR, AIDED BY CITY ATTORNEY

Within 10 seconds after Otto Zehm entered the now infamous Zip Trip, a white-haired police officer brandishing a baton rushed up behind him. Zehm, a developmentally disabled janitor, retreated and was knocked to the floor. He raised a two-liter Diet Pepsi bottle to defend himself from Officer Karl Thompson’s blows. He was tased and hogtied as he struggled on the floor. “All I wanted was a Snickers!” he shouted. Zehm died two days later in a Spokane hospital.

Spokane police defended Thompson’s actions. They claimed that Zehm “lunged” and “attacked” Thompson that night in March 2006. It would take months before the public would know the truth about what happened in the North Spokane convenience store. Thompson was convicted of excessive force and lying to cover it up, and was sentenced to time in a federal prison. Other officers on the force were found to have lied as well, and former Assistant City Attorney Rocky Treppiedi, who helped orchestrate the story that blamed Zehm for his own death, was eventually fired.

Treppiedi withheld crucial video evidence from police and the public. That footage, which Treppiedi told investigators “showed nothing of value,” revealed Zehm being blindsided by Thompson and using the soda bottle to protect himself from baton strikes. The ensuing legal battles, stretching until 2012, would also reveal Treppiedi’s efforts to feed Thompson’s legal team pieces of the federal investigation against him.

Assistant U.S. Attorney General Thomas Perez would later call the city and department’s handling of the investigation an “extensive cover-up” and a “violent abuse of power.” A federal prosecutor wrote in an email to the city that Treppiedi let his interests in defending Thompson and the city get in the way of his “search for the truth.”

Zehm’s death and the subsequent cover-up may be Spokane’s biggest scandal of the past decade. The department, now led by Chief Craig Meidl, who saluted Thompson after he was convicted, is still struggling to regain the public’s trust. (MITCH RYALS)

2015: RACHEL DOLEZAL TURNS OUT TO HAVE BEEN WHITE THIS ENTIRE TIME

Rachel Dolezal is not a black woman. But she played one in the pages of the Inlander. She also played a black woman as a lecturer for local universities, as a victim of several alleged hate crimes, as a leader of Black Lives Matter protests, and — most glaringly — as the president of the local NAACP.

And then the Coeur d’Alene Press exposed the truth, birth certificate and all. No, she hadn’t been born in South Africa. No, she hadn’t been punished with baboon whips as a child. And no, she wasn’t black.

Dolezal had darkened her skin, done up her hair, and invented a backstory, but she was born a white woman. And upon closer examination, many of her hate crime claims looked awfully suspicious, too.

Nationally, she was a sensation. She was a joke, a meme, fodder for a hundred think pieces about “transracialism.” She was a curiosity and an outrage.

But with time, fame and infamy are not so different. Next year, she’s coming out with a book, In Full Color. It’s written with the help of a white man previously best known for writing about the bluffs and deceptions of competitive poker.

Yet locally, to those who’d once defended her and marched beside her, her legacy is different. Before Dolezal was exposed, Spokesman-Review columnist Shawn Vestal had written a piece chiding those with “a tendency to dismiss and disregard” hate crime claims like Dolezal’s.

But a year later, watching with horror at how Dolezal’s lies have been cited by those doubting new hate-crimes claims, Vestal called her the “Northwest’s biggest gift to white supremacy since [Aryan Nations founder] Richard Butler.” (DANIEL WALTERS)