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Cynthia Crandlemere

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# Edward Hull CRUMP

## *A Political History*

BY CYNTHIA CRANDLEMERE

What famous people do you associate with Memphis, Tennessee? Andrew Jackson? Elvis? Dr. King? Danny Thomas? Each has a Memphis boulevard named after him, as does Edward Hull Crump. Who was Crump and what did he do to and for the city? The answer is ...a lot. In the words of the old Memphis work song: "The cotton's up and the river's down, and Mr. Ed Crump — he runs this town."

E. H. Crump, Mayor of Memphis, was a political boss extraordinary. He controlled Memphis completely for the first half of the twentieth century. Before city governments were reorganized to meet the needs of the growing population, many urban bosses sorted through the political chaos and provided projects for public improvement and care for the poor. At the same time, most were lining their pockets as well as those of their cronies. For others, the main goal was power. While Crump pursued and then maintained his power, Memphis benefitted in no small way.

The year of Edward Hull Crump's birth, 1874, was a terrible year for the city of Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis, on the fourth Chickasaw Bluff of the Mississippi River, was in the process of being annihilated by yellow fever. Three devastating epidemics struck in the seventies killing eight thousand, mostly poor Irish, and causing many businessmen and merchants to flee for their lives. Memphis' population plummeted, taxes soared, and in January, 1879, its charter was repealed.

The city's rise from these ashes is paralleled by the rise of the career of E. H. Crump. The peculiarities of each complemented the other in a way that made Crump's career possible.

Edward Hull Crump was born on a farm in Hudsonville, Marshall County, Mississippi, forty five miles southeast of Memphis. He was the third child of E. H. Crump Sr., of Fredericksburg, Virginia, who had come to Mississippi to farm the rich soil, and Mollie Nelms from Anson County, North Carolina, on the South Carolina border.

Crump's blazing red hair came from the

Nelm's side of the family and he truly believed that it destined him for greatness. His most popular nickname, the "Red Snapper," referred not only to his hair but also to his characteristically clipped speech. In later years, his hair turned a stark white, leaving him as distinctive looking as he had been in his youth. He always dressed extremely fashionably, if more than a bit on the showy side: boldly checked or striped pants, two-tone shoes, a carnation "as big as a saucer" in his lapel, tortoise shell glasses, one of his forty canes in hand, and usually, to top his outfit off, a straw hat.

Crump arrived in Memphis on the Illinois Central, at age seventeen, in 1894. He felt that the big city offered more possibilities for the future than did farming. Legend has it that he arrived in the middle of winter with only twenty-five cents in his pocket. Although this "rags-to-riches" story has its charm and the Crumps did suffer five difficult years after Crump Sr.'s death, they were far from poor, and it is impossible to believe that this seventeen-year-old boy arrived in Memphis with no plans or money for a place to spend the night.

He first found work at the Walter Goodman and Company Cotton Factory on Front Street, then (and still) the cotton hub of the world. In 1896 he became

bookkeeper for the Woods-Chickasaw Manufacturing Company, an old carriage and saddlery firm. He earned a promotion to cashier two years later, and in 1900 became financial secretary-treasurer. In 1902, he married socially prominent Bessie Byrd McLean, whose parents cosigned a \$50,000 loan, an amount which enabled him to gain control of the Woods-Chickasaw Company. The Woods-Chickasaw Company had been forced into receivership by the advent of the automobile, and also by a disastrous and outdated sales policy. Crump bought the company at an auction for a fraction of its worth, organized it on an up-to-date basis, and made it very successful. Having renamed it the E. H. Crump Buggy and Harness Company, Crump sold out after eight years to devote all of his time to public office.

Crump became involved in many social and business organizations, and then, to the dismay of his socially prominent relatives, in local Democratic politics. He often said he became hooked on politics the minute he cast his first ballot at age twenty-one. In 1905, mayoral candidate James H. Malone put Crump on his reform ticket as a candidate for the Lower Legislative Council of the Board of Public Works. Crump won, in part due to the then novel use of extensive newspaper



advertising, defeating a field of fourteen candidates.

Crump was disappointed with the lack of power he had in the Lower Council, however, and in 1907 he ran successfully for the Upper Council. To make himself known, he then staged and led a one-night-only raid on illegal gambling in the city. Not only was the raid no more than dramatic grandstanding, but it was also the last time, at least according to Crump's critics, that "reform" was heard of in the next half-century in Memphis.

In 1909 Crump became Memphis' first mayor under the new commission government system. This marked the beginning of his long, paradoxical, and unusual relationship with the black population of Memphis. The purchasing of poll tax receipts and the wholesale carting of blacks to the polls is an old story in the South, not invented by Crump, although probably never used more effectively. Crump "voted" the blacks for many years, until his strong power base made it no longer necessary. Blacks would be picked up in wagons on election day, some actually from northern Mississippi or Arkansas across the bridge. For three decades, they were given poll tax receipts out of a large basket and told how to vote. On their way out of the polls the blacks were given a silver dollar, a barbecue sandwich, a coke, a watermelon, or a bottle of local whiskey. An old story claims that after registering for the World War II draft, a black Memphian was said to complain, "Where's my barbecue and Coke?" The practice of using poll tax receipts for vote fraud was continued until the tax was repealed in 1949.

Crump's vital realization, made despite the deeply engrained plantation values of his youth, was that a black vote was worth the same as a white vote. As would happen again and again throughout Crump's career, he would hold mutually contradictory opinions, exposing in this instance his profoundly ambivalent feelings about race relations. On the one hand, according to Alfred Steinberg, author of *The Bosses*; "To Crump, Negroes were childish, useful for hard, physical labor under strict guidance, and easily given to tragedy and murder." On the other hand, however, although a segregationist, Crump did think that blacks were entitled to certain rights—to vote, if to his benefit, to be respected by the police, to have clean neighborhoods, and the use of the parks ("colored," of course).

It appears that Crump did truly love

people, although often in a paternalistic fashion, and that kindness generally tempered his racial attitudes. He was the first mayor of a Southern city to put blacks on the police force. He was also responsible for keeping the Ku Klux Klan out of Memphis, albeit for personal political reasons—they were a threat to the machine's local power.

Throughout his career Crump built an incredible "intelligence network" which eventually gave him control of virtually all offices in local civic clubs, including the Garden Club. His other main bloc of support was the city employees who increasingly owed their jobs to him. The Mayor's office enjoyed an enormous amount of patronage. There was no civil service as such and virtually every city employee owed his job to the whims of the mayor and his staff. In contrast to the stereotypical political boss, Crump would not allow the city employees to accept gifts, railroad passes or even free meals. He had all the city wagons painted bright butter yellow, so it would be obvious if anyone was using the vehicle when off duty. His personal honesty was unquestioned; he would not steal a nickel, just an election.

Crump won the mayoral election of 1909 by 79 votes, with a recount granting him an extra twelve. No story about Crump would be complete without the mention of the campaign song allegedly commissioned by Crump's supporters, by the young (and some say the first) Blues band leader — W.C. Handy:

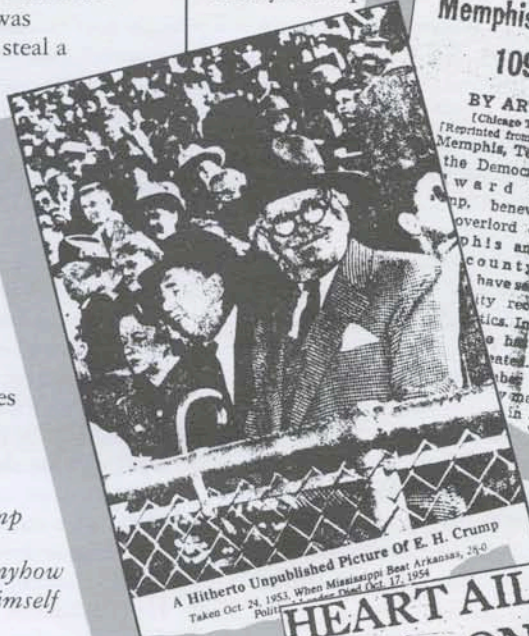
*Mr. Crump won't 'low no  
easy-riders here  
I don't care what Mr. Crump  
won't 'low  
I'm going to barrelhouse anyhow  
Mr. Crump can go catch himself  
some air*

Handy seemed to be implying that no one on Beale Street (the center of black life in Memphis) believed that Crump would carry out his "reform" campaign promises. The Crump machine did not object to the song, however, because its public performances were enjoyable, generating good will, and because Crump's control of the black vote did not depend very much on "issues" anyway. Handy later changed the title to "Memphis Blues," and it became a classic.

Crump won reelection in 1911, and at this time decided to broaden his power by

combining the sheriff's office with that of the mayor. His long-time enemy, a fiery Kentucky Irishman, C.P.J. Mooney of the local Commercial Appeal newspaper, was quick to inform Crump that state law barred individuals from holding two offices at once. When Crump announced that his close personal friend, John Reichman, would run for sheriff instead, Mooney revealed that Reichman could only run as a write-in candidate as he had declared his candidacy too late for inclusion on the ballot.

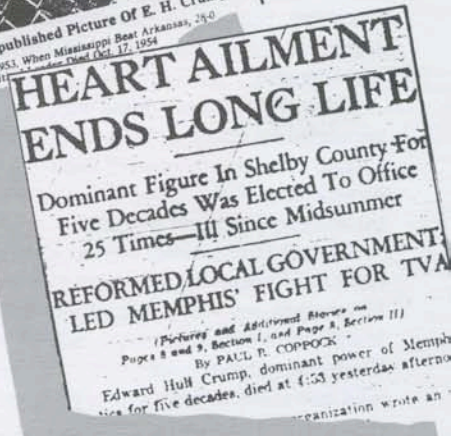
Reichman's election appeared an impossibility, at least to Mooney, considering Crump's and Reichman's need for the largely illiterate black vote. It was at this juncture that Crump perpetrated one of the most cunning outrages of his long career "and unfolded before a startled Memphis the slickest piece of adult education in Southern history." Crump



A Hitherto Unpublished Picture Of E. H. Crump  
Taken Oct. 24, 1951, When Mississippi Beat Arkansas, 29-0  
Political cartoonist: Thad. Oct. 17, 1954



**BOSSES COME,  
BOSSES GO, BUT  
NOT MR. CRUMP**  
Memphis Ed Counts Up  
109 Victories  
BY ARTHUR EVANS.  
(Chicago Tribune Press Service)  
[Reprinted from yesterday's late Tribune]  
Memphis, Tenn., July 13—The last  
the Democratic big city bosses.  
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th Jersey City, N. J.,  
York, the Pender-



**HEART AILMENT  
ENDS LONG LIFE**  
Dominant Figure In Shelby County For  
Five Decades Was Elected To Office  
25 Times—Ill Since Midsummer  
REFORMED LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
LED MEMPHIS' FIGHT FOR TVA

(Picture and Additional Stories on  
Pages 8 and 9, Section 1, and Page 8, Section 11)  
By PAUL R. COPPOCK  
Edward Hull Crump, dominant power of Memphis  
for five decades, died at 6:53 yesterday afternoon  
organization wrote an

sent dozens of his faithful, armed with chalkboards, into the black neighborhoods



and taught the blacks to "Rite it Rick." Campaign workers patiently taught "e before i," and hung huge street signs with the name Reichman on them. Trucks toured the neighborhoods with Reichman's name on the side. Reichman won by 8,996 votes. It is said that "even today (1953) in Memphis there are Negroes who can spell only one word — Reichman — even though they cannot spell their own names."

Crump's machine was not built overnight—it took a decade of alliance building, all over the state, and several jostles for power. The "Red Snapper" had effective control of all the city's wards and a good administrative record. He kept the tax rate low, but did nothing about the vice and corruption

interests. In this instance, as in many others, he paradoxically showed himself to truly represent the will of his constituency while being a big city boss at the same time. It seems clear, particularly from reading some of his correspondence, that Crump sincerely and fiercely loved his Memphis and wanted the best for it—and if not the best, then whatever the people wanted. Phrases like "will mean big things for Memphis" run throughout his letters. Prohibition did hand Crump an early defeat when an ouster law that had been developed with him in mind removed him from the mayor's job on November 3, 1916, for "neglecting his duties" by not enforcing the law. The battle cry was "Put a Crimp in Crump." Ironically, this had the long-term effect of teaching Crump that he could achieve even greater power behind the scenes, being less accountable to the public than he would be in an official, elected job.

In 1930 and again in 1932, Crump parlayed his ever-increasing political power into two terms in Congress, although, by his own admission, he did not much like being only a very small frog in a very big pond. Not a ground-breaking legislator, Crump's term in Congress is distinguished mostly by his strong support of every New Deal bill that came up. Such voting was in variance with that of most of his Southern colleagues because, as a rule, Southern Congressmen voted against what they saw as "radical" New Deal legislation. Crump's purpose, however, was to gain as many New Deal funds and programs as possible for Memphis and accompanying Shelby County. Franklin Delano Roosevelt is said to have always asked, when meeting someone from Tennessee: "Do you know my friend Mr. Crump?" He was aware that Crump could and did deliver

the votes of the entire state of Tennessee to whomever was in Crump's political favor.

While he was busy running the city and all his officials, Crump also found time to create another business, a very profitable insurance and real estate corporation still active and thriving today as E. H. Crump Companies, run now by his sons and grandsons. It amazed his enemies that, although due to the size of his company, he could easily have underwritten all the

city insurance, he "never did one cent of business with the city administration." Most city employees did, however, find it prudent to purchase at least some of their personal insurance from Crump and Company, Investment Bankers.

The "Red Snapper" continued to have absolute power in Shelby-Memphis for almost 50 years. In 1946, Time Magazine described him as "the most absolute political Boss in the US." Time continued:

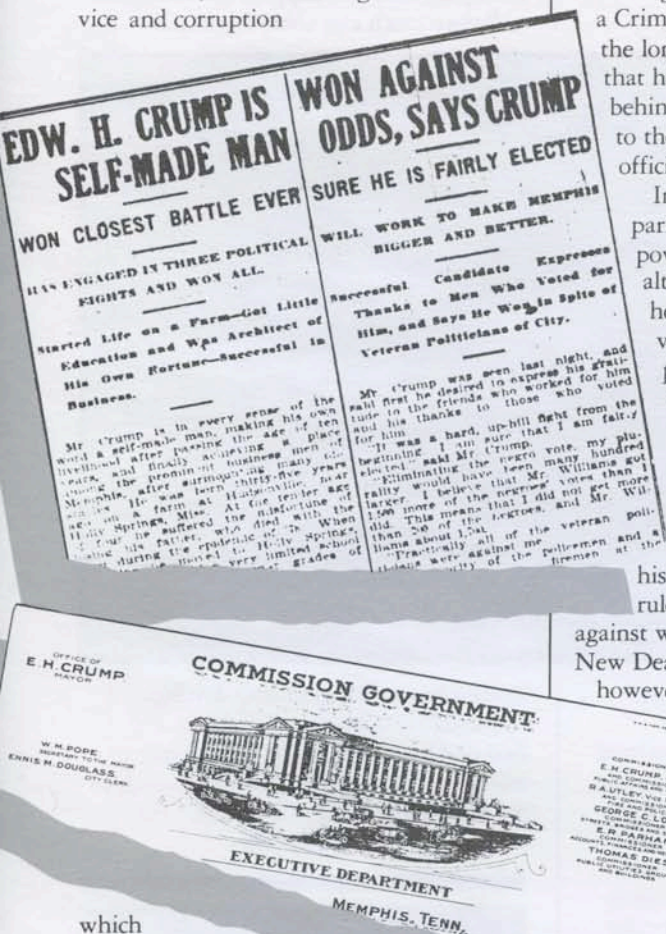
*"Since 1917 Crump has been responsible for the election of every Tennessee senator with the exception of five. He has consistently enjoyed a friendly governor and has usually controlled a majority of the delegates to the Legislature."*

Crump was neither modest about nor unaware of his absolute domination of the area. In 1938 he commented:

*I've never been defeated in my county of Shelby. I've been in politics thirty-seven years and have been elected nineteen times and have helped in sixty-four other elections without a setback here at home. I'll go to the bridge with my friends and I'll take 'em across the river and I won't let 'em drown. Go out and ask the folks.*

For twenty years, he kept a card index of every white voter. He knew how everyone voted, and furthermore, because he controlled every public job, he could pressure city workers and their families to vote for whomever he chose. It was also true, however, that he often gave the impression of having more power than he actually did by supporting strong candidates.

Over the years Crump was able to discard some of the more objectionable of his machine's practices in keeping with Lincoln Steffens' thesis that clever politicians will give the people the government for which they create a demand. Crump wanted power, not money, a stance which allowed him to be a "benevolent despot." Combined with his sincere love for Memphis and its people, this new approach to bossism resulted in many projects that really helped the people and the city including an extended street-paving program, school and hospital construction, public park extension, harbor development and noise abatement activities. Crump provided Memphis with clean, economical and efficient "honest" government replete with everything by the right of choice. The people of Memphis gave Crump power.



which certainly kept away businesses. Paradoxically, he did toughen up on vice and corruption, but not until 1939—possibly as a result of the plane crash death of his youngest son and political heir, John, which many believed made Crump turn religious.

But now, in the early years of his mayoralty, Crump, although nearly a teetotaler, clearly and publicly refused to support prohibition. He correctly felt that Memphis did not want it; he also collected much political support from the saloon



Crump's power also lay in his ability to "talk the language of any group," so that individuals felt that he truly represented them. It was only the upper crust who did not love him; they viewed him as a foreman for their interests. He had an incredible memory for names and faces. In an interview with the author, Dr. John E. Harkins remembered meeting Crump on the street several times when he was a child. He reported that although his mother was a simple, unknown widow with five children, Crump always remembered her name and asked if the family was well. Dr. Harkins is quite sure that if the answer had been "poorly," Crump would have wanted to help alleviate the problem immediately.

response: Crump accused Meeman, and the paper of "underhanded scheming treachery," and called Meeman a "lying cur and worse than that." He extended his vitriolic attack to Meeman's contemporary Joe Hatcher of the Tennessean, "this mangy, bubonic rat....Yes, anyone could take a young mouse with baby teeth and run you both in the river. Hatcher has a low, filthy diseased mind. He lies by nature and tells the truth by accident." In another letter of attack on the Tennessean, he used the word "rat" fourteen times and "liar" twenty.

Professor Gerald Capers, author of *Our Fair City*, suggests that Memphis viewed Crump as a sort of extra-legal city manager to whom they were happy to

for Memphis, but much good remains in this clean, attractive, people-minded city. Nothing lasts forever, however, and in the Senate campaign of 1948, that "bundle of calm," Estes Kefauver, proved to be Crump's undoing. Crump implied that Kefauver was the "darling of the Communists," and labeled him deceitful and cunning as a raccoon. Kefauver replied that he might be a 'coon, but at least he was not Mr. Crump's pet 'coon. He promptly donned a 'coon skin cap and turned the whole matter to his advantage. When it was obvious that Kefauver was about to destroy Crump's loyal local monopoly, discontented groups in Memphis rallied in support of Kefauver. Before much else could happen to

## Personal Political Record of E.H. Crump

1902-1904: Citizens Democratic ticket; Legislative, Senatorial and Flotterial Delegate.

1905: Delegate to the Democratic Gubernatorial Convention.

1906: Fire and Police Commissioner of Memphis.

1908: Independent Delegate to the Shelby Delegation to the State Legislature.

1909-1915: Mayor of Memphis.

1916-1923: County Trustee.

1924: Delegate-at-Large to the National Democratic Convention in New York City; Member of the Democratic Executive Committee of Tennessee.

1928: Delegate-at-Large to the National Democratic Convention at Houston, Texas.

1930: Congressman from the Tenth District, Shelby County, Tennessee.

1932: Congressman from the Tenth District; Delegate to the Democratic National Convention at Chicago, Illinois.

1936: Delegate-at-Large to the National Democratic Convention at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

1939: Mayor of Memphis.

1940: Delegate to the National Democratic Convention at Chicago.

1944: National Committeeman, for Tennessee; Delegate-at-Large to the National Democratic Convention at Chicago.

1948: Delegate-at-Large to the Democratic National Convention at Chicago; Joins Dixiecrats.

Another source of Crump's control was the threat of his legendary temper. Three commonly told stories of retaliation against private citizens who expressed open dissent included that of Frank Thompson, a local undertaker who found his hearses being tailed and given summonses for traffic violations, and the wholesale druggist who failed to get police protection during a successful AFL strike at his plant, and another druggist who found his shop boycotted because police were searching all his customers as they left the store due to the alleged suspicion that he was selling narcotics.

A favorite example of Crump's anger is the "mangy bubonic rat letter." After the death of Crump's enemy, C.P.J. Mooney of the Commercial Appeal, Edward J. Meeman of the Press-Scimitar took up the mantle of the editor who opposed the machine. He irked Crump many times, and in June of 1947 managed to earn this

give over their power. He claims that many maintained that this strange procedure was only a superficial departure from the democratic process, and was also an expression of the will of the public.

The public was also kept amused by Crump's famous attempts at personal showmanship. There was Crump Charity Day at the fairgrounds, Crump boat rides on the Mississippi for shut-ins, cripples and orphans and charity football games at E.H. Crump Municipal Stadium. Crump made a distinction between "honest" and "dishonest" graft and took the advice of another Boss, the great pundit of Tammany Hall, George Washington Plunkett, who believed that a politician who stole was a fool since a man with political pull had so many grand opportunities that there was no excuse for stealing a cent.

The debate still rages today as to whether Crump did more harm than good

weaken his machine, Crump developed a malfunctioning heart and diabetes. He died on October 16, 1955, just in time to make way for the other North Mississippi boy who made it big in Memphis. His name was Elvis Presley. ■



CYNTHIA CRANDEMERE will graduate with a degree in history from Bridgewater in May, 1988. In 1987 Cynthia was a recipient of the Centennial History Award given to the senior history major with the highest grade point average.