

UA Machine, former members remain shrouded in secrecy

The Associated Press

The monkey wrench of public scrutiny has entered the once smoothly oiled operation of the Machine, credited with secretly powering the start of many an Alabama political career.

But under recent scrutiny, names linked to the shadowy coalition of fraternities and sororities have been cropping up in print like the sudden shriek of grinding gears.

Several newspaper stories have recounted the Machine's illustrious if secretive past in the wake of campaign turmoil that prompted University of Alabama officials to call off Student Government Association elections Feb. 10-11.

The names of the Machine's most prominent forebears — the late U.S. Sens. Lister Hill and John Sparkman, chief among them — have shared space with a Who's Who of presumed Machinists denying membership or refusing to violate a sacred oath of secrecy.

By most accounts, the framework of the organization was formed in 1914 by Hill, who became the first SGA president on his way to a congressional career that spanned 46 years in Washington. Others say it was founded by Sparkman, who was elected student body president, later spent 42 years in the House and Senate and was the 1952 vice presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

Among others described as Most Likely Machinists Who Succeeded: Former Lt. Gov. Bill Baxley, who

also served two terms as attorney general; former Attorney General Don Siegleman; Democratic Party Chairman Bill Blount; former Congressman Walter Flowers of Tuscaloosa.

Former SGA presidents at Alabama in the Machine era: The late Federal Judge Robert Vance, who was chairman of the Alabama Democratic Party; former Lt. Gov. Albert Boutwell, who also was mayor of Birmingham; former Congressman Jack Edwards of Mobile; and former Sen. Donald Stewart of Anniston.

Among the non-Machine figures who came out of Alabama's campus political spawning ground, none has been bigger than former four-term Gov. George C. Wallace.

The Machine basically was a coalition of fraternities — later expanded to include sororities — that kept its membership private while exercising such clout in the public arena of campus electoral life that it was a virtual Establishment.

"You couldn't be involved in campus politics and not be involved with members of the Machine," said Loring Jones III, a Birmingham attorney who attended Alabama during 1971-75. He was president pro tem of the student Senate and student representative on the board of trustees.

"From the period of about 1917 until the early '60s, it was not even permitted for members to admit the existence of the organization," he said.

Some still may not.

Charles Morgan Jr., who graduated from the University in 1955 and became prominent for his work in landmark civil liberties cases during the 1960s and 1970s, was described by The Decatur Daily as a Machine member.

"I learned while practicing law, and prior to that time, that trust was something one did not breach," Morgan told the newspaper in an interview from his home in Destin, Fla. "If there were such a trust I wouldn't breach it. I would not acknowledge it by saying it (the Machine) ever existed."

But there's no doubt Morgan was a member, said former Birmingham Mayor David Vann. "I was the anti-Machine candidate," Vann explained. "The worst thing they did was take down my signs. Charles Morgan was head of the committee to take down the signs. He told me he was. He said he took down my signs every night."

Baxley called the Machine "more smoke than substance." He told The Mobile Register he was not a member. But he pointed a finger at his longtime associate, Huntsville lawyer Julian Butler, as a likely member.

Wayne Greenhaw, a Montgomery author and veteran political observer who attended the University, said the Machine could count Baxley and Butler both among its members.

"If those two guys weren't members, there was no such thing, and I know there was such a thing," he said.