

Chicago Plantation Manuscript Excerpt Introduction and First 2 Chapters

Introduction

There's a photo buried deep in a file cabinet in Chicago of a man I never met, an 8 x 10 glossy taken in the early 1960s by an unknown publicity photographer.

A tall thin Black man in a dark suit and tie stands in the center of a large, crowded room, holding a little Black girl of about four. The man is about forty and smiling, but the girl is afraid, worried about what's going to happen to her. A white nurse, who dominates the foreground of the photo, is pulling serum into a vaccination needle. Another Black man in a medical apron directs a young boy to a seat in front of the nurse.

It's a chaotic scene. Dozens of people are waiting while their children are vaccinated, mugging for the photographer as their images are captured. The flash from the camera washes out the nurse's face and the white tablecloth full of medical gear but illuminates its intended target perfectly: The man holding the girl stands in the center of all this chaos, happy.

He was a Chicago alderman named Benjamin Franklin Lewis. In Chicago, there are fifty Alderman on the City Council, the legislative branch of the government, elected from fifty wards, who serve four year terms.

A few months after this photo was taken, somebody surprised Alderman Lewis in his office late one evening, handcuffed him and gave him a shot of liquor. They made him lie face down on the carpet and put three bullets into the back of his head with a cheap 32-caliber pistol.

The girl Lewis was holding wasn't his daughter. He was smiling because he had used the power of his office to sponsor this vaccination clinic for the citizens of his ward. Many people think politicians are unredeemable, but I've seen them up close and found that most of them -- even the most rapacious and corrupt -- see themselves as servants of the public. When we citizens do a good deed or make a contribution to a charity we get a special thrill. They feel it, too.

The assassination of Alderman Benjamin Lewis dominated the headlines in the Chicago newspapers for a few weeks in March 1963. Although it was the last murder of an elected official in Chicago history, and is still officially unsolved, it is all but forgotten.

At least seven other people were murdered in the cause of civil rights in 1963, a list that includes NAACP Director Medgar Evers and four school-age girls from Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Benjamin Lewis's name is not inscribed with theirs in black marble on the Civil Rights Memorial in Atlanta, Georgia. He is remembered, if at

all, as a politician with compromised ethics who died under suspicious circumstances. This is not far from the truth. But it is not the entire truth.

His murder can tell us something new about how American democracy worked in the Northern civil rights struggle. The civil rights movement fought to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure their rights using boycotts, sit-ins, marches and other forms of non-violent protest. Benjamin Lewis fought for the same goals, using different tactics. We're all familiar with how white politicians worked to deny Black people political representation in Selma, Alabama, Jackson, Mississippi and a dozen other southern cities. This is the story of how white politicians worked to deny Black people representation in Chicago, Illinois.

It also tells us something about North Lawndale, a once densely packed neighborhood a few miles west of the Loop that sheltered a flood of Jewish immigrants from Europe before World War II and a second flood of Black immigrants from the South after the war. In 1968, after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., North Lawndale lost much of its commercial district to some of the most destructive urban rioting America has ever seen. In the decades that followed, it then lost most of its population and its housing stock to gang wars, slumlords and arson. Today it contributes far more than its fair share to Chicago's murder rate, now one of the highest in the country.

What would Lewis make of the events following his death? Would he be surprised that the white man Mayor Richard J. Daley appointed to rule Lewis's predominantly Black ward in 1963 would continue to run it for two more decades? That the assassin who forced Lewis to lie face down in his office at gunpoint would never be charged with his murder? What would he make of North Lawndale today, of the once bustling commercial strips along Roosevelt and West Madison that are now vacant lots, and the residential blocks off the arteries, some of which are also empty save for one or two lone row houses that remain standing at odd intervals? And what would Lewis make of me, a white writer who would show up fifty years after his death and try to discover who murdered him and why?

Chapter One

On February 27, 1963, a few hours before his assassination, Benjamin Lewis, the first Black alderman of Chicago's 24th Ward, left Cook County Democratic Party headquarters in the Morrison Hotel and drove to his new office on the West Side. Hall. Afterwards, Daley would recall the moment Lewis had appeared in his office, waving his ward tally sheets and laughing, proud that his ward had given him such a resounding vote of confidence.

Lewis was a tall man, about 6' 2" and rail thin, who wore his dark conservative suits with a slim rectangle of monogrammed handkerchief in the jacket pocket. In many of

his official photographs, he appears somber, even dour. In one, he sits stiffly in a folding chair, surrounded by two dozen Black precinct workers, the tallest and slimmest figure, and the only one who isn't smiling.

Although Lewis graduated from Crain Technical High School, one of the city's best, he spent the first twenty years of his life working in factories or driving a bus or cab. His career started taking a turn for the better when he became one of the first Black precinct captains in the predominantly Jewish 24th Ward, responsible for getting out the vote in a few blocks of the ward. When he joined the ward organization in 1950, the 24th was 87 percent Jewish. By 1957, it was more than 90 percent Black.

At that point, the Jewish political leaders who retained control of the ward needed to send a reliable Black candidate to City Council. A half-dozen Black attorneys felt they were better qualified for the position. But Lewis had learned Yiddish growing up in the city's Maxwell Street slum and addressed his political superiors as Mister Deutsch or Mister Horwitz. They, in turn, called him Ben.

So when it was time to bow to the inevitable, they chose a Black precinct captain who could teach his brothers how to cultivate and harvest votes for the greater glory of the 24th Ward, the mayor and the Cook County Democratic Party. I suppose they figured somebody without a professional degree was far less likely to give them trouble.

The North Lawndale area Lewis represented was one of the most crowded and crime-ridden neighborhoods in the city. It led the city in the number of unemployed, in welfare recipients, in illegitimate children.

In the first half of the century, Chicago's Black population had been forced to live in Bronzeville, a narrow five-square-mile ghetto on the city's South Side. But after a 1949 U.S. Supreme court ruling abolished restrictive real estate covenants, Black people started moving into white ethnic neighborhoods to the south and west. They were joined by thousands of former Black sharecropper families who began flooding into the city from Alabama and Mississippi. Many of them found their way to Lawndale, which offered cheaper rents than the South Side. At about the same time, the city also began tearing down Bronzeville tenements to build a new series of high rise public housing towers, causing even more families to head west.

The Lawndale housing stock was mostly brick two- and three-flats with larger multi-unit apartment buildings on the corners. As the number of Black people pouring into the neighborhood increased, an apartment that had housed three Jewish families would be cut up by real estate speculators into smaller kitchenette units with shared bathrooms that supported eight or more black families. At the same time, the local

school population grew, so the Board of Education assigned students to morning or afternoon shifts, leaving them to roam the streets for the rest of the day.

Teenagers organized themselves into street gangs, terrorized the local population and fought regularly over turf. Roosevelt Avenue became lined with saloons and street corner churches. Syndicate numbers runners raced through the neighborhood collecting bets twice a day. Every evening, Black streetwalkers would pick up white men cruising down Roosevelt in their cars.

As an alderman, there was little Lewis could do to address the ward's problems. He pleaded for better garbage collection and more building inspections, lobbied city officials for more health clinics, and raised money to provide uniforms and equipment for high school sports teams.

But as one of the city's six Black aldermen nominated by Mayor Daley, he was on a very short leash. The job of the "Silent Six," as they were called, was to sit in City Council and vote aye or nay when they got the signal from the chairman of the finance committee. Mayor Daley controlled forty-seven of the fifty votes in the City Council and ruled with an iron hand.

Although by 1963 Black people now made up more than 98 percent of the 24th Ward's population, political power was still firmly in the hands of the Jewish politicians who had controlled it since the 1920s. Over the course of three decades, they had mastered the art of political persuasion, creating a formidable political machine that generated consistently lopsided returns for Democratic candidates. An army of precinct workers were given "patronage" jobs in city government as long as they worked to deliver votes to their political patrons on election day. The 24th Ward precinct captains became leaders of the community by fixing streetlights and parking tickets and distributing matzos on Passover and sacks of coal to needy families. President Franklin Roosevelt had once called the 24th Ward "the greatest ward organization in the country."

When the ward turned Black, the Jewish ward leaders moved to homes in other areas of the city but held tight to their positions in the ward organization. They adapted their vote-getting techniques to the new immigrants from the deep South, many of whom were voting for the first time. Men would often receive chits for a few drinks at the local bar, women might get a few dollars worth of groceries or a pair of nylon stockings. The 24th became one of a half dozen West Side "plantation wards" where Black people supplied the votes and whites received most of the political benefits.

When Daley first ran for mayor in 1955, he carried the 24th Ward by more than six thousand votes, about twice the average plurality he received in white wards. The city's South and West Side Black wards supplied seventy percent of Daley's margin of victory. Daley was well aware that he owed his election to Black voters, but was afraid of the potential power of the Black vote. Most of the Black wards on the South Side were controlled by Congressman William Dawson, a Black politician who had wrested control of Bronzeville from whites in the 1930s by allying himself with the newly elected

Democratic mayor and organizing his own Black sub-machine fueled by patronage jobs and profits from the Black-run numbers business.

But when Ben Lewis came to power in the late 1950s, the West Side Black wards were still controlled by whites. Daley knew that if the South Side Black population and the West Side Black population ever united, they could make common cause with the Poles, the city's other dominant ethnic block, and throw him out of office.

Although Dawson still controlled most of the South Side Black vote, Daley did everything he could to limit Dawson's power by fomenting rivalries among the city's Black politicians. To keep the West Side Black votes under his control, he made sure I.Z. Horwitz called the shots in the 24th Ward. Horwitz was a county building engineer who had a real estate business on the side. He had served as a leading precinct captain in the 24th Ward organization for more than twenty years. Although Daley allowed Ben Lewis to be named 24th Ward Committeeman, making him the ward's official political leader, he made sure the key decisions were made by Horwitz and an executive committee made up mostly of loyal Jewish precinct captains.

As the de-facto committeeman, it was Horwitz, not Lewis, who had power to name the local police commander. When crime syndicate figures made monthly payoffs to protect their gambling operations in the ward, they made the payments to the local police commander and to Horwitz, not to Lewis. Horwitz also had the power to determine which precinct captain got a job in city government, serving court summonses, emptying parking meters or a thousand other sinecures. Although Horwitz was eager to recruit and train local Black individuals to serve as precinct workers, he allowed about thirty white, mostly Jewish, precinct captains to hold onto their higher-paying patronage jobs.

The Black precinct captains resented the fact that many of the ward's best patronage jobs were still going to whites who didn't even live in the neighborhood. On the South Side, Black wards were controlled by Black politicians. They believed the West Side deserved "home rule."

Lewis didn't have the political power to seize control of the ward. But he was keeping his eye on a new political opportunity emerging on the horizon. The West Side's white congressman, 84-year old Thomas O'Brien, had recently suffered a stroke. With 13,000 votes in his back pocket, Lewis was a shoo-in to replace him. Just a few days before his death, the front-page headline in the Chicago Defender, the city's Black newspaper, proclaimed that Lewis was "ready and willing" to become Chicago's second Black congressman.

Becoming U.S. Congressman would change the political equation in his favor. He would become undisputed leader of the burgeoning Black West Side, and, as the country's fourth Black Congressman, a national figure. Although he would still be dependent on Horwitz, Daley and the Cook County Democratic Party for the army of government-employed precinct workers who brought in the votes, he would be on a

much longer leash. The position would allow him to reward loyal precinct workers with jobs at the post office and elsewhere in the federal government that Daley did not control. As a U.S. Congressman, he would also have influence on federal prosecutions of crime syndicate gangsters on the West Side.

At a little after 5 p.m. in March 1963, Benjamin Franklin Lewis parked his red 1963 Buick Wildcat in a bus stop across the street from his office, and entered Carl's Restaurant, a Jewish deli that remained the neighborhood's most popular political gathering place.

He had soup, a hamburger, lima beans and a cup of coffee with two friends he saw there, a former precinct captain and a deputy sheriff. While they ate, Robert Shaw, another Black precinct worker, approached Lewis. Shaw mentioned the article in the Defender and asked Lewis about his plans to run for Congress.

"I'm just whittling my stick," Lewis told him, waiting for O'Brien to die or announce his retirement. As they all rose to leave, Lewis told his friends that he had two appointments in his office.

"I guess I better go because they are waiting for me."

The 24th Ward had recently leased a former bank building as its new headquarters, a move that signified its importance in the community. More than 200 people had been invited to an open house scheduled for Sunday. The lobby had 24-foot ceilings and Greek columns that supported a balcony that ran the length of the building. The main floor was decorated with pictures of Lewis and other Chicago politicians and scattered with folding chairs that had yet to be set up for the event. A curved staircase in front led to Lewis's second-floor office. It was well-furnished, with a modern curved desk, two upholstered chairs, a green leather couch and a small television. The walls were decorated with a large autographed drawing of President Kennedy and other political mementoes.

"There've been three of those neighborhood newspaper reporters who say they had a 5 p.m. appointment," his secretary told him, when he came into the reception area outside his private office. "But they left when you didn't show up on time."

"You should have kept those reporters waiting until I got back," Lewis scolded her. "I tried...I did!" she cried. "But after about forty-five minutes they just wouldn't wait any longer."

Ben harrumphed and went into his office where a few more minutes later, he met first with the owner and the ad salesman from Enterprise Press, a local community newspaper. When they asked Lewis to buy an ad, he referred them to Al Weinberg, the 24th Ward organization's accountant. He then received a phone call from Rev. Robert

Ford, pastor of the storefront Union Tabernacle Church, who wanted to stop by. Reverend Ford arrived a few minutes later and asked Lewis to contribute to his church benefit. Lewis told him to contact Weinberg as well. Later, Ford said Lewis “seemed in good spirits, jolly.”

At about 7:30, he received a call from Chicago police Sergeant James Gilbert, who called Lewis from his home. Gilbert later told detectives that he and the alderman discussed a minor police investigation he was conducting. At another point, he described it as “a personal matter.” Gilbert said that Lewis abruptly ended the call saying, “I'm sorry I have to hang up now.”

At about 8:45 p.m., Lewis made a call to Loretta Brown, a 38-year old receptionist who was one of Lewis’s many girlfriends and who was working late at her office. Brown said Lewis was happy about his victory and asked her to call him when she returned to her apartment on the South Side. When Brown got home at about 9:30 p.m., she called Lewis at his office but got no answer.

At about 10 p.m., James H. Brown, the building manager, went home. He said he heard the sounds of conversation and later the ringing of a telephone in Lewis's office that was never answered.

Chapter Two

I have only the slightest connection to North Lawndale. My father, Burton Kolman, the son of a Polish-Jewish immigrant, grew up in the back of his father's liquor store there in the 1930s. When my grandfather started making more money, he moved his family to an apartment on the more prosperous South Side.

My father was a rebellious young man with grades near the bottom of his high school class who had lost the vision in one eye to rheumatic fever. But his juvenile delinquency ended abruptly one summer evening when he was playing baseball with his friends on the beach. As the sun was setting, one of them threw him a fastball. It hit him in his good eye, blinding him. He was 16. My grandfather organized a group of neighborhood boys to read and study with him so he could finish high school and college.

Although my father eventually graduated first in his law school class at DePaul University, no law firm would give him a job. I suspect that was why he ran for alderman of the Eighth Ward in 1955, soon after I was born. Running for local office would give him opportunities to speak and make himself known, and could even lead to some kind of government job. At the very least, it might bring in a few clients for his struggling law practice.

He ran supporting Mayor Kennelly, the incumbent, who would soon lose to Richard J. Daley and the Cook County Democratic party. After my father lost the election, the newly elected mayor made a point of bringing his opponent's supporters back into the

fold. He asked my father to visit him in City Hall, took his measure and eventually appointed him to part-time positions on the city's Human Relations Commission, a do-nothing body designed to promote racial harmony, and the federal Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulated disputes in the transportation industry.

Daley dominated our dinner table discussions of politics in Chicago, that most political of cities. I heard my father say that most lawyers were simply elevated clerks, and that the real point of a law degree was to get entry into public affairs. All the adults in my family seemed to understand how to help him secure that entry. My grandfather's liquor store was a few blocks from Daley's bungalow in Bridgeport, and he made a point of dropping off a car trunk full of top shelf booze every Christmas. When my mother visited Europe, she brought Mrs. Daley a colorful shawl from Italy.

At one point, a reorganization of the Cook County Circuit Court required the appointment of about thirty new judges. My uncle Milt told anybody who would listen that adding a blind judge to the roster would help make the rest of Daley's political appointees look good. I'm sure my father and my uncle made several financial contributions to the Cook County Democratic Party over the years. In 1966, my father's photograph appeared in all the newspapers as part of the slate of new judges Daley had appointed.

All this was not lost on me, a precocious sixth grader in suburban Wilmette who read two Chicago newspapers and could name all the members of President Johnson's cabinet. I never understood exactly what my father did with my uncle most weeknights after work, but I assumed they were doing something political to further my father's career. I knew that Daley had created a powerful political machine that controlled forty-seven of the fifty seats in the City Council, and that he had complete control over city government. I knew that each of the city's fifty wards had dozens of precinct captains who got a city job in return for making sure their people voted for Daley and his candidates by wide margins. I knew that some people in government took bribes and stole votes and that a few went to jail for it. I also believed that Daley was somehow responsible for the plight of Chicago's Black population, who suffered from discrimination, substandard housing and poverty. I recognized that my father was connected with the Daley political machine, but I knew he wasn't corrupt. I figured that some people were, and some people weren't.

When my father died suddenly of a heart attack a year later, I had a chance to see Daley up close. He entered the funeral home with his entourage via the back door, paid his respects to my mother, and got back into his limousine. When I shook his hand, I couldn't help but stare at the wattles on his chin.

When she was questioned the day after the murder by police and reporters, Ella Lewis said she woke up about 4 a.m. at her home at 3949 W. Fillmore and checked the other bedroom, where her husband usually slept. When it was clear Ben had not come home the previous night, she called his office in ward headquarters.

They had been married for eight years. It was her second marriage, and Ben's third. While Ben was getting established in politics, she had worked and put all her savings into his career. But as he became more active in politics, they grew further and further apart. She didn't realize it at first. It just happened. She wasn't sure how or why.

On Tuesday, election day, she had taken some chicken to the precinct workers in the 19th precinct near their home. She didn't go to ward headquarters to celebrate with him. He didn't bother to call her to say he'd won. He didn't even say anything when he came home, either. He just went to his own bedroom and went to bed.

He never told her where he was going anymore, or where he had been or what he had done. When she tried to talk to him about being so aloof, he would walk away. If Ben came home late at night, she would get together a dinner for him unless she was watching a television program. Television took up a good part of the time she spent alone. When she asked him if he wanted a divorce, he walked out the door without answering her.

If there were other women in his life, they never called him or came to the house. He was as closed-mouthed about that as he was about his other affairs. She stayed with him because she had everything to gain and nothing to lose. She felt she was nothing but a housekeeper in their eight-room brick home.

Three or four months before the election, she told him she thought she heard somebody walking on the roof. He bought a .25 caliber pistol for her after that. And a few weeks later, he appeared to be extremely nervous, but never gave any reason. When the doorbell rang one night, he insisted on answering it alone. After they had an argument one night he told her, "You better hope nothing happens to me."

At about 7:30 a.m. the day after the election, she called his office and then Carl's Restaurant to see if he'd shown up for breakfast. Then she waited an hour and a half and called his office again. At that point, a police officer answered the phone.

"There's been an accident," the officer told her. "He's been hurt pretty bad."

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"I don't know what I did then," she told reporters later. "I just ran up and down the stairs."

From everything I'd read, Captain Daniel Dragel, the head of the Chicago Police Department Crime Lab, was one of the most respected professionals in the police department. He had degrees in pharmaceutical chemistry and law, had created one of the country's most modern crime labs from scratch and cared more than anybody in the department about protecting the chain of evidence.

So, he must have been frustrated by what he found when he showed up at Ben Lewis's office. If there were any prints on the telephone handset, they were long gone. One of the beat cops who found the body had used the phone to call his desk sergeant and then had answered a call from his wife. Joseph Brown, the janitor who originally found the body, used the phone to notify other people.

The engraving on the handcuffs on his body said Harvard Lock Co. Not the brand issued to the Chicago Police Department. And why would the murderer use handcuffs? Why would you need to use handcuffs if you were holding a 32-caliber automatic?

Every murder was different. That's what made the job interesting. Dragel had worked dozens of ghetto murders, with crumpled bodies splayed out on the floor, stray bullets lodged in a 180-degree arc across the kitchen, bloody palm prints on the overturned chairs, and, as a crime lab bonus, bloody footprints leading down the stairs. This wasn't like any of those. It wasn't a murder, it was a professional assassination. He found Alderman Lewis lying face down on the thick carpeting, his arms extended above his head and handcuffed. His right cheek was resting on his right arm, beside a green leather cushion from the sofa that had been placed over his head.

Well, the professional killers wouldn't have left their prints on the phone anyway. There were a couple of blood spatters on the television, but the fingerprints on the handcuffs had been carefully wiped clean.

Dragel bent down again to look at the entry and exit wounds, making sure the hem of his pant leg didn't touch the bloody halo of carpet surrounding the Alderman's head. Lewis had been shot three times in the cerebellum, on the right side, with the bullets emerging through his face. One shot emerged below Lewis's left eye, another made its exit below his right eye, and a third shot penetrated the skull and came out of the right temple. Powder burns on his head indicated that one of those shots had been fired at close range. Four .32 caliber bullets and their shells were still lying where they fell on the office floor.

It would be up to Andrew Tomey, the Cook County coroner, to determine the time of death, but the body was cold, so it must have happened sometime last night.

The detectives had already interviewed Joseph Brown, who had arrived that morning at 8:58 a.m.. Brown noticed that a light had been left on in Lewis's office and let himself

in to turn it off. When he saw Lewis on the floor, he picked up the couch cushion covering his head and ran downstairs to hail a passing police car. Patrolmen James Jackson and Eugene Belton followed Brown upstairs. Officer Belton happened to be a high school classmate of the alderman and identified the body. After searching for a heartbeat, he called his desk sergeant, who called homicide.

There was no sign of any struggle. The alderman's body bore no bruises or marks. His overcoat was hanging in his office closet and his rubber galoshes were positioned neatly just outside the door. His pockets had not been rifled and his office papers had not been disturbed. He was still wearing an expensive diamond ring and watch on his left hand and his wallet contained \$38.46 in cash. Three cigarette stubs lay in the ashtray. A radio was still playing softly in the bookcase.

Whoever had killed him had entered through the alley in back of the building, passed through a narrow corridor, walked through the empty meeting hall and climbed the stairs to his office. They left the same way, leaving two drops of blood on the stairway.

The building was already crowded with police brass: Tom Killacky, Chief of the Detective Division, Francis Flanagan, Chief of Homicide, and Tom McNulty, Commander of the Fillmore district. The Area 6 homicide dicks had lined up the ward precinct captains and the alderman's staff for questioning. His wife had come and gone, sobbing. So did his daughter from his first marriage, who worked as a schoolteacher. Now the press guys were waiting their turn to see the body. A couple hundred people from the neighborhood had gathered outside on Roosevelt Avenue in the falling snow, where a couple dozen local cops had been called to keep order. Homicide would be running the show, and the coroner had the body, but the crime lab owned the material evidence. Dragel could make educated guesses about the murder weapon from the striations on the shells. The blood spatters on the TV and the stairwell would probably match the alderman's blood type. The broken lock wouldn't tell him much. But there was also the crime scene itself, which helped construct the narrative.

The killer or killers gained entry by popping the lock in the alley. They went up the stairs and confronted the alderman in some fashion. At some point, they handcuffed him. But why? So he'd be easier to control? Did that imply a single killer?

At some point, he was shot in the back of the head at close range. Was he sitting in his chair and then did he fall forward onto the carpet with his hands over his head? Or was he ordered lie down on the carpet? Did the killer have some sort of discussion with Lewis before he was shot? Did that explain the handcuffs? Was there some kind of negotiation? Or request for information?

The whole thing was professional, but it didn't feel syndicate. They would never have bothered with the handcuffs. They would have just hit him on the street, like everybody else. What was the point of the handcuffs? Were the killers trying to communicate some kind of message?