

The Golden Age of Nucky

Joe Hamilton was the back-up driver. Louie Kessel didn't leave town often but when he did, Joe was first choice to drive the boss around. This night the stops were a baseball game, a wake, and a Fourth Ward Republican Club meeting, followed by dinner at Babette's.

A few innings of the ball game was enough and he was ready to leave. When Joe returned with the limousine there was a young woman with the boss. Joe got out to open the door and was told to drive out of town to Absecon before heading to the wake. The rest is better told by Hamilton. "There I am driving along talking to Mr. Johnson with a pretty little tart seated next to him. The next thing I knew she's got her head in his lap and Mr. Johnson's grinnin' from ear to ear." The boss never missed a chance to mix pleasure with business.

For nearly 30 years, Enoch "Nucky" Johnson lived the life of a decadent monarch, with the power to satisfy his every want. Tall (6 feet 4 inches), trim, and broad-shouldered, Nucky Johnson was a ruggedly handsome man with large, powerful hands, a glistening bald head, a devilish grin, friendly gray eyes, and a booming voice. In his prime, he strode the Boardwalk in evening clothes complete with spats, patent leather shoes, a walking stick, and a red carnation in his lapel. Nucky rode around town in a chauffeur-driven, powder blue Rolls Royce limousine, maintained several residences, hosted lavish parties for hundreds of guests, used the local police as his private gendarmes, had a retinue of servants to satisfy his every want, and an untaxed income of more than \$500,000 per year. His antics were reported widely and at the height of his reign he was a national phenomenon, hailed as "the Czar of the Ritz." Despite his notoriety, Johnson was a product of Atlantic City who couldn't have flourished anywhere else.

Enoch Lewis Johnson was born on January 20, 1883, in Smithville, a small bayside farming village several miles north of Atlantic City. The son of Kuehnlle ally Sheriff Smith Johnson, Nucky

spent his childhood moving between Atlantic City and Mays Landing according to his father's rotation as sheriff. During the years as sheriff, Johnson and his family lived in the sheriff's residence next to the county jail. The years as undersheriff, the Johnsons lived in a rambling frame home in the resort so the sheriff and his wife could enjoy the social life of a booming vacation center.

Nucky's parents, Smith and Virginia Johnson, had used politics to escape the backbreaking work of farming. Election to sheriff was the ticket to an easy life and status in the growing resort. Smith Johnson was a broad-chested bear of a man with a thick black mustache. Standing six-foot-two, weighing 250 pounds, and having paws for hands, he had the strength to lift a wagon. "No one *ever* gave Sheriff Johnson a hard time." Virginia was a tall, slender, beautiful woman with long, auburn hair, and hands with fingers meant to play the piano. She was always exquisitely dressed and was "the kind of woman that comes to mind when you think of an elegant Victorian lady." Virginia was every bit the politician in her own right. "She was big on charity, organizing fundraisers and whatnot, for the poor people, but she always made sure they knew the help came from the Republican Party."

Through his parents, Nucky was immersed in politics long before he was old enough to vote. As a child and a young man, Nucky watched his father make a plaything of government. The law forbidding the re-election of a sheriff was supposed to prevent an individual from accumulating too much power. But the cozy relationship between Smith Johnson and Sam Kirby made a mockery of the re-election ban contained in the state constitution. The sheriff's employees were handpicked solely on the basis of patronage and the fees his office collected were reviewed by no one. Smith Johnson's tactics and the success he attained taught his son early on that government and the electoral process were no more than a game to be mastered for personal power. Nucky also learned that in Atlantic City, a politician would only have power so long as he was prepared to bend the law when needed to help the resort's economy. Smith Johnson and Louis Kuehnle were close friends and the sheriff's favorite hangout was "the Commodore's" hotel. There were many evenings when, while still a boy, Nucky sat quietly next to his father at the Corner and listened to the stories and strategies of Kuehnle and his cohorts. Kuehnle's hotel was the hub of Republican politics in Atlantic City and the place where important political decisions were

made. Nucky may not have understood all he heard, but he was there, and while still in his teens began to learn the rules of the game. By age 19, Johnson made his first political speech, and as soon as he was old enough to vote at age 21, his father appointed him undersheriff. He completed high school, attended a year at a teacher's college, and put in a stint at reading law in the office of a local attorney, but it was politics he wanted.

Nucky also wanted the hand of a tall, slender, graceful girl with whom he fell in love at first sight as a teenager. Beautiful and soft-spoken, "Mabel Jeffries was the daughter of the Postmaster in Mays Landing and they knew each other from childhood—Nucky just adored her."

Nucky and Mabel lived in an era when teenage sweethearts married and remained faithful to one another until death. It was Mabel's enrollment at the Trenton Normal School (a teaching college for girls; now the College of New Jersey) that had prompted Nucky to go to college himself. Their schools were near one another and they met each day after class at a campus ice cream parlor where they made plans for their future together. A year of college—away from Atlantic City—was all Nucky could handle. They agreed he should return home and begin his career in politics. Mabel stayed on at school and earned her teaching certificate. After her graduation in June 1906, they were married and moved into an apartment in Atlantic City. By the time of his marriage, Nucky had replaced Sam Kirby as his father's undersheriff. At the next election in 1908, Nucky was elected to sheriff, with his father as undersheriff, at the age of 25, making him the youngest person in New Jersey to hold the post. Like many other locals of their social standing, Nucky and Mabel speculated in the booming Atlantic City real estate market and did well for themselves. They were on their way to a comfortable life together until tragedy destroyed their plans.

Mabel had always been a fragile person, but in the winter of 1913 she came down with a cough she couldn't shake. At Nucky's insistence, she went to a local physician who diagnosed her illness—tuberculosis. The disease was fairly common in the resort, but only the strong or wealthy survived it. On the advice of Johnson's family doctor, he traveled with Mabel to a sanitarium in Colorado. Despite his duties as Atlantic City's new boss, he was prepared to stay until she was well. But it was no use. Three weeks later, Nucky rode home

in a railway baggage car, seated next to Mabel's coffin. At the age of 28, she was gone. "My father said that Nucky mourned Mabel for months. Her death, like it was, broke his heart. After she was gone, he was a changed man."

With Mabel's death, politics became his life. While Nucky's term as sheriff was marked by his indictment for election fraud, his acquittal made him a local hero and generated support among the resort's politicians. Instead of smashing the Commodore's machine, Woodrow Wilson helped to make room for a new boss. Rather than continuing in the sheriff's office, Nucky went in another direction—control of the organization. With Kuehnle's blessing and the help of his father, Nucky became secretary to the Republican County Committee. It didn't have a salary, but it was more powerful than being chairman. It was the secretary who called meetings, established the agenda, and made the final call on who was eligible to participate in the organization.

He made his next move in 1913, shortly after Mabel's death. Again with his father's backing, Nucky was appointed county treasurer, one of the offices designated by Kuehnle for funneling graft payments on public contracts. The treasurer's office gave him access to money and, in turn, power over the organization and the selection of candidates. The position paid the same salary as sheriff but was easier to manage. An interesting note to Nucky's selection as treasurer is the fact that there was a minority faction who opposed him. They demanded, as a condition to his assuming this new position, that Nucky be compelled to reconcile the sheriff's account. He had mishandled the funds received by his office and his critics knew he owed thousands of dollars to the county for overcharges. Rather than consent to an accounting, Nucky proposed a single lump sum payment of \$10,000, which was paid in cash four days later.

County treasurer was the only political position Nucky held for the next 30 years. As with the Commodore while he was boss, Nucky chose not to seek elected office. He believed that a boss should never be a candidate. Nucky had learned much from Kuehnle and he believed, "Running for election was beneath a real boss."

Crucial to his power and the control of the Republican organization, he learned how to manipulate Atlantic City's Black population. He continued the Commodore's private welfare system, but the assistance he gave Blacks went beyond what Kuehnle had done;

come the winter he was their savior. Long stretches of unemployment in the off-season could be devastating. Johnson saw to it that the Northside had food, clothing, coal, and medical care. “If your kid needed a winter coat, all you had to do was ask—maybe it wouldn’t fit but it was warm. If the grocer cut off your credit, the ward leader told you where to shop on the party’s tab. The same was true if someone needed a doctor or a prescription filled.” In return, he was loved by the Black community and looked on as a “White god.” Nucky Johnson “owned” the Black vote and when a large turnout was needed to produce the right election results, they never failed him.

Johnson understood the need for controlling the flow of money to the candidates. With a stranglehold on the money there was no fear of reformers getting into office. To remain boss, he needed an uninterrupted flow of cash. He transformed the system of bribes that existed at the time. Under the Commodore, bribes had been paid in line with a “gentleman’s agreement” between the Republican Party and the vice industry. Under Nucky, protection money paid by Atlantic City’s racketeers became a major source of revenue for the business of politics. “With Nucky, the payments weren’t voluntary. You paid or he shut you down.”

The gambling rooms, whorehouses, and illegal saloons were vital to Nucky and his town. Without a flourishing vice industry, Atlantic City would lose an important competitive edge for attracting visitors, and the local Republican Party would lose the money needed to continue its dominance. An important lesson Nucky learned through witnessing Kuehnle’s destruction at the hands of Woodrow Wilson also required large amounts of cash. Nucky knew he’d never be safe remaining a local boss. He had to become a force statewide if he and the resort were to avoid future attacks from Trenton. His opportunity came in 1916.

In the gubernatorial election of 1916, Nucky supported the candidacy of Walter Edge. An Atlantic City resident and product of the Kuehnle machine, Edge had served in the state assembly and was elected senator from Atlantic County in the election of 1910: the election made infamous by the Macksey Commission. Edge was as honest as could be hoped for from the Atlantic City organization. He was a capable legislator and in 1912 was selected majority leader of the state senate, having gained the respect of the state Republican organization.

Walter Edge was Atlantic City's answer to Horatio Alger. Born in Philadelphia, he moved to Atlantic City as a child when his father's position with the railroad was transferred. Like other self-made men of his day, Edge pulled himself up by the bootstraps to acquire his wealth through the ownership of a local newspaper and a public relations firm. Edge continued his business success into politics and went on to hold more influential positions than any resort politician, becoming Governor, U.S. Senator, and Ambassador to France. He was an intimate of Warren G. Harding and narrowly missed becoming his vice president. While Edge later disavowed his ties to Kuehnle and Johnson, he needed their support. Despite his personal wealth, he couldn't have been elected from Atlantic County unless he was loyal to the Commodore and his Atlantic City machine; proof is Edge's choice of Nucky as his campaign manager for governor. "Edge was a stuffed shirt, but he knew where to go when he needed something done in politics—Nucky Johnson."

Edge's opponent in the Republican primary was the wealthy Austin Colgate, heir to the toothpaste fortune. The primary was hotly contested and, in a time when there were no campaign finance reports, Colgate spent his money freely. Nucky helped Edge by raising the funds needed to wage a statewide campaign and by using his skill as a powerbroker to gain support for Edge from an unexpected source.

There was no contest in the Democratic primary; the candidate was Jersey City Mayor Otto Wittpenn. A reform mayor, Wittpenn was a headache for Hudson County Democratic boss Frank "I am the Law" Hague, who decided it was time for Wittpenn to move up and out—out of Hague's way. Frank Hague was becoming a force in Democratic politics at about the same time Nucky was making his move to prominence as a Republican. Hague was the son of immigrant Irish parents, born in the "Horseshoe Section" of Jersey City in 1871. Despite having neither an education (he was expelled from school in the sixth grade) nor a family name to bolster him in local politics, Hague became a leader while still a young man. One step at a time, he amassed power as he went from constable to custodian of City Hill to the office of street and water commissioner. Like Nucky, Frank Hague branched out into state politics not because he wanted statewide power, but rather because it was useful to have the influence of state government to safeguard his city's interests.

When the election of 1916 rolled around, there weren't any Democrats whom Hague trusted enough to support for governor, making him ripe for an overture by Nucky. Prior to the 1947 State Constitution, a governor couldn't succeed himself and when Wilson left Trenton for Washington, he was succeeded by James Fiedler, a party hack from Jersey City who happened to be president of the Senate at the right time. Hague controlled Fiedler and supported him in the election of 1913; however, come 1916, Hague could find no one to support. At Nucky's prompting and with a pledge of cooperation from Edge, Hague instructed his people to "crossover" and support Nucky's candidate in the primary. Hague then abandoned Wittpenn in the general election. Wittpenn was a pawn in Hague's and Nucky's game, and Walter Edge became governor. This was the first of many occasions when Nucky and Hague put aside party differences to work for their mutual interests.

As governor, Edge dutifully rewarded Nucky by appointing him clerk of the State Supreme Court. "Can you imagine that, a character like Nucky Johnson, the head clerk to New Jersey's judiciary." Johnson continued serving as Atlantic County Treasurer despite the fact that both jobs were supposed to be full-time. The position of clerk meant little to Nucky, but it gave him an excuse to be in Trenton and to begin making contacts in the state Republican organization. At the age of 33, having a close ally in the governor's chair and the power to dispense favors beyond Atlantic City, Nucky had arrived as a force in statewide politics.

At about the same time Atlantic City was striving to move beyond being merely Philadelphia's Playground into a national resort, the city's popularity and, with it, Johnson's power, were given an enormous boost. In 1919, with Woodrow Wilson in the White House, Victorian morality won a major victory with the adoption of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Volstead Act. Woodrow Wilson, the reformer, was again unwittingly advancing the career of Nucky Johnson along with hundreds of other racketeers. "Prohibition" banned the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors—it was doomed to failure. For decades, the Anti-saloon League, and before it, the National Prohibition Party, had been waging a single-minded campaign to shut down the liquor industry. With Wilson as president, the Prohibitionists finally had someone who would listen to them. The 18th Amendment was

adopted by the required three-fourths of the states within a single year. The Amendment had been written into the Constitution and scheduled to go into effect in a few months when Hague's candidate, Edward I. Edwards, was elected governor. During the campaign, Edwards pledged, "I intend to interfere with the enforcement of Prohibition in this State." Thanks to Edwards, New Jersey was the last state to ratify the Amendment, doing so after it had been in effect for two years.

That so many people in power could take leave of their senses by supporting a law so utterly unenforceable stands as a monument to the ignorance of single-issue politics. It's the classic example of the "law of unintended consequences." While Prohibition reduced the general availability of alcohol, it greatly increased the money available for political corruption and organized crime. Otherwise law-abiding citizens refused to give up the pleasure of an occasional drink and got their booze from illegal suppliers. An authority on Prohibition, Al Capone once said:

I make my money by supplying a public demand. If I break the law, my customers, who number hundreds of the best people in Chicago, are as guilty as I am. The only difference between us is that I sell and they buy. Everybody calls me a racketeer. I call myself a businessman. When I sell liquor, it's bootlegging. When my patrons serve it on a silver tray on Lake Shore Drive, it's hospitality.

Selling liquor unlawfully was nothing new in Atlantic City. Resort tavern owners had violated the state's Bishops' Law for years by serving drinks on Sunday. If they could get away with it one day a week, why not seven? "Prohibition didn't happen in Atlantic City." As far as Atlantic City was concerned, the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution never existed. While other cities had speakeasies and private clubs, the sale of alcohol in the resort continued as usual in taverns, restaurants, hotels, and nightclubs. You could buy liquor in drugstores, the corner grocery, and the local farmer's market. The resort was more than an outlet for illegal booze, it was a major port of entry for foreign-produced liquor. Large "mother ships," bearing thousands of cases of whiskey and rum, anchored off the coast where they were greeted by speedboats, which were little more than empty hulls with twin motors. Cases of liquor were unloaded all along the

island, with speedboats pulling into the bay near a city firehouse where they were greeted by the local firemen who helped unload the booze. "Everybody helped out. If you worked for the city you could count on one time or another working a night shift and being told to go to such and such place and help unload a boat. You weren't supposed to know what it was but everybody did."

It was the Coast Guard's job to stop the flow of imported whiskey. More often than not, it was unsuccessful. In one incident, four coast guards were arrested on charges of assault with intent to kill for shooting at a rumrunner. Daniel Conover had refused to stop his boat in the Inlet at 2:00 A.M. on a May evening in 1924 when ordered to do so by Chief Petty Officer Edward Robert. Shots were fired and Conover was caught with 75 cases of liquor in the captured boat. Atlantic County Prosecutor Louis Repetto arrested Chief Robert and his three crewmates charging them with abuse of their authority for using firearms. "To my mind" he said, "the Federal men are as guilty as is the individual who uses a pistol without provocation. An officer may fire only in pursuit of persons guilty of felony. Rum smuggling comes under the designation of a misdemeanor." This wasn't an isolated incident. There were dozens of reported occurrences during the 1920s when local law enforcement authorities were used to obstruct federal officials attempting to secure compliance with Prohibition.

The uninterrupted flow of booze enhanced the resort's standing among vacationing businessmen. "You gotta understand, nobody did it the way we did here. Sure you could get booze in New York or Philly, but it was always in a speakeasy you know, hush, hush. Here it was right out in the open, and that made us real attractive to businessmen looking for a place to hold a convention."

As Nucky himself once said, "We have whiskey, wine, women, song, and slot machines. I won't deny it and I won't apologize for it. If the majority of the people didn't want them, they wouldn't be profitable and wouldn't exist. The fact that they do exist proves to me that the people want them."

Because of its willingness to ignore Prohibition, conventioneers flocked to Atlantic City and the resort became the premier convention center of the nation. This enormous success in attracting conventions resulted in the decision to build the present day Boardwalk Convention Center. Architecturally, the old Convention Hall isn't

much to look at, but when it opened in May 1929, it was the largest and only building of its kind in the world. For the people of its day, it was one of the wonders of the world. It was hailed across the nation as “the” modern convention facility. The hall was constructed without roof posts and pillars; the building’s trusses had a span of 350 feet and at the time were the largest ever used anywhere. The construction materials consisted of 12 million tons of steel, 42,000 cubic yards of concrete covering more than seven acres. Its subbasement is more than 26 feet below high tide level and is anchored with 12,000 30-foot-long pilings. In its day, it was an engineering marvel.

The construction of Convention Hall was Nucky’s commitment to a 12-month economy through conventions. Nucky didn’t need a market study to know it would be a success. Under Nucky’s direction and that of his handpicked mayor, Edward Bader, Convention Hall was constructed at a cost of \$15 million. Such an expenditure in 1929, by a city of some 65,000 residents, could not have been made without the stimulation to the resort’s popularity caused by Prohibition. And as the resort grew in popularity, so, too, did Nucky’s power.

Prohibition raised the political ante in Atlantic City. When a community is thriving, everyone wants power. This was especially true in the resort where the political spoils system was woven into the fabric of the community. With the prosperity stimulated by Prohibition, the competition for local office became intense. One such contest was the city commission election in 1924. It was a pivotal election that affected resort politics for nearly two generations.

The 1924 campaign was a bitter one. It featured two Republican slates: one headed by former Mayor Harry Bacharach and the other by incumbent Edward Bader. Bacharach had been a popular mayor serving from 1916 to 1920. At the end of his second term, he chose not to seek re-election, and Bader became mayor. Bader made thousands of friends while in office and when Bacharach decided to make a comeback, the contest put Nucky on the spot. The hostility between Bader and Bacharach divided the community, and there was nothing Nucky could do to prevent them from clashing. Johnson withheld his support, playing cat and mouse with both candidates; he liked both men and could have worked with either of them. Finally, he struck a deal with Bader and agreed to back him.

Nucky knew the election would be close and went looking for votes outside of the Republican Party. The local Democratic Party

had its start with the election of Woodrow Wilson as governor, but it never amounted to much. In the '24 election, the Democratic slate didn't have a chance; their candidates could attract little more than 2,000 votes. Nucky went to the local Democratic leader, Charles Lafferty, and offered to put a Democratic candidate on Bader's slate. At Nucky's prompting, Lafferty chose Harry Headly and the first fusion ticket was formed. Headly was not really a Democrat; he had been a Republican ward worker prior to switching parties to become a candidate. Lafferty and the Democrats turned out for Bader amid Election Day brawling and charges of election fraud. Receiving more than 1,000 illegitimate votes, cast by floaters brought in by train from Philadelphia, the Bader slate was victorious.

The arrangement between Johnson and Lafferty became a permanent fixture in resort politics with Nucky and his successor controlling the Democratic Party for the next 40 years. Headly was in time replaced by William Casey, who likewise was a former Republican having worked as an aide to Harry Bacharach when he was mayor. In later years a second Democrat was added to the city commission slates, but the Republican Party remained firmly in control. The deal between Nucky and Lafferty ensured there would never be a legitimate Democratic Party. As one old time pol has noted, "There never really was a second political party in Atlantic City, just different line-ups of players who ran under different banners. But underneath the uniforms everyone was on the same team."

The "Roaring '20s" were golden years for both Nucky and his town. It was a gay place that reveled in its ability to show its visitors a good time. The liquor flowed and the party seemed as though it would go on forever. In the days before television and widespread home radio, the Boardwalk rivaled New York City's Great White Way as a national showcase for promoting consumer products and introducing new entertainment figures and productions. During the decade between 1920 and 1930, the Boardwalk became known as the "Second Broadway" of the nation. A production didn't go to New York until it first showed in Atlantic City. There were hundreds of Boardwalk theatrical tryouts with famous stage names that drew wealthy playgoers from throughout the entire northeast, many of them arriving in their own private railroad cars.

Typical of the '20s was the year 1920, which saw a total of 168 shows open at the three main theatres: the Apollo, Globe, and

Woods. Victor Herbert started off the year on New Year's Day with his presentation of *My Golden Girl*, followed by Willie Collier in *The Hottentot* and John Drew in *The Catbird*. In March, there was Marie Dresler in *Tillie's Nightmare* with other performances throughout the year featuring the likes of Chauncey Olcott, Helen Hayes, David Warfield, Thurston the Magician, and "Mr. Show Business," George M. Cohan. Also, regulars during the '20s were the prestigious University of Pennsylvania Mask and Wig Club and the Ziegfeld Follies.

The most memorable performance staged during this era was the premier of *The Student Prince* at the Apollo Theatre in 1924. It was a national theatrical event and was the largest production ever staged on the Boardwalk with a cast of 150 players. The resort was more than a try-out town for theatrical productions; it was a showcase for comics, singers, musicians, and dancers. Among those who received their first big break in Atlantic City on the road to stardom were W. C. Fields, Abbott and Costello, Jimmy Durante, Red Skelton, Milton Berle, Martha Ray, Guy Lombardo, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Ed Sullivan, Jackie Gleason, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and on and on.

By 1925, Atlantic City had:

- More than 1,200 hotels and boardinghouses capable of accommodating nearly 400,000 visitors at a time.
- Ninety-nine trains in and out daily in the summer, and 65 daily in the winter. Of the 16 fastest trains in the world at the time, 11 were in service to Atlantic City.
- A Boardwalk lined with hundreds of businesses, extending seven miles.
- Five ocean piers with amusements.
- Twenty-one theatres.
- Four newspapers: two daily, one Sunday, and one weekly.
- Three country clubs.
- Three airports—two for seaplanes and one for land planes.
- The Easter Parade and the Miss America Pageant.

The Miss America Pageant got its start in 1921 as the "Intercity Beauty Contest." Conceived as a gimmick for extending the summer season, it was scheduled for the week after Labor Day. In all, eight young girls hailing from the likes of Newark, Pittsburgh, Ocean City,

and Harrisburg made up the field. Surprisingly, it was a success and the following year 58 beauties showed. The *New York Times* covered the second pageant during its final two days and reported: "The nation's picked beauties swept along three miles of Boardwalk this afternoon and in the most spectacular rolling-chair parade ever staged here. Crowds packed the borders of the walk, squeezed in the windows of the flanking hotels and stores, and kept up a continuous cheering from the time that King Neptune and his flower-bedecked retinue got underway. Airplanes swooped down and showered the bowered beauties with roses and confetti. Cannons roared and even the breakers boomed forth their tribute to America's prettiest girls." Where else but Atlantic City?

The first host of the City by the Sea throughout this period was Nucky. He wasn't just Atlantic City's boss, he was the town's leading party person. Nucky enjoyed beautiful women and was often in the company of the starlets and showgirls who performed in the many stage productions. When a well-known entertainer was in town he usually threw a party in his or her honor at the Ritz. Throughout his career, there were few parties of any significance held in the resort where Nucky wasn't in attendance.

Damon Runyon would have had a hard time creating a more flamboyant character. His typical day began at 3:00 in the afternoon; awakened at the usual time by his bodyguard and valet, Louis Kessel. Resembling the trunk of a tree, Kessel stood five-foot-five, weighed 260 pounds, and sported a moustache with waxed tips. He had been a wrestler, a bartender, and a cab driver, in that order, before meeting up with Nucky. In his days as a cab driver he often waited outside nightclubs for Nucky and, when he emerged, took him home, undressed him, and put him to bed. Louie was an uncomplicated person looking for a master to serve. Nucky made him his personal servant and their relationship lasted nearly 20 years.

Routinely, Louie started off his boss's day with a rubdown; pounding muscles, snapping loose flesh, and rubbing Nucky with sweet ointments and oil of wintergreen. After Louie had rubbed Nucky's skin pink, he draped his body with a silk robe and escorted him to the breakfast table overlooking the ocean from his view on the ninth floor of the Ritz Carlton. Nucky had leased the entire floor from where he reigned as the "Czar." During Nucky's residence, the Ritz Carlton out dazzled every other hotel on the Boardwalk.

Nucky's presence set a standard of unbridled hedonism; it was a "lavish temple of pleasure."

Once the Czar was fully awake, a Negro maid brought in the breakfast tray, which consisted of a quart of freshly squeezed orange juice, half a dozen eggs, and a ham steak. During breakfast Nucky would read the newspaper and receive reports from local politicians and racketeers. After the boss finished breakfast, Louie picked out one of more than 100 hand-tailored suits and pinned a fresh red carnation to the lapel. In the summer months, Nucky had a weakness for lavender and chocolate-colored suits. If the weather was cold, Louie fetched the boss's full-length raccoon coat. Once dressed and ready to go, it was a dusk-to-dawn performance. Nucky and Louie would leave the Ritz Carlton and walk to the Boardwalk, where the Czar leaned against the railing and held court. Panhandlers begged for, and got, dollar bills and sometimes more; political underlings sought advice and favors; part business, part social, this daily routine lasted an hour or two. Nucky would then go for a long ride in a rollingchair on the Boardwalk or for a stroll on Atlantic Avenue, stopping all along the way to hand out dollar bills to any poor person that looked his way.

Johnson had a passion for Atlantic City's poor people, especially the children. There wasn't a shoeshine boy, flower girl, or paperboy whom Nucky didn't pat on the head and give a dollar or two. If there was a sporting event or another affair at Convention Hall that Nucky thought might excite the children, he saw to it they were permitted in without charge. One lesson Nucky learned well from the Commodore was that the poor have votes just as well as the rich, and if you took care of the poor, you could count on their votes.

Upon completing his daily rounds, Louie then drove the boss in his Rolls Royce to a nightclub, dinner party, an indoor hotel pool—Nucky stayed fit by swimming—a political meeting, and a gambling room or whorehouse, depending on his agenda for the evening. It was common for Nucky to have one of the local call girls accompany him as he made his rounds in the evening, permitting lustful interludes in the back seat of his Rolls.

The Czar of the Ritz was every bit the celebrity on New York's Broadway as he was on the Boardwalk. Despite the fact that there was "never any snow on the Boardwalk," Atlantic City's winter months were longer than Nucky could handle. To cope with the winter doldrums, Nucky rented a large apartment in an exclusive section

of Manhattan overlooking Central Park. The rent for his apartment alone nearly equaled his annual salary as treasurer. Evidence of his reputation as a “man about town” is an article by a New York gossip columnist who wrote admiringly that Nucky and oil millionaire Guy Loomis were “among the most liberal and careless spenders of the present day.” The reporter noted that when in New York, Nucky was always accompanied by a group of hangers-on, mostly female, whom he took from one nightclub to another, picking up the tabs. On numerous occasions, he’d give a waiter a \$20 bill for handing him an extra napkin; tips of \$100 were common. Nucky was so popular with restaurant and nightclub help everywhere he went that the waiters’ union made him an honorary member—Union card #508—Atlantic City Local.

In addition to fancy nightspots, Nucky loved to be part of major events. He could always be found ringside during a championship boxing match accompanied by a group of friends, and bought whole blocks of tickets for the World Series, inviting dozens of guests. On several occasions, he enjoyed a Broadway play so much that he brought the entire cast to Atlantic City for a weekend at his expense. As an old-time local lawyer recalled, “I went to my first World Series with Nucky. The game was just the beginning of the evening. He sure knew how to have a good time.”

Nucky’s audacious generosity had no limits. He deliberately made himself a mark for charity solicitors, and when approached by one with a book of tickets to sell, he’d take his silk hat and fill it with tickets; however many it held was what he bought. He was also obliging with the use of his several automobiles. In addition to his Rolls Royce, Nucky owned two 16-cylinder Cadillacs, a Lincoln, and a Ford. This fleet was always available to visiting notables, whether politicians, entertainers, or mobsters. Nucky’s lifestyle was the personification of his town’s golden years. He was the most colorful player in the World’s Playground and was idolized by Atlantic City residents.

The closing years of the Roaring ’20s saw Atlantic City’s boss attain prestige and power in two different worlds. And as his stature rose, so did his town’s. In his own inimitable way, Nucky worked himself into a position in which he was at once the kingmaker in New Jersey Republican politics and a major player in the national family of organized crime.

By the mid-1920s everyone on the public payroll in both Atlantic City and the County owed his job to Nucky. He personally interviewed and okayed every person hired. There wasn't a single employee who wasn't beholden to the boss. He established a practice that was continued by his successor for 30 years more after Nucky was gone. Every successful applicant, regardless of the job's importance and whether the decision to hire had already been made, was required to first meet with the boss to pledge their loyalty and receive instructions on their political duties.

The selection of police officers was most important to Nucky, and he personally screened every applicant to ensure that the police department cooperated in the smooth operation of the vice industry. The elite corps of the department was the vice squad; it was Nucky's right arm for protecting Atlantic City's rackets and collecting the payoffs from bars, gambling rooms, and brothels. A retired detective talked about his hiring. "I was told I had the job but had to go see Nucky before starting work. Nucky was very friendly. He asked me about my folks and said the ward leader liked my family. He told me to just follow my superiors' orders and I'd enjoy being a policeman."

There was no civil service or any type of job security other than to be in the good graces of the organization. In order to keep their jobs, city and county workers had to kick back from one to seven percent of their salary to the local Republican Party, depending on the amount of their wages. This "macing" was done on each of the 26 paydays throughout the year. Every department supervisor was required to keep records of these payments on mimeographed forms that Nucky had distributed. The form listed the scale of payments to be made and provided space for checking them off. Kicking back wasn't an employee's only duty to Nucky. They were also responsible for seeing to it that an assigned number of voters got to the polls on Election Day. Some of those voters were dead, others were out-of-town summer help who weren't in town in November—no matter, they voted, even if it meant a city employee had to vote two or three times in different districts.

In addition to the revenue from macing, Nucky held a tight grip on every contract for public construction jobs and for supplying public institutions with coal, vegetables, milk, and so on. He saw to it that everything had its price and he and his organization profited handsomely. Nucky's organization had become a finely tuned instrument; every part had a function and purpose. There was no one

in city or county government or among the contractors, retailers, or professionals who did business with local government—along with the vice industry—who did not have a role to play in keeping the Republican machine running smoothly.

Nucky went beyond what the Commodore had achieved in terms of constructing a formal organization. Kuehnle relied upon his personal popularity and the ability to dispense handouts to the poor, financed through graft and extortion. Unlike the Commodore, Nucky was an organizer. His flamboyant lifestyle camouflaged a calculating mind, figuring angles and planning his moves constantly. Nucky was always talking politics and strategy. He understood human nature and what motivated people, especially the residents of Atlantic City. Under his direction a rigid political spoils system was established. Its hierarchy was based on the four voting wards of Atlantic City. This ward system was the basis for his machine's election victories and cranked out votes, year after year.

Machine politics was the inevitable product of Atlantic City's development. The predominance of a single political party for several generations after the Civil War and Atlantic City's uniquely singular purpose produced a mentality that discouraged pluralistic politics. Atlantic City depended totally on the visitor for its survival. The illicit thrills enjoyed by tourists were a cornerstone of the local economy. Reformers or critics of the status quo couldn't be tolerated. They were bad for business. The resort's singular purpose demanded a single mentality to manage its affairs, a mentality unburdened by political ideologies. The philosophies of the national political parties were irrelevant in resort politics. Success of the local tourist economy was the only ideology.

Nucky seized the opportunity created by such a mentality. He was a professional politician who took his business seriously and understood that the only test he'd ever have to pass was to keep the local economy profitable. One means to that end, the protected violation of vice laws, became the accepted way of doing business. He was able to identify himself with the success of the resort's economy and by doing so elevated himself and the political ward system to the status of a sacred institution.

Nucky's ward politicians were social workers required to keep an eye out for the personal needs of their neighbors; not just at campaign time, but every day of the year. The four wards of Atlantic City

were divided into precincts, blocks, and streets with every constituent accounted for. When someone hit upon hard times, Nucky learned about it from one of his lieutenants. More often than not, assistance was offered before it was requested. Whatever the problem, Nucky's organization worked to find a solution. When necessary, Nucky's machine was an employment office, providing a government job of some type or exerting personal influence with private employers.

At Thanksgiving and Christmas everyone in need received a turkey and a basket of vegetables from the Republican Party. During the winter months truck loads of coal were dumped in vacant lots in various neighborhoods and the people in the area were free to take what they needed to keep their homes warm. Should there be a death in the family, the wake was always attended by the block leader and precinct captain, usually by the ward leader, and very often Nucky himself. Nucky was a master at holding the hand of a widow and whispering gently what a fine man her husband was. Always, one of Nucky's several Cadillacs, complete with an obliging uniformed driver, was available to the grieving family should transportation be needed on the day of the funeral. "Remember, there aren't any cemeteries in Atlantic City—it's an island. A ride in a fancy car to the mainland for the funeral made poor people mighty grateful." Funerals were part of the business of politics and Nucky and all who worked with him dedicated themselves to this business every day of the year. By satisfying the personal needs of his constituents, Nucky was able to perpetuate his machine. He had won the hearts of Atlantic City's voters, and they were loyal to him.

Nucky's political clout reached its zenith in the election of 1928. In that year, he supported Morgan Larson for governor and Hamilton Kean for U.S. Senator, both of whom were elected. After the election, a U.S. Senate Committee conducted a formal investigation into a charge that before the primary, Kean had given Nucky a signed blank check, which was cashed for \$200,000, with the money used as a slush fund to buy votes. The check was never found but the primary was noteworthy because it was another in which the Democrats in Hudson County crossed over into the Republican primary. The orders went out from Frank Hague and thousands of Democrats invaded the Republican primary to vote for Larson and Kean. Even Democratic election officials themselves voted in the

Republican primary. The investigating committee estimated that nearly 22,000 Hudson County Democrats had crossed over. This would never have occurred but for Nucky's relationship with Hague. Kean discounted such talk and attributed his victory to Nucky's magnetism, describing campaign rallies he had attended by saying, "Every speaker began his talk by declaring that he was devoted to God and Enoch Johnson." The following year Larson and Kean offered Nucky the state chairmanship of the Republican Party, but he turned it down. His power was beyond positions and titles.

A vivid illustration of Nucky's power and the manner in which he flaunted it was his encounter with a reformist group known as "the Committee of One Hundred." The committee was an idealistic group of crusaders trying to dismantle the resort's vice industry. Nucky made fools of them.

The Committee of One Hundred was chaired by Samuel Comly, a local attorney. Comly had tried for years to clean up the resort by applying pressure to Atlantic County's criminal justice system. He was frustrated at every turn. Comly and Walter Thompson worked their way through the entire system without making a dent in Nucky's empire. They began by hiring their own private investigators who secured sworn statements of eye witnesses to prostitution, gambling, and the sale of liquor. These affidavits were then submitted to Atlantic County Prosecutor Louis Repetto. This was the same prosecutor who had indicted the Coast Guard officers. Repetto found the committee's proofs lacking and rejected them.

Comly then went to Common Pleas Court Judge William Smathers and asked him to order the closing of a well-known gambling casino, the Golden Inn, on Missouri Avenue. Judge Smathers told Comly, "I'm no reformer. I earn my salary as a judge." Handpicked by Nucky, the judge wasn't about to interfere with the resort's major attractions. Comly then approached State Attorney General E. L. Katzenbach, who refused to get involved. He said, "I'm not going down to Atlantic City unless summoned there by the Supreme Court." Comly made that stop, too, and got the same reception, being advised by Justice Luther Campbell, "I think you're all right legally, but I don't think the community wants anything done." Nucky had influence with all these people, but it was more than his power that accounted for the reception they gave Comly; the people of Atlantic City were happy with the way their town was being run.

Vice as an adjunct to tourism had grown into the resort's major industry and no one was about to tamper with success.

The final humiliation for Comly and the Committee of One Hundred came on January 31, 1930. That night there were two gatherings held in Atlantic City. Comly, Thompson, and several clergymen had organized a rally at the Odd Fellows Hall on New York Avenue. It was the largest meeting of reformers ever held in the resort. There were nearly 600 persons in attendance—mostly religious leaders from out of town—and Nucky and his lieutenants were denounced royally. The resort was likened to Sodom and Gomorrah and the blame for laxity in law enforcement was laid at Nucky's feet. Nucky was unperturbed. He was busy hosting an affair of his own. This was the evening for the gala known as "Nucky's Nocturne."

While the crusaders were condemning the Czar, he was at the Ritz Carlton entertaining the governor, his cabinet, and the entire state legislature, Republican and Democrat alike. Nucky's Nocturne was Johnson's way of once a year showing his appreciation to all his friends in Trenton. Governor Larson had been invited to the Committee of One Hundred's rally and the meeting was rescheduled several times for his convenience, with phony scheduling problems arising each time. A good party was more to Larson's liking than speeches by Prohibitionists and muckrakers, and Nucky's Nocturne was a party no guest could turn down. It was a 12-course meal, beginning around midnight. Nucky served up the best in food, drink, and women the resort had to offer. The state's political leaders were Nucky's playthings and his critics could expect no help from them. But Nucky's political influence was merely a means to an end.

The real business of Atlantic City's boss was protection money from the local rackets. And it was big business, with Nucky personally receiving more than \$500,000 per year as his share of the take from Atlantic City's vice industry. The primary source of Nucky's income from the rackets were "tribute" of \$6 per case on all liquor brought into Atlantic City during Prohibition, "inspection fees" paid by the proprietors of brothels, "wire service charges" paid by horse race betting rooms, and a percentage of the profits from every gambling room and the numbers writers syndicate.

Nucky's involvement in the rackets extended beyond Atlantic City. In the late 1920s he was taken into the inner circle of Charles "Lucky" Luciano, becoming a trusted member of his family. At

about the time Nucky had attained the height of his power, Luciano was a young, ruthless mobster on his way to the top of organized crime. Two of the major forces with whom Luciano had to contend were the Maranzano and Masseria families. Both of them wanted Luciano to join forces with them, and refusing either meant trouble. Luciano eventually sided with Masseria, but interference from Maranzano remained a concern. To strengthen his position, Luciano, on the advice of Meyer Lansky, forged a new interstate crime syndicate comprised of those racketeers he considered his strongest allies. This merger was limited to seven outfits by Luciano, who had a superstition about that number.

The “Seven Group,” as it was called, was an infamous bunch that gave the FBI fits and included the following members: the Bug and Meyer gang (Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky), which covered New York City and functioned as prime protectors, enforcers, and shippers of bootleg liquors; Joe Adonis of Brooklyn; Longie Zwillman and Willie Moretti, whose territory consisted of Long Island and Northern New Jersey; King Solomon of Boston, who controlled New England; Harry “Nig” Rosen from Philadelphia; Luciano himself; and, lastly, Nucky Johnson, “the ruler of the South Jersey Coast.” The Seven Group was an instant success and by 1929 it had struck cooperative alliances for buying, selling, distilling, shipping, and protecting with 22 different mobs from Maine to Florida and west to the Mississippi River.

In the same year in which Nucky had orchestrated the election of a governor and U.S. Senator and turned down his party’s state chairmanship, he became a major player in organized crime. Smith Johnson’s son had come a long way from his days as his father’s undersheriff.

Lucky Luciano wasn’t satisfied with the success of the Seven Group. He wanted to extend his network further. Under Meyer Lansky’s tutelage, Luciano encouraged theories and techniques of doing business never before practiced in the world of crime. Luciano promoted the idea of a national convention of the major racket bosses. It took months to make the necessary contacts and establish an agenda, but the selection of the convention site was never in question. Everyone agreed this first underworld conference would be held in Atlantic City. The reasons were simple. Nucky ran the type of town other mobsters envied; his was a wide-open operation, with the rackets immune from the police and courts because Nucky controlled

them. In Atlantic City the delegates could come and go as they pleased without attracting attention, knowing their every need would be catered to by Johnson and his people.

The second week in May 1929 was chosen as the date for Luciano's meeting. It was a memorable event. Long, black limousines carrying mobsters arrived in town from all over the country. Al Capone arrived from Chicago, bringing with him Jake "Greasy Thumb" Guzik; Max "Boo Boo" Hoff, Waxy Gordon, and Nig Rosen came in from Philadelphia; from Cleveland came Moe Dalitz and his partners, Lou Rothkopf and Charles Polizzi; King Solomon drove down from Boston; and Abe Bernstein, leader of the Purple Gang of Detroit who was unable to attend, sent a delegate in his stead. Boss Tom Pendergast of Kansas City likewise sent a surrogate, John Lazia; Longie Zwillman and Willie Moretti represented Long Island and Northern New Jersey. Aside from Nucky, who had his entire organization in town, the largest delegation was from New York City led by Luciano, Meyer Lansky (who was honeymooning at the time), Costello, Lepke, and Dutch Schultz.

The original plans for the convention called for the delegates to stay at the Breakers Hotel. At the time, it was one of the most exclusive hotels along the Boardwalk, and Nucky had reserved suites for his guests. Much to Nucky's embarrassment, it was a mistake. Because the Breakers was restricted to WASPs only, the reservations were made in Anglo-Saxon aliases. When the front desk staff took one look at Al Capone and Nig Rosen they refused to admit them. Nucky wasn't present and the manager of the Breakers didn't know who his guests were. What happened after that is best related by Luciano himself (no doubt, with the help of his biographers):

A hurried call to Nucky Johnson, a quick call by him, and then the fleet of limousines pulled out of the Breakers driveway and headed for the President Hotel. Before they arrived, Nucky Johnson, resplendent as usual with a red carnation in his lapel, joined the cavalcade. When Capone spotted him, he brought the parade to a halt in the middle of the street. Nucky and Al had it out right there in the open. Johnson was about a foot taller than Capone and both of 'em had voices like foghorns. I think you could've heard them in Philadelphia, and there wasn't a decent word passed between 'em. Johnson had a rep for four-letter

words that wasn't even invented, and Capone is screamin' at him that he had made bad arrangements so Nucky picks Al up under one arm and throws him into his car and yells out, "All you fuckers follow me!"

Once the delegates were settled in their rooms, the first order of business was a lavish party hosted by Nucky. There was liquor, food, and women in abundance. For those delegates who had brought their wives or girlfriends, Nucky had presents of fur capes. The party lasted a full day before they got down to serious business. After breakfast in their rooms, the delegates wandered out onto the Boardwalk where they were taken for a ride in rollingchairs. At the undeveloped end of the Boardwalk, the mobsters abandoned their rollingchairs and headed for the beach. Once they reached the sand, they took off their shoes and socks, rolled their pant legs to their knees, and strolled along the water's edge discussing their business in complete privacy.

All of the decisions involved in the birth of a national network of crime organizations, operating jointly with decisions made by equals at the top, were made out in the open on the sand during those daily walks along the beach. The main topics of the convention were the need to halt senseless warring of one family with another, nonviolent alliances against over-zealous police and their informers, and peaceful cooperation among gangs in the same business in order to minimize competition and maximize profits. The significance of this convention was later detailed by Al Capone:

I told them there was business enough to make us all rich and it was time to stop all the killings and look on our business as other men look on theirs, as something to work at and forget when we go home at night. It wasn't an easy matter for men who had been fighting for years to agree on a peaceful business program. But we finally decided to forget the past and begin all over again—and we drew up a written agreement and each man signed on the dotted line.

Atlantic City was the birthplace of the first nationwide crime syndicate, and Nucky Johnson was the proud host.

Not all of Nucky's encounters with the mob were as cordial as his relationship with Lucky Luciano. One winter evening in 1932 Nucky was "doing the town" in Manhattan. He was giving one of his usual

princely parties in a speakeasy with a showgirl for every one of his guests. Flanked by beautiful women, gluttoned on rich food, and submerged in champagne, Nucky was having one of the many times of his life when a stranger entered the room and asked to speak with him in private. Nucky thought it was just another person seeking a favor and agreed to step into the next room. The stranger was Tony “The Stinger” Cugino, a hit man from South Philadelphia. The next thing Nucky knew there was a gun in his ribs and he was being whisked away to a dingy tenement in Brooklyn. His lieutenants were notified that he was being held for ransom. Nig Rosen initiated negotiations with Cugino and a ransom of \$100,000 was raised and paid within several days, with Nucky released unharmed. There were those who believed Cugino was hired by Rosen so he could pay a phony ransom and win Nucky’s gratitude. Regardless of the true reason behind the kidnapping, Nucky rewarded Rosen by giving him a portion of the Atlantic City numbers operation and granted him permission to operate a gambling casino on Iowa Avenue.

Nucky’s career as a racketeer and politician sheds light on the complexity of his personality and the town he ruled. Conceived and created as a resort, with the sole purpose of dispensing pleasure, Atlantic City and its residents had no qualms about “ripping off” an out-of-towner. The trick was to keep the visitor smiling as he parted with his money. Johnson was the master of this scheme and local residents loved and admired him. Nucky and his cronies were the idealization of what the resort was all about. During his reign, local racketeers attained a status and prestige they could never find in another city. The easy money from corruption created a perverse sense of community morality. Speakeasy owners, gambling room operators, numbers writers, pimps, whores, policemen on the take, and corrupt politicians who elsewhere would be viewed as lowlifes and crooks were respected members of the community. The more successful ones were heroes and role models. This was the foundation of Nucky’s empire: Atlantic City was corrupt to its core.