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Investigations: Bobby's High Life

Out of the hearing room and into the arms of waiting newsmen stepped Arizona's Democratic Senator Carl Hayden, a member of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration. "No comment," grumbled Hayden. Next out was Nebraska's Republican Senator Carl Curtis. "I can't tell you a thing," said he.

The remaining members of the nine-man committee were equally uncommunicative about what they had found out so far in their investigation of Bobby Gene Baker, 35, who last month precipitously resigned from his \$19,600-a-year position as Secretary for the Senate Majority (TIME, Oct. 18). Indeed, not even Delaware's Republican Senator John Williams, who appeared before the committee as a witness against Baker, would say what was going on.

Why this sudden affliction of senatorial lockjaw? The answer seemed obvious: Baker is involved in a scandal of major proportions, and the Senate plainly feared that some of its own members are in it with him. Yet the Senate's self-protective silence had an unintended effect, creating a climate in which talk and speculation flourished with tales of illicit sex, influence peddling and fast-buck financial deals.

Carole. One subject of considerable curiosity was Carole Tyler, 24, a shapely (5 ft. 6 in., 35-26-35) Tennessee girl who won the title of "Miss Loudon County" before she turned up in Washington in 1959. Three years later she was Baker's private secretary at \$8,000 a year. Chain-smoking, martini-drinking, party-loving Carole also became a favorite in Baker's high-flying circle of acquaintances.

Last December Carole took up housekeeping in a cooperative townhouse at 308 N Street S.W., just a short ride from the Capitol. It was a well-furnished apartment, with prints on the walls, silk draperies in the bedrooms, lavender carpeting in the bathrooms. The parties there were lively. The twist was danced both inside the house and on the patio outside; the convivial drinking and animated chatter lasted long into the night. Some nearby residents noted that visitors appeared in the daytime as well as the evening. "A lot of people used to come through the back gate," recalls one neighbor. "That struck us as strange. Most of our guests come through the front door."

Carole shared the house for a time with another girl, Mary Alice Martin, a secretary in the office of

Florida's Democratic Senator George Smathers. But neither girl owned the heavily trafficked house they lived in. The owner was Bobby Baker, who bought it for \$28,000 on a down payment of \$1,600. On the FHA forms that he signed, Baker listed both girls as the tenants of the house, said that Carole was his "cousin." She resigned from her job as a Senate employee at the same time Baker did, and has not since been available to inquiring newsmen.

Ellen. Investigators were also sifting through stories that concerned several call girls who operated in this rarefied atmosphere. Among these was a young German woman who was asked to leave the U.S. after FBI agents showed her dossier to other interested authorities. She was Ellen Rometsch, 27, a sometime fashion model and wife of a West German army sergeant who was assigned to his country's military mission in Washington. An ambitious, name-dropping, heavily made-up mother of a five-year-old boy, Elly was a fixture at Washington parties. In September, five weeks after the Rometsches were shipped back to West Germany, her husband Rolf, 25, divorced her on the ground of "conduct contrary to matrimonial rules." Last week, while Elly hid out on her parents' farm near Wuppertal, Rolf spoke ruefully of his Washington experience, said that he "had no idea what was going on behind my back. It's a case of a woman who falls for the temptation of a sweet life her husband can't afford."

The Club. One repository of the sweet life was the Quorum Club, located in a three-room suite at the Carroll Arms Hotel, just across the street from the new Senate Office Building. Elly is remembered as a hostess there.

Bobby Baker was a leading light of the "Q Club." He helped organize it, was a charter member and served on the board of governors. The club, so its charter says, is a place for the pursuit of "literary purposes and promotion of social intercourse." Actually it was open to anyone with a literate bankroll: initiation fee, \$100; yearly dues, \$50. Among the 197 members are many lobbyists and several governmental figures, including Democratic Senators Frank Church of Idaho, Daniel Brewster of Maryland, J. Howard Edmondson of Oklahoma and Harrison Williams of New Jersey. Among Republican members are two Congressmen, Montana's James Battin and Ohio's William Ayres.

Many members were quick to point out that the club is a handy place to dine ("My wife is fond of the steak and sandwiches," said Bill Ayres) as well as a convenient spot for cocktails. Decorated to the male taste, the club's dimly lit interior sports prints and paintings of women with imposing façades, leather-topped card tables, a well-stocked bar, a piano and, most convenient of all, a buzzer that is wired to the Capitol so that any Senator present can be easily summoned to cast his vote on an impending issue.

The Q Club was a useful spot for meeting influential people in business and politics. Such people, in turn, were useful to Bobby Baker in his breathless pursuit of a buck. It was, by any standard, a successful pursuit, for Baker's net worth rose to something around \$2,000,000. That income, presumably, enabled Baker and his wife Dorothy, who has an \$11,000-a-year job with a Senate committee, to move recently into a \$125,000 house near the home of Bobby's friend and longtime Senate sponsor, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, in Washington's Spring Valley section.

The Deals. Though he was well liked by many people, Bobby unquestionably left behind him a roiling

trough of bitter enemies. One man who thinks that Bobby did him dirt is an old friend named Ralph Hill, president of Capitol Vending Co. Hill is suing Baker for \$300,000. He claims that through Bobby he got a contract for the vending-machine concession at Melpar Inc., a Virginia electronics firm. Hill charges that Baker thereafter demanded a monthly cut from Hill in return for his good will.

Hill claims that for 16 months he appeared regularly at Baker's Capitol office with envelopes containing cash—\$5,600 all told. Last March the Serv-U Corp.—a competing vending-machine firm, of which Baker's law partner Ernest Tucker is board chairman—moved to buy Capitol Vending's outstanding stock. Hill resisted, and Baker warned him that he would see to it that Melpar canceled Capitol Vending's contract. Sure enough, in August 1963, Melpar said it would.

Baker's dealings with the Novak family of Washington started out pretty well. Builder Alfred Novak and his wife were friendly with the Bakers. Early in 1960, Novak agreed to lay out \$12,000 so that Baker could cash in on a good stock tip. They agreed to share fifty-fifty in the profits. And they did just that. The investment brought in \$75,321, and Baker got his 50%—\$37,660—without having invested a cent of his own money.

It was with the Novak family that Baker launched a \$1,200,000 motel, the Carousel, in Ocean City, Md. For the Novaks the experience was a painful one. Baker, who initially invested \$290,000, borrowed on promissory notes from the Serv-U Corp., began campaigning for more money from the Novaks; he wanted to build a restaurant addition to the motel, then a nightclub. The Novaks could not afford the extra investment, sold some of their shares to Baker. The Novaks were disillusioned in their partner, and Novak became deeply depressed. Five months before the Carousel opened for business, he died at 44 of a heart attack. Says Gertrude Novak of Baker's handling of financial matters: "We felt we were being pushed up against the wall."

In any event, the Carousel, billed as a "high-style hideaway for the advise and consent set," opened with a merry party. Two hundred Washington big shots traveled to the event in chartered buses. Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson were there, and Entrepreneur Baker was all over the place.

The Page. Baker also had a variety of other financial interests. Apart from his law firm, he was an agent for the Go Travel agency of Washington and invested in a Howard Johnson's motel in North Carolina. But he did not restrict himself solely to million-dollar enterprises. On at least one occasion, he showed an interest in the money problems of his Senate page boys. Young Boyd Richie was a \$403-a-month telephone page in Baker's office. Richie, a 17-year-old Texan, roomed with another page, Walter J. Stewart, and paid Stewart \$50 a month rent. Stewart, it seems, was on temporary military duty and so was not on the Senate payroll. One day he told Richie to give him an additional \$50 a month—on orders of Bobby Baker.

For three months, Richie dutifully forked over the extra money, but the more he thought about it the angrier he became. It happened that Richie was dating Lucy Baines Johnson, L.B.J.'s 15-year-old daughter. So one evening when he came to call for Lucy, Richie confronted the Vice President in his den and told him what was going on. Next day Lyndon informed the boy that he need not continue the payoff and would be permitted to live rent-free for three months at Stewart's place to make up for his losses.

Baker himself admitted that "some of Boyd Richie's money had been deferred. After all, he was just a teen-ager and making a good salary."

The Gift. Another good Senate friend of Baker's was Oklahoma's millionaire Democrat Robert S. Kerr (Kerr-McGee Oil Industries Inc.). Before he died last January, Kerr was one of the Senate's most powerful members. At one point, Baker got a \$275,000 mortgage on Serv-U Corp. from Oklahoma City's Fidelity National Bank, of which the Kerr family owns 12%.

A couple of weeks ago, Baker journeyed to Oklahoma City to see Kerr-McGee's President Dean A. McGee and the late Senator's son, Robert Jr. He said he wanted to find proof of the fact that Senator Kerr had once handed him \$40,000 as a gift, told McGee that the Senator had said, "I want you to have the money. Be sure and report it on your income tax." But both McGee and young Kerr denied that the Senator had given Baker any money, insisted that there were no records of any gift. "I think I would know it if Dad had given him \$40,000," says Kerr. Adds McGee: "There's only one person who really knows, and that's the Senator, and he's dead. Baker seemed to be concerned about it. He gave me the impression it was a problem."

Obviously, a lot of deep-digging investigating remained to be done before the scandalous skeins of Bobby Baker's high life could be untangled and strung back together in a definitive way. But it was just as certain that the U.S. Senate was doing itself no service by its closed-door, clam-mouthed handling of the case. For the way things were going, instead of only a handful of members suffering embarrassment or worse, the Senate and almost all its members were being subjected to suspicion.

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