

Mike Royko

Augustine Bowe: A Judge Who Spoke His Mind

A few days before Judge Augustine J. Bowe died, a reporter dropped in to ask him about credit law problems.

Judge Bowe said the situation seemed clear enough: The existing laws are no good.

The reporter asked him why.

At this point, most public officials would pause, look over their shoulder and give a suitably vague, inoffensive answer.

After all, many of the legislators who passed the laws in 1961 are still around — and they are still helping run things in Chicago.



MIKE ROYKO

Besides, it isn't part of the political game to say things that might hurt the feelings of people in your own party.

Running true to form, Bowe didn't pause or look over his shoulder. He said:

"The truth is the (1961) Legislature was dominated by downstate bankers and loan sharks who didn't want reform."

As one of his admirers said when he read the story the next day: "There goes Gus again."

Bowe thought nothing of saying that the legislature had been dominated by hustlers because he was one of the few men in public life who always said what he thought—sometimes before he thought about it. And if it caused a stir he shrugged, almost in wonder that people should fuss because a man speaks his mind.

BOWE'S OUTSPOKEN ATTITUDE probably was the result of having become a judge rather late in life.

He made it the hard way, first building a reputation as a fine lawyer, achieving financial independence, being active in civic affairs, and then being elected as a blue-ribbon candidate to head the Municipal Court.

Not having spent his early years as a lawyer trotting respectfully behind a ward boss, he never learned how not to speak his mind.

Even when things got hot — and for the judge in charge of Municipal Court, heat waves never end — he didn't hide behind public relations doubletalk or duck a controversy.

In fact, he had a knack for saying just the right thing to keep a controversy going.

A few years ago, a little-known Chicago lawyer went to a small town club meeting and made a speech about corruption in Judge Bowe's Municipal Courts. The charges were vague, but they thrilled the small-town people.

When the speech somehow hit the headlines, Bowe was asked by reporters about the sweeping charges.

THE STANDARD ANSWER in such situations is something like this: "If he has any information regarding wrongdoing, he should bring it to the attention of the proper authorities and . . ."

Bowe, however, just snorted and said:

"A city man likes to make a big man of himself when he's talking before small-town hicks."

This is known as "instant furor." . . .

The hicks from the small town were indignant at being called hicks. Politicians who like to get along with our downstate cousins were indignant at Bowe's lack of tact. Bowe was roundly denounced.

He finally went to the small town and made a speech, apologizing to the hicks for calling them hicks.

Some time later, the lawyer who started the whole thing got a chance to go before an investigative group and tell all he knew about the corruption he talked about in the small town.

He sighed and said he had simply been a city man trying to make a big man of himself before small-town hicks.

Bowe refrained from laughing and saying, "I told you so."

BOWE ACHIEVED HEROIC proportions in the eyes of many lawyers when he said a few choice words about the Chicago Bar Assn., to which most lawyers must bow in reverence.

The bar association had decided that four lawyers were "unqualified" to be court magistrates. Bowe felt they were qualified. So he said:

"I'm bitter about the bar association having something to say on a subject they don't know a damn thing about."

Then he added: "I know a hell of a lot more about these men than the bar association."

And for good measure, he tossed in: "It was a horrible mistake — simply stupid."

Judge Bowe died Sunday night at the age of 73. The town is already duller.