

Former Sheriff Edward Bullock's 'interest' in young boys no secret, former officers say

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First of a three-part series

Years before he was charged with any wrongdoing, officials in Warren County -- including numerous officers in the sheriff's department, elected officials and members of law enforcement - were aware former Sheriff Edward Bullock may have had a perverted interest in young boys, according to recent statements made by two ex-sheriff's officers.

Rumors swirled around the Belvidere courthouse, jokes were made among staffers, and some even snickered when they saw the sheriff escorting boys down the hallway and into his office, the officers said.

But despite having a "general knowledge" of the sheriff's alleged behavior, "no one seemed to care" and it became a running joke, one of the retired sheriff's office members said in statements obtained by The Express-Times.

"Everybody that was involved in the Warren County Courthouse and the surrounding politics knew," a second officer said.

"Absolutely, it wasn't a secret, there just wasn't a secret," the individual added later.

The Express-Times is withholding the names of the officers in the documents because the statements were given to a private detective with the understanding they would not become public. Both have declined a reporter's request for an interview.

The 86-year-old Bullock, who now lives in Ocean County, New Jersey, was indicted in February on three counts each of aggravated sexual assault and sexual assault. He has been free on \$100,000 bail.

Prosecutors say he began sexually abusing a 10-year-old boy in December 1986 and the abuse continued for more than a year.

Bullock, who has pleaded not guilty to the charges, has also been named in a civil lawsuit filed by the victim in the case. Warren County is also named as a defendant.

A secretary for Bullock's attorney, Brian White, declined comment on the lawyer's behalf and Jerald Howarth, the attorney representing Warren County in the civil litigation, did not return a phone message.

An open secret

In a series of statements made to a private detective working on behalf of the victim's lawyer in the civil litigation, two former officers, who began working under Bullock in 1985, expressed their belief that people at the highest levels of authority in Warren County were well aware there was a "problem" for a number of years.

From the interview:

Investigator: So, is it, it your impression or your belief that people like the judges, people like the prosecutor or the deputy chief or the undersheriffs, people with authority....

Officer: Yeah.

Investigator: ...were aware that there was a problem with Bullock with his interest in young boys?

Officer: Yes.

Investigator: No doubt in your mind?

Officer: There's no doubt in my mind, went right to the Probation Department to Criminal Case Management, the Clerk's Office, the...

A central theme in the two former officers' statements to the investigator is that there also seemed to be a culture of complicity within the courthouse, as many joked or laughed about the sheriff's alleged behavior. At no point did either say they or any other individuals witnessed Bullock sexually abusing boys.

But high-ranking members of the sheriff's department would make remarks about being forced to leave their offices when Bullock had taken a young boy into his, according to the statements.

"Oh the sheriff's got a kid in his office now you know, and they'd get like a little smirk or a giggle, or it was just understood kind of throughout the whole courthouse that Sheriff Bullock was interested in boys," one officer said in the interview.

Rumblings of trouble

Like the officers, John Polhemus, a Warren County freeholder from 1986 to 1992, said he believed it was "common knowledge" among many that "there was a problem." It got to the point where Polhemus said he began to fear civil lawsuits against the county might be forthcoming.

"I knew about (the rumors) and expressed privately to my fellow freeholders that I was concerned about potential civil liabilities," he said recently from his home in Baltimore.

Scott Ferguson, then chairman of the county's Democratic Party, said recently that while he had no firsthand knowledge of any wrongdoing, he too had heard rumors something might be amiss in the sheriff's office.

"I think it's fair to say that in a lot circles, not just political circles, it was just strong suspicions that something had gone on," said Ferguson, a longtime Phillipsburg attorney who became county prosecutor in 2004. "But I don't think anybody I was affiliated with had personal knowledge of what might be going on."

According to the officers, Bullock's tendencies were so well-known among court employees they could predict which of the boys that he would target. They said the sheriff had a specific type: boys with blond hair and blue eyes who came from troubled homes.

"Yes that was kind of like the big joke, he would look over and then he would like have a, we used to call it his love look," the transcript reads. "It was like a, a puppy dog, pouty look and it, it was just disgusting, yeah."

In addition to finding potential targets at Warren Acres -- the county's then youth shelter for juvenile offenders -- or the courtrooms of Warren County, Bullock would troll the Phillipsburg Mall and use his position as sheriff to pick up boys there, according to the sheriff's officers.

While many had heard of the sheriff's behavior, "nobody would do anything about it because there was politics involved and there was too many, um, it would have been too much of a scandal in Warren County," one of the ex-officers said.

Caught in a sting

It wasn't until several years later, in 1991, that Bullock resigned from his position as sheriff amid charges he tried to curry sexual favors from an undercover New Jersey State Police trooper.

It was, according to the transcripts, one of his own officers who came up with the idea to place a young-looking trooper inside the Phillipsburg Mall as part of the sting.

The officer said it came as no surprise when Bullock took the bait.

"I knew it would work, but I didn't think it work that quick," the officer said.

The sheriff, a Republican, later pleaded guilty to a charge of official misconduct and served nine months in the Hunterdon County Jail.

At the time, several high-ranking GOP members denied knowing of the allegations before Bullock's arrest.

After being released from jail and with his political career in Warren County over, Bullock moved to Ocean County, where he lived in what his attorney previously described as "obscurity and peace."

His name began to resurface publicly in September 2012 when allegations of sexual abuse were made in a tort claim, a legal notice generally filed leading up to a civil lawsuit. The lawsuit was

filed in April 2013.

Polhemus, a Democrat, said that while he was unaware of any investigation into Bullock until after he was arrested in 1991, the accusations at the time were not surprising.

"By that time it was kind of like somebody had to do something -- that kind of attitude," he said. "Certainly nobody was surprised."

COMING WEDNESDAY: *A former secretary at the Warren Acres juvenile detention center recalls that Bullock's reputation was well known.*