

In stunning fall for former lawman, ex-St. Tammany Sheriff Jack Strain charged with rape, incest

Jack Strain, who spent 20 years locking up criminals as St. Tammany Parish's tough-talking sheriff, was walked into his former jail in handcuffs Tuesday to be booked on charges of rape, incest and other sex crimes.

A parish grand jury indicted Strain on Tuesday morning on two counts each of aggravated rape and aggravated incest, as well as one count of sexual battery and one of indecent behavior with a juvenile, according to 22nd Judicial District Attorney Warren Montgomery.

Two of the alleged victims were under the age of 12 when prosecutors say Strain raped them.

The alleged incidents stretch back decades, to when Strain would have been as young as 12 years old.

Mark Finn, now a troubled man of 49, told The Advocate earlier this year that when Finn was 6, Strain, then a family friend, anally raped Finn and forced him to perform oral sex over a number of years. Those allegations line up with one of the rape charges in the indictment, which alleges Strain raped a child under 12 from 1975 until 1981, when Strain was a teenager.

A second allegation of rape, involving a different victim, occurred during roughly the same time period, from 1979 until 1980, according to the indictment.

Strain was a newly elected sheriff when the alleged incest began in 1996,

according to the indictment. The court documents charge him with incest and indecent behavior with a third victim between April 1 of that year and July 1, 2002, a period when the former school bus driver-turned-lawman was developing a reputation as a hard-charging force against crime on the north shore.

He also was charged with incest and sexual battery involving a fourth victim that the indictment said occurred in June 2004.

Strain, 56, faces the possibility of life in prison if convicted on an aggravated rape charge.

The staggering fall for the former official is the culmination of an investigation that Montgomery said began in 2017.

"Over the following 18 months, we conducted a joint investigation, brought in the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and used the grand jury to confirm and corroborate the allegations," Montgomery said during a brief news conference outside the parish courthouse.

Strain was arrested by State Police at his house in Abita Springs on Tuesday morning, according to a source familiar with the investigation. He arrived at the St. Tammany Parish jail that afternoon, riding in the front seat of an unmarked SUV. A half-dozen State Police officers in three vehicles brought him in, all but one of them in plainclothes.

Strain was wearing a short-sleeved salmon-colored shirt and khaki shorts; he was handcuffed in the back. He did not answer questions from the media as officers ushered him into the jail's garage and then into the building.

He is being held in lieu of posting \$400,000 bail, according to the District

Attorney's Office.

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Strain's attorney, Billy Gibbens, did not respond to requests for comment.

The investigation that resulted in the rape and incest charges grew out of a separate federal probe into financial dealings at a work-release program that Strain privatized and turned over to two members of his Sheriff's Office inner circle.

Those associates, Skip Keen and David Hanson, pleaded guilty in February to conspiracy to solicit a bribe and to commit wire fraud. Their sentencing, originally set for the end of May, was recently postponed at the request of prosecutors. Strain has not been charged in the federal case, but court documents filed in relation to the charges against Keen and Hanson suggest that he will be.

Sources familiar with both cases said that plea talks between state and federal prosecutors and Strain had broken down in recent months.

Earlier this year, Finn, who has spent nearly half his life in jail because of drugs and acts of violence, brought to light some of the startling allegations against Strain in a series of interviews with The Advocate and WWL-TV.

Finn claimed his life started to unravel when Strain began molesting him. Finn said he never told anyone what happened because he didn't think anyone would believe him. But when authorities approached Finn recently to ask him about Strain's financial dealings, Finn instead told them about the alleged sexual abuse.

Gibbens, Strain's attorney, has called Finn's allegations "completely false."

Finn was arrested again last week, accused of possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine, raising questions about whether Montgomery's office will prosecute him on the drug charges when he is likely to be called as a witness in the case against Strain.

At least one alleged victim testified May 22 before a state grand jury in Covington, according to a second source with knowledge of the probe.

Strain, a native of Abita Springs who was known to close friends and associates by the nickname "Booboo," began his political career as police chief of that small town. In 1995, he emerged from a field of 10 candidates to be elected St. Tammany sheriff, and for most of his career he seemed politically invincible.

But in 2015, he was defeated by then-Slidell Police Chief Randy Smith. Leading up to the election, Strain's reputation had taken a beating from a series of escapes from a work-release program that he had privatized and was forced to close. Questions of cronyism in the Slidell work-release program, which ultimately led to the federal investigation, also dogged the sheriff.

Montgomery announced the indictment Tuesday surrounded by officials from other agencies, including Col. Kevin Reeves, superintendent of the State Police; Jeffrey Veltri, assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's New Orleans office; and Chris Stifflemire of the U.S. Postal Inspector Service.

Collin Sims, chief of Montgomery's criminal division, will prosecute the case along with Assistant District Attorney Elizabeth Authement.

"I have a duty to pursue justice when a crime has been committed," Montgomery said. "The grand jury was presented evidence of sexual misconduct by Mr. Strain and made the determination that probable cause exists that Strain committed the violations. ... Mr. Strain deserves a speedy trial by an impartial jury, and I will make sure he is given a fair trial."

In addition to a potential sentence of life in prison on the aggravated rape charges, the aggravated incest charges Strain faces carry a penalty of not less than five years nor more than 20. Indecent behavior with a juvenile carries a penalty of not more than seven years and sexual battery not more than 10.