

MINGO MESS BAFFLING TANGLE

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PERHAPS world chess champion Garry Kasparov (or his nemesis, the Deep Blue computer) would have the mental capacity to keep track of the amazing complexities involving Mingo County public officials.

Consider:

State Sen. Truman Chafin, D-Mingo, was indicted on federal wiretap charges in his messy divorce, but was found innocent.

Former Mingo Sheriff Gerald Chafin - no relation to Truman, and part of a rival Democratic faction - likewise was indicted on federal wiretap charges, supposedly stemming from an attempt to blackmail a "whistleblower" deputy, but likewise was found innocent.

Ex-Sheriff Chafin, a mortuary owner, was appointed coroner by Mingo County's commissioners - but state rules require that coroners be physicians, so he couldn't take the post.

Next the commissioners gave the job to **Dr. Diane Shafer of Mingo County, who previously was convicted of bribery in nearby Kentucky.** (She had been under investigation in Kentucky for suspected overbilling, but she married the overbilling investigator and gave him \$ 42,500. They both were convicted of bribery, and he of bigamy, but the convictions were set aside. West Virginia's Board of Medicine has set August hearings on whether to revoke her license.)

Meanwhile, Dr. Shafer may - or may not - have married a former Mingo coroner, Henry Vinson, who was convicted of running a male prostitution ring in Washington, D.C.

Vinson, also a mortician, had been ousted as Mingo coroner after he was convicted of making harassing phone calls to a rival funeral home director. **Then he was accused in a paternity suit. Next he moved to Washington, where he was charged with operating "Dream Boy," a male escort service.**

While the Washington investigation was in progress, Vinson "died" and his obituary was printed by newspapers around West Virginia - but his sister in Mingo County said the obit had been phoned to papers as a hoax.

In 1990, Vinson vowed that he'd never be convicted, because he said his "call boy" service had been utilized by officials of the Moore administration in Charleston and by officials of the Reagan-Bush White House in Washington. But the next year, he pleaded guilty and got a five-year prison term.

Now Vinson's sister says she thinks he's married to Dr. Shafer. Reporter Maryclaire Dale (who is white) called Dr. Shafer's office Monday and talked to a man who called himself "Henry Shafer." When she asked if his name is Henry Vinson, he screamed: "Would you like to come and have sex with me, you [racial obscenity]?" Is this another count of phone harassment?

Well, that's just this week's developments in murky Mingo, where public officials have always been bizarre.

Matewan Police Chief Sid Hatfield led strikers in a historic shootout with Baldwin-Felts detectives; Sheriff Johnie Owens "sold" his elected office to another politician for \$ 100,000; Kermit Fire Chief "Wig" Preece and his relatives sold drugs from the firehouse - that's public life in the Deep South coal county.

Mingo residents must wonder if they're living in a zoo.