

Lawsuit links several defendants to vote scheme

JIM MUIR THE SOUTHERN | Posted: Saturday, June 4, 2005 12:00 am

PULASKI COUNTY - A saga that began more than five years ago amid accusations of voter fraud in Alexander County has resurfaced in Pulaski County Circuit Court in the form of a civil lawsuit naming numerous high profile defendants and asking more than \$2.5 million in compensatory damages.

The suit, filed by former Alexander County Circuit Clerk Susan Hileman, alleges her civil rights were violated and she was deprived of the right to a fair election when she ran for re-election as an incumbent circuit clerk.

The multi-count lawsuit stems from allegations several county, state and union officials masterminded a vote-buying scheme during the March 21, 2000, Alexander County primary election.

Named as defendants are:

- 1 Former state Sen. Larry Woolard
- 1 Edward Smith, vice president of Laborers International Union and a member of Laborers Local 773
- 1 Alexander County Sheriff Warren "Buddy" Mitchell
- 1 Alexander County Circuit Clerk Sharon McGinness
- 1 Former Alexander County Clerk Lewis Maze
- 1 Alexander County Commissioner Lewis R. McRoy
- 1 Former Alexander County sheriff's deputy Joey Thurston, who currently serves on the Cairo City Council
- 1 John Price, a business agent for Laborers Local 773
- 1 Jim Aveary, of Alexander County
- 1 Danny Brown, of Alexander County
- 1 James Taylor, of Alexander County
- 1 Committee to Elect True Democrats
- 1 Committee to Elect Sharon McGinness
- 1 Citizens for Woolard
- 1 Laborers Local 773

Allegations surfaced in mid-February 2000, only days after absentee voting began in Alexander County, that people were being paid to vote for specific candidates. Several courthouse employees reported witnessing numerous absentee voters carrying small pieces of paper with four numbers - 35, 64, 83 and 104 - written on them. It was also reported that voters were being paid \$3 to vote after they returned to a parking lot adjacent to the courthouse.

The four candidate names that corresponded with the numbers on the primary ballot were McGinness (83), Woolard (64), McRoy (104), and Smith (35). Smith was a candidate to be a delegate for Al Gore at the 2000 Democratic National Convention; the others ran for the offices indicated. All four were victorious in the primary.

After complaints were registered, the Illinois State Board of Elections and the Attorney General's office both conducted investigations prior to the primary election. The investigations centered on a political action committee that was operated through Laborers Local 773 in Cairo.

The Committee to Elect True Democrats received sizable donations from three of the four candidates who were linked to the vote-buying scheme. McGinness contributed \$6,300, Woolard contributed \$6,000 and McRoy contributed \$5,000.

The lawsuit alleges that Aveary, Thurston, McGinness, Taylor and Brown received nearly \$10,000 from the Committee to Elect True Democrats - money that was later dispensed in exchange for votes.

The latest suit is not the first time Hileman has been in court with McGinness alleging that the election was tainted. Hileman, an incumbent who had been circuit clerk for 16 years, was defeated by McGinness by 200 votes in the primary in question but claimed that vote buying and voter fraud swayed the election and filed suit asking for a new election.

In May 2000, Associate Judge John Speroni ruled the Democratic nomination for circuit clerk was invalid because of voting irregularities and ordered a new election. McGinness then appealed that decision to the 5th District Appellate Court, which granted a stay on the new election and sent the matter back to the circuit court for an evidentiary hearing to determine if fraud took place.

During a three-day evidentiary hearing in June 2001, more than a dozen witnesses testified they were paid to vote and that vote-buying and vote fraud - particularly among absentee voters - was prevalent during the primary election. Ten days later Speroni ordered McGinness removed as circuit clerk. One week later the Alexander County Board voted unanimously to reappoint McGinness to the position from which Speroni ordered her removed.

Hileman, who is represented by Mount Vernon attorney Morris Lane Harvey, first filed the civil suit in U.S. District Court, but the matter was remanded to state court.

Along with asking for \$150,000 from each of the 17 defendants, Hileman also is seeking a jury trial.

writeon1@shawneelink.net

618-625-2006