



MCFEELY MUSCLE

THE CAMPAIGN TO RUIN GEORGE HARPER

BY HOLLY METZ

Holly Metz, author of *Killing the Poormaster* (Lawrence Hill, 2012), is adding documents discovered during her research, as she can, to www.thepoormaster.com and www.hollymetz.net

Or how the FBI came to investigate the sudden withdrawal of hundreds of clients—all city employees or their kin—from a milk seller in Hoboken, N.J., after he displeased the city’s political boss, Mayor Bernard McFeely.

Until October 1938, when a local organizer of the unemployed, Herman Matson, dared to speak out in a Hoboken park about the absence of poor relief under the McFeely administration and was viciously beaten by the mayor’s thugs, federal law enforcement officials had not much troubled themselves with Hoboken’s undemocratic rule. For years protestors had been removed from the city’s streets to the main police station, overseen by the boss’s brother, and were often threatened with job loss or harm, left with broken ribs and swollen faces, or met with other forms of catastrophe. No serious investigations followed.

Matson’s very public beating, documented and decried in area newspapers, challenged the feds to take action. By February 1939, representatives from the Justice Department’s new Civil Liberties Division had met with Matson, and the FBI was tasked with collecting documents and verbal accounts of

McFeely’s efforts to suppress dissent and to punish residents who displeased him.

Among the records assembled by the FBI were detailed allegations of a 1937-1938 campaign by McFeely and his cronies to cause the collapse of a longstanding Hoboken milk business, then run by George Harper, a son of the founder, and his wife Ann. According to their testimony, George Harper maintained a life-long friendship with two men who had crossed “Boss” McFeely: former city commissioner Joseph A. Clark and former school janitor Thomas Magnan. McFeely’s displeasure with the latter had been expressed in physical blows: news reports determined that the mayor had bludgeoned Magnan with a heavy ashtray when the two quarreled in his office.

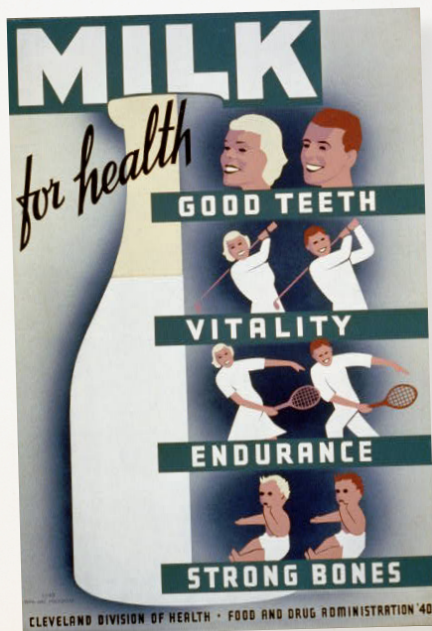
Harper’s Crime

Harper’s “crime” (according to McFeely) was to have marched with his old friends in the front line of a Hoboken church parade. The day after

the 1937 march, Harper’s customers told him the mayor was “raising the devil” about it and was threatening to ruin the milk purveyor’s business. His business partner came by to announce he was leaving the company because of the mayor’s displeasure.

On the advice of his lawyer, George Harper went to see McFeely in City Hall, and asked him directly about the rumors. “How can I, as mayor of the city, run you out of business?” the mayor asked Harper before launching into a tirade about Magnan and Clark. Harper later told the FBI that he listened to McFeely’s “rants” for twenty minutes before leaving City Hall.

The next day, at least fifty of Harper’s customers cancelled their milk orders. He listed each cancelation in a small memo book and approached customers individually to find out why they were quitting their business with him. All were evasive and indirect, but many alluded to coercion. Harper jotted



WPA poster promoting milk, Cleveland Division of Health¹

down their replies and later supplied his notebook to the FBI. “You know how it is,” some said pleadingly. “You know how McFeely is.” Others—customers for decades—remarked, “We’ve got our orders,” or “The orders are to stop buying milk from you.” Every one of those customers, Harper observed, was on the city payroll or had relatives employed by the city.

Partnership Broken

Harper’s business partner followed through on his threats to break from him. When the former partner then established a competing milk business, he made City Hall’s approval evident to frightened would-be customers by hiring one of McFeely’s relatives as a driver.

Over the coming days and months, Harper lost more customers. By the time he met with the FBI in May 1939, he could document a loss of about 250 clients—half of his original customer base—including two dieticians who had previously purchased milk from his company with federal funds. The Works Progress Administration program was administered on the local level and McFeely cronies had thus been able to put a stop to Harper’s milk deliveries.

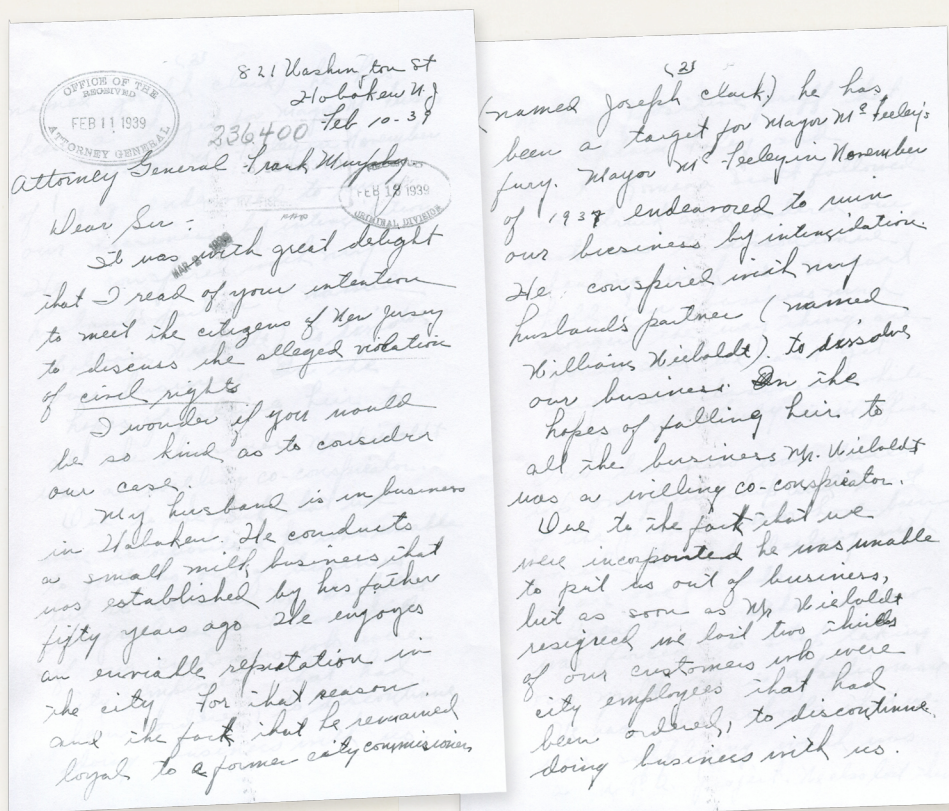
John T. Madigan, an agent in the FBI’s Newark, New Jersey, office typed out Harper’s account of the cancelation of milk orders by city employees and added them to a McFeely case file detailing alleged “civil rights [violations] and domestic violence.” (A review of the machine veterans on Harper’s list shows a cancelation by Fred DeSapio, a McFeely stalwart who would later run as a reformer and unseat the Boss as mayor.)

The Chief Executive

Not long after, Madigan interviewed Boss McFeely. In his written account of the meeting, the FBI agent made note of the mayor’s claim that “it is his policy, and always has been his policy, to allow anti-administration speakers to speak freely.” Hoboken’s residents, McFeely pointed out, had elected him “time and again” with

large pluralities. He had concluded that voters simply preferred him as their “chief executive.” The mayor said he had no personal knowledge of the incidents that had precipitated the FBI interview—including the beating of Herman Matson and the campaign against George Harper—but he assured Madigan that “he would be very glad to cooperate” with the Justice Department “in unearthing the true facts” behind every allegation. If McFeely, or anyone from his administration, sent further updates, the FBI did not retain those communications. ■

¹Statement of Bernard N. McFeely to John T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, report 44-2, 2-4, filed November 1, 1939, box 17594, folder 144-48-1, DOJ Subject File 144-48-1, Records of the DOJ (RG 60), National Archives, College Park, Maryland (NACP).



Two pages of Ann Harper’s letter to Attorney General Frank Murphy, 1939, regarding McFeely’s efforts to ruin her husband’s business²

HARPER'S LIST OF LOST PROOF

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is being furnished to the Bureau, together with copies of this report, so that the Department may have the benefit of same.

It is to be noted that this newspaper clipping contains the names of individuals who possibly in the future be pertinent witnesses in this investigation in the event the Department desires to give consideration to the Clark incident. However, at this time said witnesses are not being given consideration.

Mr. GEORGE HARPER called at this office on May 9, 1939 and submitted to the writer the names and addresses of the various customers of his, who, since his difficulties with Mayor HANLEY, have notified him that they no longer desire to take milk from him. These names are contained in a note book which is being retained in the file of this case, the names being set out hereinafter for possible future use in this investigation.

Mrs. ANNE CARROLL, Police Matron, customer for 7 years, discontinued 11-10-38;
JAMES CALLAGHAN, 227 1/2 Street, Police Officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 11-10-38;
Mrs. MURRAY MURRAY, 1204 Hudson Street, wife of ex-freeholder, customer 7 years, discontinued 11-10-38;
MIRA and MAY HALLIDAY, 956 Hudson Street, teacher and sister of Commissioner THOMAS HALLIDAY, customer 7 years, discontinued 11-10-38;
Mrs. NORMAN WILSON, 1204 Hudson Street, wife of Assemblyman, (Harper and his father served Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and their parents for past 40 years). No date of discontinuance;
Mrs. PAUL CARLFIELD, 510 Garden Street, wife of City Engineer and U.S.A. boss, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
EDGEM, 511 Garden Street, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
BROWN, 581 Garden Street, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
MRS. S. TOOMEY, 531 Garden Street, teacher, customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
FRANK BOLAN, 608 Garden Street, city fireman, father and brother policeman, customer 20 years, discontinued 1-30-39;

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MAY WILSON, 660 Garden Street, daughter clerk in a school, 15 years customer, discontinued 1-30-39;
JOHN DELAY, 721 Garden Street, Chief of Fire Department, customer 20 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
FitzPATRICK, 724 Garden St., police officer, customer 20 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
BILL McHANNY, 809 Garden Street, retired police officer, customer 12 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
AMEY HOPPER, 813 Garden St., teacher, (Harper and father served parents for 12 years) customer 8 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
THOMAS NORMANVILLE, 921 Garden Street, Deputy Surrogate, (Harper served parents 25 years), customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Capt. DENNIS SULLIVAN, 160 11th St., Police Commissioner, customer 25 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
JOHN F. LEWIS, 1113 Garden St., President of Board of Education, customer 10 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
THOMAS MAGRATH, Sr., 1221 Garden Street, P.W.A., customer 30 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
EDWARD STACH, City Insurance (served parents 15 years), customer 8 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
EDWARD COYLE, 1221 Garden Street, Clerk, City Hall, customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
ARTHUR KILL WADSWORTH, 1113 Garden Street, County Police Officer, customer 4 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
GROVER WADSWORTH, 1310 Garden Street, teacher, (served parents 20 years), no length time customer, no date of discontinuance;
HAROLD BUTLER, 1201 Bloomfield Street, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
PHILLIPS, 1201 Bloomfield Street, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Dr. WARDENING, 1026 Bloomfield St., customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
LANTON, 161 10th St., teacher, Stevens Hoboken Academy, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Mrs. FORD, 625 Bloomfield St., city payroll, customer 35 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
BILL CONNELL, 625 Bloomfield St., city payroll, customer 35 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
EDITH MARRIHAN, 92 Garden Street, police officer, customer 6 years, discontinued 1-30-39;

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CASPAR SUHARS, 148 Washington Street, fireman, customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
JOHN TRACY, 526 Washington Street, school janitor, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
McQUINN, 716 Washington Street, transit officer, customer 15 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
FRANK CAPRICE, 727 Washington Street, police officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
KING, 729 Washington Street, City Insurance, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
HAROLD STUTZ, 1205 Washington Street, railroad tunnel officer, (served parents 20 years), customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
ALPHONSE CARTER, now deceased, 601 Washington Street, City Commissioner, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
MAGREY, 912 Washington Street, housekeeper for Carsten, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Dr. JOHN TALEY, 931 Washington Street, city payroll, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
LOONEY, 1206 Washington Street, son of fireman, customer 3 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
EDWARD FITZGERALD, 1121 Washington Street, Sergeant of Police, customer 8 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
JOHN LOONEY, 1121 Washington Street, police officer, customer 2 months, discontinued 1-30-39;
FRANK WELLS, 1215 Hudson Street, Detective Sergeant, customer 20 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
HARRY SUTTON, 1210 Hudson Street, accountant; brother-in-law of John F. Lewis, President, Board of Education, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
M. CANNON, 1204 Hudson Street, teacher, customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
EDWARD McFEELEY, 1204 Hudson St., Chief of Police, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
SULLIVAN, 1121 Hudson Street, retired fireman, customer 25 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
ARTHUR MILLER, 1110 Hudson Street, police officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
THOMAS SHANNY, 1211 Hudson Street, police officer, customer 4 years, discontinued 1-30-39;

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PATRICK KENNEDY, 1016 Hudson Street, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Dr. JOSEPH LOWRIGAN, 1200 Hudson Street, city payroll, customer 30 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
JAMES O'NEILL, 1000 Hudson Street, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39; (served parents 10 years);
CROSS, 1000 Hudson Street, retired police sergeant, customer 20 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
ANTHONY TROMBAY, 1000 Hudson Street, Board of Health Inspector, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Dr. VINCENZI, 933 Hudson Street, city payroll, customer 6 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
QUISTO MR. BOBBE, 933 Hudson Street, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
Mrs. LAUREL KILLY, 900 Hudson Street, widow of Inspector of Police, customer 40 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
JOHN McLAUGHLIN, 912 Hudson Street, County Custodian, customer 15 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
JOSEPH TOOMEY, 922 Hudson Street, teacher (served parents 15 years), customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
JAMES O'LEARY, 730 Hudson Street, city attorney and sometimes acting recorder, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39; (served parents 10 years);
MILCAREY, 730 Hudson Street, customer 5 years, discontinued 1-30-39; (served parents 30 years);
PETER PELUSO, 710 Hudson Street, P.W.A., customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39; (served parents 15 years);
MILAN CALLAGHAN, 160 11th Street, saloon keeper, customer 7 years, discontinued 1-30-39; (served parents 20 years);
LEO ZATTA, 534 Hudson Street, teacher, race horse bookie, customer 4 years, discontinued 1-30-39;
FRANK ROMANO, 700 Clinton Street, City Inspector, customer 5 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
NICK CHRISTIANO, 124 Newark Street, detective (Harper says Christian told reporter he had to stop), customer 3 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
Dr. F. X. STACH, 210 Garden Street, Harper's family doctor and Board of Health, customer 25 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
MICHAEL PELUSO, 252 1/2 Street, Board of Health Inspector, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39;

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THOMAS RALLY, 1131 Washington Street, police officer, customer 20 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
JACK McQUINN, 931 Willow Avenue, fireman, customer 5 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
BILL McPHY, 1010 Willow Avenue, police officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
NICK SCOTT, 1011 Willow Avenue, fireman, customer 35 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
WALTER RAFTER, 1105 Willow Avenue, P.W.A., customer 35 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
LEO KILLY, 1235 Park Avenue, Captain, Fire Department, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39; (served parents 10 years);
FLORENCE ZATTA, 251 10th Street, clerk in school, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
GEORGE ROLLIER, 255 10th Street, Lieutenant of Police, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
FRED DeSAPIO, 1201 Bloomfield Street, Immigrant leader, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
JOHN SULLIVAN, 1028 Garden Street, Detective Sergeant, customer 10 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
HENRY VINCENZI, 704 Grand Street, Department of Streets, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-15-39;
SAM CAPARENG, 500 Adam Street, store keeper, 12 years customer, discontinued 1-10-39;
JIM DeSAPIO, 715 Adam Street, P.W.A., customer 4 years, discontinued 5-13-39;
Mrs. VINCENZI, 715 Adam Street, city employee, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-13-39;
MRS. ALBERGO, 505 Adam Street, city employee, customer 20 years, discontinued 5-13-39;
GENE BIGGIO, 650 First Street, saloon keeper, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-13-39; son of police officer;
COOLE, 92 Willow Avenue, fireman, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-13-39; (served parents 10 years);
PATRICK WHALEN, 123 Garden Street, byline officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-13-39;
MAY COUPLAND, 512 Garden Street, clerk in school, customer 30 years, discontinued 5-13-39;
PETER CLANCY, 15 Willow Terrace, son of county employee, customer 15 years, discontinued 5-13-39;

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WILLIAM McHONAHAN, 841 Willow Ave., police officer, customer 15 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
MRS. BOOBY, 1011 Willow Avenue, Deputy Police Dept., customer 5 years, discontinued 5-11-39; (served parents 12 years);
COOLE, 1013 Willow Ave., brother of fireman, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
JOHN HYAS, deceased, 1032 Willow Avenue, fireman, customer 15 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
Mr. McGRATH, 1234 Garden Street, teacher, customer 2 years, discontinued 5-11-39; (served parents 30 years);
CHARLES KRASINSKI, 1233 Garden Street, police officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39; (served wife's parents 15 years);
JOHN REILLY, 1302 Park Avenue, Battalion Chief of Fire Dept., customer 20 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
JOHN FRALIS, 1251 Park Avenue, Secretary to Commissioner GILBERT, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
Mrs. TOM FLYNN, 1203 Park Avenue, county employee, customer 25 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
FRANCIS O'DON, 1126 Park Avenue, son on city payroll, customer 10 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
FRANCIS O'DON, 1126 Park Avenue, son on city payroll, customer 10 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
WILLIAM LEWIS, 1108 Park Avenue, brother of police officer, no length of time customer, discontinued 5-7-39; (served wife's parents 25 years);
ANTHONY LAMIE, 1113 Park Avenue, county employee, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
O'DONOGHUE, 1001 Garden Street, teacher, customer 25 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
JOHN GAYDON, 215 10th Street, city Horse Shoer, customer 10 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
VINCENT FALLON, 906 Garden Street, fireman, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39; (served parents 15 years);
ANTHONY BRUCE, 730 Park Avenue, School Board, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
BRISCOLL, 718 Park Avenue, Park attendant, customer 15 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
TIM LARSEN, 626 Park Avenue, Superintendent of Parks, customer 20 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
ETAL, 516 Bloomfield Street, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-7-39; son police officer, husband, school janitor;

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WILLIAM FLECK, 1136 Bloomfield Street, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-20-39;
HARRY KERP, 1136 Bloomfield Street, Principal of School No. 6, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
FRANK MARSHALL, 100 13th Street, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
MARTIN KELLY (LANNIHAN), 1312 Bloomfield Street, police officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
MATTHEW QUINLAN, 1221 Washington Street, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
JOSEPH FULFAN, 59 13th Street, Sergeant of Police, customer 25 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
LEW MATTHEWS, 1027 Bloomfield Street, retired Sergeant of Police, customer 15 years, discontinued 5-20-39;
ANTHONY MALONE, 802 Hudson Street, city clerk, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
Dr. BENSON J. O'NEILL, 931 Washington Street, city payroll, no length time customer, discontinued 5-20-39; (served wife's parents 10 years);
WILLIAM MOONEY, 827 Washington Street, fireman, no length time customer, discontinued 5-15-39;
Dr. MAGUIRE, 501 Hudson Street, wife and mother on city payroll, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39; (served parents 15 years);
STEVE BRIGOLIA, 601 Hudson Street, candy store, customer 2 years, discontinued 5-15-39, ordered by JOSEPH LISA to stop taking;
MILLER, 127 Garden Street, (sold out), ice cream parlor, customer one month, discontinued 5-11-39; ordered to stop by police;
Mrs. WALDRON, P.W.A. Nursery, School No. 3, customer 2 years, discontinued 5-11-39;
Miss MARIAN O'BRIEN, P.W.A. Nursery, School No. 8, customer 1 year, discontinued 5-11-39; she told someone else she was ordered by the Superintendent of Schools, Dan Kealey;
TOM BYLANE, deceased, but wife alive, 507 Garden Street, police officer, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-15-39;
FALCO, 500 Grand Street, dry goods store, customer 2 years, discontinued 5-22-39; ordered by police;

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VINCENT DOWNEY, 1110 Hudson Street, fireman, customer 35 years, discontinued 5-10-39;
LISA, 1222 Hudson Street, P.W.A. worker, customer 4 years, discontinued 5-22-39; ordered by foreman on P.W.A. to stop taking milk;
DeRODOL, 1028 Willow Avenue, delegate to Chauffeur's Union, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39. Adelman Neil Murphy ordered Mrs. DeRocco to stop taking milk.
JIM TOBIN, 705 Park Avenue, city stable man, customer 10 years, discontinued 5-6-39;
EDWARD KENNEDY, 1011 William Avenue, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-11-39; (served parents 10 years);
Mrs. O'BRIEN, 920 Bloomfield St., customer 25 years, discontinued 5-11-39; rents rooms to race horse bookie and was told to stop by Mrs. Birdie Lane, wife of Commissioner. 1203 Willow Avenue;
JIM CALLAGHAN, 821 Washington Street, police officer, customer 5 years, discontinued 6-2-39;
MARTIN LOUIS, 1116 Park Avenue, son on county payroll, customer 35 years, discontinued 6-2-39;
MORRIS, 261 10th Street, grocer, President of Delicatessen and Grocers' Association, customer 2 years, discontinued 2-11-39. Said he couldn't afford to get in trouble;
FOX HILL FAYERS, owned by John Parry and Benny Barfo, 265 10th Street, customer 7 years, discontinued 2-11-39. Ordered by Capt. Foley to stop taking milk.
WALTER FORD, Mrs., 1110 Park Avenue, teacher, customer 7 years, discontinued 6-2-39;
JOHN BRADY, 255 10th Street, saloon keeper, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-10-39;
WILLIAM O'NEILL, 1032 Garden Street, saloon keeper, customer 7 years, discontinued 5-10-39;
ARTHUR BRADY, 41 Hudson Street, police officer, customer 15 years, discontinued 5-10-39;

With further reference to his case, HARPER submitted several pieces of correspondence, which he felt might be of value in this investigation.

1. Letter dated November 27, 1937 signed by JOHN S. APRILGATE, attorney-at-law, addressed to Mr. HARPER, while explaining his desire to have a conference with Mr. HARPER.

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Documents above derived from:

"Report of J. T. Madigan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark, NJ, Regarding Bernard N. McFeely, Alias Barney McFeely; Edward McFeely; Frank Romano, Civil Rights and Domestic Violence," filed June 6, 1939, box 17313, 4th folder, DOJ Central Files, Classified Subject Files, Correspondence, Records of the DOJ (RG 60), NACP; and Ann Harper to Attorney General Frank Murphy, February 10, 1939, box 4402, folder section 1 (1/2/39—2/15/39 236400), Records of the DOJ (RG 60), NACP. See also, re. McFeely's alleged beating of Magnan: "McFeely Battler Fails to Appear in Court," JJ, October 25, 1937.

Image credits from preceding page:

Box 4402, folder section 1 (1/2/39-2/15/39 236400), Records of the Department of Justice (RG 60), NACP.

²Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, [LC-USZC2-1086DLG.]