

Bama alumni recall Machine experiences

From Staff and Wire Reports

MOBILE — Accusations that a secret political group at the University of Alabama had a challenger assaulted don't sound far-fetched to Mobile attorney Jim Zeigler. He still remembers the night his dorm room got torched.

That was 22 years ago, after Zeigler had beaten the Machine's candidate for president of the Student Government Association and turned back an attempt by the Machine to impeach him.

"People who didn't go to the University of Alabama find it hard to believe that student politics is taken this seriously, that in elections thousands of dollars are spent, people are bullied around," the former Public Service Commission member said.

Zeigler and other former students recounted their experiences with the Machine for the Mobile Register after Minda Riley, a non-Machine candidate for SGA president, was beaten and the University administration shut down the SGA indefinitely.

Zeigler said from 1966 to 1970 the Machine consisted of 13 of Alabama's largest fraternities and was accustomed to winning student elections. He became one of the few non-Greek students elected to SGA when the Machine split its votes between two candidates.

Tony Davis, the Machine candidate in 1970, said he didn't remem-

ber much about Zeigler's administration but said he ran a clean campaign.

"We obviously weren't involved in dirty tricks because we didn't win," Davis, now a Birmingham attorney, said.

Although not Machine-backed, Zeigler turned out to be one of the most controversial SGA presidents ever. According to back issues of *The Crimson White*, Zeigler was accused of making "outrageously long long-distance phone calls" and was "partying away" student money in Las Vegas.

Two-thirds of the way through his term, in early 1971, the Machine-dominated student legislature tried to impeach him.

"The day the student court threw out the bill of impeachment and cleared the way for me to finish out my term, I got a couple of threatening telephone calls. I didn't pay much attention to it," he said. "That night, while I and my friends were out celebrating, somebody torched my dormitory room. Burned it completely up, everything I had in it — clothes, books, the works." •

However, because of the allegations that Zeigler abused student fees, his candidacy was considered more of a black mark for independents than the Machine, said Cleo Thomas, who served as the only black SGA president in 1976.

•see Zeigler, page 3

Zeigler

• continued from page 1

"I wasn't there during the Zeigler presidency, so I can't speak whether he was a bad president," Thomas, now an Anniston attorney and a University trustee, said Sunday. "But my opposition would point out him as having a failed administration, and how inept independent candidates were."

Bill Donaldson, a Mobile attorney, was a Machine-backed candidate for SGA vice president in 1975.

"It is simply an organization that organizes the greek vote," he said. "I think you could equate the Machine to a political party that holds a convention."

Donaldson lost his race to Sylvester Jones, one of the first blacks elected to a high SGA office and now dean of institutional development at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham.

Jones said the Machine's power reached beyond student politics, including blackballing deserving students from Jasons, Alabama's top honorary organization.

Preston Bolt, a Mobile attorney, was a member of the Machine in

the 1970s and said it was nothing more than 12 to 13 fraternities that cooperated and endorsed candidates.

"It was not a very efficient or malicious organization when I knew about it," he said.

He said student politics "has a serious side and a ridiculous side. The amazing thing to me is we spent much more time per vote and more money per vote at the University of Alabama, voting on an organization that had a budget of \$300,000, than would be spent on the average candidate at the time for the Legislature."

Student Politics Editor Scott Travis contributed to this story.