

## “The Royal Coach Affair”

*The city council went auto buying yesterday and wound up with 20 autos, headed by a 12-cylinder Lincoln for the mayor. There was little discussion on purchase of 19 of the cars but the mayor's auto provoked much discussion.*

--San Diego Union, Nov. 21, 1934

Lasting only six months, the mayoral term of Dr. Rutherford B. Irones was one of the shortest in San Diego history. It was certainly the strangest.



Irones was appointed mayor on August 2, 1934, replacing former mayor John F. Forward, Jr., who had resigned with poor health. The 57-year-old Irones was a respected physician and World War I veteran. He was best known as the director of the local chapter of “the Crusaders,” a militant anti-prohibition organization.

Mayor Irones got off to a rough start. His first paycheck—about \$100—was garnished to partially satisfy an old debt of \$648. Irones recovered from the embarrassment and launched a public safe driving campaign to combat the “staggering” number of automobile accidents in the county. Pointing out that San Diego had “one of the highest casualty ratings in the nation,” Irones urged the police to enforce “strict observance of traffic regulations.”

In October, Irones decided to test his clout by investigating San Diego’s Civil Service Commission. The commissioners supervised the appointments of more than 1000 government workers. Control of the commission meant power over the appointments. Vowing he would “clean house from bowsprit to aft rail,” the mayor demanded the resignation of every member of the commission. The plan failed when he could not secure a majority of council votes.

Irones found his next campaign more successful. He determined he needed an official automobile. The council agreed and offered him a small 8-cylinder car. Irones countered with his own specifications: “a machine of at least 150-horsepower, with a 7-passenger body” and a “12-cylinder engine of the V-type.”

On November 21, Mayor Irones took delivery of a 12-cylinder Lincoln costing the taxpayers \$2,716. The public immediately mocked the extravagant purchase. “People are in breadlines,” a letter to city council pointed out, adding, “a flivver is good enough for anyone.” The newspapers named the oversized black sedan “the Royal Coach.”

Irones enjoyed his Lincoln for only three days. Late Friday afternoon, the mayor and his wife went out for a drive. Moments after leaving their Torrance Street home in Mission Hills, the mayor sideswiped a car as he raced up Reynard Way. The other car was knocked to the side of the road and overturned, badly injuring George and Mildred Pickett. The “Royal Coach” paused momentarily after the collision, then sped up and disappeared.

Two police radio prowl cars were quickly at the scene. As Mr. and Mrs. Pickett were being taken to Mercy Hospital a young boy told the police he had just been at the mayor's house and had seen a damaged black sedan. Patrolmen Nickel and Logan drove to the house and found the mayor walking around his official vehicle, muttering about a car that had forced him over on the wrong side of the road. "He seemed to be drunk," the police report read. "The smell of liquor was very strong on the mayor's breath and his speech was incoherent."

The mayor would not report to work the following Monday. While he recovered in bed from "a concussion and hemorrhage," his wife fended off newsmen. "Although uninjured, she said today 'she dislikes so to make all these explanations,'" reported the *Los Angeles Times*.

Irones' alleged drunken, hit and run was ignored by the police. Beyond release of the police report to the newspapers, Chief George Sears refused to comment on the incident. The city council seemed unconcerned, as well, though they did worry about who would pay for the estimated \$300 in repairs to the "Royal Coach."

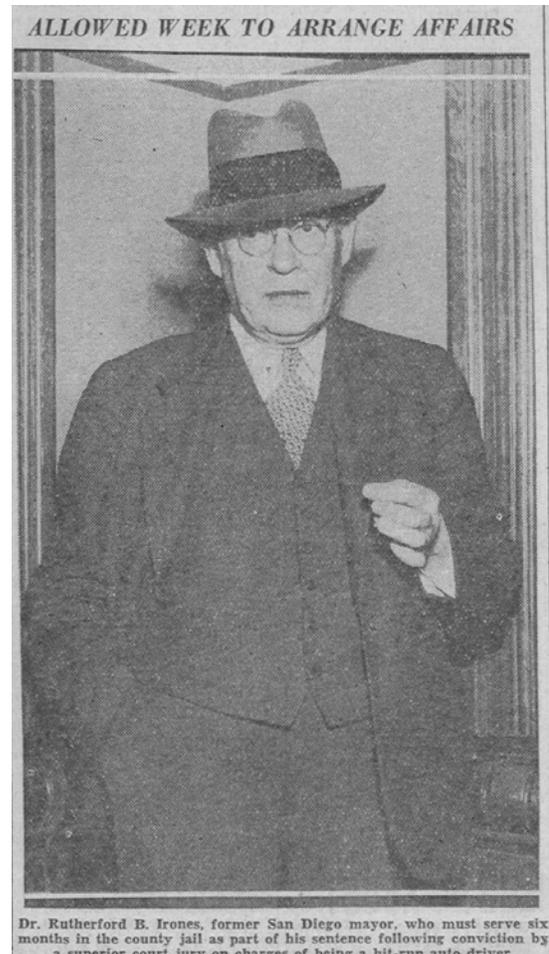
But many San Diegans were incensed by the affair. Several women's organizations, led by the influential Thursday Club, demanded the mayor's resignation for his "detrimental" conduct, which they found "particularly injurious" to the coming Exposition planned for Balboa Park.

On December 22, Mayor Irones was arrested on a felony criminal complaint of leaving the scene of an accident and failing to render aid to the accident victims. The case went to trial in Superior Court in late January. A jury of ten women and two men listened to a parade of witnesses who had seen the mayor's speeding sedan strike another car.

The four-day trial ended on February 1. The jury returned a verdict in 22 minutes, convicting Irones of hit and running driving. Two weeks later, Judge G. K. Scovell sentenced the mayor to one year in the County Jail. "I'll take it on the chin like a man," Irones declared. "I'm sure I haven't lost any friends . . . those I just thought were friends don't count."

The ex-mayor served six months and was released after agreeing to pay the hospital bills of Mr. and Mrs. Pickett. The couple later won a civil suit and collected \$20,000 in damages from Irones and \$10,000 from the Ford Motor Company.

The doctor resumed his medical practice in San Diego but his troubles continued. His wife Essy left him in 1937. Two years later, he was arrested for stabbing his 28-year-old girlfriend. Charges were dropped when the jury failed to reach a verdict. A conviction for assaulting a hotel owner cost him two months in jail in 1940. He died without survivors on February 13, 1948, at the Sawtelle Veterans Home in Los Angeles.



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