

The New Sheriff In Town: Sheriff Cory Hutcheson Vowed to Clean Up His Rural Missouri County. Now He's the One Facing Prison

by Doyle Murphy

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The boy sheriff of Mississippi County had made some big promises.

Sheriff Cory Hutcheson told voters during the 2016 campaign he would wage war on rural drug dealers in their stretch of the Missouri Bootheel. No more meth heads doing business across the street from their schools. No more addicts stealing them blind in the night. No more unanswered calls for help.

"It kind of gave me hope," recalls Adrienne Thurmond-Adams, a 32-year-old social worker and mom. "We needed hope around here."

Running as a Republican — a break from the socially conservative county's Dixiecrat-like tradition — Hutcheson, 33, challenged his old boss, upsetting the twelve-year incumbent by 258 votes. It was a bitter campaign. When it was over, half of the eight-man department left rather than work for a know-it-all kid with less than a decade in law enforcement. Not that it bothered Hutcheson. He had made it clear he was bringing in his own team, openly boasting on Facebook about plans to fire rival deputies.

"He'll be done on January 1," Hutcheson wrote of one deputy with whom he'd squabbled about a car chase.

January is when the young sheriff took office, and he immediately went to work.

"Deputies Arrest East Prairie Man on Drug Charges," read the front-page headline of the *East Prairie Eagle* following Hutcheson's first full week in office. It was the beginning of a pattern. Week after week, readers were treated to a parade of mug shots and drug busts. Hutcheson and his loyal team filled the 110-bed Mississippi County Detention Center and piled in another 60 inmates on top of that, county officials say. A once-a-month criminal court schedule that used to finish around lunchtime began stretching into the late afternoon to accommodate all the new arrests.

"All you seen on the news was the sheriff's office arrested someone again," says Melissa Weakley, a 31-year-old mother of two. She found it exhilarating after years of watching helplessly as drugs took over her hometown. "My sister and I would even talk, 'I wonder who's going to be arrested tonight?'"

Hutcheson is clean-cut, with blond-brown hair combed straight down on his forehead, à la Caesar, and a hard cop stare for the cameras. He'd graduated with honors from Southeast Missouri State University before returning home to a county where only one in ten adults holds a bachelor's degree.

The new sheriff was still a little awkward in front of the cameras, but he seemed to enjoy the attention the drug busts brought. He created a sheriff's office Facebook page where followers could see the latest arrests and scroll through photos of Hutcheson posed next to neatly arranged stacks of seized cash and drugs.

Even more than the arrests, crime-weary residents loved his tough-talking style. For years, they had been begging for someone to do something, and here, finally, was a sheriff saying exactly what they wanted to hear.

"NOTICE: If you sell illegal drugs in Mississippi County, you ARE on our list," warned the sheriff's Facebook page. "Your own friends & family have told on you and it's only a matter of time until you see our lights. In fact, you're probably next ..."

In February, Hutcheson went undercover, barely disguised in a ballcap, to take down a marijuana seller. He personally bought weed from the dealer and then busted her supplier and two henchmen, according to a story that aired on the local CBS affiliate. Even better, the 23-year-old dealer had grown up in the same small town as he did.

"She's from East Prairie, and so am I," Hutcheson told KFVS 12, the slightest hint of a smirk on his lips. "We really didn't think it would work. We thought for sure she would notice who I was."

The stories played well with his fans, who began to swap tales of a dwindling supply of drugs and dealers who were too afraid to operate in the sheriff's jurisdiction.

"He has done nothing but wear them out," 61-year-old farmer Mike Bryant says.

And then Hutcheson himself was arrested. Less than four months into the sheriff's tenure, Missouri Attorney General Josh Hawley unveiled a barrage of eighteen criminal charges against the young lawman. The counts spanned two cases, one dating back to a 2014 FBI investigation alleging

that, as a deputy, Hutcheson illegally tracked the phones of state troopers, the old sheriff and a judge who presides over Mississippi County and neighboring Scott County. The other case charged that the sheriff had roughed up a 77-year-old hairdresser in March, causing her to suffer a heart attack. Hutcheson then allegedly filed a bogus report claiming that the woman had kidnapped his sister-in-law, authorities say.

Hutcheson was booked into the Cape Girardeau County Jail on the morning of April 5. He bonded out that afternoon. By 5 p.m., he was back on the job.

Cory Hutcheson is still popular in Mississippi County, even after his arrest.

Shaped like an arrowhead, the county is a puzzle of low-lying farmland surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River. South of St. Louis by about 150 miles, it butts up against the southwestern edge of Kentucky, hovering less than five miles north of the Tennessee border. The culture tracks south, as does the local accent, a softened pronunciation that makes "I" sound like "ah."

And while the population is small and getting smaller — last year's U.S. Census estimates had the county sliding below 14,000 people — the land is vast. The sheriff's office has more than 400 square miles to cover. Residents say that's left them vulnerable to all kinds of crime, as hard drugs take an ever-stronger hold.

It was little surprise that Hutcheson's message resonated with local voters.

"It's a farming county," says Scott Peters, 48, who farms near the tiny town of Bertrand. "It's about our only industry here. Thieves can cost you a lot of money in a hurry."

Addicts creep down gravel roads at night to steal diesel fuel and expensive machinery. Over the past decade, they've begun scaling the irrigation systems that stretch like giant, metallic skeletons over wheat fields, climbing up to the controls and cutting away hundreds, even thousands, of feet of copper wire that they can sell for a dollar or two a pound to scrap metal dealers.

Peters says it costs about \$5,000 to replace the ruined controls and potentially thousands more if they hit him at the wrong time and a crop dies.

"I've got to live here, and I'd like to see something done about it," he says.

He's not just talking about stealing. He's got kids, and it worries him to see heroin, meth and crack seeping into communities where beer and marijuana used to be as bad as it got.

"I'm not trying to run down our previous sheriff," he says, "but I really wonder what they were doing."

You'll hear versions of this across the county, particularly in Hutcheson's hometown of East Prairie. A block off Main Street at the Prairie Queen diner, employees Brittany Woodard, 26, and June Wheatley, 56, are both supporters of Hutcheson. They were sick of the old sheriff, whom Wheatley calls "haughty." Hutcheson was making a noticeable difference when it came to drugs — maybe too much of a difference, Woodard says.

"I really think he stepped on somebody's toes, and they didn't like it," she says.

Wheatley asks Woodard if she thinks the sheriff was set up.

"I do," Woodard says.

You'll hear versions of this, too. Supporters suspect there's a conspiracy behind the charges. The campaign was so nasty, it only makes sense that the old sheriff wanted revenge, they reason. Or it could be the work of a high-powered drug dealer who was pissed to see a crusader like Hutcheson cutting into his profits.

For this theory to work, this puppet master would need enough juice to force the FBI, Missouri State Highway Patrol and state Attorney General Josh Hawley to collude on a plot to take down the sheriff of a county where two-story buildings stand out. The scheme would need to include a pair of elderly hairdressers and their customers, probably doctors, a state prosecutor to handle the criminal case and untold others.

Improbable as all that might seem, Hutcheson's supporters have put their faith in him, and the alternative — that he's no better than the people he's been locking up — is troubling to contemplate.

"Everybody wants him to be innocent," Wheatley says.

Not everybody wants him to be innocent. In fact, there are many people in Mississippi County and beyond who are pretty sure he is guilty.

Over at Joyce's Beauty Shop, 77-year-old Bonnie Woods is back to work after a three-day hospital stay that authorities say was the result of a violent confrontation with Hutcheson. The salon belongs to her younger sister, 75-year-old Joyce Baltrusaitis, who is also working during a recent visit.

Their attorney has told them not to talk to any reporters about what happened, Baltrusaitis says.

"I wish I could, honey," she says, reaching out to pat a reporter's hand. "I wish I could tell my story."

Hutcheson loyalists will describe the two aging beauticians as cagier than they seem, downright vicious whenever an employee quits. Aside from farming and a handful of trucking companies, the thriving business in East Prairie seems to be beauty salons. There are at least three within walking distance of Joyce's, but her shop is the mother ship, the place where many young stylists get their start. Baltrusaitis has been in the business 57 years, 31 in the little brick building that now has a picture of Marilyn Monroe in the window.

"We're nice ladies," she insists. "We're not going to assault anyone."

Woods, mindful of the lawyer's advice, interrupts: "That's enough."

"I'm too loving," Baltrusaitis continues, tears forming in her eyes, "and then I get a broken heart."

Hutcheson's sister-in-law, Kasey Hall, was one of the stylists who worked at Joyce's. The trouble began when she quit to start a competing salon on the other end of downtown. The elderly sisters claimed she stole something — it's not clear what from court records, and they declined to discuss the incident in detail. But they apparently refused to hand over her last paycheck until the item was returned.

Unlike many of the towns in Mississippi County, East Prairie has its own police department, one presumably capable of tackling any law enforcement issues at a beauty salon. But Hutcheson showed up in uniform on March 24 to get his sister-in-law's money, authorities say.

The scene quickly turned physical, according to a state trooper's account. Hutcheson is accused of handcuffing Woods' arm when the septuagenarian refused to give up the check, cinching the cuff so tightly she bled. When she still did not give him the check, he allegedly went for her other arm.

The salon showdown was described in an April 4 probable cause statement filed by Missouri State Highway Patrol Trooper T.S. Craig, who investigated the case against Hutcheson and handed over the results to the Attorney General's Office.

"Sheriff Hutcheson grabbed Woods' right arm near the bicep, causing a contusion that resulted in significant bruising," Craig wrote. "Sheriff Hutcheson grabbed Hall's paycheck from Woods' right hand, unhandcuffed her, and abruptly left."

The shocking confrontation caused Woods to have a heart attack shortly after Hutcheson walked out, authorities say. A customer drove her to a local doctor, but it was closing time, so Woods' nephew took her to another office in neighboring Scott County. Realizing she was having a heart attack, staff there had her rushed to Cape Girardeau, where she underwent an angiogram and an angioplasty.

Hutcheson continued on his way, depositing Hall's \$428 check into her account. Authorities say he also filed a probable cause statement that same

day with the county prosecutor, seeking kidnapping and assault charges against Woods. Instead of the sheriff roughing up Woods, supposedly she'd roughed up the sheriff's sister-in-law.

Trooper Craig wasn't buying it.

"Sheriff Hutcheson alleged Hall was assaulted and held against her will by two elderly females when she went to pick up her final pay check from them," Trooper Craig wrote. "I conducted interviews with multiple witnesses regarding the incident that occurred the morning of March 24, 2017. The witnesses indicated Hall was not assaulted or held against her will."

Hall declined comment when contacted by the *RFT*, but she posted a defense on Facebook. The 23-year-old doesn't mention anything about being kidnapped by a pair of senior citizens, but, she writes, "things did get ugly with words & them grabbing & pushing me physically..."

No one "wrestled an older lady and arrested her in her beauty shop," Hall adds. "Also, I'm sure said elderly women would not be strong enough being almost 80 years old to put up a big enough fight for an officer to have to struggle with."

Among the dozens of comments on the post is one from Hutcheson.

"They're upset to be losing their top earners and are doing the only thing they can... lying & smearing," he writes. "But I don't know why they brought me into their drama."

Drama seemed to follow Hutcheson's law enforcement career.

He had grown up normal enough. Former classmates remember him as a nice guy and smart, if a touch nerdy. He played a little football on some mediocre East Prairie High School teams. He later studied political science at Southeast Missouri State and graduated with distinction.

It was in college that his political ambitions began to show. He went to work for Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson (R-Cape Girardeau) while still in school, according to his LinkedIn profile, and also ran for student body president. (He lost badly.)

Hutcheson married an East Prairie girl shortly after graduating in 2006 and later returned to his hometown, taking a job with the sheriff's office at the county jail. He rose quickly through the corrections ranks, eventually landing a job as jail administrator.

In September 2014, a 28-year-old woman named Tara Rhodes was admitted to the jail. Rhodes was an addict with a history of low-level offenses tied to using drugs and trying to get money to buy drugs. She was also pregnant, a fact she learned from a pregnancy test taken inside the jail.

In a lawsuit later filed on her behalf by the American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri, attorneys describe a difficult pregnancy. Jail staff noted in records that she had reported pain and bleeding. She eventually persuaded jailers to transport her to the hospital.

On October 31, 2014, two deputies shackled her and drove her the 35 miles north to St. Francis Medical Center in Cape Girardeau. It was there that an obstetrician diagnosed Rhodes as having a high-risk pregnancy. The doctor

faxed a note to the jail, informing staff that it was serious enough that Rhodes would need "urgent/emergent access to healthcare."

Rhodes posted bond and was released shortly after, but she knew her legal troubles weren't over.

"She knew a longer prison sentence was a possibility, so she wanted to make arrangements for childcare," ACLU attorney Jessie Steffan says. "I think she tried."

Rhodes had found a family friend who was willing to adopt the baby. The two of them visited Cape Perinatology Services for a checkup in December, and they made plans for another follow-up visit, according to the suit. But before they could make it, Rhodes was arrested again for stealing a credit card and drug possession.

She was high on December 15 when she was booked into the jail. Steffan says they dumped her in an isolated "detox" cell without medical attention for three days before moving her into the general population on December 18.

By then, Rhodes knew something was wrong. She was in pain and leaking fluids so badly her pants were soaked through. When she asked for medical attention, a jailer told her she would have to wait until December 23, five days away.

Hutcheson is named as a defendant in the case along with the county and six members of his jail staff. He knew what was going on, the ACLU contends. As jail administrator, it fell to him to approve trips to the doctor and other medical care.

Rhodes filled out form after form, pleading for help, she claims. She was sure she was going into preterm labor. But even though she was passing blood clots by December 22, she still remained at the detention center. One of the jail staffers told her she did not know where she was getting fluids and blood clots but she needed "to stop," according to the suit.

Instead of a hospital, Hutcheson's crew began making plans to transfer Rhodes to a state prison on the other side of Missouri, in Vandalia. That night, they told her she was being moved to a different cell in preparation for her departure the next morning.

Four days had passed since she asked to see a doctor, and she could barely move. When she told Hutcheson and the others she could not walk, he had jailers drag her on a sleeping mat into her new cell, according to the suit.

It was a long night. When Rhodes pounded on the door, pleading for help, jailers allegedly threatened to physically restrain her.

Finally, at 6 a.m. on December 23, they shackled Rhodes around her belly, loaded her into a van and began a miserable five-hour journey across the state. They passed St. Francis along the way, followed by more hospitals in the St. Louis metro area. Yet when they paused, it was at a gas station — so corrections officers could use the bathroom, Steffan says.

Rhodes' pants were soaked down to the ankles, the fluid now coming out green, by the time they finally reached the women's prison in the northeastern end of the state.

Jailers in Mississippi County had listed her medical condition on transfer forms only as pregnant and in need of "follow-up care," the suit says. That gave staff in Vandalia little warning of the crisis at hand.

Rhodes spent another hour in a cell before a nurse checked her out and called for a doctor. They made arrangements to send her to the Audrain Medical Center, 30 miles away. By the time Rhodes was admitted, nine hours after leaving Mississippi County, five days after she first began begging for help, it was too late.

A doctor discovered her cervix had dilated two centimeters and she had ruptured membranes. The umbilical cord and the baby's foot were poking out of her vagina. The doctor detected a heartbeat, but there was little to be done. On Christmas Eve, Rhodes delivered a lifeless baby boy. The child's foot was black.

In April 2016, the ACLU filed its suit on her behalf, alleging that her callous treatment violated the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which is supposed to guard against cruel and unusual punishment.

Steffan, who is representing Rhodes along with ACLU Missouri legal director Tony Rothert and ACLU attorney Gillian Wilcox, says her client is undergoing therapy for depression and anxiety at the prison in Vandalia and seems to be doing better, given the circumstances.

Hutcheson and his staff at the jail never took Rhodes seriously, Steffan says. They let her suffer for days, and then shifted the responsibility for her care to the state Department of Corrections.

"Not having any way for a person in acute medical distress to get emergency care is, I think, beyond the pale, and pretty awful," Steffan says.

The suit is still pending in federal court.

"Leaving a pregnant woman in excruciating pain for days is the definition of cruel and unusual punishment," Rothert said in a statement when the suit was filed. "This kind of abuse, which reaches far beyond the boundaries of human decency, is exactly what the Constitution was designed to protect against."

The lawsuit made news statewide and was featured on *The Daily Beast*, under the headline "Lawsuit: Pregnant Missouri Prisoner Was Chained Up Until She Miscarried." But back home in Mississippi County, people were worried about drugs, not the fate of jailed addicts. In February, Hutcheson announced he was going to take on his longtime boss, Sheriff Keith Moore.

Moore, running as a Democrat, was hoping for his fourth four-year term. At first glance, the county is a stronghold for Democrats. The local party places the majority of county officials, and some Dems even ran unopposed in 2016. But county voters tend to veer far right of the national party's progressive politics. George Bush stomped John Kerry here. Obama lost big twice, and Trump's dominance — he beat Clinton by more than 40 percentage points — was almost laughable in a county that ostensibly bleeds blue.

And Hutcheson styled himself as a changing of the guard. The Trump supporter ran as a straight-up Republican, promising a new way of doing things. While Moore relied on the old system of handshakes and name

recognition, Hutcheson tapped social media and outspent his opponent nearly tenfold. Along the way, he painted the old sheriff as ineffective and hopelessly slow to respond, stopping just short of the "low-energy" barbs Trump used to kneecap Jeb Bush during the Republican primary.

The race was close. Like Hutcheson, Moore had grown up in East Prairie, and he has lived in Mississippi County all his life. The ugly campaign left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he says he's moved on after his defeat. He says he had nothing to do with the current allegations against Hutcheson, and the idea he is seeking revenge is ridiculous.

"It's got nothing to do with politics," he says. "It's right and wrong."

The former sheriff sees this latest scramble as confirmation of what he's known for the past several years.

"This boy cares for nobody but himself," Moore says.

Barrel-chested with a bodybuilder's biceps, Moore worked for 24 years in the sheriff's office, the last twelve as the man in charge. He first hired Hutcheson as a part-time jailer and later made him jail administrator. In news articles, Moore publicly praised investigations by his young charge, but says now that he eventually recognized Hutcheson's ambition outstripped his morals.

He wasn't the only one growing suspicious.

FBI agents visited the sheriff's office in 2014 and took Hutcheson's computer, Moore says. The former sheriff says he is not sure how the investigation began, but he soon learned they suspected the deputy was

illegally tracking cell phones, including one belonging to Moore. Court documents signed by Attorney General Hawley accuse Hutcheson of using a technique called "pinging," which uses a phone's GPS to determine its location. The then-deputy was allegedly keeping tabs on Moore, five state troopers and Judge David Dolan.

Police sometimes need to ping cell phones in a hurry to find a kidnapped child or head off a crisis, such as a bombing, and the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed for them to do so without warrants. But authorities say this was not one of those emergency situations. Hutcheson allegedly still bypassed the warrant process. He is accused of slipping into the computer interface of a call service used by the sheriff's office and filing false affidavits to persuade the service to turn over off-limits GPS coordinates that told him the location of the phones — and by extension, the phones' owners.

It is not clear why Hutcheson would want to know the locations. A highway patrol corporal who picked up the investigation from the FBI gave no explanation in court filings of the former deputy's possible motives. Judge Dolan refuses to discuss the case.

Moore says he confronted Hutcheson, but he still is not sure of his reasons.

"We had us a sit-down on it," he says. "His little explanation was more or less he just wanted to know where we were."

The accusation that Hutcheson was willing to lie on official documents troubles some defense attorneys who represented some of the people he was so eager to publicly shame as criminals and scumbags. Even dating

back to his days in the jail, Hutcheson would conduct drug raids around the county, backing up his aggressive pursuits with a flurry of search warrants.

Attorney Amanda Altman, a former public defender in Mississippi County who continues to handle cases there as a private defense attorney based in Cape Girardeau, says she has been wary of Hutcheson for years because one client after another reported questionable tactics. The latest charges only heighten her suspicions that his paperwork was sketchy.

"How many people have been falsely accused?" she asks. "How many people are incarcerated because he lied to build cases against them?"

Moore says the rapid pace of the search warrants Hutcheson has filed since taking office seems reckless at best. Drug cases can take months to investigate, including repeated undercover buys to make sure they don't incriminate the wrong person, he says. But Hutcheson seemed driven not by the pace of the case but the desire to have something new for the local news each week, he says. Moore sarcastically describes his former underling as having the "fastest fingers I've ever seen" when it comes to typing up a search warrant application.

"Now those fingers have come back to burn everybody," he says.

For all his suspicions, the former sheriff says he never had enough to fire Hutcheson. Even the 2014 investigation did not offer grounds for termination, because no charges were filed at the time, he says. The FBI's visit, however, had put him on guard. One of Hutcheson's specialties was surveillance, and his co-workers began to suspect he had bugged the office

and was recording them with tiny body cams, even during casual conversations.

But Hutcheson had his own allies inside the sheriff's office. That became clear in the spring of 2016 when six jail staffers abruptly walked out one day, leaving more than a hundred inmates behind in the detention center. In follow-up news reports, the staffers alleged Moore was undercutting their boss, Hutcheson, who had recently announced his intention to run for sheriff. The jail had become unsafe, so they walked out, they claimed. Moore says he had no warning and deputies had to scramble to cover a potentially dangerous situation.

Within days, Hutcheson was out of a job. Exactly what happened is up for debate. Hutcheson has claimed he never walked out, and that the sheriff fired him anyway. Moore says Hutcheson did walk out, putting deputies, inmates and the community in danger.

"That's not a grocery store — you can't just walk out," the former sheriff says. "He terminated himself."

In a way, he says, it was a relief not to have Hutcheson slinking around the jail, although it was hard to shake the feeling they were still being recorded. Moore says he and his remaining team were cleaning out the jail administrator's office when they found a tiny camera that he claims was still linked to Hutcheson's home computer, even after he was gone.

"We were being watched," Moore says.

The boy sheriff has become a local celebrity, and he has no plans to go quietly now that he's facing criminal charges.

The Missouri Department of Public Safety took emergency action after Hutcheson's arrest to suspend his peace officer's license, meaning he can no longer make arrests. But that doesn't prevent him from keeping his title, showing up for work every day and collecting his salary. Although Hutcheson has delegated the criminal investigation side of the operation to his chief deputy, he still runs the force as an administrator, according to a sheriff's office supervisor.

"The sheriff is still the sheriff," Captain Barry Morgan says.

Hutcheson began a social media blitz to defend himself the day after his arrest.

"The allegations made against Sheriff Hutcheson are demonstrably false and will be resolved through the legal process," read a statement posted on the office's Facebook page. A petition to "Support and Retain Sheriff Cory Hutcheson" appeared online the same day, quickly gathering more than 500 signatures.

An online fundraiser to "Support Sheriff Cory Hutcheson's Legal Defense" asked donors to help raise \$35,000 to cover his legal bills. Hutcheson is being represented by hotshot Clayton defense attorney Scott Rosenblum. (In a brief statement, Rosenblum says that he does not feel it is appropriate to try cases in the media, adding, "I feel very comfortable that Mr. Hutcheson will be vindicated.")

The page claimed that the sheriff had "all but eradicated illegal drugs from our county," making 80 drug arrests in his first 90 days in office. "Those hard-fought gains were all but lost in early April, when in response to

complaints filed by the former Sheriff and one disgruntled resident, the Attorney General's Office charged Hutcheson with a litany of offenses, most dating back years ago to the previous Sheriff's administration," the statement continued.

Hutcheson linked to the fundraiser on his personal Facebook page, and a nearly identical plug was posted on the sheriff's office Facebook page. Hutcheson has helpfully noted that donors can send money directly to him via a PayPal account linked to his email address.

Meanwhile, at the sheriff's office, the stream of mug shots continues. The sheriff's Facebook page recently posted pictures of a handful of marijuana plants found under a house on the eastern edge of the county. The post was followed by well-wishers, cheering them on.

Morgan says that deputies give Hutcheson regular updates on the arrests and cases, but everyone is abiding by the rules as they keep chasing cases.

"We're not going to stop because of these allegations," he says.

That's welcome news to the sheriff's supporters. Shannon Jenkins, 33, went to high school with Hutcheson and says she is praying he is able to keep his job.

"I think the county would be lost without him."