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**Ex-aide defends trips from MSI**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-An indicted former Public Aid supervisor Wednesday defended his trips to Germany and Mexico arranged by a top official of Management Services of Illinois.

Asked if a 1993 trip to a Mexican resort with ex-MSI owner Michael Martin and their girlfriends was a bribe, the administrator, Ronald Lowder, replied: "No. I just seen it as a vacation for myself."

Lowder told jurors in MSI's corruption trial that he paid his own expenses and did not consider the trips improper, even though he was charged with overseeing the firm's main state contract.

Lowder, a 21-year Public Aid employee who quit the agency to join MSI in 1995, spent Wednesday answering friendly questions from his attorney, Peter Wise.

Wise portrayed Lowder as a conscientious state employee who had little to say about how the company's controversial Public Aid contract was structured.

Lowder, Martin and MSI owner William Ladd are charged with participating in a scheme that bilked the state welfare agency out of at least $ 7.1 million.

Federal prosecutors have alleged that the trips MSI offered to Lowder and his superior, Curtis Fleming, were a thinly veiled attempt to buy influence within the state agency.

Although Lowder said Wednesday that he paid his own airfare and lodging on the Mexican vacation, prosecutors presented evidence earlier in the trial that MSI paid for $ 530 in hotel bills incurred by Lowder and his girlfriend.

Later in 1993, Lowder testified, he accepted an invitation from Martin to travel to Germany to visit a BMW automobile plant.

Lowder said he paid his own way after consulting with his boss, Fleming, who "indicated if I paid my share of expenses, it shouldn't be a problem."

When prosecutors begin their cross-examination of Lowder today, they are likely to question his claims of making two payments for the trip, including one after a criminal investigation into MSI had begun.

Estimating his share of the trip to be worth $ 3,400, Lowder testified that around the time of the travel, he sent a money order or cashier's check for that amount to a New York travel agency. But he acknowledged neither the travel agency nor the Springfield bank where the payment was cut have proof of the transaction.

In October, 1995, six months after a criminal investigation into MSI began, Lowder said, Martin approached him, saying he owed $ 2,295 for expenses Martin incurred on a credit card on Lowder's behalf during the Germany trip.

When asked by his attorney, Wise, why he paid Martin when he thought his share of the trip already had been paid for, Lowder said, "Because he asked me to."

Prosecutors say Lowder paid Martin the $ 2,295 to make the Germany trip appear legitimate, when it was nothing more than a junket.

Earlier Wednesday, U.S. District Judge Richard Mills ruled that prosecutors can use some secret tapes of phone conversations between Fleming, Martin and Lowder.

On the tapes, Martin allegedly told Fleming that the government's case against MSI would lead "right up to (Gov.) Edgar's lap."