

Sugar, Ashes, and Dust

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When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the east coast and interior of America in the 1830's, he sailed via Lake Erie to a small city densely surrounded by trees. The promising city, Cleveland, nicknamed "The Forest City," grew through shipping and industry, but kept its sylvan moniker. Cities resemble a forest ecosystem, always growing, dying, changing, and full of denizens that nourish the city while consuming its resources. Cleveland has a rich history of achievement, industry, politics, and arts that complement the tall, noble oaks and the lush canopy.

Cleveland also had a seedy underworld of crime, seething with activity under the rocks, in the shadows, growing in what light does not touch. From the 1920's to the late 1970's, Cleveland's organized crime networks reached a power status surpassed only by New York's and Chicago's. As the North Coast turned into the Rust Belt, and our forest decayed, Cleveland's criminal tendrils grew from Murray Hill and reached across the United States. Let's take a walk in the Forest City tonight and turn over a few rocks.

In 1920, Cleveland was a city swelling with immigrants from all over Europe. It was proud to call itself "the Sixth City," in terms of size. With an abundance of good industry, high commerce, and a city plan developed by the Van Swearingen brothers, the capacity for a good life met the initiative of its immigrants. The Woodland neighborhood on Cleveland's East Side was the first stop for Italians, Jews, Irish, and black immigrants.

January 16, 1920 marked the day Prohibition went into effect and necessitated a parallel market for millions of imbibers. Bootlegging during Prohibition is commonly broken into three phases. The first comprised the selling of all alcohol legally produced prior to January 16. The second was the illegal production of alcohol, mostly in thousands of small stills. The final phase, prior to repeal, involved running booze from Canada.

Before Prohibition, the only noteworthy organized crime in Cleveland involved newsie toughs organized by Mickey McBride to push more circulation of the *Cleveland News*. Mickey would go on to own taxi stands, a racing wire, and the Cleveland Browns. During Prohibition, the dearth of alcohol drove thirsty immigrants to produce their own hooch, and thousands of pounds of sugar was needed for fermentation.

Enter two families from Licata, Sicily. The Lonardo and Porello families were both mining sulfur before immigrating to Cleveland in the early 1900s. "Big Joe" Lonardo was the head of the nascent Cleveland Mafia, with the support of his three brothers. Lonardo's right hand man was "Big Joe" Porello, who brought his six brothers with him from Licata. Their base of operations was East 110th St and Woodland Ave. The group started as confectioners who dabbled in extortion before becoming the sole supplier of corn sugar to bootleggers. Competitive sugar suppliers seemed to die off with little notice from Cleveland Police. When Porello decided he should be the only "Big Joe" in Cleveland, the Porellos murdered Joe Lonardo and his brother John during a card game in a barbershop at East 110th St and Woodland Ave.

Porello sought legitimacy from larger, more influential crime families. He called a summit to Cleveland, the first ever national La Cosa Nostra meeting on record, resulting in a declaration of Joe Porello as the BOSS of the Cleveland Mafia in 1928. The coronation sparked the Sugar War in Cleveland. Bodies fell daily from guns, knives, and bombs. Big Joe himself was murdered during a sit-down to resolve the conflict. Three more Porello brothers were murdered at East 110th St and Woodland Avenue before the family fled Cleveland.

The groups that survived the Sugar War sought a more symbiotic existence, one that ensured the dollars flowed faster than blood. The Mayfield Road Mob referenced in *The Godfather, Part II*, as “The Lakeview Road Group,” existed concurrently with the remains of the Cleveland Mafia. Leader Frank Milano was more tolerant of allies and partnerships, and secured a seat on the La Cosa Nostra Commission, formed by Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky. Cleveland crime went from organic to organized. The Mob prospered through the end of Prohibition before the Feds developed the silver bullet of tax evasion prosecution and eliminated their leadership in 1944.

Cleveland had a significant number of Jewish immigrants who fled Russian pogroms starting in the 1880s. Moe Dalitz, Morris Klienman, Louis Rothkopf, and Samuel Tucker were offspring of those immigrants. They met in anonymity, operated in silence, and never left a loose end. Starting as members of the Mayfield Road Mob, they formed the Cleveland Syndicate, splitting everything they raked in four ways, to the penny. During the final years of Prohibition, they operated the “Jewish Navy of Lake Erie,” running rum from Canada. They owned

and operated dozens of illegal casinos and swanky clubs, including The Beverly Hills Supper Club, River Downs Race Track, and other dens of iniquity in Newport, Kentucky. Ten days before the end of Prohibition, the Molaska Corporation was founded. Conceived and organized by the four of the Cleveland Syndicate, Molaska made organized crime families east of the Rocky Mountains partners in importing molasses to supply legal distillers. By consolidating logistics and cutting costs, organized crime made more money supplying molasses to alcohol producers through Molaska than supplying alcohol to the public during Prohibition.

Moe Dalitz became the most public of the four partners, a “first among equals.” Given his success running casinos, he made Las Vegas a phenomenon. Bugsy Siegel, Las Vegas’ visionary founder, was murdered for gross incompetence. This opened the door for Moe and his partners to take their Cleveland-borne style of gaming organization to building Las Vegas into a true moneymaker. As Dalitz became “Mr. Las Vegas” through the 70’s, The Cleveland Syndicate members never broke rank, never lost sight of the dollars, never got sloppy, and it was never, ever, personal. It was strictly business.

Most Clevelanders are affable, hardworking, and loyal, generally full of pride, but lacking ego. Alex “Shondor” Birns was an exception. Born Alexander Bernstien in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his family established themselves in the Woodland area by the time Alex was one. Shondor’s family made money bootlegging in their home for “Big Joe” Lonardo. When Shondor was 13, his mother was the fatal victim of an accidental fire while producing booze. Shondor took to an

orphanage before taking to the streets, earning a name and reputation during the circulation wars of Mickey McBride's era.

Birns's criminal career stretched five decades, and his notoriety became his brand. He operated one of Cleveland's finest restaurants while he ruthlessly ran protection and numbers rackets. During the 1940's, Birns solidified his power under the backing of the Cleveland Mafia and in conjunction with the Cleveland Syndicate. The Syndicate disapproved of his high profile, but the Mafia liked his flair and rigid grip on the numbers rackets and policy games that gamblers craved. Numbers was also known as "the black lottery," and Birns established a commission of the top five black numbers operators to keep peace and profits stable. In 1957, when Donald "the Kid" King decided to hold out on protection and tribute to Shondor and the Mafia, King's front porch was torn from his house by an explosion. After surviving this bombing and a subsequent assassination attempt, Don King decided to leave the Numbers game and take boxing promotion more seriously. It proved to be a wise career decision.

Birns had a protégé in the early 1970's in Danny Greene. Danny was another orphan who was good with a baseball bat, on the diamond or on the street corner. Intensely proud of his Irish heritage, he formed about himself the image of a Celtic warrior. Working up from a longshoreman on Lake Erie to a union organizer, Greene caught the eye of Birns as an enforcer. Both men had a stage presence, and Greene sought the top billing from Shondor. His green eyes burned with the desire to take over Shondor's numbers empire. He moved to the

neighborhood of Collinwood, set up "The Celtic Club," and began to build a fiefdom of Irish toughs to challenge the old guard of the Cleveland underworld.

Shondor and Greene's relationship soured quickly, and Birns met his maker on Holy Saturday, 1975 in a gruesome car bombing. Retaliation came in kind, but the luck of the Irish helped Greene survive one of the most amazing acts of violence in this story. Greene's ENTIRE APARTMENT BUILDING was levelled by a bomb in 1975. Greene ended up under a refrigerator lodged against a wall during the explosion, protecting him from the rubble. Providence only emboldened Greene, who went public with his challenge to eliminate the Mafia as he doubled his efforts to form his own empire in protection, numbers, and vending machines.

John Scalish, the boss of the Cleveland Mafia since 1944, kept various criminal groups organized in Cleveland while maintaining close ties with the rest of the National Commission. In May 1976, he died during heart surgery. Nature abhors a vacuum. His named successor was immediately challenged by Greene and his allies. Cleveland literally exploded into a mafia war. In 1976 alone, thirty-six bombs exploded in the city. The ATF temporarily moved their regional office from Cincinnati to handle the workload of investigations. Cleveland was dubbed "Bomb City, USA." Bodies fell like the leaves of autumn.

Greene thwarted or survived eight attempted hits on his life, while executing dozens of enemies, before a car bomb killed him as he left a dental appointment in 1977. Through Divine Intervention, the man who triggered the bomb was spotted at the scene by a woman who was a police sketch artist with a photographic memory. Ray Ferrito was quickly nabbed, flipped to the FBI, and helped the Bureau and ATF start building the case to bring down the Cleveland

Mafia. The death of Danny Greene was the death knell of the Cleveland Mafia, which is today effectively defunct.

Cities' ecosystems have borne the blight of crime since cities existed. So much of a city's character is indicative of the people who make up its population. Criminals, especially career organized criminals, will always captivate us like the venomous beasts of the natural world. Several of the men I discussed tonight would be fascinating friends or even Club guests if they weren't so damned ruthless and deadly.

Whether through the efforts of law enforcement or their propensity to kill and eat their own kind, we no longer encounter the spiders' gallery of the Forest City's underworld. They leave behind a vacant web of illicit enterprise, ingenuity, and death that faintly glistens along the shores of Lake Erie.

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Further reading:

Messick, Hank: *The Silent Syndicate*. (Macmillan Publishing, 1967)

Porello, Rick: *The Rise and Fall of the Cleveland Mafia: Corn Sugar and Blood* (Barricade Books Inc., 1995)

Porello, Rick: *To Kill the Irishman: The War that Crippled the Mafia*. (Next Hat Press, 1998)

Fischer, Steve: *When the Mob Ran Vegas*. (Berklene Press, 2005)

The Cleveland Memory Project

The Cleveland Plain Dealer Archives