

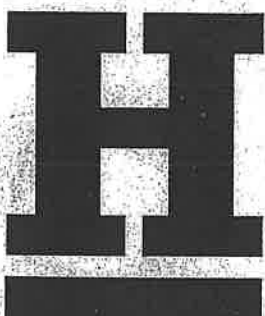
CHICAGO'S DEADLY DECADE

Though the popular conception is that gangsters did most of the killing in the prohibition era, the historical facts are different. Consider this snapshot:

Chicago—its citizens, politicians and even its newspapers in their circulation wars—was already soaked in blood before its criminals and its cops began shooting each other. The Illinois Crime Survey of 1929 estimated that of the 250 gangsters known to have been killed between 1922 and 1926, 160 were killed by police. Meanwhile, more than 2,400 people died in domestic disputes, barroom brawls, lovers' triangles, robberies and other violent encounters during that period. ■ In 1924—the year that Leopold and Loeb kidnapped and killed their neighbor; the year that the real murderers who became “Chicago’s” Roxie Hart and Velma got drunk and killed their boyfriends—Chicago’s homicide rate was 24 percent higher than the national urban average. By comparison, New York’s was 31 percent below the national average. ■ By 1924, the Chicago Tribune began to print a strange kind of clock face on the inside pages of its weekly editions. The clock had three hands, collectively labeled “The Hands of Death.” One hand was labeled “Moonshine,” one was labeled “Guns” and one was labeled “Autos.” (Drivers who were not only inexperienced but also drunk were new urban phenomena.) ■ Mobsters who fought turf battles over the sale of illegal liquor had a lot at stake. In 1927, Chicago’s U.S. Attorney’s Office estimated Al Capone’s gross annual income at \$105 million. (Multiply that sum—and every sum in

BY MICHAEL LESY

the excerpt that follows—by 10 to calculate its worth today.) ■ The gang wars that began in November 1924 included the blood feud between Hymie Weiss (baptized Earl Wajciechowski and known as “the perfume bandit”) and Capone, a feud that began with the assassination of Dean O’Banion—also called Dion—a man Weiss truly loved. Capone tried to solve his problem with Weiss by offering him a great, great deal of money: exclusive rights to sell alcohol to every speakeasy north of Madison Street. Weiss refused. O’Banion’s death had broken Weiss’ heart and he couldn’t forgive Capone. Weiss and O’Banion were bandits and business partners. They had cracked safes together, highjacked whiskey trucks together. Loved the work, loved the money. Thick as thieves. ■ Kill the men who killed my friend, was Weiss’ answer. Capone began to make other plans.



Hymie Weiss got out of jail in April 1926. He decided to make Dion O’Banion’s flower shop on State Street his new headquarters. Weiss made deals with bootleggers in Cleveland, rumrunners in Miami, wholesalers in Quebec. Big slot-machine operators from Cicero, bootleggers from Chicago’s South Side—any and all enemies of Al Capone became Weiss’s new friends.

By July, Weiss was ready to resume his war of revenge for the killing of his friend O’Banion. He planned an ambush. He began by kidnapping Capone’s driver. The man knew Capone’s daily schedule, but he wouldn’t talk. Weiss had him tortured. Burning cigarettes, branding irons, the man endured the torments of a holy martyr. Not a word. Weiss shot him in the head, then dumped him in a cistern.

Capone was appalled. People said that he and [crime boss John] Torrio used to torture people in the basement of the Four Deuces on Wabash. No matter. Capone was outraged. His driver was his driver.

Three months passed. In October, one of Weiss’s new allies—an over-the-hill South Sider named Joe Saltis—went on trial for murder. Weiss raised \$100,000 for Saltis’s defense. The first day of the Saltis trial, after court ended, Weiss told his driver to take him to headquarters. Weiss had a list of Saltis jurors in his pocket and a list of state prosecution witnesses in his safe. He was eager to get to work. He jumped out of his Cadillac and crossed the street. He never made it to the shop’s front door.

Capone would have killed him sooner, but he’d been out of town. Not on vacation, but in hiding. All because of something that had happened the same month Weiss got out of jail. The three months Weiss spent rebuilding his connections, Capone spent working out a deal—from a safe distance—with state and federal prosecutors. Capone returned to Chicago in July. Six grand juries met, fretted—and decided nothing. Capone’s problem faded away, like a stain in a rug.

Capone’s problem started one night in late April. He had been having dinner at his headquarters in Cicero—a hotel called the Hawthorne Inn—when one of his watchers interrupted his meal. The O’Donnell brothers—gang leaders from the South Side—were wandering around Cicero, drunk and disorderly, as if they had nothing to fear. Capone decided to relieve them of their lives. He sent three men to kill them. He sat in his own car and watched.

Unfortunately, no one told Capone that the O’Donnells weren’t drinking alone. A well-known public official, an assistant state’s attorney named McSwiggin, had made the mistake of joining them. Maybe the O’Donnells thought that with McSwiggin along they were safe. Maybe McSwiggin thought that he was too well connected to die. Capone’s men attacked the O’Donnells with machine guns. The O’Donnells ducked; McSwiggin didn’t.

A prosecutor shot dead in Cicero would have been embarrassing enough, but McSwiggin was no ordinary prosecutor: His father was a veteran Chicago police detective; his mentor was [Cook County State’s Atty. Robert] Crowe himself. McSwiggin had won so many death-penalty convictions that the papers called him “the hanging attorney.”

... Capone’s real problem was that on McSwiggin’s way up the ladder—on his way to becoming a prosecutor—Crowe asked him to do what he couldn’t do: McSwiggin had tried, very publicly, to indict Capone himself. Not for bootlegging or pimping or election fraud, but for killing a man in front of witnesses in a bar back in 1924.

The shooting made headlines. Capone’s picture appeared in the papers. William McSwiggin saddled up and went after him. William Dever had just been elected mayor. Crime and corruption would end. Justice would prevail.

Nothing came of the case. Witnesses forgot or rearranged their memories. Capone presented himself to McSwiggin and offered to explain everything: He was a businessman; he’d been out of town; he’d never met the dead man. The coroner’s jury ventured a guess: The dead man had died because he’d been shot. End of story. Except, Capone and McSwiggin met. They took a good look at each other. They were both on their way up. Capone would inherit Torrio’s world; McSwiggin would inherit Crowe’s. Why not live and let live? Maybe even do business.

McSwiggin’s body was still warm when it was found. The O’Donnells had emptied McSwiggin’s pockets, ripped the labels out of his clothes and dumped him on a prairie road. Crowe—and all the papers in the city—decided that William McSwiggin had died a martyr’s death. The young prince had been killed while patrolling the streets of Cicero. Cicero—where not even the sun set without Capone’s permission.

Crowe announced a \$5,000 reward—money from his own pocket—for information leading to a conviction. He deputized 300 detectives and set them loose.

His deputies broke down the doors of gambling dens, tore brothels to ribbons, flooded speakeasies with beer from their own broken barrels. Whatever ledgers and account books they found, they brought back to Crowe and laid them before him like spoils of war.

“It has been established,” said Crowe, “... that Al Capone in person led the slayers of McSwiggin ... five automobiles, carrying nearly 30 gangsters, all armed with weapons ranging from pistols to machine guns, were used. ... It has been found that Capone handled the machine gun, being compelled to this act in order to set an example for fearlessness to his less eager companions.”

Capone left town. He thought he’d be shot on sight. ... Three months later, when he returned (he’d been hiding in plain sight in Lansing, Mich.), he made a statement:

“I’m no squawker,” he said, “but I’ll tell you what I know about the case. All I ask is the chance to prove I had nothing to do with the killing of my friend, McSwiggin. Just 10 days before he was killed, I talked with McSwiggin. There were friends of mine with me. If we had wanted to kill him, we could have done it then and nobody would have known. But we didn’t want to; we never wanted to. ... I liked the kid. Only the day before he was killed, he was up at my place, and when he went home, I gave him a bottle of Scotch for his old man. ... I paid McSwiggin and I paid him plenty—and I got what I was paying for.”

That settled everything: Crowe’s protegee was just another cop who took money. Sleep with dogs, wake up with fleas.

Capone went back to solving the problem of Hymie Weiss. One week after some boys found the body of Capone’s driver, Weiss met a man named “Schemer” Drucci at Drucci’s hotel. They had an appointment that morning with a ward boss named Morris Eller, Weiss’s connection to Crowe’s office. Drucci handed envelopes to Eller; Eller would take what he needed, then pass the envelopes to John Sbarbaro (the assistant state’s attorney whose funeral home specialized in dead crooks). Sbarbaro would take his share, then hand

d from
ER CITY:
ody
of Chicago
wenties”
orton, 2007)
rel Lesy.
if
Lesy

the envelopes to someone else. No one discussed who that someone else was.

That morning, Drucci had an envelope with \$13,200 in it. It was such a nice day, and Eller's office was so close to Drucci's hotel, Weiss suggested they walk there.

Four men attacked them with handguns just as they reached the front door of the Standard Oil Building. Weiss threw himself down; Drucci took cover behind a mail box and fired back; two men charged him; Weiss ran; the men disappeared in the crowd. Drucci commandeered a car. "Take me away and make it snappy," he told the driver. He didn't get very far: Police appeared, blocked the sidewalks, blocked traffic. . . . They arrested Drucci and one of the men who'd rushed him.

[THE MACHINE-GUN] ATTACK WAS A PIECE OF THEATER. IF CAPONE HAD WANTED TO KILL WEISS . . . IN AS PUBLIC A PLACE AS NINTH AND MICHIGAN, HE WOULD HAVE. WEISS DIDN'T TAKE THE HINT.

Neither Drucci nor the other man gave their real names. No matter. The police knew Drucci by sight. They knew the other man worked for Capone. They presented him to Drucci for identification. "Never saw him before," said Drucci. "It was a stickup," he said. "They wanted my roll."

Thirty rounds were fired; no one was dead; the only person wounded—slightly—was a pedestrian. The attack was a piece of theater. If Capone had wanted to kill Weiss and Drucci in as public a place as Ninth and Michigan, he would have.

Weiss didn't take the hint.

On Sept. 20, while Capone was having lunch at the Hawthorne, everyone around him stopped talking. They listened: machine-gun fire, distant, steady, then closer and closer. Capone's bodyguard pulled him down. Everyone in the restaurant hit the floor.

The gunfire passed in front of the hotel, then faded away in the distance. Capone pulled himself up and headed outside to inspect the damage. His bodyguard preceded him. No broken windows, no bullet holes. Capone's bodyguard understood before he did. Blanks. A trick to draw people outside. The real show was about to start. Capone's bodyguard knocked him down, then covered him with his own body.

Six cars—big ones, Cadillacs and Lincolns—drove slowly past the hotel, firing broadsides, like ships of the line. Hundreds and hundreds of machine-gun slugs tore chunks out of the Hawthorne's facade, ripped apart its lobby, blew holes through the front walls, windows and insides of shops on either side of the place.

Two more cars appeared. They turned and parked in front of the hotel. Screams, falling glass, masonry dust. A man in overalls and a work shirt climbed out of the first car, carrying a Thompson. He knelt as if he were on a firing range, braced his weapon, and began. He went through two 200-round magazines. Deliberately. Methodically. He made long, parallel rows of holes, chest high, along the Hawthorne's inside walls. Then he stood up, turned his back, and walked to his car. The driver blew his horn three times; the two cars drove to the head of the line, paused, then led the convoy away. East. Back to Chicago.

Michael Lesy has written 11 books and teaches literary journalism at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass.

Capone had had enough. He put two plans in motion. One was visible: He proposed a truce. One was hidden: He sent agents to rent rooms, next to and behind Weiss's headquarters. If Weiss agreed to a truce, the rooms would be blinds for watchers; if Weiss refused, the rooms would be sniper posts.

Capone didn't give Weiss the satisfaction of proposing anything to him personally. Instead, he ordered the president of *Unione Siciliane*, Tony Lombardo, to meet with Weiss and make him an offer. . . .

The two met in a hotel room on Oct. 4. Lombardo began by reminding Weiss that if the war continued, no one would be alive to enjoy the peace. There was plenty of money to be made. Plenty of money for everyone. Capone was prepared to be generous: He would give Weiss the exclusive right to sell beer to every speakeasy north of Madison Street in Chicago. Capone's offer was equivalent to Uncle Sam offering Weiss the Philadelphia mint. Weiss refused.

He didn't want territory; he didn't want money. Then what? asked Lombardo. Albert Anselmi and John Scalise, said Weiss, referring to the two professionals who had shot his friend O'Banion. Yes? said Lombardo. What do they have to do with Mr. Capone's offer? Tell Mr. Capone, said Weiss, if he wants things to stop, he needs to give me Anselmi and Scalise.

Lombardo left the room to call Capone. Capone shouted into the phone, "I wouldn't do that to a yellow dog." Lombardo told Weiss. Weiss left. No truce. No peace.



week after the attack on the Hawthorne, a young man—blonde, German-speaking—asked to rent a room in the boardinghouse next door to O'Banion's old shop. The young man said his name was Oscar Lundin. The landlady showed him a back room; it faced a wall. Not so nice, but all she had. The young man said he'd been hoping for something with more light. The landlady said there might be a better one—nice view, looked out on Holy Name—opening up soon. Sure enough, a week later, the young lady across the hall gave notice. Mr. Lundin moved right in. He worked nights, slept days. No one except the landlady's son, Steve, even remembered what Lundin looked like. He did have friends, though. Steve remembered an older man, small, dark, Jewish, maybe. Or Italian. The man visited once or twice.

The same week that Lundin moved in, a pretty young woman—Mrs. Thomas Schultz—was her name, come to the city all the way from Mitchell, South Dakota—rented a third-floor apartment on West Superior Street. The apartment didn't have as nice a view as some people might have liked. Especially a person from South Dakota, used to all that sky. If you looked one way, all you saw was the intersection of State and Superior. Nothing but cars. If you looked the other, there was just an alley. Behind a flower shop.

Mrs. Schultz said she was glad to find anything she could afford. Beggars can't be choosers, she said. She paid her first two months' rent in advance. After that, hardly anyone saw her. She must have had relatives, though. Probably lent them her keys, the way they came and went.

While Capone's agents were renting rooms, jury selection began for the murder trial of Weiss' ally Saltis. Weiss wanted to prove that he could bend the law as easily as Capone. The lawyer Weiss hired W.W. O'Brien, was experienced and he guaranteed results. Morris Eller, the ward boss who'd been waiting for Drucci's envelope at the time of the sidewalk "robbery," supplied Weiss with other men who could help: An enforcer named Ben Jacobs became O'Brien's "investigator"; a drifter with a criminal record named Sam Pellar became Weiss's driver. Both men carried weapons; both men stayed close to Weiss and O'Brien when the Saltis trial began.

Jury selection ended on Oct. 11. The Criminal Courts building was only a quarter of a mile from O'Banion's shop. Weiss and W.W.

Continued on page 11

'Murder City'

Continued from page 14

O'Brien drove back from the Criminal Courts building and parked next to Holy Name Cathedral. They crossed the street together. Straight into the ambush set for Weiss.

Another Weiss bodyguard, named Murray, died where he fell. Weiss had enough holes in him—machine-gun and shotgun rounds—to have died there too. A fire rescue truck took him to a hospital, where he died on the examining table. O'Brien was hit in the arm, the side, and the stomach. He staggered into a nearby doctor's office and lived.

Pellar was hit in the abdomen. When the shooting started, he thought Weiss had set him up. He pulled his gun and fired a round. It hit Jacobs in the foot. Pellar lurched away; Jacobs hobbled after him. Machine-gun fire chased them around the corner onto Superior. Pellar threw his revolver down a basement stairwell. One of them spotted a doctor's office; they tumbled through the door and were saved.

Crowds gathered around Murray's body. Police found more than \$2,000 in his pockets. Police searched Weiss's clothes: in one pocket, a rosary; in the other, a wallet with \$5,000 in it. In his jacket, two envelopes: one had an unsigned check for \$6,000; the other had a list of jurors.

Almost as soon as the shooting stopped, two well-dressed men came bursting out a ground-floor window behind the boardinghouse next to the flower shop. One man carried a machine gun; the other carried a revolver, muzzle up, in each hand. Neither of the men looked like Oscar Lundin. When they reached Huron, the man carrying the machine gun lofted it over a back fence. No one saw those two again.

Police searched the room where they'd been: days and days of cigarette butts; shell casings from a machine gun and an automatic shotgun. [And] a nice, new, gray fedora from a shop in Cicero.

A week later, a lady who lived below Mrs. Schultz's apartment on West Superior complained that Mrs. Schultz's radiator was leaking water through her ceiling. A janitor went to fix the leak; he discovered Mrs. Schultz had moved out. She left a golf bag with an automatic shotgun in it.

[Police] Chief Morgan Collins announced delivery of 215 new police cars. He planned to arm them with

rifles and shotguns "to combat the winter crime wave."

"These roaming fortresses," he said, "will cruise the streets, ready to pump lead into every bandit caught committing a crime." Reporters asked about the killing of Weiss. "I don't want to encourage this business," he said, "but if somebody has to be killed, it's a good thing the gangsters are murdering themselves off. It saves trouble for the police."

Reporters asked the chief whether the killings would delay the Saltis trial. "No," he said, "nothing will delay Saltis's swift prosecution." Attorney O'Brien spoke from his hospital bed; his wounds would not affect the trial. His law partner, Frank O'Donnell, was more than ready to proceed with the defense.

Three days later, a Saltis juror began talking to himself. A bailiff reported to the judge: "During the night, the man began to shout, rave, and whistle from an open window . . . I asked him what the idea was, and he said he wanted to hear the echo. He also spoke of being in a coal mine. . . . Then he gathered up the cuspidors and tried to put them in a dresser drawer." The judge questioned the man's wife. She said her husband had been in and out of mental hospitals for the past four years. The judge asked a court psychiatrist to examine the man. "Circular insanity," said the psychiatrist.

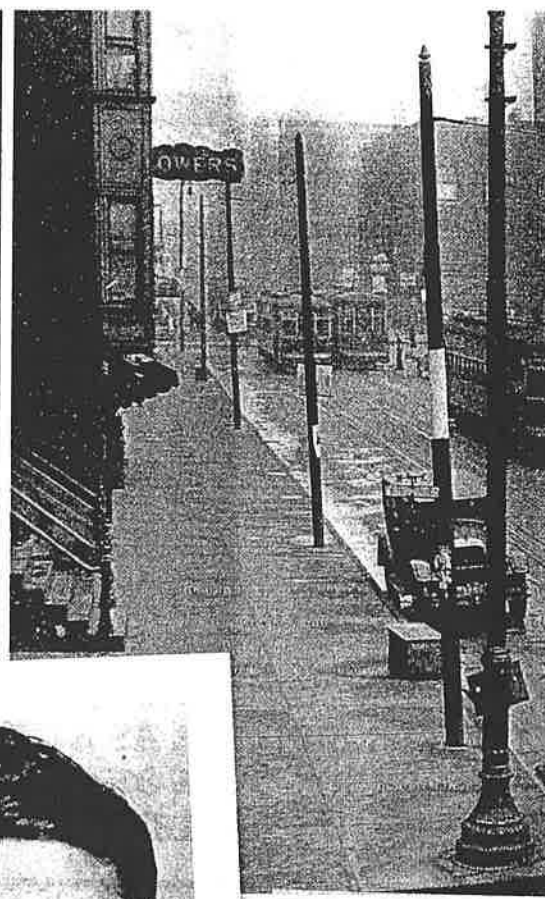
The judge declared a mistrial.

The coroner convened an inquest. Steve Juranovich, the landlady's son, described Oscar Lundin. Two Salvation Army workers and two artists who shared a studio on Cass Street described Pellar and Jacobs staggering away from the shooting. A woman said she thought she saw Pellar turn back and fire at Weiss. A man named McKibben testified that he'd seen Pellar and Jacobs draw their weapons and fire them, point blank, at Weiss.

Pellar was brought to the hearing on a stretcher. He refused to say anything. Jacobs hobbled in on crutches. He refused to say anything. Finally, Hymie Weiss's brother Fred was called to testify. "I saw him only once in 20 years," said Fred. "That was when he shot me three years ago."

John Sbarbaro patched up Weiss's body just as he had O'Banion's. O'Banion's widow, Viola, came to the service. She sat next to Weiss's mother and patted her hand.

Eight cars of flowers followed Weiss's hearse. Morris Eller, John Sbarbaro, and a man running for county judge pinned political placards to Weiss's hearse to advertise their candidacies. □



Center: Hymie Weiss, ill-fated victim of crime boss Al Capone. Clockwise from upper left: Mrs. Belva Gaertner and Belva Annan, whose fatal shooting of their boyfriends inspired the "Chicago"; The corner of State and Superior streets, where Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb were slain; "thrill killers" Richard Loeb (left) and Nathan Leopold (right) in court in 1934 on a vagrancy charge, which was dismissed; Dion O'Banion, whose slaying triggered the Weiss-feud.

