

Did Al Capone once hide out in Johnson City?

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By JAMES BROOKS

JOHNSON CITY - Did Al "Scarface" Capone **once hide out in Johnson City**, giving it the name "Little Chicago," or is that an urban legend that deserves to be buried with the godfather of all gangsters?

Capone was a creature spawned by prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s. It made him the paragon of gangsters. What was called the Noble Experiment turned America into a nation of drunks, and the criminals who supplied the alcohol were given a Robin Hood character that made them heroes to many.

Underlying the gangster culture was violence, perhaps best exemplified by the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago on Feb. 14, 1929. A group of men driving a Cadillac modified to look like a police car, with some of them dressed as police officers and carrying Thompson machine guns and shotguns, wiped out seven men.

The actual target of the shooting was Bugs Moran, who ran the bootleggers and speakeasies on the North Side. Moran was late for his own execution, however, and saw the Cadillac pull up as he and his henchmen were walking toward the S-M-C Cartage Co. on North Clark Street. Thinking it was another police raid or shakedown, they ducked into a coffee shop to wait it out.

Capone, according to local legend, was at his hideaway apartment at Montrose Court in Johnson City in order to establish an alibi. Most historians actually have him at a mansion he had recently bought in West Palm Beach, Fla., where he booked an appointment with a vacationing Chicago city commissioner. That would be a more plausible alibi than laying low in Johnson City.

Harvey Crane, of Limestone, says he did plumbing work at Montrose Court when it was remodeled into condominiums several years ago and said he heard many stories about it being Capone's hideaway at that time, but none of them with any specifics. The management of Montrose Court has declined to be interviewed about its history.

Still the legend persists. There is a **Little Chicago Blues Festival** at the Down Home annually, and the Road Company once performed a play by Jo Carson of that name. Carson said she discovered some compelling oral history to substantiate Capone's presence in town during her research for that project.

Perhaps the best discussion of the pros and cons is on the Web site www.johnsonspot.com, compiled by Alan Bridwell of the Economic Development Board. He says the best oral history comes from members of the black community, who were providers of services in the 1920s as railway porters, cooks, delivery boys and messengers.

"If anybody knew who was coming and going in Johnson City, those who provided services would best know," Bridwell said. An old boarding house on South Roan Street was once pointed out to this reporter by a member of the black community who said it was once a brothel visited by Capone on his visits to Little Chicago. Capone did die of the effects of syphilis in January 1947, but the prostitutes in Chicago and Cicero, Ill., are historically given the credit for infecting him.

The evidence remains circumstantial. Capone was in the alcohol business, and East Tennessee was one of the centers where moonshine was made. It is likely that he did business with local suppliers, but the question remains whether the head of "da mob" would have purchased his corn squeezings personally, or would he have sent henchmen to do it.

Some historians have said that he liked to personally strike deals with suppliers, and it is very likely that Chicago gangsters from the Capone mob came to Johnson City, Newport, Knoxville, Chattanooga and other Southern cities to make deals.

Old railway workers have said it would have been easy to disguise booze shipments on the Clinchfield going north or on the Southern Railway going to Chicago by way of Nashville.

Even before Prohibition hit the nation as a whole, Johnson City Police Chief **George Campbell** was murdered by bootleggers in 1914, Bridwell said. Jonesborough Police Officer **James Hood** also was murdered, supposedly by bootleggers, in 1928.

Johnson City was one of the hardest hit places in the nation by a neural disorder called the "**jake leg**," which killed many and left others with a distinctive hitch in their stride. The reason given was that the cost of whiskey was so high locally, running about \$1.50 and up for a flask, while Jamaican ginger, medicinal alcohol and bay rum - all containing lethal denaturants that caused the jake - sold for well under \$1.

The question is, why was the cost of whiskey so high in an area of the country where moonshining flourished ever since the first whiskey taxes were levied in 1793? **Supply and demand is what determines price, and it appears that the price of whiskey was driven up by outside buyers.**

Capone was never dependent on one source to keep the speakeasies of Chicago supplied. The good stuff was bottled in Canada and smuggled in by boat, plane or car. Beer was made all over the city in abandoned buildings or warehouses and distributed in trucks painted up as milk trucks or any other sort of delivery vehicle.

Moonshine, whether from Tennessee or rural Wisconsin, was the basis for bathtub gin or other concoctions. Capone was known to have sold lethal whiskey to rival gangs in other parts of the city to tarnish their reputation so he could take over their turf.

Up until Prohibition, drinkers took their whiskey, rye, gin or other alcohol neat or with a bit of branch water. The cocktail, involving the addition of sugar, fruit, juices and coloring to drinks, came about in the speakeasy era to disguise the awful taste of bad hooch.

To date not one scintilla of evidence exists, other than oral history and rumor, that Al Capone ever set foot in Johnson City. There were three railroad lines running through town, and Chicago was known as a railroad center before the Capone era. The name Little Chicago could have come from nothing more than local pride in the railroads.

Bridwell says some families in Johnson City may not want the story told of how they acquired their wealth.

"There were people in organized crime buying moonshine in the area," said Bridwell. "Capone was the most visible gangster of the era, so that's probably how people made the association."