



Woman Tells of Father's Card Game with Al Capone Gang at Windsor Hotel

Bob L. Cox, *Johnson City Press*, June 30, 2007

Recently, a city resident, (whom I will call Mary) revealed two stories to me that evolved around her late father, Frank (assumed name), a once well-known and successful downtown businessman in his day.

In 1945, Frank escorted his young daughter to the **Windsor Hotel** to reveal a long-held secret that would be talked about by family members for years. Frank lamented that the once magnificent grand hotel had fallen into disarray as evidenced by tattered velvet curtains, cords that had fallen down and dirty windows everywhere, a far cry from its heyday.

After walking past the hotel lobby, the pair climbed the steps to the second floor. At the top of the stairs, Frank pointed to a block of private rooms along the north end that he said were once reserved by hotel management for special guests and events. Mary indicated that her father always had a love for “a good card game” and routinely met at the hotel with three of his closest friends to play cards in one of the private rooms.

Frank remembered when some men, discreetly identified as Al Capone's bodyguards, joined them and became regulars in the card game whenever they were in town. This occurred from about 1921 to 1926. Mary further explained: “Daddy said ‘Capone's boys,’ as he called them, came in after dark, played several hands of cards and then left. They were never seen in town in the daytime. Everything was done quietly and with as little fanfare as possible. Daddy believed the ‘boys’ either stayed at the hotel or left in the early morning hours.”

On one memorable evening, Frank got the surprise of his life when Al Capone abruptly walked into the room, sat down at Frank's table and began playing cards with his group. Frank emphasized that this was one isolated occurrence and that he established no rapport with the underworld kingpin that night; he simply played cards with him.

Mary learned later that “Scarface” routinely ran alcohol from Newland, NC to Johnson City along a 44-mile stretch of two-lane dirt road. He said the section of road between Newland and Elk Park became known as “Smokey Straight.”

Mary then offered a story of her own: “In the summer of 1946, our family went on vacation to Miami Beach as we often did. During the trip, Daddy and I drove over to Al Capone's estate (on diminutive **Palm Island** in nearby Biscayne Bay). Along the way, Daddy told me that because Al was very sick and near death, he had been granted an early release from prison to return to his Miami home.

“When we arrived at the Capone main gate, Daddy walked over and spoke some words to the guard. I stayed behind in the car. Although we were not permitted to go through the entrance to the house, we were allowed to walk around the outside of the metal fence to the pool area. Daddy pointed through the sparse shrubbery to a frail looking man slumped over in a beach chair. It was Al Capone. He looked terribly sick. While we were standing there, some men came over to us and began talking to Daddy through the fence. A few of them appeared to know him. I stayed back at a distance.”

Al died at his Palm Island home about six months later on January 25, 1947 at the age of 48. Mary said she has replayed these two events in her mind hundreds of times over the years.

Mary concluded by saying: “It was important to Daddy that his family know about his brief encounter with Al Capone and his ‘boys’ in downtown Johnson City. Now I want to share it with others.”



Key from the Windsor Hotel

Courtesy of Frank Tannewitz