2018

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol14/iss1/16

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SMOKING GUNS OF TAMPA

By LULA JOUGHIN DOVI

It was a time of machine gun elections, alleged "ballot box stuffing" and winter visits to tropical Florida from Northern mobsters or gangsters. That was the underside of Tampa during the 1920s and 1930s. A time of Prohibition and bootlegging, too. And part of that brief time, from 1929 to 1932, my father, R.T. "Bob" Joughin, was Sheriff.

My father was called from his plumbing and heating contracting business by then-Governor Doyle E. Carlton to begin serving the unexpired term of the Sheriff who was suspended. And as I recall that period I remember seeing a machine gun sitting in the corner of his bedroom and two pistols resting under his pillow. There was an ever present threat of ambush.

Uncle Cleve (R.C. Joughin), who was living at the time at 320 West Amelia with my father, told me how he and the man across the street, Mr. Simpson, would sit in darkened rooms with guns at the ready until my father would get safely into the house.

GOVERNOR'S ORDERS

There were some fatal shootouts with gangsters during my father's term as Sheriff that the magazine, True Detective Mysteries, chronicled in an August 1933 issue.1 According to the article Governor Carlton's mandate was, "Gang rule must be broken and I believe you're the man to break it."2

One of the new Sheriff's first moves was to appoint a "highly efficient force of deputies" and wait for the gangsters to make their first move. Not only did Tampa have to contend with the so-called gangster elite from other cities but also its own underworld. A secret staff of "stool pigeons" or informers took shape to flash tips to the waiting deputies.

In February of 1930 a sleek roadster from Missouri was noticed in the business section of Tampa. Although
W.G. Peoples appeared to be a wealthy tourist, the Sheriff’s office confirmed that he was actually the "Carnation Kid", bandit de luxe and darling of a dozen gun molls."³

'CARNATION KID' DROPS

In a roadhouse party shootout with gangsters that Peoples had invited, the new Sheriff "fired only once - and the 'Carnation Kid' dropped in his tracks, dying almost instantly. The bullet severed his spine."⁴ One of the gangsters had a room said to be filled with guns, ammunition and fountain pen tear-gas pistols.

A second gun duel took place eleven months later on January 2, 1931, with a former member of the "Bugs" Moran mob of Chicago, James "Happy" Turner. Turner was serving a sentence for robbery. While he was working with a convict gang near Tampa, Turner and seven other prisoners overpowered the guards and escaped to a cornfield on the outskirts of Tampa. In answering the gunfire of the gangster's automatic the "Sheriff's pump gun roared just once. Turner collapsed ... (and) died before the police surgeon arrive."⁵ The new Sheriff was gaining a reputation for courage and marksmanship.

A third fatal gun battle involved a local mobster and former convict, Valentino "Dutch" Gonzalez, who had been pardoned after serving time for complicity in the theft of more than a hundred automobiles. A New York gangster, Henry Menendez, joined forces with Gonzalez, and they planned a daring attack on a safe in a real estate office across from the Federal Building.⁶

"WE'RE TRAPPED"

Police Chief A.C. Logan and the Sheriff had stationed Deputy Sheriff Keltner as a lookout to signal them when to attack the robbers. Apparently Gonzalez had forced open the office door and stood guard while Menendez worked on the safe. But Gonzalez caught sight of Keltner and screamed, "We're trapped!" Logan and the Sheriff came up the stairs and called to the men to surrender. Instead, the gangsters opened fire when the officers entered the office.

The final account of the gun battle revealed this: "Firing at the flash of Menendez' pistol, the Sheriff riddled his man before Chief Logan killed Gonzalez with a bullet through the jugular vein, firing the fatal shot as the gangster rushed forward for a hand-to-hand encounter."⁷

BALLOT BOX STUFFING
The last story about gun battles in the magazine article related how "novice gangster" W.E. McElvey from New Orleans was wounded in the skull after an attempted warehouse raid. According to the story, "This battle also was fought in the dark and the Sheriff fired only one shot. The bullet furrowed McElvey's scalp."

The Sheriff ran for election but lost in 1932. There were rumors of ballot box "stuffing." Former Governor Carlton recalled to me when my father died in 1961 that he and my father were told about a polling place where there was allegedly some ballot box "stuffing." The two of them were getting ready to go check out the rumor when, as Carlton recalled, "We remembered we didn't have any guns on us."

The National Guard was called out for some hotly contested elections in the 1930s. My father mentioned one time that he and his brothers and workers stayed behind some stacks of pipes while soldiers and machine guns kept guard in front of his office on North Franklin Street. Elections in Tampa are much different today.

NOTES


2 Ibid, p. 64.

3 Ibid, p.64.


5 Ibid, p.65.

6 Ibid, p.65.

7 Ibid, p. 112.

8 Ibid, p. 112.