

Illinois gangsters meet their fates



By Mark W. Sorensen

“For the wages of sin is death....”

Romans 6:23

On Thursday night, December 11, 1958, millions of Americans and I watched PLAYHOUSE 90's television docu-drama, *“Seven Against the Wall,”* the story of Chicago's famous 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre. The well-known tale explained that Alphonse Gabriel “Scarface” Capone, leader of the south side gang, ordered his henchmen to devise a plan to kill north side gang leader George Clarence “Bugs” Moran [born Adelard Cunin]. The executioners carried out their plot when they thought Moran entered a garage on North Clark Street as they lined up seven of his workers and shot them down. Ironically Bugs was late arriving and thus spared from the slaughter.

Fast forward to 1985 when I was supervising the records inventory of the Chicago Police Department for the Illinois State Archives and an officer produced several hand-written ledgers cataloging all of the city's homicides from 1870 to 1930. I immediately checked February 14, 1929 and sure enough found the routine listing of Moran's associates Pete and Frank Gusenberg and five others all being murdered in an unsolved case. Today you can search these Chicago Police Department Homicide Records online

at <https://homicide.northwestern.edu/search/>.

During the Prohibition Era and following Great Depression, Capone and other bootleggers and bank robbers were often seen as folk heroes, but Capone's blatant murdering of seven people in broad daylight had public sentiment turn against him and others. He was soon harassed by the police everywhere he went and in 1931 was convicted of tax evasion. At age 33 he was sentenced to eleven years in the federal prison system but was soon diagnosed with neurosyphilis and became so impaired he was released in 1939. By 1946 doctors concluded that Capone had the mentality of a 12 year-old child. He died in his Florida home on January 25, 1947 at the age of 48. As for the Chicago gangster who escaped certain death in 1929, Bugs Moran continued his life of crime in Chicago for a few more years before moving on and becoming mostly a petty criminal. He went to prison in 1939 and spent most of the rest of his

life incarcerated until he died unnoticed at Leavenworth Federal Prison on February 25, 1957, at the age of 63.

Southern and Central Illinois also saw their share of violent gangsters and lawlessness. Former state historian Paul M. Angle's 1952 book *“Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness”* concludes with a description of the Shelton Gang and Charlie Birger. Originally from Wayne County, Carl Shelton, and his brothers, Bernie and Earl, oversaw the illegal booze business throughout Southern Illinois and paid off local officials and law enforcement to ignore their vice. There being no honor among thieves, the Sheltons and gang member Charlie Birger had a falling out.

The feud ended when Birger was hanged in 1928 for the murder of Shelton associate and West City Mayor Joe Adams. Birger [pronounced “Burger” in Southern Illinois] was born Shachna Itzik Birger in Russia around 1880 and immigrated to the United States as a child. His hanging on April





19, 1928 was witnessed by about 500 people outside the Franklin County jail and was the last public execution in Illinois. The Franklin County Historic Jail Museum in Benton contains Birger's cell, actual execution memorabilia and a reproduction of the gallows which can be visited outside. [On July 6, 1927, Illinois Gov. Len Small signed the law that changed Illinois' method of execution from hanging at county jails to electrocution in penitentiaries. However, verdicts reached before the bill signing were allowed to be carried out under the old system. Thus Charles Shader was the last person legally hanged in Illinois on October 10, 1928.]

The Sheltons moved on to gambling operations in East St. Louis in the 1930s before settling in Peoria in the 1940s. Carl was killed in 1947 and Bernie was murdered the next year. Their assailants are unknown. Earl soon wisely relocated to Florida. Why the Shelton clan came to the former "sin city," what influence they had there, and why they were killed have received sometimes conflicting explanations from former Capitol news man Taylor Pensoneau in his 2002 *"Brothers Notorious: The Sheltons, Southern Illinois' Legendary Gangsters;"* Peoria journalist Bill Adams, in his 2005 book, *"The Shelton Gang: They Played in Peoria;"* and the late Norman V. Kelly, Peoria historian, in his writings found at the Peoria Public Library.

John Herbert Dillinger served nine years in Indiana penal institutions for a small-time robbery. From his release in June 1933 until his death on July 22, 1934 he participated in at least 12 bank robberies and one homicide. After being caught he soon escaped from jail and was dubbed Public Enemy #1 by J. Edgar Hoover. Hiding

in plain sight in Chicago for several weeks, he was eventually gunned down by federal agents in Chicago after leaving the Biograph Theater. Having become somewhat of a folk celebrity during his crime spree, thousands of people came to see his body in the Cook County morgue before it was shipped back to Indiana.

On July 24, 1934, the Chicago *Tribune* printed "An Object Lesson for a

Mourning Hero Worshiper" on its front page. Drawn by the newspaper's Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist John Tinney McCutcheon, a father warns his toy gun toting son that gangsters in Illinois were doomed to "A short life and a quick death!"

On November 27, 1934, Chicago-born sociopath and Dillinger crime associate Lester Gillis [a.k.a. Baby Face Nelson] was also shot dead by federal agents in Wilmette. Details about the crimes of Capone, Dillinger, Nelson and many others can be found on the FBI website of famous criminals <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases>.

Mark W. Sorensen is the former assistant director at the Illinois State Archives and a frequent contributor to Illinois Heritage.

