



## America's most controversial cop

Crooks fear L.A. Police Chief Bill Parker—  
but so do civil liberty groups  
who charge he doesn't know when to stop

**O**NE AFTERNOON IN 1953, Sam Sirianni, a handsome plain-clothes man on the Los Angeles Police Force, strode into the county jail, a miniature sound recorder cunningly concealed on his person.

Ostensibly, Sirianni was there to visit his “girl friend.”

Actually, he was acting on direct orders from Los Angeles' crusty Chief of Police William H. Parker; and the “girl friend” was in reality a

*by Al Stump*

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

prisoner—located in a cell adjacent to an inmate named Barbara Graham—who had turned police informer. It was Barbara Graham that detective Sirianni was really after. An attractive blonde, she was charged with having helped to strangle and pistol-whip to death a crippled 62-year-old widow.

At the time of Sirianni's visit, it seemed likely that "Babs" Graham would go free, since the chief witness against her suddenly had been abducted from his home.

But after Sirianni's call, the Graham woman was entrapped. Hungry for male attention and unaware that Sirianni was a policeman, she flirted with him, and during later visits made a bold offer. Would Sirianni accept \$25,000 to testify he and Barbara had been in a motel together the night of the killing? Her actual words, picked up by Sirianni's hidden recorder and read back in court, were: "I was in on it . . . without your help, I'll go to the gas chamber . . . not a soul saw me, but I was there."

This evidence helped convict Barbara Graham of murder, and on June 3, 1955, she died in the cyanide chamber at San Quentin Prison, the third woman thus executed in California history. And the outcry against Police Chief Parker and his tactics reached a new pitch of indignation.

Attorneys, politicians, civil liberties groups—all accused him of illegal "entrapment" or employing a ruse to plant the idea of a confession in the victim's mind. Parker's retort—"She concocted the scheme

we taped, we merely gave her a chance to stop lying"—only added to the storm. Last year, Hollywood revived the Graham case with the explosive film *I Want to Live!* portraying Parker's agents as framers and perjurers. When Susan Hayward—playing Babs, and winning an Oscar for it—went to her death in the film, audiences wept, believing her to be innocent.

At 57, muscular, flinty-faced Bill Parker is America's most controversial cop. He has been sued for \$15,000,000 by citizens who claim he tramples their Constitutional rights, lauded as "a brilliant chief" by Sir Arthur Dixon of Scotland Yard and mentioned as possibly the next director of the F.B.I. His crack-down on Los Angeles vice has won 60-odd awards from reform groups; even his opponents concede his incorruptibility. The International Association of Chiefs of Police has saluted his hard-fisted administration of the nation's largest (453 square miles), toughest beat.

An intellectual, Parker holds language credits from Harvard, publishes books on criminology and is an attorney accredited to practice before the U. S. Supreme Court.

Yet in L. A. many don't like "Deadwood Bill" Parker. After 272 taxpayers' lawsuits, he is probably the most maligned and hated cop in the profession. For one reason, 100,000 Angelenos annually are jailed for gambling, drinking or disorderly conduct. For merely appearing tipsy on the street, they're booked, fingerprinted and tried.

More frightening is Parker's

avowal that the *Magna Charta*, written in 1215, is outdated and that a man's home isn't necessarily his castle. "It can be a place of evil, too," the chief declared recently. "The police should have access to such places with every tool at their command." By that he means wire-taps, dictaphone "bugs" and the right to on-the-spot seizure and search of suspects, which are banned by Federal order.

**P**ARKER SEES Los Angeles as a sleeping pushover for a vast criminal army. "The Mafia has moved here in a big way," he says. "Right now I need a 110 percent increase in personnel to meet the mob menace. A Chicago of the '20s is developing in Los Angeles, yet my enemies—many in high places—block me. I'm convinced that a widespread plot exists to destroy police authority in the name of 'liberalism' and break down the wall that protects society from the hoodlum.

"One night recently," Parker goes on, "an officer surprised two men prowling around an empty warehouse. A thorough on-the-spot search turned up opium on them. Yet the judge freed the men on the ground that we 'had no right to run our hands over the suspects in such a detailed manner prior to their booking'! The human rights argument again! It's typical of the decisions we get—the reason why crime is up 35 percent in Los Angeles in a decade.

"We're the most lawless nation on earth; an overriding reason is our tribunals—which create a Shan-

gri-La for thugs and murderers."

Smashing in doors, covering L. A. from above by helicopter and from below with skin divers, Parker takes on his critics singly or in batches. Last May, State Attorney General Stanley Mosk blasted Parker in the chief's presence. "He should accept court rulings in good grace," said Mosk, "and start using his brains instead of hobnail boots tactics."

For a moment, observers thought the six-foot, 185-pound Parker might go after Mosk with his fists. Quivering, he leaped up to thunder, "The peace officer has every bit as much right to criticize the courts as any citizen! And, believe me, they need it!"

Parker cited these figures: of 5,760 criminals given paroles between 1956 and 1959, 2,865—50.6 percent—committed a fresh crime. "Here's one killer we just ran down," Parker pointed out. "Since 1927, convicted five times, three times paroled—and on the loose when he murdered again. No wonder no woman is safe on our streets."

Earlier, Parker sent a "termite inspector" to the penthouse of big-time bookie Charlie Cahan. Thereafter, via a listening device hidden under a chest of drawers, detectives could tune in on Cahan at their leisure. There followed a raid in which door and windows were kicked in. After Cahan pleaded guilty and was given a 90-day sentence, the California Supreme Court flayed Parker for using the sound device and "for forcibly entering the premises without warrant," and reversed the lower-court ruling. "One

of the most flagrant violations of the 14th Amendment we have witnessed," wrote the court.

Outspoken in his criticism of the court's decision, Parker bided his time. Typically, he later tripped Cahan on another count and sent him to San Quentin.

Not since the Cahan decision of three years ago, insists Parker, has he used electronic snoops—a claim his critics refuse to accept—and he points out that narcotics, bunko and bookmaking offenses have almost doubled since. Not to mention an annual 1,200 rapes, 160 murders, 150 kidnapings, 26,000 burglaries and a major crime against one of every ten Los Angeles residents.

According to F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, Chief Parker is just what Los Angeles needs. He accepts only rookies who are college-entrance material—I.Q.s must be 110 and up—and has introduced psychiatric screening of all police personnel. L. A. cops are natty, youthful, polite—and must attend criminology seminars. And Parker's crime laboratory is a marvel visited by lawmen the world over. One huge electronic "Sherlock Holmes" machine fingers violators from filed data at the rate of six cards per second. In the Anna Sosyeva rape-killing—a pretty movie starlet slain at night, with no clues—the machine selected her slayer from punched cards within 48 hours.

Even crooks respect the "scam" setup run by Parker's 37-man Intelligence Division. "Scam" is police talk for a criminal conspiracy. "When a guy gets off a train here,

Parker knows in five minutes where he goes," narcotics kingpin Joe Sica told his lawyer in 1958. "New York and Chicago ain't that good. How he does it, we dunno."

By "bugging" a public telephone booth which Sica considered safe—a perfectly legal technique—Parker sent the "California Capone" to prison in 1950.

On another occasion, two oil-field promoters rushed in to report they'd been threatened on the phone by Jimmy "The Weasel" Fratianno, a suspected Mafia member.

"Yes, we know," they were told by Intelligence. "We have the conversation on tape." Jimmy "The Weasel" was sentenced to 15 years for extortion.

Despite his success, Parker—a crack shot—keeps a .38 revolver handy. "Each morning when I sit down in my chair," he says, "I can't be sure it won't be my last." In one month, three death threats—of a total of more than 500 to date—were received by the chief and his wife, Helen. Twice, returning to his modest home in the Silver Lake section, he has found squads searching the shrubbery for reported bombs. Parker also has had to forego his favorite German café, where, he learned just in time, outsiders planned to spike his drink and photograph him passed out on the floor.

At home, Mrs. Parker "monitors" TV jabs at her husband. In May, 1957, she heard mobster Mickey Cohen denounce him in the most scurrilous terms. Parker was awarded \$45,975.09 in libel damages.

Thirty-five years ago, Parker was a

\$30-a-week Los Angeles taxi driver, wedging in law-book study between passenger runs. Earlier, as a boy in Deadwood, South Dakota, he grew up in awe of the law. Among the German-Irish Parkers, there was a grandfather and an uncle who were ax-swinging county prosecutors.

At that time, seven bordellos ran wide-open in Deadwood. Upon becoming a bellhop at the Franklin Hotel, Bill determined that it wouldn't become the eighth. The first cases he "broke" concerned traveling salesmen from Dubuque, Iowa, accustomed to checking in with a girl friend. Some guests never recovered after having the South Dakota law on "cohabitation" quoted them by a 17-year-old kid.

In 1922, Parker moved to Los Angeles with his mother. He passed the bar examination, but when no clients appeared he signed on in 1927 as a \$170-a-month rookie patrolman. "As a cab driver I'd heard of police corruption," he recalls, "but what I saw was unbelievable. Some nights I was the only sober man in the booking office." When Parker scored top grades in a promotion exam, the marks were altered. Demanding an inquiry, he saw 23 high-ranking officers fired—one of whom committed suicide.

By 1943, a pedantic type, not popular and apparently frozen at captain's rank, he had been "passed by for promotion more times than any officer in Los Angeles Police Department history." In every examination, his name led the list. "Yet they broke me again and again, crushed me, humiliated me," he

says, eyes frosty. "I felt perhaps something was wrong with me."

In the Army during World War II, however, he zoomed from director of police and prison plans for the Normandy invasion to the Allied Command's top job in reshaping the police forces of Munich and Frankfurt. Rooting out concealed Nazis was his specialty. Wounded by a strafing plane, he returned to L. A. in 1946.

And this time his break came. "The best police force money can buy," as cynical citizens called it, fell apart in a Hollywood call-girl scandal, and the chief resigned. Again scoring the highest marks in a competitive exam, Parker won the No. 1 badge in August, 1950. His present salary is \$19,500 a year.

Today, age is visibly settling over Parker. "The job is slow death," says an associate. "Bill has high blood pressure, can't drink or smoke and diets heavily." In 1928, he married a Philadelphia girl who worked as a telephone operator during their lean years. Childless, the Parkers find some peace in fishing, walking their Cairn terriers and playing Vienna waltzes on hi-fi.

Still, no slow-up is in sight. A while back, a State Assembly move to abolish capital punishment was met by an irate Parker. He personally beat down the bill with, "This is a monumental absurdity. Individual responsibility cannot stop, a man always must be fully punished for his sins."


Parker was again involved in controversy last September when Nikita Khrushchev, in Los Angeles, was re-

fused permission to visit Disneyland. Parker threw such a tight police cordon around Khrushchev that the Soviet premier snapped, "I am under house arrest!" Retorted Parker, shrugging off pressure to extend his coverage of Khrushchev to suburban Disneyland: "Police protection will stop at the city limits."

Still fuming when he left L. A., Khrushchev claimed that Parker should have "remained a bit calmer" and not taken so seriously a tomato can thrown at the Premier's entourage—which, ironically, struck Parker's official automobile.

But Parker had the last word.

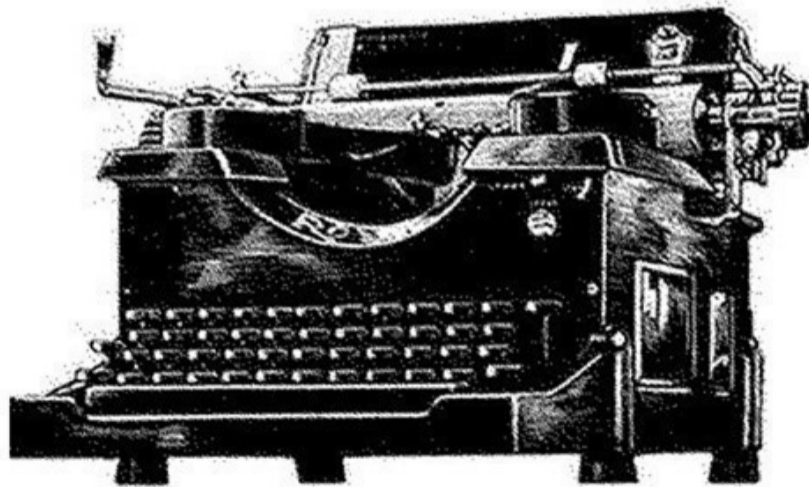
When Khrushchev flatly declared that the Disneyland trip had been on his official schedule from the beginning of his U. S. tour, the police chief produced evidence that this was untrue. Three weeks earlier, Gen. Nikolai Zakharov, the chief Soviet security agent, had agreed with Parker that such a trip was too dangerous.

"The Russians tried to pull a last-minute switch on us," a police official says now, "but Bill wouldn't go for it. Standing up to Khrushchev was easy for him. He's been practicing on California politicians for years." 

# Coronet

*February, 1960*

*p. 160*



[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)