

When gang wars were a worldwide symbol of American violence

by Herbert Asbury



Six mobsters brutally shot down in a garage helped shock us into recognizing—and halting—our plunge into barbarism

The Chicago underworld was a symbol of America's '20's when, for a time, the gangsters seemed to be the spearhead of a new barbarism. But today the most dramatic episode of that era can be presented as a chapter out of America's growing up—a reminder of American potentiality for violence.

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO the 2100 block on North Clark Street in Chicago was, as far as appearances went, exactly like a thousand other blocks in the Windy City—a few small stores, a garage or two, a couple of newsstands, and two rows of red brick and graystone buildings. But there was this difference: the garage at 2122 North Clark was actually not a garage at all. It was the principal “drop,” or distribution center, of the notorious North Side gang of bootleggers, hijackers, and beer runners founded by Dion O’Banion, and captained successively, after O’Banion had been murdered, by Hymie Weiss, reputed originator of the “one-way ride”, Vincent (Schemer) Drucci, and George (Bugs) Moran. It was also the scene of the most merciless slaughter in the history of Chicago’s prohibition wars.

ten o'clock. Another member of the gang, Willie Marks, was on his way to the garage from downtown.

Sometime between ten and ten-thirty o'clock, Mrs. Max Landesman, ironing in her kitchen on the second floor of the building which adjoined the garage on the north, heard a crash in the street. She ran to her front window and peered out in time to see what had happened. A delivery truck, driven by a young man named Elmer Lewis, had brushed against a large black touring car which Mrs. Landesman recognized as a police car—it had a gong on the running board and a gunrack on the back of the front seat, and was occupied by five men, two of whom were wearing police uniforms. One of the latter wore horn-rimmed glasses with dark lenses. Mrs. Landesman saw Lewis draw up to the curb, while the driver of the police car got out to examine a smashed fender.

"Oh, my," said Mrs. Landesman to herself, "that poor truck driver's in trouble now!"

But when Lewis climbed down from his truck and started back toward the scene of the collision, the driver of the police car laughed and waved him away. Curious, Mrs. Landesman watched while the police automobile pulled up to the door of the garage and the five men got out and went inside the building. She noticed that although the day was not cold, all of them wore overcoats closely buttoned to the neck. Then, having seen everything there was to see, she returned to her ironing.

Mrs. Landesman selected a shirt, sprinkled it, and laid it on the ironing board. But she got no further. From the garage next door came the blasting roar of shotguns and the drumming rattle of machine guns. She hurried to her front window, and a moment later the five men emerged from the garage. One ran ahead and got behind the wheel of the touring

car. The two in civilian clothing stumbled across the sidewalk with their hands above their heads. Behind them came the two in police uniforms, with revolvers in their hands. They boarded the car and the machine rolled slowly south on North Clark Street, gradually picking up speed.

Mrs. Landesman ran downstairs and into the street. She opened the front door of the garage and peered in. She saw nothing, and heard nothing save the lugubrious howling of John May's police dog. But she stopped a man who was passing and told him she was sure something terrible had happened.

"I heard a lot of shooting," she explained, "and then all those cops came out."

"I'll see," the man said.

He went boldly into the garage, but soon came running out.

"My God!" he cried. "It's full of dead men! They're all over the place!"

He hurried away. The neighbors began to gather around the door of the garage, but none ventured in. They stood silent, listening to the howling of the dog. Finally the police came. Some twenty feet from the recess where the Moran gangsters had awaited their leader, they came upon Frank Gusenberg. He was still alive, although he had been struck by fourteen machine gun bullets and several shotgun slugs, and was desperately trying to crawl toward the front door, a trail of blood marking his course. He was taken to Alexian Brothers Hospital, and Police Lieutenant Thomas Loftus, who had known him since boyhood, was sent to sit beside his bed, waiting for him to regain consciousness.

THE POLICE WENT ON into the garage. They found six dead men, each with fifteen to twenty machine gun bullets in his body, the flesh of each ripped by shotgun slugs. Four—May, Schwimmer, Hyers, and Weinshank—had fall-



The 1920's: Dion O'Banion's lush public funeral represented gangland's supreme arrogance. This year a few relatives buried Al Capone in five minutes

en backward; they lay at full length, faces up, bodies rigid. Weinshank's revolver, the only gun found in the garage, lay beside him. Clark had plunged along the wall, his bloody hands clutching at the bricks; he lay face downward. Peter Gusenberg had fallen across a chair; he knelt there, on his knees, as if he had been praying. But he was dead. Frank Gusenberg had fallen in a corner near the storeroom; when the murderers left he started to crawl. The dog was unharmed, but it kept on howling until the police took it to the city pound.

From the positions of the bodies, and the fact that every man had been shot in the back, the police were able to reconstruct the massacre. The gangsters obviously were not expecting trouble; otherwise they would have posted a guard at the front door of the garage. It was clear, too, that when the five men walked in, the gangsters thought they were policemen. There was nothing about a visit from Chicago policemen to alarm a prohibition gangster. Sometimes the cops, on orders from their superiors, made arrests and even confiscated liquor. Sometimes they wanted to borrow a few dollars, or cadge a few bottles of liquor.

But this visit didn't go off in the usual manner. The Gusenbergs and their comrades had scarcely said hello before the visitors drew shotguns and machine guns from beneath their overcoats and ordered the gangsters to line up

against the wall. Apparently, one went along the line, disarming the men and dropping their pistols—all but Weinshank's, which fell to the floor—into his overcoat pocket. Then, while the gangsters waited, the five men stood shoulder-to-shoulder and levelled their guns.

Had the killers waited five minutes longer before entering the garage, they could have included George Moran, Willie Marks, and Henry Guseberg among their victims. It has always seemed obvious that Moran was the man they were really after; gangland, in fact, considered the expedition something of a failure because Moran hadn't been killed. The police learned later that for ten days prior to the massacre three men had kept close watch upon the Moran headquarters from windows across the street; the killers went into action when these spies reported that Moran had arrived at the garage. Apparently they mistook Weinshank for Moran; the two men resembled each other, and on St. Valentine's morning Weinshank was clad in a gray topcoat and tan fedora hat such as Moran ordinarily wore.

But Moran was a little late leaving the Parkway Hotel and took a short cut through an alley. Just as he was about to emerge into Clark Street he saw what he supposed was a police car stop in front of the garage and the five men go inside. He returned to the hotel and warned Henry Guseberg that the cops were making a token raid of some sort, and both men remained at the Parkway. Willie Marks got off a Clark Street trolley car about a block from the garage, and saw the car standing in front of the building; apparently he arrived a few minutes after the shooting, for he heard nothing. He started to note the license number of the car, when the five men came out of the building. He was too far away to recognize anyone, but supposed that the two men with their hands

up were his comrades. Fearing arrest, he ducked into a doorway.

At the hospital, Frank Gusenberg had a moment of consciousness, and Lieutenant Loftus leaned over him.

"Frank," he said, "your brother Pete is dead and you're dying. Tell me who shot you."

"It was coppers done it," said Gusenberg. "Coppers. That's all I know. It was coppers."

He said no more. After three hours he died.

The fact that the killers used a police car, or at least a car closely resembling a police machine, and the further fact that two of them wore police uniforms, confused both the public and the detectives who worked on the case. New theories were advanced in the newspapers every day, and police and prohibition officials issued predictions by the dozen. But the only statement that really made sense was George Moran's:

"What's the use of all this hol-lerin'? Everybody knows who did it. Only Capone's gang kills like that."

The police were soon convinced that Moran was right. But Capone had an airtight alibi; at the time the murders were committed he was in Miami, Florida, talking to the District Attorney of Dade County. But it was established, although it is doubtful if the police could ever have proved it in court, that the murder car had been driven by Joseph Guinta, head of the *Unione Siciliana*, and that two of the machine guns had been handled by John Scalisi and Albert Anselmi, notorious even in gangland as cold-blooded killers. They had killed Dion O'Banion and Hymie Weiss, and had probably shot Frankie Uale, or Yale; for years they had been Capone's most trusted trigger-men.

About three months after the massacre, the bodies of Anselmi, Scalisi, and Guinta were found in an automobile in Douglas Park,