



Episode 018 – Burbank Bosses (transcript)

Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at burbankinfo.org.

Announcements

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead. Burbank Public Library's Burbank Reads program returns in October 2021 with readings and activities to spark discussion about climate change and sustainability.

Burbank Reads is based on the idea that the common ground of the whole community reading the same title will bring people together and provide opportunity to discuss and debate complex issues, such as the environment.

Our primary title this year, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, is a mix of information, reflection and meditation about our relationship with the natural world.

Stories of the warming earth are in the news every day. Reading a book alone will not turn things around, but perhaps you will be inspired by self-reflection and tales of activism to speak up and effect change. You are invited to read the book, attend programs for all ages, join the discussion, and plan for the future.

Story

What does Burbank have in common with Chicago, New York, and Las Vegas? Well this may come as a surprise, but Burbank was once a haven for some of the most notorious criminals of a long ago era. So how did it all go down and how did we turn it around to become one of the safest cities in the United States?

After the end of prohibition, organized crime turned back to its roots of gambling and bookmaking. By the 1940s, the mafia had spread its tendrils to the west, infiltrating Vegas and Los Angeles. Even Burbank can claim to infamous happenings in its history. In the late 1940s, there was a local underground casino near the corner of Riverside and Mariposa that was run

by Mickey Cohen, who at the time was the head of the west coast crime syndicate. According to reports, in early 1946, a Burbank stock farm owner received a telephone call from Mickey Cohen in which he was solicited to allow Cohen to build a 'private club' on his property. The owner agreed and received \$100 a month for the use of his premises. "A market at a street corner a few feet away from the farm entrance was used as a lookout when the casino was in operation. Patrons of the casino were told that it would be open only on nights when an electric sign near the market was [lit]." The world of the local mafia started to get uncovered in 1947 when this Dincara stock farm casino was raided by officers from the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office. When they requested assistance from Burbank Police, the lieutenant in charge sent officers to guard the gambling equipment. A few hours later, the same lieutenant called the men back to their regular duties. But two, who found this move highly suspicious returned to the casino after their work shift to find the gambling equipment being loaded up and taken away by Mickey Cohen and some of his associates. In 1948, Burbank detective Harry Strickland led another raid on Cohen's Dincara establishment and arrested three of the casino operators. Cohen showed up to the police station informing the officers that he was a friend of the police chief, Elmer Adams, and that they should dismiss the offense. The officers did not comply. However, a few weeks later, a Rabbi executed an affidavit stating that on the day of the raid no gambling was taking place, just a secret meeting of an organization. Because of this claim, all charges were dropped against the Cohen associates. Records that Cohen kept and were later investigated showed that he made regular payments to an "Adams." But Chief Adams refused to admit if he was the Adams in the paperwork because he said that his answer might tend to incriminate him. Mickey Cohen had the police chief in his pocket. The California Crime Commission was reported as saying, "when professional criminals have gained such a hold upon local government that the chief law enforcement officer cannot testify concerning his relations with them without involving himself in crime the whole community is in danger and the situation is an emergency. But by the early 1951, Cohen was tried and convicted of tax evasion and sentenced to four years in prison. Upon his release, he did not return to Burbank.

Another popular illegal past time was bookmaking. Ralph Maddox was widely known as a local bookmaker who placed bets for gambling men. His business was first conducted at a local pool room, but after that got raided, he established his headquarters at a café on Magnolia Boulevard. Ralph Maddox regularly entertained the likes of city councilmen Walter Mansfield and Floyd Jolley even accompanying them on a trip to Las Vegas. Maddox was recounted as having complained "bitterly and profanely about having to pay out [large sums] of money for police protection." In 1950, the editor for the local paper "Magnolia Park Reporter" received accounts of the wide-open operations of bookmakers without apparent restriction by law enforcement and issued a paper that contained a front page editorial on the subject. Chief of Police, Elmer Adams, showed up at the editor's office, much to her surprise, and demanded she publish an apology, to which she refused. She later was harassed and threatened via telephone. Maddox contacted local businesses and told them to discontinue their advertising in her paper which they did. They ultimately ran the paper out of business. In late 1950, Maddox retired his bookmaking from Burbank and moved to Nevada, to establish himself there.

But it wasn't until October 1951, that the seedy underbelly of this outwardly idyllic town finally started to be exposed. Even with the raids, it took the formation of the Burbank Citizens' Crime Prevention Committee to reveal the crisis to the local residents. Headed up by Bonar Dyer and George Thomson, this group was charged with the duties of observing activities of local law enforcement and of observing and reporting on local crime conditions. In a 1953 testimony to city council, they asserted that locals let the crime get out of hand in the city due to a simple lack of knowledge that it was even taking place in the first place. Additionally, the officials charged with protecting the city were being bankrolled by the mafia in exchange for turning a blind eye to the criminal activities taking place in their back yard. In 1953 Chief Elmer Adams was investigated and tried for his collusion with and protection of the local criminals and their illegal activities. Also, in May 1952, the city initiated a five-man Police Commission to enforce the duties of the local police force and to investigate when complaints were made. A 1956 Coronet Magazine article stated that "In May, 1954, [the] newly-appointed City Police Commission, under the chairmanship of Attorney Earle Burke, also an ex-FBI man, scheduled three weeks of public hearings on what many people called 'the mess in Burbank.' The hearing room in the City Hall was jammed with the wide-eyed Burbank citizens who heard [city councilman] Floyd Jolley sneer at the Burbank Citizens Crime Prevention Committee and call its members 'rats,' 'vigilantes,' and 'Dick Traceys.' He interrupted witnesses and shouted at the chairman," and at one point was escorted out of the chambers. The Police Commission hearings were successful in what they set out to do, they rid Burbank of organized crime and saved the city's reputation. And that's the story of Burbank's short stint as a haven of crime.

News from Burbank

Today's news comes from the August 8, 2015 Los Angeles Times.

Harry Strickland, a retired Burbank Police detective who busted up illegal gambling operations run by gangster Mickey Cohen in the 1940s and '50s, died Monday. Strickland was 100 years old.

Not only was he a part of Burbank's history, Strickland founded the Burbank Historical Society with his wife in 1973 and spent two years in the early 1980s restoring the 1887 Mentzer House, located in George Izay Park on Lomita Street, which is now home to the society's Gordon R. Howard Museum.

The centenarian was born in Forest Hills, N.Y., in March 1915, and came with his family to North Hollywood about eight years later, then to Burbank in 1938. He joined the police force in 1940 and served until 1969, with a break during World War II to serve in the U.S. Navy as a radioman in the South Pacific from 1943 to 1945. After retiring from the police department, he worked for the Superior Court in Los Angeles for more than a decade.

It was as a Burbank police officer after the war, in 1948, when Strickland had a memorable encounter with the famous crime boss Cohen, which bears resemblance to a scene from a noir movie.

In a *Burbank Leader* article in 2000, Strickland told the reporter that he and his partner, Sandy McDonald, had received instructions from then Police Chief Elmer Adams to check out the Dincara Stock Farm, an old horse stable on Mariposa and Riverside Drive, and raid it if they found evidence of gambling.

After coercing a lookout to bring them to the entrance — a door with a large peephole — the detectives heard a lot of movement and saw 50 people and gambling paraphernalia, such as roulette wheels and craps tables, according to a later account in 2003.

“I’ve given it a lot of thought, and in a way I’ve never forgiven Elmer Adams for doing what he did to McDonald and me,” Strickland said to [a] *Leader* reporter, adding they had no radios, no backup and no vice squad. “I’m sure he knew who Mickey Cohen was. But he sent two policemen down there. Nobody in their right mind today would do that.”

Cohen confronted Strickland and McDonald at the police station about three arrests they made at the covert casino, Strickland said. He demanded to know what exactly Adams’ orders had been.

“That was the demise of Elmer Adams,” Strickland said.

About four years later, on the eve of a grand-jury investigation that connected him to payoffs from racketeers, Adams resigned.

Strickland married his wife, Mary Jane, in 1951. His bride of 64 years said this week she remembered that time in Burbank, calling Cohen “quite a little hoodlum.”

Harry Strickland was also involved in the investigation of the murder of Mabel Monohan, Rivera said in an interview this week. The murder inspired the 1958 movie “I Want to Live!,” in which Susan Hayward won a best actress Oscar for her portrayal of one of Monohan’s murderers, Barbara “Bloody Babs” Graham.

Strickland’s daughter, Penny Rivera, said her father wasn’t one to tell stories about his exploits, but was “just a sweet, dedicated man — dedicated to his family, dedicated to the museum, dedicated to the city.”

And that’s the news from August 8, 2015.

End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfo.org.

Thank you for joining us today.