

Gangster Paradise

“I am like any other man. All I do is supply a demand.” ~ Al Capone

Al Capone was called everything from “Public Enemy Number One” to “the greatest gang leader in history.” Having orchestrated dozens of murders, he was a legend in his own lifetime. He operated speakeasies and prostitution rings in Chicago, New York, and Miami. He spent his winters in a sprawling mansion on Palm Island.

In Chicago, Capone maintained an appearance of respectability living a modest life in a middle class neighborhood. He passed himself off as a salesman. But in Miami, he was feared. Residents and authorities alike worried that his presence would have a negative effect on tourism for the resort town. Capone turned Miami Beach into a hotbed for rum running, gambling, and prostitution. The city of Miami called his home “a menace to the safety and well-being of residents.” The state of Florida declared martial law and ordered the immediate arrest of Capone.

Capone was arrested and released several times in Miami. While being under scrutiny for one murder, he managed to arrange his most notorious crime, the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. On the morning of February 14, 1929, as Capone was held in

Kalila Smith

questioning in Miami, seven men gathered in the garage of George “Bugs” Moran in Chicago.

The group had met there to collect a shipment of bootleg liquor that was on its way from Detroit. As they waited for Moran, they had no idea of what horror lie ahead for them. The meeting was actually a setup. Rather than a shipment of booze, several police pulled up in front of the home and began walking up towards the garage.

After ordering the seven to line up against a wall, the cops pulled shotguns and machine guns from their coats and began blasting away. Witnesses would remember blood splattered everywhere, smearing the wall and pooling on the cold cement floor. "Only Capone kills like that," Moran said when told of the slaughter. Capone was sunning on the beach in Florida at the time of the murders, but he'd set up the hit that became legendary in American criminal history. Al Capone was said to have believed that the ghosts of the massacre haunted him the remainder of his life.

In May 1929, Capone was arrested in Philadelphia for carrying concealed weapons and sentenced to a year in the Eastern State Penitentiary. He served only eight months but long enough for IRS Special Intelligence Unit to use his Miami home as proof of his income. Eliot Ness, leader of the “Untouchables,” simultaneously gathered evidence of his bootlegging activity.

Capone returned to Miami in 1930 continuing to bootleg all the while trying to improve his public image by hosting goodwill dinners. In 1931, Capone

Miami's Dark Tales

was found guilty of 22 counts of tax evasion and sentenced to 11 years in prison.

In 1934, he was moved from a federal facility in Atlanta to Alcatraz Prison. He had served only six and half years of his sentence when he was released on parole.

He returned to Miami suffering from dementia and other symptoms of advanced syphilis. He died in his Miami home on January 25, 1947, one week after his 48th birthday.

Although both Alcatraz and Eastern State Penitentiary claim to be home to Capone's ghost, no doubt the ghost of the notorious mob boss prefers his Miami home for his ghostly stomping ground. Through the years, various residents of the home claimed to have heard pots and pans banging in the kitchen late at night, lights going on and off and a voice believed to be Capone's. Some have felt the sensation of someone climbing into bed with them.

The Clay Hotel on Washington Avenue is the former location of Capone's Miami Casino. It's the same hotel where eighteen-year-old Desi Arnaz started the rumba craze in Miami. Desk clerks believe that Capone and his cronies walk the halls late at night. Strange sounds emit from the top floor, now an internet Café. Footsteps are often heard late at night, but the room is usually empty upon examination. There have been numerous reports of a woman dressed in 1920s attire wandering about the top floor and in the stairwell. During my stay, scraping sounds and loud bangs could be heard. It was as if furniture was being moved in the wee hours

Kalila Smith

of the morning. Interestingly, none of my neighbors at the hotel heard anything.

One ghost in the hotel is believed to be that of another mobster, Johnny Roselli, a former thug for Capone. Roselli was called “the man who knew too much.” But it wasn’t knowing too much that got Johnny killed, it was talking too much about what he knew. His death is the most mysterious in Miami’s history. Conspiracy theorists still try to pinpoint who murdered him.

Johnny began his career with Capone then became a trusted employee of Sam Giancana. He worked for years as a liaison between the two. In the late 1930s, he was arrested for extorting one million dollars from Hollywood movie companies then again in the 1960s for running crooked card games in L.A. But it was what Johnny called doing his “patriotic duties” that got him the most attention, probably the wrong kind at that. The CIA called it “Operation Mongoose.”

In 1960, the CIA contacted Roselli and Giancana via Howard Hughes’ assistant about a special assignment to assassinate Fidel Castro. Most of the work fell on Roselli. Roselli met with them at the famed Fontainebleau Hotel on Collins Blvd. The hotel was a favorite hangout for mobsters in earlier years and during the 1960s a hotspot for celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford, Dean Martin, and Joey Bishop, otherwise known as the Rat Pack. The CIA gave him money, guns, and poison pills for Castro. In return, Roselli gave them a lot of talk.

Miami's Dark Tales

A Castro aid was supposed to have slipped him the poison but backed down, a waiter was supposed to have put it in his food but Castro stopped going to that restaurant. Another hit man was set to give the Cuban leader a poisoned milk shake but like the first, backed down. A group of snipers in Havana setup on a building wound up being spotted and arrested. Johnny claimed to have attempted the assassination personally by taking a high speed boat to Cuba but that the boat was shot from under him. He was rescued and taken back to Miami by another boat. In the 1970s, there was a security leak about the operation and that's when Johnny began talking.

In 1975, he testified three times before Congress. He interviewed with syndicated columnist, Jack Anderson about assassination plots. He rumored to U.S. Senators that mobster Santo Trafficante had joined Cuban Communists in the assassination of JFK. It was Trafficante, again at the Fontainebleau Hotel, that the CIA had used in another failed Castro assassination attempt. He too was given poison for Castro. After taking their money however, Trafficante flushed the pills down the toilet and disappeared. Several days before Sam Giancana was to testify before a U.S. Senate Committee, he was found shot to death in his basement. Johnny continued to talk.

Johnny Roselli was seventy-one-years-old in July of 1976 when his sister last saw him as he left for a golf game saying he'd return for dinner. He was never seen alive again. Several days later his 1975 Chevy Impala was found in the parking lot of the

Kalila Smith

Miami airport with his golf clubs still in the trunk. Eleven days after his disappearance a couple of fishermen found a 55 gallon drum floating in the bay. It was wrapped in chains with holes drilled into it. Through the holes, the men saw the swollen, decaying body of Johnny Roselli. It seemed that the killer perhaps had attached weights that had broken off and the gases in the decomposing body kept it afloat. To this day, no one has confirmed who killed Roselli. Today, there are only theories and the murder remains a mystery, but then again, mystery is what Miami is all about.