

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member

'Just the Facts'

L.A. Noir author John Buntin describes the strangely intertwined careers of two of Los Angeles's most fabled figures, LAPD Chief William Parker and mobster Mickey Cohen.

The 20th century in the City of Los Angeles, the 1930s through 1960s, experienced one of the most monumental crime and corruption eras of any city in this country. The cast of characters read like a criminal report out of New York, Chicago or New Jersey, and in some instances could be a great fantasy mystery using the same temperament and eccentricities as the original cast.

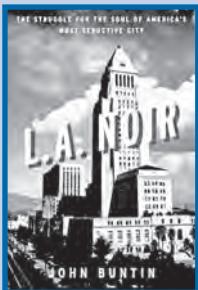
I would like to introduce you to a fantastic new book, *L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City*, by John Buntin, a staff writer at *Governing* magazine, in Washington, D.C., where he covers crime and urban affairs. This tome is one of the most comprehensive books I have ever read, and it focuses only on Los Angeles. By the time you read this, you should be able to find the book for sale at the Club Store soon.

The main cast of characters in the book are Mickey Cohen; Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel; Police Chief William H. Parker; Mayor Frank Shaw and his brother, Joe, the LAPD; stool pigeons; and the mob.

— Hynda Rudd



John Buntin. Photo by David Kidd.



L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City by John Buntin.

Story by John Buntin. Photos courtesy the Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library photo archive.

"Wherein lies the fascination of the Angel City? Why has it become the Mecca of tourists the world over? Is it because it is the best-advertised city in the United States? Is it that it offers illimitable opportunities for making money and eating fruit? Hardly that. After all the pamphlets of the real estate agents, the boosters' clubs, the Board of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce have been read, something remains unspoken—something that uncannily grips the stranger."—Willard Huntington Wright, "Los Angeles: The Chemically Pure, 1913"

Seven years ago, I came to Los Angeles to write a profile of then-Police Chief Bill Bratton. I'd lived in Los Angeles previously and loved it, but I'd also been puzzled by it. In Washington, D.C., and Boston, where I'd lived previously, it had been easy to find people who could tell you everything about everything about their native cities. Los Angeles was different. Even the people who governed it seemed unsure what the City was becoming. People also seemed uncertain about where it had come from. For a City that had inspired writers and directors from Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder to Roman Polanski and James Ellroy, LA's history seemed surprisingly uncharted. That was particularly true of the Los Angeles Police Department.

No police force has been more revered and reviled than the LAPD. As I prepared for my profile of Chief Bratton, I read everything I could about the history of the department. But what I found puzzled me. I discovered that the force depicted as the epitome of efficiency in the television show *Dragnet* was the same force depicted by in the novel and subsequent film, *L.A. Confidential*, at the same moment in time, December 1952. That year seemed to be a magic moment in the history of the LAPD. The police department that preceded it was a force renowned for its spectacular corruption.

The one that followed it was known for its efficiency but also for a troublingly adversarial relationship with LA's minority communities. What, I wondered, had changed? The attempt to answer that question would occupy the next five years of my life. But first it led me to two extraordinary Angelenos. The first was William Henry Parker, the police chief who created the *Dragnet*-era LAPD. The second was Parker's rival for power, Los Angeles's most notorious gangster, the mobster Mickey Cohen. For more than 40 years, from Prohibition through the Watts riots, politicians, gangsters, businessmen and policemen engaged in an often-violent contest for control of the City. Their struggle shaped the history of Los Angeles, the future of policing, and the course of American politics.

In 1920, Los Angeles surpassed San Francisco as California's largest city. It was a moment of triumph for *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler, who had arrived four decades earlier when the City of Angels was a dusty, water-starved pueblo of 10,000 souls. Chandler and his associates worked tirelessly to build a metropolis, relentlessly promoting the fledgling City and ruthlessly securing the water needed to support it. Yet 1920 was also the year that witnessed the emergence of a major threat



Mickey Cohen (second from left) sits with his alleged gang in 1948.

to their authority. The threat came from Prohibition. For years, Harry Chandler and the so-called business barons had supplied local politicians with the advertising, the publicity, and the money they needed to reach the city's new residents. In exchange, they gained power over the city government. But with the imposition of Prohibition, a new force appeared with the money and the desire to purchase LA's politicians – the criminal underworld. To suppress it, the business community turned to the Los Angeles Police Department. The underworld also looked to the L.A.P.D. – for protection.

In 1922, Bill Parker and Mickey Cohen entered this drama as bit players in the struggle for control of Los Angeles. In 1937, Parker emerged as a protégé of Los Angeles's top policeman while Mickey became the enforcer for L.A.'s top gangster. In 1950, they became direct rivals, each dedicated to the other's destruction. Two more different characters would be hard to imagine.

Parker arrived in Los Angeles in 1922 from Deadwood, S.D., a proud, ambitious 17 year old, one of the tens of thousands of migrants moving west to Southern California in what the writer Carey McWilliams described as "the largest internal migration in the history of the American people." He hoped to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, a pioneering prospector on the Western frontier, and make a career for himself in the law. But instead of opportunity, Parker found in Los Angeles' temptation. Instead of becoming a prominent attorney, he became a cop, a patrolman in the Los Angeles Police Department. Coldly cere-

bral (*Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry, a one-time LAPD officer and Parker speechwriter, based the character Mr. Spock on his old boss), intolerant of fools, and famously incorruptible (in a department that was famously corrupt), Parker persevered. Gradually he rose. Between 1934 and 1937, he masterminded a campaign to free the Police Department from the control of gangsters and politicians, only to see his efforts undone by a blast of dynamite and a sensational scandal. Then, in 1950, another scandal (this one involving 114 Hollywood "pleasure girls") made Parker Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, a position he would hold for 16 controversial years.

In contrast, Mickey Cohen wasn't troubled by self-examination until much later in life (when he would grapple with the question of going "straight.") Born Meyer Harris Cohen in 1913 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, Mickey arrived in Los Angeles with his mother and sister at the age of three. By the age of six, he was hustling newspapers on the streets of Boyle Heights. At the age of nine, he began his career in armed robbery with an attempt to "heist" a movie theater in downtown L.A. using a baseball bat. His talent with his fists took the diminutive brawler to New York City to train as a featherweight boxer. His skill with a .38 took him into the rackets, first in Cleveland, then in Al Capone's Chicago. In 1937, Mickey returned to Los Angeles to serve as gangster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel's right-hand man. It was a job that put him on a collision course with Bill Parker.

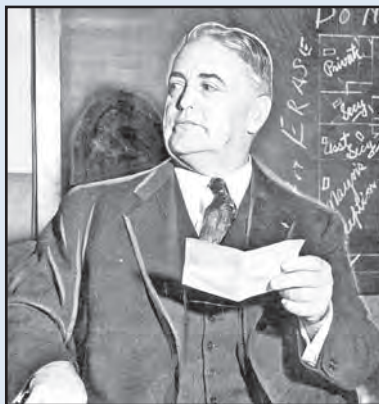
Next time: How their struggle played out.



Former LAPD Chief
William Parker.



Bugsy Siegel (right side) with Frank Carbo on trial in 1942.



Mayor Frank Shaw defends his brother, Joe, on the stand, in 1938.