

# History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd,  
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## Parker, Poulson and the Mob

L.A. Noir author John Buntin examines the workings of LAPD Chief William Parker by looking at the 1953 race for mayor. **Part 2 of 3.**

John Buntin's article is the second of a trilogy. It is a continuation of the August entry, where he gives an overview of what City government was dealing with in the mid-20th century Los Angeles. In his volume, *L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City*, Buntin gives a layout of crime and corruption that is almost too hard to believe.

Enjoy this article! But get prepared for next month's conclusion. It will be a knockout!

— Hynda Rudd

John Buntin covers crime and urban affairs for *Governing Magazine* in Washington, DC.



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 Herald-Examiner and Security Pacific Collections, Los Angeles Public Library photo archive.

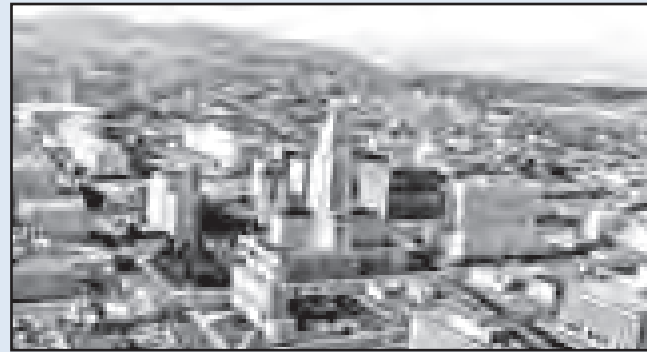
How do cities really work? It's a question I wrestle with frequently as a reporter who covers crime and urban affairs. It's also a question that must be answered to make sense of mid-century Los Angeles and the two figures who did so much to define it, LAPD chief William Parker and his pint-sized rival, mobster Mickey Cohen.

For years, filmmakers, journalists and many historians have promulgated the notion that Los Angeles was shaped and ruled by a small plutocracy of real-estate developers and newspaper publishers. I call this the *Chinatown* interpretation of LA history, after Robert Towne and Roman Polanski's eponymous 1974 film, and it remains enormously popular, reinforced by books both historical (David Halberstam's *The Powers that Be*; Eric Davis's *City of Quartz*) and fictional (James Ellroy's Los Angeles trilogy), as well as by films including *Crash* and television shows like *The Shield*. Histories of the LAPD, including Joe Domanick's *To Protect and To Serve* from 1994, have taken a similar tack, presenting the history of the police department as a series of civil rights abuses; Chief Parker, who from 1950 to 1966 built the modern LAPD, was portrayed as a brilliant but paranoid chief executive who used the pretext of the Mob to build an intelligence operation whose true task was defending the Chief and the department.

However, in recent years, historians including Tom Sitton have criticized this interpretation as simplistic. In this article, I'd like to offer a fresh take on this dispute by recounting how Chief Parker and the underworld clashed over one of L.A.'s more colorful political campaigns, Republican Congressman Norris Poulson's 1953 race against incumbent mayor Fletcher Bowron. Poulson's unpublished memoirs depict the LA underworld in its last flush of great power, illustrating both the very real threat that Chief Parker and the LAPD faced as well as the darker recesses of Parker's personality.

In December 1952, *Los Angeles Times* publisher Norman Chandler and Pacific Mutual Insurance president Asa Call summoned Los Angeles's business elite to a strategy session on the top floor of the *Los Angeles Times* building. Among the invitees were lawyers Frank Doherty and James Beebe of O'Melveny & Myer and business leaders Neil Petree, Henry Duque and Preston Hotchkis. The top item on their agenda was choosing a new mayor. Thirty-four names were up for discussion, but when the group got to number 16, everyone agreed that they had found their man in Congressman Norris Poulson, a died-in-the-wool conservative who'd done yeoman's duty in Congress blocking Arizona's efforts to secure a larger allotment of water from the Colorado River.

The day after Christmas, Norman Chandler called Poulson at his home in Washington, D.C., and informed the Congressman that a group of civic leaders wanted to draft him to run for mayor. Chandler asked Poulson back to Los Angeles so that Poulson could hear their pitch. A follow-up letter described the details of their offer. In addition to promising to bankroll Poulson's campaign "generously," Chandler's letter noted that the mayor's salary was likely to be increased and that Poulson as mayor would be "entitled to strut around in a car (Cadillac) and chauffeur supplied by the city." Although Poulson privately admitted that he "knew very



The central city, 1965.

little about the immediate problems of Los Angeles," except for the public housing issue (which, of course, he opposed), he quickly agreed to sign on for the race. *Times* reporter Carlton Williams took charge of launching the Congressman as a candidate.

Bill Parker, though, was suspicious.

One year earlier, Parker had taken command of the LAPD after a scandal involving the administrative vice squad, 114 "pleasure girls," and mobster Mickey Cohen had led to the ouster of Chief C.B. Horrall. The new chief's previous experiences had demonstrated the ample powers of the underworld. As a result, Parker was determined to vet anyone who might oversee him. So Parker unleashed his newly expanded intelligence division on candidate Poulson. An unsettling connection was soon discovered, not to the Mob but to Moscow. A left-wing attorney who had attracted the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had given Poulson a small "liquor refrigerator" — price \$157.35 — from Hecht's department store in Washington, D.C. The story soon broke, to Poulson's great embarrassment. While Poulson rode the scandal of "the Red refrigerator" out, his troubles with the LAPD had only begun.

Several weeks later, Poulson was approached by an athletic young man (a plainclothes detective) who asked the candidate what we would do about the police department if elected.

"I just casually reached over and touched a microphone, which I detected pushing out from his shirt," Poulson recounted in his unpublished memoirs. Then he walked away.

The realization that the LAPD was investigating him angered Poulson. But as the campaign progressed, Poulson's anger towards Parker was modulated by the growing realization that Chief Parker had a point: "the hood-



Broadway looking south, 1953.

lum element" that Mayor Bowron and Chief Parker constantly warned about was real.

This realization came slowly. At first, Parker critics approached Poulson to express the view that "Parker and his 'Gestapo' should be controlled," recalled Poulson in his memoirs. But as the weeks passed, Poulson became increasingly uncomfortable with the drift of these discussions

and the people who engaged in them. Some had very close connections to mobster Mickey Cohen. Just days before the election, Poulson went to breakfast with someone he would later identify only as "a former deputy district attorney and now the vice-president of a Los Angeles and nationally known institution." When he arrived, the candidate was startled to find the shady ex-LAPD-captain-turned attorney and a well-known "Las Vegas gambling man" waiting for him. As he sat down to breakfast, Poulson was "really scared." The men got right to it: They offered Poulson \$35,000 if he would agree to name three men to the five-member Police Commission, which oversaw the chief of police. Poulson tried to stall. The men then insisted that he "go out and talk in the gambler's car." Even though he suspected that he was being maneuvered into a "bugged" car, Poulson was too scared to refuse.

"I talked in circles," Poulson wrote in his memoirs. A few days later, on April 7, Poulson defeated Bowron, 53 to 47 percent, to become Los Angeles's next mayor. Yet as Poulson left the Gaylord Hotel downtown to go to his campaign headquarters to celebrate his victory, he was "filled with mixed emotions." Thoughts of Cadillacs, chauffeurs and a nice raise now seemed far away. Poulson now had to worry about how he could avoid "opening up the town" in light of the fact that "some of the people who had supported me thought I would." Faced with a choice of keeping his police chief or facing the underworld alone, Poulson decided, with great reluctance, to retain Parker.

What does this story tell us? It shows that the dominant narrative about Los Angeles was run not in some dark fantasy but rather rooted in truth. It all demonstrates, decisively to my mind, that the 1950s Los Angeles's underworld and its influence were very real. Both revelations exculpate Chief Parker in important ways: the LAPD's intelligence division developed, at least initially, in response to a real threat.

But the story of Norris Poulson's election also illuminates some dark corners of Bill Parker's soul. "In my conversations with [Chief Parker]," Poulson would later recall, "he would inadvertently tell what he knew about this person or that... I later found out that chief Parker had a file on many people and not all communist suspects."

The intelligence division's operations would continue long after the LAPD broke the power of the Mob. Parker's files would soon emerge as a real source of fear among the City's politicians. Had he resigned in 1959, Parker would have been remembered as LA's greatest policeman. But by staying into the 1960s, a decade in which Parker emerged as an outspoken critic of the civil rights movement, Parker would become Los Angeles's most controversial policeman instead.

Former LAPD Chief  
William Parker.

Mayor Norris  
Poulson, 1960.

Mayor-elect  
Norris Poulson with  
Police Chief William Parker, 1953.

Mayor Fletcher  
Bowron.