

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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The Road to Watts

LAPD Chief William Parker's preoccupation with the Mob in general (and Mickey Cohen in particular) blinded him to the changing nature of race relations in LA. **Third and final part.**

Hello everyone. This is John Buntin's third article in the trilogy excerpted from his *L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City*. It is one of the finest articles I have read on this subject of an internal struggle within any given city in this country. I want to take this opportunity to thank John for this trip through the City of Los Angeles' mid-20th-century development and growth. I sincerely hope that reading these three parts of a cunning true story has enlightened your knowledge about this incredible city we work and live in.

And we're working to have the Club Store carry John Buntin's volume in the very near future.

— Hynda



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, Christine Rice, director.

In Greek tragedy, the hero is often undone by a tragic flaw in his personality. The same might be said of the final episode in the decades-long struggle for power between mobster Mickey Cohen and *Dragnet*-era police chief William Parker. Two more different personalities would be hard to imagine, yet each man was undone by a tragic flaw. For Cohen, it was a weakness for showgirls. For Chief Parker, it was a blindness to the moral dimensions of the civil rights movement. Cohen's lapses would lead to the end of his criminal empire. Parker's antipathy to the civil rights movement would lead the City straight to the Watts riots.

Mickey Cohen was not a handsome man, nor was he a natural conversationalist. Given these drawbacks, it's easy to understand how Cohen would eventually gravitate toward "professional" women including artist/stripper Liz Renay and burlesque dancer Candy Barr. Mickey was soon spending tens of thousands of dollars on Barr and a succession of other stripper paramours as the LAPD and federal agents watched. Cohen had already done one stint in the federal penitentiary system during the mid-1950s. In 1961, he was convicted of income tax evasion again. This time he was fined \$30,000 and sentenced to 15 years in prison.



Former LAPD Chief William Parker.

Parker's tragic flaw was far more consequential. As a devout young Roman Catholic who had grown up in Los Angeles at a time when Protestant ministers such as The Rev. "Fighting Bob" Shuler had routinely castigated Catholics for everything from the assassination of Abraham Lincoln to the Mexican Revolution, Parker might have been expected to have some understanding of what motivated the civil rights movement but as it turns out, he didn't. The chief was particularly horrified by the concept of civil disobedience. Parker seemed to believe that Los Angeles already was as integrated as it could be, barring "reverse discrimination" (i.e., forcing white people to work with and live next to black peo-

when they would rather not). To Parker, the willingness of Los Angeles-area civil rights organizations to criticize the LAPD – a department that Chief Parker firmly believed had done "a magnificent job" with race relations – afforded the final proof that the civil rights movement was essentially pro-Communist and anti-police.

In Chief Parker's world, race relations had a "through the looking glass" quality – race relations in Los Angeles seemed bad only because race relations were normally so good. Unnamed forces, Parker insisted, had chosen Los Angeles as "a proving ground" for their strategy of damaging the police precisely because it took racial complaints so seriously. Fortunately, the chief asserted, it wasn't working. "Negroes," he confidently asserted in the summer of 1963, "aren't ready to make big demonstrations." Nor would he permit the threat of disorder to intimidate the department into unilaterally disarming.



Mickey Cohen in handcuffs, 1962.

"This city can't be sand-bagged by some threat of disorder into destroying itself," he told *Los Angeles Times* columnist Paul Coates in the summer of 1963. "We have the most advanced department in the nation in human relations." Even the outbreak of the Watts riots two years later failed to change his mind.

"A great deal of the courage of these rioters was based on the continuous attacks of civil rights organizations on the police," declared

Parker one month after the riots. Most Angelenos seemed to agree. Parker claimed that in the weeks following the riots and his media appearances he had received 125,000 telegrams and letters — "99 percent of them favorable." Forced to choose between Chief Parker and his critics, L.A.'s elected politicians made their choice: they went with the police. In March 1966, the City Council voted to commend Chief Parker for his management of the department and the "pattern of realistic human relations" he had established with the city's African-American community.

"It's most plausible that Chief Parker is the most powerful man in Los Angeles," mused *Los Angeles Times* publisher Otis Chandler to a *Washington Post* reporter that summer. "He is the white community's savior, their symbol of security."

Parker's post-Watts power proved short-lived. On the evening of July 16, 1966, the chief went to a banquet at the Statler Hilton Hotel to receive an award from the Second Marine Division, which was celebrating its 17th annual reunion. There he received a plaque citing him as one of the nation's foremost police chiefs. After a few brief remarks, he walked back to his table while a thousand Marines Corps veterans gave him a standing ovation. He sat down, then suddenly he leaned back and start-

ed gasping for air. Slowly he crumpled to the floor. His heart had finally failed him. After almost 39 years on the force, Chief William H. Parker was dead. He was 61.

Six years later, on Jan. 6, 1972, Mickey was released from the Springfield federal penitentiary. He was a shadow of himself. Nine years earlier, a deranged inmate had brained Cohen with a three-foot-long led pipe. Despite extensive physical therapy, Mickey still needed help with the most basic tasks, including getting dressed and standing up. After a visit with Carlos Marcello in New Orleans and some R&R in Mob-controlled Hot Springs, Cohen returned to Los Angeles to find a city transformed. The Sunset Strip he had once known was gone. Teenage punks and rock-n-roll had taken over what had once been Hollywood's grandest boulevard. Women now walked around "with skirts up to their neck." Even crime was bewildering and different.

"Today, it's a whole new setup, because you got punks running around. Kids go in, and people give them their money, and they still kill them afterwards," Mickey lamented.

Mickey's muscle days were over. But as the threat of violence that had long been associated with him dissipated, he now became what arguably he'd long wanted to be – a celebrity. When he went to the fights, real celebrities like Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr. and Redd Foxx would come over to say hello. (Mickey appreciated the fact that Sinatra always greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and the more formal, "Michael.") Although Cohen's tips were sadly reduced ("I maybe used to tip a barber \$20, I maybe tip \$5 now"), he still lived much as he had lived before. He still wore tailor-made



The funeral Mass for LAPD Chief William Parker, 1966.



Mickey Cohen and a bulletproof car, 1950.