

Terrell County Memorial August, 2014
Sanderson, Texas
Museum News
Al Capone Visits in the City



Photo : sfgate.com

The Forty Thieves Express, or, the Al Capone Special, as it was called in the Sanderson Times, pictured as delivered to Alcatraz Island. Security was so tight that spectators and photographers were not allowed to get close to the passenger cars; only long distance photos could be made of the infamous train.

Residents of Sanderson were shocked to see the banner headline of the *Sanderson Times* for August 24, 1934. Al Capone had achieved celebrity status as the nation's "Kingpin of Crime," and the cas-

ual observer could not believe that he would show up in Sanderson.

Al Capone was born to Italian immigrants in Brooklyn, NY, in 1899. His early years were marred by his inability to



Photo : mchenrycounty1981.com/

Al Capone (1899—1947) was known by close friends as “Snorky,” a slang term for a suave, stylish dresser.

follow the rules. He was expelled from Catholic school at the age of 14 for hitting a female teacher in the face.

He spent his latter teenage years running with local gangs: the Junior Forty Thieves, the Bowery Boys, the Brooklyn Rippers and the notorious Five Points Gang. During that period he was mentored by gangsters Johnny Torrio and Frankie Yale.

Working the door at a night club one night he insulted a female patron. Her brother took offense and in the following brawl the brother slashed Capone's face three times with a knife, thus earning him the nickname "Scarface," a name he always hated.

It was during this period that Capone married to legitimize his only child, a son. Ironically, he was underage and had to have his parents give their written consent to his marriage.

Capone was recruited by mentor Johnny Torrio to go to Chicago as an enforcer in a bootlegging, gambling and prostitution operation. From there, his

career took off and he eventually rose to the top of the gang world.

He began to shape politics in the Chicago area by enabling a mayoral candidate to be elected in the suburb of Cicero. A month later, when the man promised publicly to get rid of Capone, the outraged gangster confronted him at city hall and knocked him down a flight of stairs. Capone was the boss!

By 1930, much of his family had relocated to Chicago and several were members of his organization, including brother Ralph "Bottles" Capone, who was in charge of Capone's legal and illegal beverage concerns.

Capone also supported many charities and organizations, earning the reputation of a modern-day Robin Hood. But, he seriously damaged that reputation when he ordered the bloody St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929, the wholesale and horrific summary execution of seven rival gang members. That, and other acts, kept a mob war going in Chicago between Capone's "The Outfit" and rival gangsters Bugs Moran and Hymie Weiss.

Capone's gang made millions of dollars from its illegal activities, but because of wide-scale bribery and corruption of law enforcement and judges, he could not be brought to trial.

In 1929, agent Elliot Ness and the Bureau of Prohibition began an investigation of Capone's empire. Using forensic accounting they brought charges against Capone and his men for federal tax evasion; he had failed to report the income from his illegal activities. That, along with charges involving the Volstead (Prohibition) Act, the feds felt they had a good chance to bring the big man down.

But, Capone had his ways. He went to work, bribing and threatening the jury pool for his trial. When Ness and the feds got wind of this, they switched jury pools with another trial in progress, and eventually gained five convictions for tax evasion and failing to file his tax returns. His

appeals failed and Capone was sentenced to eleven years in a federal penitentiary, the longest ever assessed at that time for tax evasion.

Capone was sent to the federal pen at Atlanta, but, using his charm and considerable persuasive abilities he gained special privileges and favored status, turning his "punishment" into a sham.

When authorities were alerted of an attempt to break Capone out of jail, it was decided to send him to the new maximum security prison on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, supposedly impenetrable and inescapable.

A special armored passenger train with barred windows carried Capone and forty-two of the nation's most hardened criminals (known as the Forty Thieves Express) down the rails to California and a just fate. This is what brought Capone to Sanderson.

On Monday, August 20, 1934, the "Al Capone special," as the *Sanderson Times* called it, rolled into town and made a twenty-minute stop in the rail yards by the depot. The reporter for the *Times* wrote a great "tongue-in-cheek" description of the event.



Evidence of the "special favors" granted him at the Atlanta prison, Capone is shown here with a federal guard, riding on the special train that took him to Alcatraz. He looks more like a dapper businessman than a sadistic criminal.

As the reporter commented, "Without word of warning, leaving the reception committee up in the air as far as a scheduled program was concerned, and our spokesman without a prepared speech, the Al Capone special rolled into Sanderson Monday afternoon bound for San Francisco Bay where Al, instead of boarding a palatial yacht, will be introduced to his new quarters, room and rent-free, during the remainder of his 11-year sentence for dodging the tax collector.

"And to make matters worse, Al, sometimes called Public Enemy No.1, refused to come out on the platform and take a bow. In fact, the delegation received a cool reception from even his bodyguards, who fondled machine-guns in such a way as to discourage any intimacy with old friend, Al."

Because of the secrecy surrounding the transfer of the prisoners, few people in San-



This was Capone's cell with lavish furnishings (and his own radio!) at Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania.

derson were aware of Capone's presence.

So, like President McKinley's visit in the middle of the night in 1901, both Sanderson and Capone idled away the time during the stopover, blissfully unaware of each other's presence.

When the "Forty Thieves Express" finally reached the northern shore of San Francisco Bay, the train was transferred to a car float and a heavily armed flotilla of ferry and federal gunboats escorted it across the bay to Alcatraz Island.

Here, Al Capone's charmed life of special privilege in the federal penal system came to an end. Issued heavy blue work clothing, he spent the next five years working in the prison laundry, shoe and clothing factory and the kitchens.

Unfortunately for Capone, the last year of his sentence was spent in and out of the prison hospital, suffering from *neurosyphilis*, the debilitating form of the disease that attacks the brain, acquired as a bawdy youth on the streets of Brooklyn.

At the end of his incarceration in 1939,

he still had to serve a one-year sentence for contempt of court. When finally



Capone's first resting place in Chicago.

released, he moved to his Palm City, FL, mansion to spend his final days.

In 1946, physicians pronounced that due to syphilitic brain damage, his mental stature was reduced to that of a 12-year-old. He was completely unable to resume his life of crime, but the repeal of Prohibition and the tight reins held over him at Alcatraz had already seriously affected his finances and his crime organization.

On January 25, 1947, Al Capone, the quintessential stereotype of the modern gangster, succumbed to the effects of a stroke and heart attack, in the presence of his family and close associates. He was buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Chicago with a most ostentatious headstone, but even in death Al Capone was the subject of subterfuge. His body was spirited away to Mount Carmel Cemetery in the Chicago suburb of Hillside, IL, where it is marked by a simple, recessed stone. Ironically, enemy Hymie Weiss is buried nearby in a fabulous tomb, complete with stained glass window.

So, once again, Sanderson's location on a busy transcontinental railroad gave it another opportunity to "rub elbows" with greatness, although this time the "greatness" was more sensational and controversial than "great."



Capone's final, simple burial in Hillside, IL.

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