

Out of the Kitchen

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In the annals of American crime, journalists and book writers have spilled an avalanche of ink chronicling the Italian Mob in all its manifestations: the Mafia, Cosa Nostra, Black Hand, the Five Families. Movies such as *The Untouchables*, *Goodfellas*, *Once Upon a Time in America* and the epic *Godfather* trilogy, have created a rich lore of Italian crime myth-making.

I would like to turn the spotlight tonight from the Dagos to another criminal enterprise with an equally bloody past, the Paddies or Irish Mob. Their gangland roots go back farther in American history, dating more than 150 years to the infamous Five Points district at the lower tip of Manhattan.

Five Points was a shantytown laid out on the edge of what had once been a sewage pond. It evolved from being an industrial district of tanneries, glue factories and turpentine distilleries to a residential haven for the city's growing immigrant population. Five Points is reputed to have contained the nation's first tenement.

Gangs were ubiquitous in the area and the predominantly Irish ones had names like the Kerryonions, Patsy Conroys, Hudson Dusters (for their love of cocaine), Roach Guards and the Dead Rabbits.

Some of the gangs adopted special colors or clothes, just like today. The Plug Uglies wore hi-top derbies stuffed with padding to use as battering

rams, the Shirt Tails wore their shirts untucked, the Dead Rabbits sewed red stripes down the outer seam of their pants to distinguish themselves from the Roach Guards who wore blue stripes.

These gangs, which had from 10 to over 100 members, were constantly brawling. Along with succeeding gangs like the Whyos, the Gophers and the Westies, untold buckets of blood were spilled.

While Italian gangsters made their initial homes and base of operations in Little Italy and the Bronx, the Irish mob's base migrated north to the West Side of Manhattan in the early 20th Century.

Irish crime's heyday was in the 1920s with Prohibition. The Volsted Act was passed by Congress on January 19, 1919. It was seen by immigrants as an attack on their personal liberty by the Know-Nothing Movement and later by the Anti-Saloon League. In Prohibition's early months, there was a spike in shops that sold malt, hops, yeast, bottles and all the paraphernalia for home brewing. But manufacturing a product that people wanted to drink was much trickier and led to a growing black market that criminal elements were only too happy to exploit.

It is not surprising that Irish Americans, with their cultural attachment to alcohol, saw the temperance movement as a direct assault on their hallowed

community meeting place, the saloon. Nor is it a coincidence that Irish Americans played a major role in bootlegging activity.

William "Big Bill" Dwyer, a son of Tenth Avenue, was an enforcer or dock walloper and stevedore with the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). As a local bookie, he knew many underworld figures. He devised a scheme that would allow him to smuggle liquor into the country without interference from Prohibition agents, the Coast Guard and local police.

Dwyer bought a fleet of steel-plated speedboats equipped with machine guns. The ships would meet liquor shipments at sea, off-load the cargo and transfer it by truck to storage facilities around the city. However, the trucks were often hijacked by renegade gangs who sold the stolen booze.

To meet the threat, Dwyer formed an alliance with Owney Madden, a young thug and ruthless killer who killed his first victim at age 14. He was head of the Gophers gang and later became Dwyer's enforcer.

Madden grew up in his aunt's cold-water tenement in the midtown neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen, an area whose most recent boundaries extend from 34th to 59th Street and from Eighth to 12th Avenue east to west. The neighborhood's defining physical features, until the 1940s, were the Ninth Avenue elevated rail, the dangerous Hudson River Railroad tracks which carried freight and livestock along 11th Avenue and the shipping

docks on 12th. The Gophers were particularly notorious for raiding and robbing the railroad yards.

Some Gophers, besides Madden, achieved notoriety for their violent natures.

There was Legs Diamond and Mallet Murphy who routinely bludgeoned unruly customers in his saloon with a wooden mallet. Happy Jack Mullraney murdered Paddy the Priest for laughing at his facial scar. And One Lung Curran started a fashion craze when he blackjacked a policeman, stole his overcoat and presented it to his girlfriend. Soon, all the other gang molls wanted an overcoat of their own. Thus, many patrolmen in the area were seen walking around missing their overcoats.

Working with Dwyer, Madden organized the underworld in a series of partnership alliances known as "The Combine" that came to control the flow of liquor from the source to the tap. They opened the Phoenix Cereal Beverage Company early in 1924. Using a government patent that had been issued to the previous owners, the Phoenix operated under government authorization and produced the popular, though illegal, Madden's No.1 brew.

Madden grew quite rich and eventually owned nightclubs, racehorses and prizefighters. He had many famous friends, including movie stars George

Raft, who grew up with Madden, and James Cagney. Madden was known as “Duke of the West Side”.

Nightclubs and speakeasies flourished in the booze-fueled *Roaring Twenties*. What kept the Combine running smoothly was the payment of bribes for protection from gang violence. Dwyer, Madden and several Combine partners joined all the elements under their control—booze, the protection racket and Tammany Hall politicians—into what came to be known as New York’s “organized crime” syndicate.

While Prohibition made certain bootleggers rich, many bootleg workers lost their livelihood when Prohibition ended abruptly in 1933. A great number found themselves going to work on the docks, another prime criminal roost. Over a 15-year period, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, the ranks of the ILA in the Port of New York, under the leadership of Joseph P. Ryan, known as Boss Joe, was home to ex-cons, killers and some of the toughest figures in the Irish-American underworld.

Local 824, in the heart of Hell’s Kitchen, was one of the ILA’s most powerful crews handling Piers 94 and 96 where the luxury liners, *Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary*, docked. Passengers disembarking from those ships often were easy prey for pickpockets and robbers.

The power of that local was exercised by Mickey Bowers whose rap sheet listed 13 arrests between 1920 and 1940. He was suspected of being behind the death of union rival, Tommy Gleason, who was gunned down in a funeral parlor on Tenth Avenue.

Gangland control of the docks was dealt a heavy blow in the 1950s by two events: the courageous crusade of a Jesuit priest, the Rev. John Corridan, to expose corruption which led to the formation of the watchdog Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor in 1953 and Senator Estes Kefauver's hearings.

Fr. Corridan, the son of a West Side policeman, was known as the "Waterfront Priest". His work was featured in the 1954 film, "On the Waterfront" with Karl Malden playing the role of "Father Barry".

As a result of reform efforts, the number of longshoremen dropped from 40,000 in the 1940s to fewer than 20,000 by the mid-'60s. A power vacuum prevailed in the Kitchen from the early '50s to early '60s as gang leaders left the area to avoid prosecution and assassination. Into the breach stepped the last real Irish boss, Mickey Spillane, the mobster not the writer.

Spillane got his start in a life of crime as a numbers runner for a 300-pound bookmaker named Hughie Mulligan. Mulligan was not a violent man but rather a facilitator whose influence in the underworld derived from his

friends in city government, the police department and crooked contractors. Spillane grew up the hard way. His first brush with the law occurred in 1950, at age seventeen, when he was shot and arrested while robbing a movie theater. He was sent to St. Clare's Hospital (where I was born) and then to jail. He racked up twenty-four more arrests on various charges, with the primary crime being gambling. He served short sentences.

Spillane was well-liked and most knew he was primed to be Hughie's successor. The writer, P.J. English, in his book "Paddy Wacked" notes that, "in the mid-'60s when he took over as boss of the West Side, things were looking up. There was an Irish-Catholic in the White House while Spillane held court at the White House bar on 45th Street and 10th Avenue"

Spillane acted as an old-time ward boss, doling out favors and settling disputes. When Spillane learned that a neighbor had landed in the hospital, he usually sent flowers. On Thanksgiving, turkeys were delivered to families in need. He was also well-liked by the nuns at Mount Carmel Convent on West 54th Street to whom he made donations.

Spillane also had a good sense of history. In 1960, while Kennedy was inaugurated, Spillane married into the politically powerful McManus family at

Sacred Heart Church. The McMani, as the family was known on the West Side, had ruled the Midtown Democratic Club since 1905.

The wedding of Mickey and Maureen McManus had huge symbolic weight. They were "the living embodiment of the link between legitimate and illegitimate forces...at the heart of the Irish Mob."

While the Italians dominated organized crime in the mob, they stayed out of Hell's Kitchen while Spillane ran the show. While he ran rackets such as gambling and loan-sharking, he never allowed the sale of drugs, which was the Italian mob's domain.

It was not until the early 1970s that a gangland war erupted in Hell's Kitchen. Italian mobsters, like the Genovese crime family, grew increasingly jealous not only of the amount of money being generated by Madison Square Garden, the waterfront and the unions but, most critically, the new Jacob Javits Convention Center. Spillane refused to allow the Italian mob to have a stake in his piggy bank and the Irish-Italian mob war began.

The Italians hired an Irish-American hitman, Joseph "Mad Dog" Sullivan, to assassinate three of Spillane's chief lieutenants. As the war heated up, Spillane moved his family out of Hell's Kitchen to Woodside, Queens to

protect his children from threats of violence. However, he himself was killed outside his apartment on May 13, 1977.

At his wake at the McManus & Ahern Funeral Parlor on 47th Street, Jim McManus, the funeral director and leader of the West Side Democratic clubhouse said of him, "Where Mickey and I grew up on Tenth Avenue...you either became a priest or a cop or something else that you don't want to hang a sign up about. He became something else."

One time, when he was being tried, the prosecutor asked if he was related to the other Mickey Spillane. Mob boss Spillane grinned and said, "No, but I'd be happy to change places with him." He was a real piece of work.

In the wake of the block-busting Godfather trilogy, the Mafia were stronger than ever and they wanted a controlling interest in every racket in town. The war resumed in the late 1970s with a notorious Irish gang of hard-core killers, "The Westies" about whom English has written another book.

That is the colorful story of the West Side Irish Mob that history knows. Hell's Kitchen was the shorthand tag outsiders and the media gave to their playpen. Yet they missed the everyday life of the neighborhood's law-abiding residents who went about their lives quite oblivious of their crime-connected neighbors.

I'd like to now present a series of bottom-up flashbacks of the everyday life of a Hell's Kitchen native. **Me!** I may not be a typical case but I know at least 10 other friends who grew up in the neighborhood with no ill effects.

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, the rat-a-tat-tat narrative played no part in my growing up. (I actually only learned the gory details of the area's corrupt and bloody past doing my research for this paper).

Here's my personal take on that maligned district, scene of my happy boyhood and one shared by my friends. Unfortunately, neither the old Hell's Kitchen (now gentrified and recently renamed as Clinton) nor that 1950s childhood exist anymore. There's no more Cheap Louie's candy store where a dime could fill your hand with a lot of penny candy or Rose and Bob's which I'd visit once a month for the latest ten-cent Batman and Superman comics.

Yes, the area's gangland past was a hard legacy to live down. When asked during my growing-up years where I lived, I would answer midtown Manhattan. When the follow-up question was "Where in midtown?". I'd simply say 49th Street. Often, I could see their expression change and I imagined a thought balloon over the questioner's head saying, "That's Hell's Kitchen. Gee, he seems like a good kid."

There are several versions of how Hell's Kitchen came by that name. The earliest use is attributed to American Frontiersman, Davy Crocket, in a comment he made about Five Points: "In my part of the country, when you meet an Irishman, you find a first-rate gentleman; but these (Five Points residents) are worse than savages; they are too mean to swab hell's kitchen."

Perhaps the most common story is attributed to Dutch Fred, a veteran police officer, as he watched a riot in progress on West 39th Street near 10th Avenue with his partner who commented: "This place is hell itself". Fred answered, "Hell's a mild climate. This is Hell's Kitchen."

The neighborhood I knew was a safe, tightly-knit, community of Irish and Italian families (with a small influx of Puerto Ricans) where, unlike my mother, few women had professional jobs and the men were mainly blue-collar, though one 49th Street resident was a union president who went on to become President Nixon's Secretary of Labor.

I lived at 405 West 49th Street, two doors west of 9th Avenue in a small, four-and-a-half-room apartment in a new five-story building that housed 10 families. I know it was newer because it boasted a separate, indoor bathroom, unlike much of the older housing stock of coldwater flats where

residents had to boil water to take a bath and the toilet could be in the hallway.

In the immediate vicinity, there were an abundant supply of saloons that served as the local hangouts for workingmen to shoot the breeze and the elderly to pass the time. If my memory serves me right, there were five bars in the four block area from 47th to 51st Streets on Ninth Avenue alone. My father, who sometimes got lost on his way home from doing an errand, could usually be found at one of two favorites, Sheehy's or Richie's.

I attended Sacred Heart elementary school, on West 51st Street near 10th Avenue and initially attended that parish church where I made my First Communion and Confirmation. Starting in the fourth grade, I began serving as an altar boy at St. Malachy's Church on West 49th Street, a more prosperous parish that housed the "Actor's Chapel". It tended to local residents plus the many Broadway workers and actors in the area. I once saw Jerry Lewis and Yankee sluggers, Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle, in the pews. It was where my wedding took place 50 years ago this September.

As I grew up, I realized there were two Hell's Kitchens—the more gangland locale, roughly from 10th to 12th Avenue, about which I was warned against venturing into and a more respectable part that ran from 8th past 9th Avenues. That latter part was home to Madison Square Garden, a wide

assortment of restaurants, including West 46th Street's Restaurant Row, and cheek by jowl to the Broadway theaters.

Madison Square Garden is where I saw the Rodeo, Ringling Brothers Circus and its "Freak Show" of sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, midgets and the tattoo lady. I also spent many nights cheering a very inconsistent New York Rangers hockey team from my dollar seat in the "nosebleed section".

I seldom stayed out past 9 p.m. in those days unless I was at the movies or a sporting event. Instead, after-school and weekends found me lost in books, bowling (I remember scoring a 279 once), riding my bike and taking missions of urban discovery.

Life was lived on the streets. Back then, the neighborhood was a parent-free zone. In that pre-helicopter era, parents were too busy working or doing housework to keep tabs on us. So, when they said "Go out and play", we did just that. When we got home, parents always wondered what we'd been up to. The title of a 1955 best-seller captured this parent-child dynamic perfectly, "Where Did You Go? Out, What Did You Do? Nothing".

There were a whole variety of games, now lost. There was Ringolevio which I think was a variation of Hide-and-Seek. We didn't have Little League but there was Stickball, played in the street, with a pink, 10-cent Spauldeen and an old broom handle for a bat. We also played our street version of

touch football, moving to the curb to avoid oncoming traffic. Car traffic was fairly light in the early 1950s. A friend from 47th Street remembers playing roller hockey in the street between light changes.

When the School of Printing opened a few doors down from my apartment building during my teen years, the neighborhood kids and older teenagers would use its large yard for pick-up softball and basketball games. In summer, tenement residents would sunbathe on the roof known as "Tar Beach". Two things I never tried were swimming in the polluted Hudson River and grabbing onto the back of a moving bus for a free ride or freefall.

I remember shooting marbles, either maggies, pearlies or pee-wees, on top of the manhole cover outside my building. Besides making model airplanes, collecting stamps and rooting for the Yankees, one of my biggest hobbies was collecting baseball cards. I loved "flipping" cards with other guys after school and trying to win their collection. I had a special way of holding the cards so that they would roll off my fingers and show either heads or tails as needed. In one memorable match, I had to flip 12 heads in a row to win. One tail and the pot's large stash of my cards would be lost.

A highly-important neighborhood value was to be seen as a "regular guy", someone who fit in. I was not a "Tough Kid" by any means. I didn't look tough with my specs, talk tough or walk tough. And I never was ready to

rumble. Yet, I also didn't run away from a fight, if sufficiently provoked. Fighting was a big way to gain respect. The worst taunt was to be called a coward.

"Coward" was the worst bullying remark. Yet, I took a lot of lesser bullying and you never forget those cruel names. My tormenters' favorite taunts were "Four Eyes", "Bucky Beaver", due to my large front teeth and "The Brain" since I got high marks in school, a very uncool thing.

However, I knew the tough guys and they accepted me. Knowing gang members and being part of the neighborhood had its advantages. I still vividly remember walking down 50th Street between 9th and 10th Avenues one night when I sensed a posse of kids running behind me, ready to pounce and rob me or worse.

Suddenly, a voice I recognized rang out, "Hey, that's Tommy Mullaney, leave him alone" and all scattered in a flash, like a flock of pigeons. It was a teenage tough, Billy Busweiller, with whom I sometimes played basketball. Billy was a deadly scorer, in spite of having only one arm as the result of playing on the 11th Avenue railroad tracks and being hit by a train.

Yes, there were youth gangs but most were minor league punks compared with the tales of old. A lifetime friend reminded me that, in the '50s, there were outside gangs, such as the Vampires, the Young Lords and -

the Heart Kings, all Puerto Rican, who came from the Bronx, to rumble in the neighborhood.

The most sensational incident of those days involved a member of the Vampires who murdered a local youth in the park on West 46th Street. The killer was the infamous "Capeman" and that killing became the subject of a later musical by Paul Simon.

There was no better playground for growing up in the '50s and '60s than New York City. The Fifties ushered in the Rock 'n Roll revolution. Before Elvis or Ricky Nelson, there was the music of the street corner, Doo-Wop. I couldn't get enough of the stunning harmonies of Danny and the Juniors ("At the Hop"), Dion and the Belmonts ("I Wonder Why") or The DelVikings ("Whispering Bells"). Those sounds are earworms that remain in my brain and can be reproduced at will.

In those days, I became the unofficial DJ of 49th Street since my mother had purchased a fancy Grundig-Majestic stereo console that sounded a thousand times better than our Victrola's tiny speakers. On many summer evenings, a flock of 15 and 16-year-old street corner friends would gather in my family's living room to dance to the latest 45s by the Coasters, Jerry Lee Lewis or the Crests unforgettable "16 Candles".

The Five Satins' "In the Still of the Night" was a welcome chance to hold your partner really close. And the official closer for dancing was always Bobby Darin's "Mack the Knife". But the fun and summer romances died when school resumed in September.

Since I danced pretty well, I was a hit with the neighborhood girls. Yet, I didn't have a steady girlfriend throughout my teenage years. I never was able to lure a desirable female up to the last row of the balcony at the Tivoli theatre to **not** watch the movie.

My 16th year brought my best New York discovery--Greenwich Village--with which I have had a lifelong romance. I got off the subway one day at West 4th Street and found a part of Manhattan that was a world away from my usual haunts. People dressed differently, there were blocks of distinctive houses to be seen on my walks, a teeming nightlife, bookstores galore and a new array of places, called coffeehouses, with piped-in classical music. It all seemed like some urban Shangri-La to my young eyes and ears.

Over the next decade, a subway ride to the Village was my favorite form of escape. It was where I drank espresso at the sublime Café Peacock, bought books at innumerable bookshops, listened to the Modern Jazz Quartet at the Village Vanguard or Oscar Peterson at the Village Gate and had my first exposure to foreign film directors, Francois Truffaut and Ingmar Bergman, at

the Bleecker Street Cinema. And, on Sunday afternoons, I would sometimes go to hear folk singers in Washington Square Park.

Finally, there were five indelible years, from ages 16-20, when I worked as a concession vendor in a host of Broadway theaters. The routine was to check coats at the start, then sell drinks and candy at intermission. Armed with a a full box of Orangeade, I would roam the aisles barking such lines as "Take a drink to your seat. Your seat will love you for it". I never failed to get laughs and a lot of sales. Before and after intermission, I would read for pleasure or high school assignments. My pay for working 6 shows a week was a meager \$35 but the memories were priceless.

How had I landed such a plum? Well, many of the usherettes who worked the theaters lived in Hell's Kitchen, like our family's upstairs neighbor, Anne Dessimoz. When an opening for a vendor materialized at her theater, she suggested I should apply to my mother who, I'm sure, thought it would be a good way to keep me occupied and out of trouble.

The first show I worked was "The Hostage" by Irish poet and playwright, Brendan Behan, starring Behan himself. When that show closed, I moved to the St. James Theater on West 44th Street (which became my home base) for a musical comedy, "Do Re Mi", starring Phil Silvers with book and lyrics by the famed team of Betty Comden and Adolph Green.

I'll never forget marveling at Mike Nichols and Elaine May's hilarious skits as well as the madcap English revue, "Beyond the Fringe" with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. I laughed myself silly at the "Mad Men-like" antics in "How to Succeed in Business...Without Really Trying". That musical had two delightful songs. One was directed at the lecherous CEO, Rudy Vallee, "A Secretary is Not a Toy". The other was sung by the brash hotshot, Robert Morse, as he gazes into the men's room mirror and croons, "I Believe in You".

I had the privilege to see three incomparable British actors on stage: a young Albert Finney transform himself into Martin Luther, Alec Guinness portraying Irish poet, Dylan Thomas, and Richard Burton as Hamlet. When the show was over, Burton would rush outside to join Elizabeth Taylor in a waiting limousine. The final show I worked was "Hello Dolly" with Carol Channing which I read is being revived with Bette Midler.

Those years on the Great White Way all resulted from my being a Hell's Kitchen kid. So, I can't complain about my good fortune and happy life. I treat my Hell's Kitchen brand as a badge of honor.

I left Broadway to devote more time to the last two years of studies at Fordham University. Then, one September night in 1966, I boarded my very first plane ride at LaGuardia Airport bound for graduate study at the

University of Chicago. As the plane glided down the runway and took off, I was finally out of the kitchen and onto life's next chapter.

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Bibliographic Note

Most of the Irish Mob history and all the quotes are from "Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster" by T. J. English (Regan Books: Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2005).

The origins of the Hell's Kitchen name can be found on the website, www.howitgotnamedthat.com/name-003-hells-kitchen.html.

