

THE TALE OF “LITTLE CHICAGO”?

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THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT MOBSTER AL CAPONE’S links to Johnson City and alleged visits in the 1930s to this same city – referred to by some as “Little Chicago” – could remain forever a legend only. The only original sources for Capone stories are now dead so all we’re left with is a legend, a play and some lingering speculation and doubts.

Did the infamous mobster use Johnson City as a stopover point on the rail lines between Chicago and Miami? Do escape tunnels really exist, long buried beneath Johnson City’s streets and buildings? Did Capone’s henchmen, armed with machine guns, actually stand down terrified Johnson City Police officers on the steps of the Montrose Hotel? Were the Appalachian rumrunners and moonshiners of the 30’s a part of Capone’s operation?

Local playwright **Jo Carson** set out to answer these beguiling questions in the early 1980s as background for a play she was writing for The Road Company, a local theater group no longer in existence.

“I grew up hearing stories about Capone’s ties to this area and that he’d used Johnson City as a hideout,” said Ms. Carson during our recent interview. As a well-recognized natural born story teller – whom she joked, “came out of the womb a liar,” she saw the rumors as fodder for an intriguing historical play. As it turned out, the play became “a murder-mystery musical in which no one dies,” according to Ms. Carson.

During her research, the playwright learned that in the 30s Capone took over what was then referred to as Chicago’s **“Appalachian Ghetto.”** The area was a valuable resource for the mobster because this is where illegal bootleg liquor came from – and one can safely assume from the name, the bootleg originated in the then poor Appalachian Mountain region. “It’s fairly obvious this is how Capone made his money,” said Ms. Carson.

Reinforcing the sketchy details for the playwright, were the good railroad lines which once ran between Chicago and Johnson City plus the fact that there weren’t too many East/West rail connections due to natural barriers presented by the mountains. Another fairly well documented historical fact is that the Appalachian Mountains were known as a hotbed of “still” activity and a regional source of illegal alcohol.

Much of Ms. Carson’s material for the play was gathered from a now deceased source whose anonymity the playwright still chooses to protect in deference to the woman’s family.

What Ms. Carson did divulge to the *Downtown Observer* is that in the 1930s, her main source ran a restaurant in close proximity to the train and bus stations. Apparently at the same time there was lots of activity with all the rail and bus traffic coming right through the current downtown.

According to Ms. Carson, “Johnson City was a rough place at the time,” and her source was right in the middle of all the activity as an eye witness and ear for news and rumors. Since one of the woman’s relatives was a prominent newspaperman, she was reluctant to publicly reveal her identity. No tape recording of their conversations was permitted and when Ms. Carson asked specific questions, the answers were a yes or no only. The playwright says this was the system they used by agreement to verify information as the woman **seemed fearful of people still living.**

One of the play’s characters, a Mr. Robertson, was modeled after a reportedly local bootlegger named Cockey Cox. According to the story told, Cox’s vehicle was run off the mountain by an unknown enemy but Cox’s body was never recovered – thus no murder could be proven. In the play’s opening scenes, flashlights help depict the wreck of the bootlegger’s vehicle.

Without a doubt, the most **provocative piece of information** in Ms. Carson’s search for answers came some time later in the form of a phone call from Nashville. The nameless caller explained that her friend, then living in a nursing home, had seen the “Little Chicago” play when it toured the Nashville area. She said her friend was now quite interested to talk with Ms. Carson on terms of anonymity.

During the meeting that ensued with a frail, elderly woman and her helper friend, Ms. Carson received the most telling documentation to date. The woman revealed that her father had participated in the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre in Chicago. The woman said Capone, understandably, had left Chicago for that infamous event. The night of the murders, the woman continued **she had met Capone at the home** of one of his henchmen in Johnson City.

Unfortunately – for both the play’s historical documentation and further verification of the Capone/Johnson City legend – the trail ended there. Both of Ms. Carson’s sources are deceased and those alive in the days of bootlegging, rum running and moonshine stills are either dead now or probably too young to remember.

Thus the Al Capone/Little Chicago story may be destined to descend only into legend, folklore and NASCAR racing (thought to be today’s version of the rumrunner’s souped-up vehicle outrunning the Revenuer’s) – **but it won’t go down in the history books.** That is, until there’s someone out there who still remembers.

There are those in Johnson City still fascinated by the roots of why the old city was once called “Little Chicago.” Then there are others, quite dismayed by the association with such an off-beat, off-color, and notorious period of our history when the rumrunners,

Revenuers and even a gangster or two may have traveled through our mountain “hollers” – or possibly even through a city tunnel trying to outrun each other.

The plain fact is, however, that legend and fact do inextricably collide in the tale of Little Chicago and make some of us insatiably curious to know more about those days that could be our very own 1930s version of the Wild West.

ABOUT LITTLE CHICAGO’S AUTHOR – JO CARSON

A two hour conversation with Jo Carson produces the suspicion that you’ve only barely touched the surface of a full and rich life experience. Ms. Carson’s twenty year body of work, based primarily on Appalachian life, is both prolific and award winning.

A born and bred local, she has garnered a “National Endowment for the Arts” award in the 1990s for her play “Bear Facts,” a Roger L. Stephens award for New American Plays for her, “ A Preacher with a Horse to Ride” and an AT&T On-stage Award in 1995 for “Whispering to Horses” to name just a few. The latter play, written before the perhaps, more well-known book and movie starring Robert Redford was based said Ms. Carson “on a tradition from this part of the country.”

The play’s story line was derived in part from her very own personal experiences and growth in a difficult relationship with her father while together they nursed Carson’s dying mother. The breaking and calming of a beloved by recalcitrant horse at the same time provided a connecting link between the two situations, and also an epiphany for the writer.

Ms. Carson, much in demand these days for seminars and lectures, has traveled the world from Nicaragua to Rome and Juno, Alaska. Locally she was scheduled to give a sermon at Unity Church on July 7th based on a recent work about energy healing.

“Human experiences are really quite extraordinary,” said Ms. Carson who also travels to other communities throughout the U.S., teaching residents how to collect their region’s stories then turn them into performance pieces. Most recently she worked with a Mennonite community whom she notes, “sing like angels.”

In addition to a busy lecturing and writing schedule, Ms. Carson is currently involved in real hands on fashion with the renovation of an old family home left to her by a relative. She is an avid animal lover; has two horses and rides often in the mountains; She also has two dogs, one of which she recently rescued from a death sentence at the pound. One suspects there’s likely a new children’s story brewing about a frisky, fuzzy blond little pup who was spared by a kind stranger.

As a writer, Ms. Carson is a true Appalachian treasure for her intuitive chronicles about this area’s unique but fast disappearing native culture. One hopes she’ll capture on paper any of the still remaining, rich history before it’s swallowed up into legend and myth.

Some of her works including a collection of short stories and three children's books are available at the University Bookstore in Johnson City.