

Johnson City as “Little Chicago”

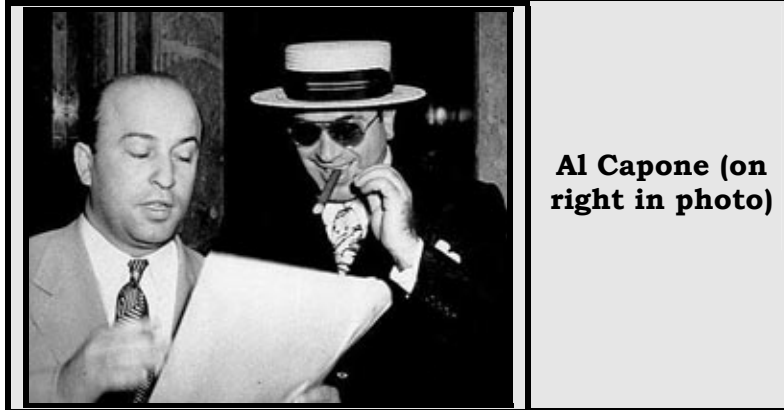
The Clues

In response to **numerous questions and items submitted** via the Johnson’s Depot website, the following discussion will examine stories and theories relevant to the **“Little Chicago” era** and Al Capone’s presence in Johnson City. Due to the subject at hand, ***the most notorious gangster in American history***, an active imagination is required as no records obviously exist from local or national gang activity, but attempts have been made to compare local legends and stories with known facts and reported incidents. The Appalachian Mountain region (with Johnson City, Tennessee as its center) was most definitely one of the hotbeds of smuggling and alcohol manufacturing during the Prohibition years (as was Canada where the Prohibition laws were not in effect), the Atlantic seaboard area from Florida to Massachusetts, and the Ozark and Ouachita Mountain regions of Arkansas.

The Myth or Reality of “Little Chicago”

Since 2002 a team of history buffs has looked into the plausibility of the local legends associated with the **Roaring 20s in Johnson City, Tennessee**, and particularly involving **Al Capone**. Primary sources include the Johnson City – *City Directory (1928 Edition)*, the *Johnson City Staff-News* and *Johnson City Chronicle* daily papers, interviews with local citizens (born prior to 1920), railroad routing timetables from the era; and similarities with other towns associated with Capone involving bootlegging/alcohol transport. Since all direct participants in the local Prohibition era activities in Johnson City are deceased, the full extent of the Capone network’s level of “crime as a business” relationships and activities in the area can never be known.

The depth of the folklore and legends surrounding Al Capone’s presence in Johnson City is strong and merits a critical and fair examination of the plausibility of the stories. The research also serves as a case study of one smaller city’s experience with the Prohibition era and the pressures brought to the local government. In this process, some interesting items have been discovered and theories developed. In existence are second generation accounts of Al Capone’s presence in Johnson City and these accounts are being recorded.

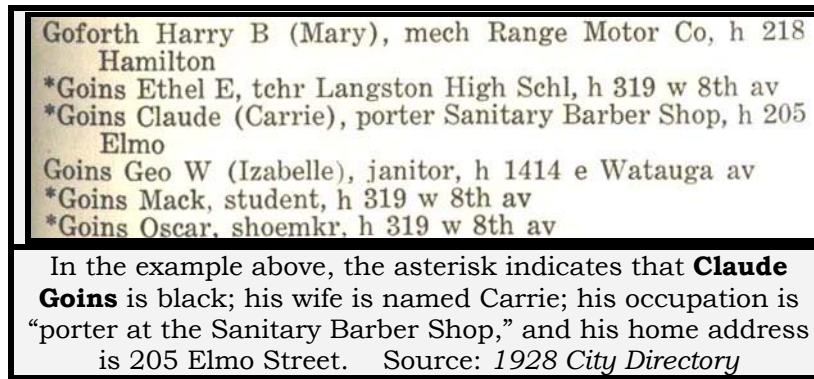


Al Capone (on right in photo)

The Legendary Stories. Interviews with second generation family members (descendants of 1920s era service sector employees) affirm that Al Capone was in Johnson City on numerous occasions from 1922 through 1929. Both the **Windsor Hotel** and the **John Sevier Hotel** are locations prominently mentioned in the interviews, as frequently as **Montrose Court**. Cities stated as also frequented by the Chicago travelers are French Lick, Indiana and Hot Springs, Arkansas. The most knowledgeable person interviewed and taped stated her father came to Johnson City at age 19 in 1922 from North Carolina, and began work carrying baggage for train passengers to the local hotels. **The young man became a “runner” for several area bootleggers servicing the hotels and later served Capone and his entourage who traveled in the highest of style and were extravagant tippers.** An interesting point is that this young man was a complete “outsider” with no local ties and thus was deemed worthy of trust due to having no local family connections. His account is consistent with stories of on-going gambling activities and at times a complete floor of the John Sevier Hotel being booked by a gambling/crime syndicate entourage. This person died during the 1970s but his daughters attest to the stories and other credible accounts originating in the black community are consistent with this account. A huge “underground” economy existed in the local service sector involving alcohol distribution. In context with Al Capone, it has been assumed that Johnson City was a stopover point on the way to Miami as well as a source of bootlegging supply.

The City Directory for Johnson City has verified that the service workers (porters, hotel workers, etc.) whose family members have given oral histories related to Al Capone were working in the railway/hotel/services sector in 1928 as stated in the interviews. The annually published directories list occupations and addresses for every occupied dwelling unit and business in the city.

All oral history accounts included as reference material include persons verifiable as being in Johnson City in the mid-to late 1920s. See the example below for **Claude Goins**, who worked as a porter in several downtown Johnson City establishments:



Travel by train. Travel in the 1920s was predominantly by train. There was no commercial air service and roadway conditions were horrible. There was not even a highway in existence between Johnson City and Kingsport at that time. Persons living in the 21st Century cannot envision how outstanding the rail service was during the 1920s (Johnson City was served by 18 – 22 passenger trains daily via 3 railroad lines) and **how poor travel** by automobile was. Al Capone was not “hiding out” in the sense of the wild western days but was constantly on the move and could travel freely anywhere he wished to go. Any purported “hiding” that was done was simple avoidance of gangland violence in Chicago. Also in an era prior to television, particularly before 1928, Capone would not have been recognized and traveled under assumed names.

The extent of Capone’s alcohol distribution network is known to have stretched geographically from Canada, which did not have the Prohibition laws, to the hills of Arkansas and Tennessee to Florida and Puerto Rico. This subject has never been researched and might be impossible to accurately assess other than tracking the folklore of towns historically associated with Capone. In the March 23, 1930 issue of *Time* magazine which became infamous with Capone on the cover, the following narrative describes Capone’s rise to power, his takeover of the Chicago racketeering and the following quote:

*With expansion, as in any well-run business, came prosperity. Capone took over the cross-roads village of Cicero, outside the city limits, made it a special gambling and vice resort. He started dog-racing. **He developed his liquor trade in every direction.** When men got in his way, his hirelings shot them down. A famed Capone saying: "It's bootleg when it's on the trucks but when your host hands it to you on 'a silver tray, it's hospitality."*



Famous *Time* Cover: March 23, 1930

Johnson City in the 1920s. There were numerous cities with vice conditions worse than Johnson City (see Newport, Kentucky – a suburb of Cincinnati in the 1930s) but for a relatively small Appalachian city, Johnson City certainly proved an incredible challenge for law enforcement agents. Newspaper accounts report an unusual degree of cooperation between local officials, police, and bootleggers. Raids were tipped off and public officials are accused of being financial backers of the local bootleggers. The bottom line is there was no fear of being busted in Johnson City for prohibition charges for persons willing to pay for the protection and to major operators from large cities this cost would have been “pocket change.”

It is thought that Capone tapped into previously organized existing operations in the creation of his national network. In the case of the “moonshine” industries of the Appalachian and Ozark Mountains, the increased demand for and value of products that came with access to major northern cities and metropolitan populations were welcome events. Untaxed wealth was spread far and wide with metropolitan/national distribution replacing what had formerly been local or regional operations. During Prohibition, it was easy to get moonshine throughout the mountain areas of East Tennessee and surrounding states. According to historian Ray Stahl, “*if a mountaineer sat by the roadside whittling on a stick of wood it was a signal that he had some liquor for sale.*”

Johnson City’s afternoon newspaper, the *Staff-News*, provides an unusually vivid account of the city’s struggle with prohibition issues and the pressures on the small police force. A detailed examination has been

made on local news stories in 1926 which may have been the “break-out” year of vice conditions. Johnson City’s morning paper, *the Chronicle*, refrained from printing vice reports as frequently as the *Staff-News* and its courageous editor, Carroll King.

This is not to say that Johnson City was a ***scary place to live***, or that there were gangland shootouts similar to Chicago, but there are editorials suggesting corruption by city officials and that an “underground organization was attempting to strangle the town.” Newspapers confirm that the town’s location in the Appalachian Mountains, its role as a major rail center and also home to one of the largest veterans’ facilities in the nation (Mountain Home) created lucrative conditions for bootlegging, alcohol smuggling, and shipping illegal products to distant locations via the railroads.

Unlike many cities of similar size, **Johnson City was an easy city to “get lost in.”** The city doubled in size from 12,441 in 1920 to 25,080 by 1930 as Johnson City became the fifth largest city in Tennessee at that time. The city’s economy thrived prior to the Great Depression as it became the center of commerce and nightlife for a steadily growing portion of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. With 20 -25 passenger trains daily with travelers, business people and residents/visitors to the National Sanitarium (National Soldiers Home/VA Center), Johnson City was a bustling city with a constantly changing population mix.

Interviews with older residents of Johnson City today merely are used to verify that stories of Al Capone being in Johnson City were being told in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, while he was still living (and in jail). Many residents have affirmed that this was fairly well known in that era as a topic of discussion.

Would it make sense to travel through Johnson City rather than Knoxville or Nashville from Chicago to Florida? Prior to 1909 and the opening of the Clinchfield Railroad, it would have been somewhat illogical to travel to Florida via Johnson City, Tennessee. However, with the advent of the Clinchfield, a massive north-south shortcut was created across the Blue Ridge Mountains equalizing and in most cases shortening the distance from Chicago to Florida available via the Southern, L&N or other competing railroads. The mileage differential was critical enough that the Southern attempted to build a competing parallel line south of Johnson City in a futile effort to force **George L. Carter** to abandon the Clinchfield route, and in turn it was Southern that scrapped their plans after acquiring right-of-way and grading a portion of the new route. In addition, Johnson City afforded a far safer venue for an *emerging (not yet ultimate crime czar)* to travel through and use as a layover point than a larger city such as Nashville or even Knoxville or Chattanooga. Capone is known to have been in and stayed in several Tennessee cities, presumably en route to Florida – just as interstate highway travelers would today. The tie-breaker could have been the ease of access to the first-class John Sevier Hotel via both the Southern and Clinchfield Railroads and the major alcohol distribution point Johnson City became during Prohibition. Regular shipments of illegal alcohol have been verified by former Clinchfield

employees including to various destinations such as a Congressional office in Washington, DC. Local legends have purported that shipments to Cicero, Illinois, were shipped under the disguise as “dairy products.” This can not be verified via company records but oral testimonies account that there were no inspections of individual packed goods by railroad officials that were presumed to be legitimate.

The Windsor Hotel

The Windsor Hotel was a landmark Johnson City hotel located diagonally across from Fountain Square. The hotel opened in 1909 as the **Pardue Hotel** and was advertised as the “handsomest furnished hotel between Richmond and Chattanooga.” In 2007, Bob Cox interviewed a lady in Johnson City who retold a story her father, a prominent businessman in town, told her as a child. She recounted that her father, who frequently gambled at the Windsor Hotel, became friends with Al Capone’s bodyguards, who occasionally gambled with the local men when they were in Johnson City. On one occasion, Capone entered the hotel room where the card game was underway, sat down and played cards with the group. This only happened once. The lady also accompanied her father on a family vacation in which they visited the Capone compound in Miami. Her father talked with his friends and although not admitted inside the gates, the extremely ill Al Capone was visible through the gates at the pool. The time interval for Capone and his entourage being at the Windsor Hotel was placed between the years 1921 and 1926.

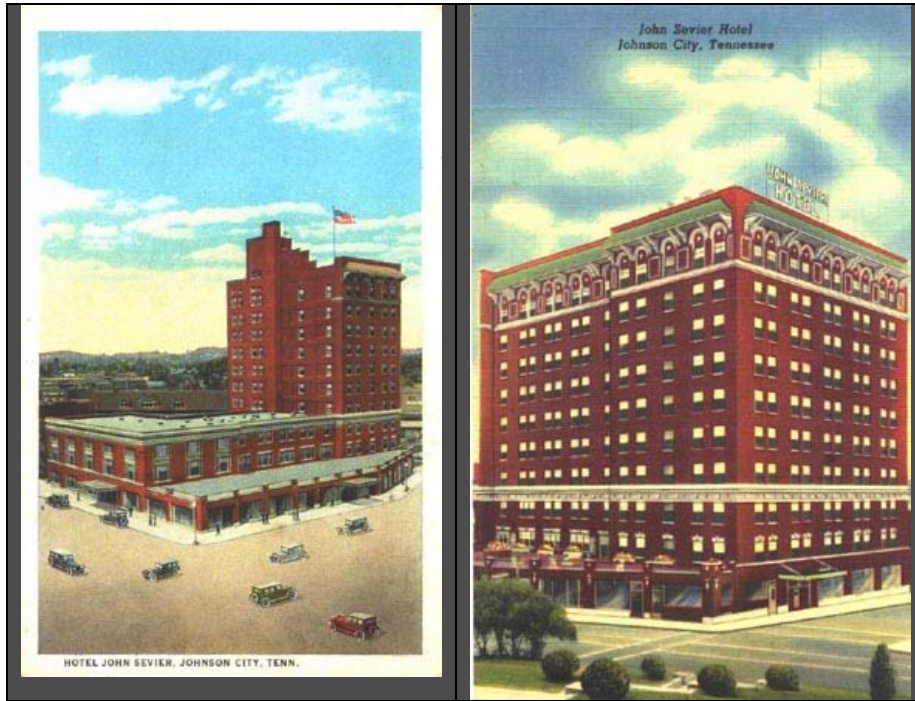
The John Sevier Hotel

The John Sevier Hotel was a lavish early 1920s era hotel that is hard to imagine today how elaborate it was. The marble stair cases and ballrooms were spectacular and the hotel was the center of the city’s social life for decades. The building still exists today as the John Sevier Center, a high rise complex for the elderly. The property survived a **tragic fire on Christmas Eve** in 1989, in which 16 persons died of smoke inhalation. The building was again restored as a retirement center following the fire which was its current use in 1989.

The 10-story hotel building was originally built in 1924 and was planned to have 3 wings. Two wings (one in 1924 and a second in 1929) were built prior to the Great Depression (note the difference in width in the postcards below. The Depression halted plans for the third phase which was never built.

In its heyday (1924 – 1960) the John Sevier Hotel was a **fabled railway-centric hotel** being located adjacent to Johnson City’s active Southern Railway depot which was also roughly one city block from the Clinchfield and ET&WNC Railroad passenger terminals. A local person has an “*oak backbar*” that came out of the John Sevier Hotel. For years it was stored in The Atlantic Ale warehouse in Johnson City located behind the Sevier café. The backbar has an “alarm button” inside one section. If the police raided the hotel the bartender opened the cabinet door and pressed the button which illuminated a light in a backroom where illegal gambling was going on according a former owner of the

item. The present owner has no indication of exact years this system was in use.

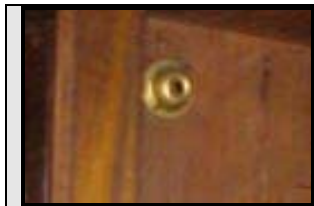
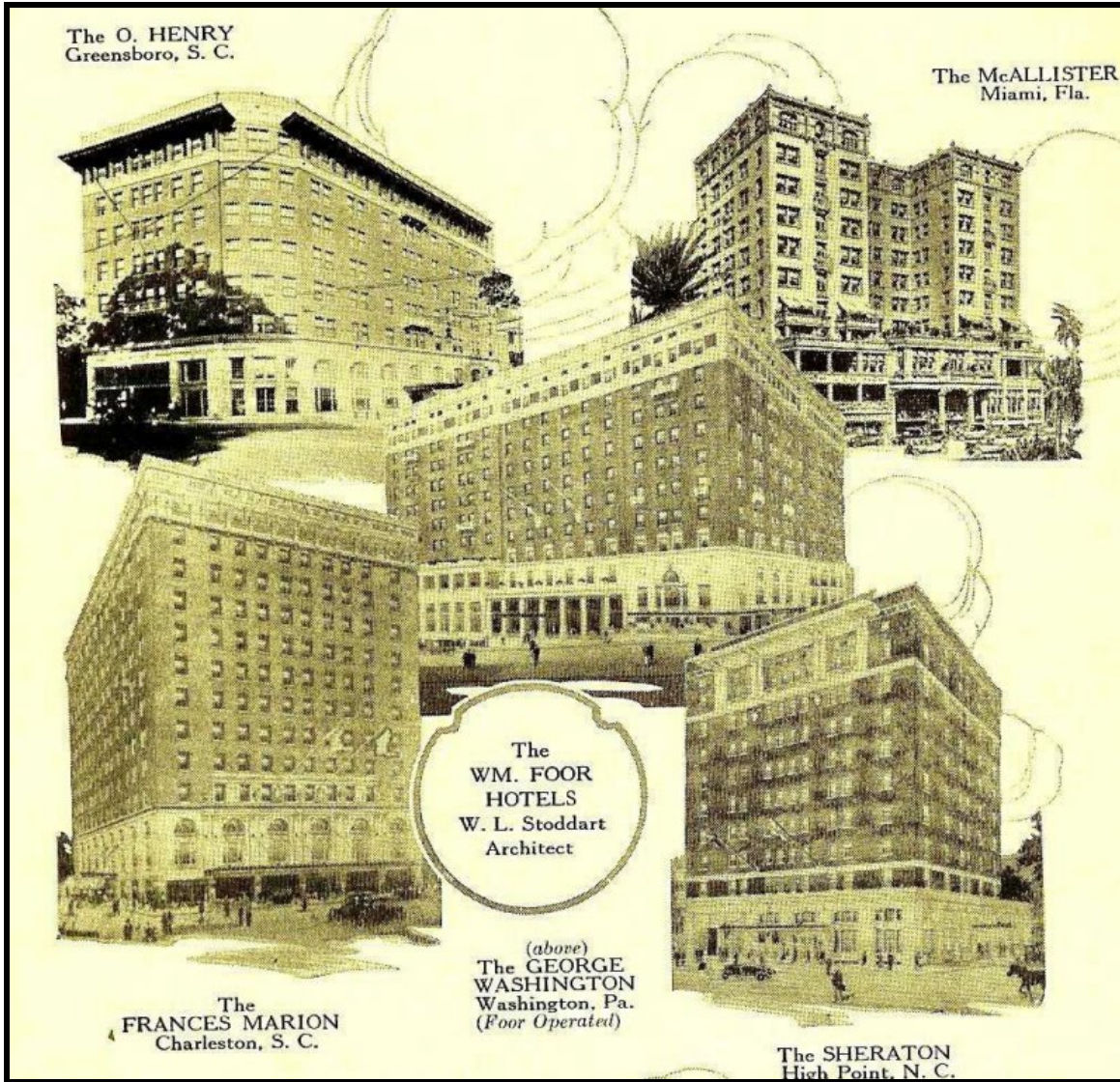


Vintage Views of Johnson City's "Million Dollar Hotel"

The **John Sevier Hotel** was part of the **William Foor** Hotel Group which included the Francis Marion in Charleston, SC; the Aragon and Duval Hotels in Jacksonville, FL; the McAllister Hotel in Miami; the Charlotte Hotel in Charlotte, NC; the O Henry in Greenboro, NC; the Sheraton in High Point, NC; the George Vanderbilt Hotel in Asheville, NC; and the Great Southern Hotel in Columbus, Ohio, among others. In the advertisement on the following page, note the architectural similarity of the John Sevier Hotel to others in the William Foor hotel family.



Ad – 1928 City Directory



Warning Device from the "Backbar" of the John Sevier Hotel activating light when police entered hotel.

Courtesy of Charlie Barnette

Montrose Court. Although the John Sevier Hotel is more prominently featured in the Little Chicago folklore, **Montrose Court, a luxury apartment house** in the Southside (Tree Streets) neighborhood of Johnson City has long been associated with Al Capone also. Originally constructed in 1922, the complex was devastated by fire in 1928. Research from the 1928 city directory and via

the Johnson City Staff-News reveals that the complex was advertising for vacancies throughout the time period. The theory related to Montrose is that a close associate of Capone was a resident here during the period 1924 – 1928 and Capone was an occasional house guest. Montrose Court was the most luxurious residential complex of its type for hundreds of miles and was a premiere facility as was the John Sevier Hotel.



Vintage Postcard – 1920s

Montrose Court is listed on the National Register of Historic Places due to its architectural significance and not with any relationship to any individual. It was rebuilt following the fire in 1928 and was restored and back in operation by 1930 as shown by local newspapers. The building has had a fascinating history; originally built as the height of luxury, it was occupied by “hippies” during the late 1960s and 1970s and fell into ruins; and later restored to its quality state today housing condominiums.

The 1920s research has shown that it should have been easy to rent an apartment or multiple units for much of the time period under evaluation. Persons living there were of high social standing in general and from interviews access to the apartments were controlled by a telephone operator/porter from the lobby level. The German industrialists establishing the Bemberg Rayon plants were Montrose residents including Arthur Mothwurf, the plant manager.

<p>MONTROSE COURT— 11 Chalkley J H McCorkle W C 12 Webb A L 13 Preston R E 14 Shearer D R 15 Barnes G N 16 Tiller H M 17 Chalkley J H 18 Stotenhoff D Hardt G</p>	<p>MONTROSE COURT</p> <hr/> 18-20 Vacant 21 Earnest A T 22-23 Ring J W 24 Meadow W T 25 Van Landingham P C 26 Roesel A D Salamon Srich 27 Gasteiger L D 28 Morrison Emma Morrison Charlotte 29 Marthaus H F 30 Crosby Ward 31 Hopkins R B 32-34 Vacant 35 Watkins Malcolm 37 Mothwurf Arthur 38-40 Vacant 39-41 Vacant
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Montrose Court Residents – 1928 City Directory

Why does nothing exist that directly ties Al Capone to Johnson City? To expect that there would be photographs of Capone dining at the John Sevier Hotel, getting off a train at a local depot, or something similar is absolutely beyond any realistic possibility. **In fact, about the same amount of information on the day to day activities of Daniel Boone exists today as that of Al Capone.** Capone operated on a cash basis using fronts, aliases, assumed names and intermediaries, and he himself provided no first-hand information even during court testimonies. Capone is a fascinating but elusive figure to historians as well as tracking his reputed \$60 million annual revenue stream and the network serving those “businesses.”

It took years for federal authorities to finally imprison Al Capone on income tax evasion. There were no records kept, everything was a cash transaction, and enforcement of the prohibition and federal income tax laws had not been tested and in fact were laws much of the public felt unnecessary. Prior to television and particularly early in Capone’s career, his face would not have been known and recognition not easy, even in Illinois.

Additional Comments from Inquiries

Comment: several “Little Chicago” items on the Johnson’s Depot website seem beyond reasonable credibility. This is a fair statement and actually a solid observation. No effort has been made to edit or otherwise take exception to items submitted for inclusion on the website. For example, the “Tale of Little Chicago” authored by Polly Salvati includes several items that are debatable based upon subsequent research. **During the 1930s** Al Capone was in federal custody for the most part and the time period he was in Johnson City was the

1920s. In addition, the elderly lady interviewed by Jo Carson, recounted that Capone was in Johnson City *the night of* the St. Valentine's Day Massacre and that she saw him. **Court testimony places Capone in Florida during that time.** It is possible that the route taken to Florida in February 1929 was via Johnson City and that the lady's recollection is of earlier the same week rather than the exact night of the murders. The fact that this was an unsolicited call to Ms. Carson from a lady from Nashville rather than a local person is intriguing. In addition, the *Staff-News* local newspaper reports **"a dragnet of federal, state, and local authorities" swarmed Johnson City in April 1929,** roughly six weeks after the famed murders in Chicago. This is quite possibly a totally unrelated incident but it also could be a related since "federal authorities" led the raids and a general crackdown was underway on a host of Capone-related enterprises. In late summer and fall 1929, law enforcement agencies launched an ambitious attack on prominent moonshiners in the surrounding mountain counties. Several deputies and officers were wounded in the "moonshine wars."

The **Jim Jones** interview via the Johnson City Press also has an item or two that could be debated. Travel via a "convoy of armored limousines" over a primitive mountain roadway system could seem to attract far more attention than using the railroads. However the trip from Chicago to Florida could have included a mix of automotive and rail travel and the exact method of travel is not known but rail service definitely is more plausible (if not the only reasonable option) for longer distance trips as a modern roadway system was not in existence.

How and in what year did the name "Little Chicago" originate? The earliest documented reference of Johnson City being called Little Chicago is found in the October 28, 1928 edition of the *Johnson City Chronicle*. A headline article in the Sunday edition detailed a series of robberies and lamented the lack of resources for the Johnson City Police Department. Shown below is the microfilmed newspaper with the reference.

Numerous complaints are heard daily on the police department with reference to the robbery wave which has been sweeping Johnson City for many months—and taxpayers are plain in their denunciation that if something isn't accomplished immediately, steps will be taken by civic clubs and individuals in an attempt to stop the crime wave, which has caused Johnson City the embarrassment of being called the "Little Chicago of the South."
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This article confirmed oral history interviews with elderly residents who recalled hearing the city referred to with the "Little Chicago" nickname in the 1920s and 1930s. In addition, this refuted claims that the nickname came from depression-era bootlegging or from the 1940s era.

This “essay” will be revisited and revised as more research becomes available or is submitted via the johnsonspot.com website. Gratitude is expressed for items contributed and contributors for this project.

The following materials are in the process of examination:

City directories from 1922 – 1930

Currently available are the 1922 and 1928 directories via the Tennessee Room at the Johnson City Public Library.

Johnson City Staff-News and Chronicle newspapers 1920 – 1930

The newspaper examination via microfilm is 60% complete.

Railroad routes and timetables from the 1920s

The Clinchfield and connecting routes are of most interest here.

Personal interviews with local historians and persons whose family members passed down stories related to Al Capone.

Key family members have not consented to be identified but are compiling oral history tapes for future research and have allowed selected parts of their stories to be used on the website.

Authors Jo Carson and Bob L. Cox

Similarities with other Capone-associated towns; and/or dissimilarities

Many stories are similar in character; research and contacts ongoing.

Interviews with older citizens of JC – referencing Prohibition or Capone stories talked about in the 1920s or 1930s. These are used for reference only. The author encountered serious difficulties attempting to document “Little Chicago” stories during the 1980s from area residents, but this is not true today with second generation families. Whether older Johnson City residents of the 1980s felt the era “reflected poorly on the city” or whether there were family reputations at stake (or an **actual fear** of telling first-hand accounts), it was not deemed possible to pursue oral history interviews with that generation. Basically “Little Chicago” was considered an off-limits topic like an old family secret. Jo Carson encountered the same exact situation with research for her play in the early 1980s.

Al Capone: The Media Superstar

Just as attitudes have changed with regard to Johnson City’s “shame” over its Prohibition-era reputation, attitudes toward **Al Capone have changed dramatically as well over the past 25 years.** Some of the reluctance to acknowledge Capone’s association with Johnson City is rooted in the 1970s - 1980s mythology resulting from several gangster-related blockbuster movies including *The Godfather* series. As time passed Al Capone has been transformed from a basic gangster-hoodlum to a cult icon similar to Marilyn Monroe or Elvis (although obviously in a different vein). For this basic reason it is presumed by many that a gangster of this stature (the most notorious of the

20th Century) would not have been present in Johnson City, Tennessee at any particular time interval. This viewpoint fails to acknowledge the business genius of Al Capone, and his gradual rise to power tying independent territorial alcohol manufacturing and distribution operations into a national scale enterprise. Ignoring the Appalachian/Blue Ridge Mountains in creating a network would have been quite an omission as the area had been an alcohol production center since the early 1800s and due to topography, law enforcement officials could not remotely monitor activity in the mountain hills and hollows, and even in populated areas such as Johnson City where Prohibition laws were essentially ignored. Johnson City with its excellent railroad service, central location, and reputation as a wide-open town certainly was an easy and willing participant in the economic opportunities provided by the ill-founded Prohibition laws.

The following is an excerpt from the 1999 essay "*Happy Birthday, Al Capone*" authored by Stewart O'Nan which comments on the emergence of Al Capone to icon status that occurred following release of the Godfather movies.

AL CAPONE would have turned 100 this week, a milestone few people outside of his adopted home of Chicago have noted.

In a country that feeds with such frenzy on its popular past, this is strange. Over the past fifteen years, mainstream American culture has been greedily recreating the '50s, '60s, '70s, and now even the '80s. There are signs that our popular historical vision has begun to re-include World War II, if only for the breadth of its spectacle and the opportunity to make easy moral pronouncements. But the Jazz Age, prohibition and the Great Depression have disappeared, it seems, from our screens, large and small.

Capone ruled Chicago in the '20s and '30s, buddying up with police and politicians, sweeping his competition under the rug (and the river) with dramatic daylight raids and cold-blooded operations like the St Valentine's Day Massacre--another day celebrated only in Chicago. His success was as much due to organization as to muscle and will, and the police and FBI were never able to get him on any charges of substance. It took the Treasury Department working with the IRS (then a mere fledgling organization) to nail him on tax evasion charges and send him up the river.

In prison, it was said, Capone's spirit and then his health gave way. The American public, partly disgusted and partly fascinated with the gangster, found the ending of his story unsatisfying. Unlike the spectacular bloodbath of Bonnie and Clyde, Capone's demise was ordinary, even dull. Others rose from within his organization to take over, but none were strong enough to keep Chicago whole, and soon skirmishes between the rival gangs gradually escalated into warfare. Turf was lost, the kingdom divvied up.

Our real memory in America is visual, and Capone and his compadres were well represented during their time. Actors such as Jimmy Cagney, Edward G. Robinson and Humphrey Bogart rose to their now iconic stardom by playing these same hoods--young men with nothing to lose in an unfair society where money meant everything. But when the noir thriller replaced the straight gangster flick in the late '40s and early '50s, Capone and his kind were relegated to the small screen--most notoriously to the TV series *The Untouchables*. The '60s did little with the mob, and nothing serious; a *Star Trek* episode returned to '20s Chicago to spoof the customs, as did any number of cartoons.

The full return of the Mafia to the American imagination came in 1972, with Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. Besides being a massive hit and award winner, it spawned any number of imitators, so that the basic structure of the family and its operations once again became part of the popular, shared heritage, and the godfather, the don, became again a figure of fear and veneration.

Al Capone is the obvious model for Don Corleone, and it's no mistake that the two contemporary actors who play the heads of their families--Brando in *The Godfather*, DeNiro as Capone in the film *The Untouchables*--are not only capable of great menace, but great wisdom. Both actors also have that quality so necessary to appeal to American audiences: that of the talented outsider, the individual working against the machine, willing to face it with guile, violence and, those failing, to deny its right to use them through sheer refusal, even at the risk of destruction. It's the same quality that drew Americans to Capone and Dillinger, the same quality that had us cheering Cagney as he fired away at the coppers.

Updated 1-10-09