

Once Upon A Time in North Park

Gangsters in Burlingame

by Bret Harris

When thinking of the Mafia or gangsters like Al Capone, places like New York or Chicago come to mind. Have you ever considered San Diego, specifically, the "exclusive" Burlingame section? In late February, 1925, there was plenty of excitement, including armed robbery, deceit and ultimately a brutal murder and the consequent capture of the villains on the quiet street of San Marcos Avenue.

It started late Friday night on February 28, 1925, when two female tourists from Los Angeles were robbed at gunpoint of their diamonds, worth over \$10,000, from their U.S. Grant Hotel room. On Sunday morning, March 2nd, the body of an unidentified man, who just happened to fit the description of the jewelry thief, was found severely beaten, with a gunshot wound in the head and a knife sticking out of his heart. Taking the only clue they had, a laundry mark on the man's shirt, the police traced it to the Barbara Worth Hotel. There the clerk, R.C. McMahon, identified the dead man as George McMahon, whose alias was Frank Harrington.

The clerk was also able to identify his two companions, Thomas Johnson and Hugh McGovern, as well as an address on San Marcos Avenue. When the detectives arrived, they found "a combined arsenal and charnel house [a place for dead bodies]" (SD Union 3/3/25) that contained bloody clothes, towels, rugs, two loaded revolvers and a shotgun. After interviewing and arresting Johnson and McGovern and delving into their backgrounds, it was discovered that the closure of Johnson's gambling business in the Chicago gangster cleanup wave led him and his "assistant", McGovern, and the dead man, Harrington, to start a gambling business in Mexico. The arrest was called "the culmination of the fastest and most brilliant piece of detective work in the annals of crime here [in San Diego]." (3/3/25)

Two motives were considered. One theory was that Harrington stole the jewelry from the tourists at the Grant Hotel and then was murdered for the \$10,000 heist. Another theory was that a business disagreement arose on how to split the loot and Harrington was "put out of the way." Regardless, it was a brutal murder. The police reenacted the scenario. Harrington was sitting on a chair with his back to the bathroom when the assailant came out and hit him numerous times with the butt of the revolver, cracking his skull, and then he was shot once in the head. One of the three guns found in the house had seven marks on the butt indicating the custom of adding a notch for every life taken. Another interesting aspect occurred when a retired sergeant of the Chicago police force offered help and made this statement: "The similarity to the methods used by Chicago gangsters struck me. The gangsters never troubled to hide the victim, merely taking the body out somewhere and dumping it." (3/4/25)

The two men were subsequently put on trial for murder. The outcome? I wish I knew. My research has led me to a DEAD end (pun intended). Anybody out there who knows what happened, please fill me in. Readers, stay tuned...