

THE PURPLE GANG AND DOUGLAS LAKE

During the 1980s and the 1990s, during the final decades of his life, Max Silk ran two small restaurants near Corktown, close to the old Tiger Stadium in downtown Detroit. He was a fixture in the luncheon trade and was well known by many of the lawyers practicing in the area.

It was rumored that he had been either a junior member of or a close associate/employee of the notorious Purple Gang, a ruthless criminal consortium that held sway over Detroit and the eastern side of the state up through northern Michigan in much the same way and at the same time that Al Capone did likewise over the greater Chicago area and over the western portion of Michigan's lower peninsula.

In his latter years, Max would politely decline to answer pointed questions about his membership in the gang or would deflect the questions with laughing, good-natured denials. However, there was little doubt among the lawyers or the local media (both the Free Press and the Detroit News had their offices within blocks of his establishments) that there had been some type of connection during Max's youth.

Although most of the criminal gangs of that time were Sicilian, the Purple Gang was unique in that it was made up mostly of Russian Jewish immigrants or their children. Names like the Bernstein brothers come to the fore when thinking of those gangsters, whose heyday coincided with the Prohibition Era. Not surprisingly, a major focus of their criminal activity involved the importation, hi-jacking and distribution of alcohol from Canada, most of which entered the United States either in the Detroit area (I.e. across the Detroit River, the St. Clair River, or Lake St. Clair) or along the eastern portion of the state up through Mackinaw City. The local media estimated that roughly 75 percent of the alcohol entering the United States during Prohibition came through the Detroit, Michigan area, making that activity one of the major sources of criminal revenue during those turbulent times. The dividing line in Michigan ran up U.S. 31, with the Capone gang overseeing criminal activity west of U.S. 31, which travels through Petoskey and Pellston on its way to its terminus in Mackinaw City, and the Purple Gang holding sway over the eastern portion. Douglas Lake fell in the eastern, or Purple Gang portion.

Prohibition in Michigan began three years prior to the adoption of the federal Volstead Act in 1920, based upon a local Michigan initiative. For many of the 16 years constituting Prohibition here in Michigan (save for a brief period in which the Michigan Prohibition Act was struck down by local courts), the Purple Gang was a major force in the lucrative illicit liquor trade, which persisted through the repeal of the Volstead Act in 1933. At its height, in the latter 1920s and early 1930s, the illegal alcohol trade employed almost 50,000 people, according to the Free Press, either operating the so-called "blind pigs" that dotted the neighborhoods in metro Detroit or elsewhere in Michigan or handling the importation and distribution of the Canadian alcohol. Included in its membership or associations were many so-called "rum runners" -- who drove the

trucks or boats containing the kegs of whiskey intended for distribution in Detroit and across the nation. Max Silk cheerfully conceded his own “rum running” activities during that period. The American Legion Convention that took place in Detroit in 1931 was apparently a huge impetus for the importation of even larger quantities that year.

In any event, Max was a wonderful teller of tales, many of which some people tended to brush off as the chatter of a charming “restauranteur/raconteur”. However, several of the local Jewish attorneys who knew him best and who may have been related to other members of that interesting association have stated that his stories were probably conservative descriptions and that he had undoubtedly been involved, at least peripherally, in the “rum running” trade during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Every time a new attorney would walk into his tiny restaurant along Michigan Avenue in the shadows of what was then Tiger Stadium, he would sidle up and introduce himself and find out who you were and what you were interested in. He and I chatted occasionally over bowls of his celebrated bean soup while I was working in the State Office Building at Sixth and Howard Street in Corktown, only two blocks from his tiny fiefdom.

One day, I happened to mention that I was going up North to spend the weekend at my cabin up near the Mackinaw Bridge. His ears perked up almost immediately and he asked me where the cabin was located. When I told him “Douglas Lake,” almost the first words out of his mouth were that he had spent many a wonderful day or two staying in one of the small cabins at the Douglas Lake Hotel. Apparently, he would drive up to pick up a load of alcohol coming in from Canada. Because the conditions on Lake Huron could vary, he might have to wait a day or more for the “product” to become available. Those days were spent quietly at Douglas Lake. Then, when word would come that the merchandise had arrived (presumably on the hotel telephone), he would pick it up with his truck and drive back to Detroit.

Later in the conversation, Max realized that John Bryant, the then owner of the Douglas Lake Hotel, was my mother’s stepfather (her mother Julia Squibb having married him in 1932). At that point, he shut up immediately and managed to “forget” that he had ever been in Northern Michigan, despite the fact that his memory operated unimpededly in all other areas, whenever I broached the subject again. Were any of our local residents aware of what had been going on? Who knows? And, after the passage of so many years, who cares?