

Michigan Every Day **By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly**

Sept. 16, 1931

The Purple Gang's Collingwood Massacre

Just as Detroit's location made it a center of beaver pelt trade when the Great Lakes economy was driven by fur, Detroit became a trade center for booze during Prohibition. The reason was simple- liquor was not banned in Canada and police had trouble tracking motor boats as they crossed the Detroit River under the cover of darkness. As Detroit became a center for illicit booze, organized crime soon followed. The most notorious criminals of the Detroit underworld were known as the Purple Gang. The leaders of the Purple Gang were four brothers - Abe, Joe, Raymond, and Izzy Bernstein. They made their money by hijacking shipments of liquor brought in by older, more established gangs.

Since criminals don't report crime, this tactic had advantages. But stunning brutality was necessary to make a living stealing from mobsters and the Purple Gang earned its reputation in blood. When a load of liquor landed on the Detroit shore, its owner had to be prepared to fight to the death to protect it from these gangsters. The gang prospered for years under this business model. But, despite a growing list of enemies, the gang's downfall came from the inside. A group of gang members brought down to Detroit to work as enforcers decided to branch out on their own. They worked outside of the territory they had been allotted, double crossed business associates and lost bets they couldn't cover. Their moves were seen as a prelude to breaking from the gang to become an underworld power in their own right.

Three members of the gang, Hymie Paul, Joe Sutker and Joe Lebowitz, were called to an apartment on Collingwood Avenue on Sept. 16, 1931, ostensibly to work out a deal for peace. The men arrived unarmed for a meeting with Purple Gang leaders. They were shot down and killed in what would come to be known as the Collingwood Massacre. Their driver, Sol Levine, was spared due to his friendship with Ray Bernstein. Levine soon was captured by police and convinced to testify. The fact that prosecutors had a living witness to the massacre simplified their task. Ray Bernstein, Irving Milberg and Harry Keywell were convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.