

Off Color: The Violent History of Detroit's Notorious Purple Gang

Daniel Waugh

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"Those boys are tainted, off-color!" This plaintive lament from an early 20th century Detroit pushcart merchant was said to have given the Purple Gang their nickname. Off Color is the complete story of how a group of juvenile delinquents rose from robbing street peddlers to become one of the most notorious bootlegging mobs in history. Due to Detroit's close proximity to Canada, the Purple Gang was in a prime position to strike it rich in the illegal alcohol trade, whether by smuggling whiskey across the Detroit River, hijacking it from those who did, or making their own. Not limiting themselves to the booze business, the Purples were violent jacks-of-all crimes who dabbled in kidnapping, extortion, arson, labor racketeering, narcotics, and murder-for-hire. Noted for being extremely dangerous, the Purples were known to victimize friend and foe alike. Their nefarious influence reached into the Michigan state capitol and members of the gang were suspected of participating in both the St. Valentine's Day Massacre and the Lindbergh kidnapping. While the loosely-knit Purple Gang would eventually dissolve under a storm of prison terms and violent infighting, they endure in American history as a colorfully named group of hoodlums who rose to prominence in the wild era when booze was illegal, men wore spats, women were flappers, and gangsters like the Purples enforced their will with the business end of a machine gun.

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