THE KING OF BAIL BONDS

The George Stahlman Story

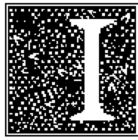
George Stahlman
with
James C. Simmons

"Early to bed and early to rise,
work like hell, and advertise!"

George "King" Stahlman

IV

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE BAIL BONDS BUSINESS



n late 1944, *Time* magazine published a memorable photograph of a group of Marines back in America from the war in the Pacific for some well-earned rest and recreation. They had hung a "Home Again!" sign across the side of their train car, but their true feelings were clearly much more complicated than that. A corporal described why he couldn't sleep at nights ("I just lie there all night grinning"). Another Marine jumped off the train to grab a piece of ice from a passing wagon ("Boy, what I would have given for ice on Guadalcanal"). But most sat there silently, wondering what it would feel like to be home with their families once again after experiencing the horrors of warfare.

My return did not pose any emotional or psychological problems for me. Like most combat veterans from that time, I never offered in conversation any stories about my experiences in the war zone. If people asked me questions about the war, I would give them short answers. The horrors of some of my combat experiences were simply too remote from the everyday life of civilians for me to talk about them in any detail.

Dad and I had our reunion at his house in Hollywood, but moving back there was never really an option for me. I grew up in an old German family, in which the tradition was that the son moves out at an early age and sets up on his own. My father had done this, and now it was my turn. I spent perhaps a week in Dad's house and then rented a bedroom in a rooming house on Gower Street in Hollywood.

I thought then that I wanted to become a lawyer and follow in Dad's footsteps. Of course, I needed a college education for that. Not having even a high school diploma, I took the high school equivalency test and passed.

Raising the flag at Iwo Jima re-imagined in bronze.

Then I enrolled in Los Angeles City College's pre-law program. I quickly learned that a good many former servicemen had also enrolled in my classes, thanks to the G.I. Bill of Rights, which had become law in 1944. It guaranteed financial aid for veterans who sought industrial, liberal arts, or business education. (The program ended in 1956, but not before it had enabled several million veterans to go to college.) School turned out to be a nightmare in ways that were completely unexpected. The college suffered from incredible over-crowding, and classes at decent times were almost impossible to get. I had five classes from eight in the morning to nine in the evening. That meant I could not get a part-time job to help with my expenses. No one would hire me with that kind of class schedule. I switched my major to radio broadcasting and got a more manageable schedule. I landed a job at the family-owned grocery store in Hollywoodland where I had worked when I was in high school. I earned a dollar an hour, this time as a stock boy rather than the butcher's assistant.

Soon I felt I was too old at twenty-three for this kind of life and decided to look up Max Spielberg, a bail bondsman. I had met Max on a leave in 1944. Dad had introduced us. At that first meeting, he told me to come to him after I got out of the Navy if I needed a job. And, boy, did I need a job! So I went to his office in downtown Los Angeles near the courthouse and reminded him of his offer. "If your dad approves, then you can come to work for me," Max told me.

I went to see Dad at the house and explained what I wanted to do.

"My God, what are you thinking, George?" he said. "Those people make money off the miseries of others. No way will I OK that."

Of course, this was rather hypocritical. After all, Dad was a defense lawyer! But Max wouldn't hire me unless Dad approved. So I hounded Dad.

Finally, my sister Georgene spoke up. "Oh, Dad, why don't you let George try the bail bonds business?" she declared. "You know he's never completed anything he started in his life!" (Here I am in 2007 sixty years later and still in the bail bonds business! I showed her!)

Dad gave in and phoned Max to say that I had his approval. I started working for him for the princely sum of $25 a week. I answered the telephone, typed reports, ran errands, swept the floor, and did a host of odd jobs. Everybody else was over forty. It quickly became apparent that I

was a young man in an old man's business! I also learned that I needed to be licensed before I could actually start writing bail bonds, so I studied, passed the state's exam, and soon had my credentials on the wall.

I fell in love with the business on my first day of work. I sometimes felt as though I had been thrust into a Hollywood *film noir* movie, full of dark shadows and rain-slicked streets and suffused throughout with anxiety, cynicism, and betrayal. The appeal for me also lay in the people I met. My clients and colleagues were all characters straight out of a Raymond Chandler crime novel with an element of comedy added. Many of these folks ended up in the local papers for the things they did. As a bail bondsman, I was in the middle of it all.

After learning the ropes with Max, I got a job with the Glasser Brothers Bail Bonds Company. It was the biggest such operation in Los Angeles County. Irving and Louie, the brothers, were both memorable characters, Jews who had been raised on the wrong side of the tracks in the Brooklyn Heights area of eastern Los Angeles. Louie was a compulsive gambler who could never turn down a bet if he had some money in his pocket. Needless to say, he died broke. He was very much a down-to-earth fellow who preferred to sit around the office chatting with the staff rather than do any serious work.

Irving, or Izzy, as his friends called him, really ran the business. He was the tougher of the two, although you would never have known it from his outward appearance. He was a flashy dresser, showing up at the office wearing expensive suits with his hair always neatly cut (I think he went to a barber once a week), his shoes always shined, his fingernails always trimmed (I wouldn't have been surprised if he visited a manicurist, too), and gold cuff links always on his shirts. He was about forty years old and married with two daughters.

Izzy had close ties to organized crime going back to his involvement in the bootleg liquor industry in the twenties. When Prohibition was appealed in 1933, all those bootleggers had to find a new line of work. With their well-developed criminal connections, they were a natural for the bail bonds business. As a result, for the next twenty years or so organized crime dominated much of the industry. Izzy was no exception. He was tight with some of the biggest names around and was prominent enough

in 1951 to attract the attention of the Kefauver Senate Special Committee's investigation into organized crime, which identified him in its report as "a partner in, and front for many of the gambling operations in the Los Angeles area. He also has a loan business and handles the major portion of the bail bond business there, including bonds for Mickey Cohen."

Shortly after I started working for the Glasser brothers, Izzy was involved with organized crime's attempt to introduce gambling at Rosarito Beach in Baja California, Mexico. He was down there with some of the Mexican honchos for an important meeting. He left an hour before the Mexican federal police stormed in and arrested the entire group, an action that cost him the big bundle of cash he had already put into the business.

The Glassers had started their business about ten years before I joined their firm. It was located at the corner of Temple and Broadway across from the courthouse in downtown Los Angeles. They employed three agents to work in the office, and another six worked at large hustling clients, coming into the office only to write their bail agreements. The funny thing about the bail bonds business is that it has been around since biblical times, but only became big business during this time. Business was so good that there were another ten or fifteen bail bonds offices in the immediate neighborhood.

Sixty years ago, we had to be much more aggressive about getting clients than the bail bonds agents today, who usually just sit around in their offices waiting for the clients to walk through the front door. Back in those years, I hustled nonstop throughout the day in the courts and jails, tracking down new clients, because most didn't know enough to come to us. In my enthusiasm, I often worked up to fifteen hours a day, including the night shifts, when people came in at three in the morning to inquire about bail for a family member or friend whom the cops had just busted. On some nights, I found fifteen or twenty bookies in the office, waiting to make bail. The bail for bookmaking at the time was $500, and the person charged was expected to pay the bonds broker a ten percent fee. Izzy gave them all a special deal of $35 instead of the usual $50 to write the bonds because they were such good repeat customers.

Izzy didn't pay me a salary, just commissions on the bonds I wrote. But I was soon earning $200 to $300 a week, an enormous sum in those long-

ago days before inflation. I bought my first car for $600, a used 1941 Oldsmobile four-door sedan with automatic shift and electric windows, firsts for Detroit. (However, the windows rarely worked!) And for $35 a month I rented a two-room apartment in Hollywood.

By the way, I had to fight Izzy almost every week for my money. We would argue about amounts as little as $2.50. He just wouldn't yield an inch and finally wore me down until I gave up. But this was just about the only negative to the business.

After returning from the war, I had to make a completely new set of friends. My Hollywood High School buddies had all dispersed around the city and country. I don't think I saw any of them after I got back. My best friend became Louis Gaitan, who worked with me at the Glasser Brothers office. He was an older man with a young heart, so we hit it off nicely. We often double-dated in the evenings. He was another colorful guy who had gravitated to the business after a shady past. Louis was Mexican and in the twenties had gotten involved with a group of revolutionaries in San Diego. They all lived in a hotel there, where they plotted the overthrow of the Mexican government. One day, he was given a suitcase with $250,000 cash and ordered to go to Los Angeles to buy guns for the planned revolution. A few hours after he left to drive up the coast, federal agents raided the hotel, arrested all his associates, took them to the border in Tijuana, and turned them over to the Mexican police. Louis learned about the arrests from the stories in the newspapers that evening and the next day. There he was in Los Angeles with lots of money and no mission. So, he kept the cash and lived the high life for a good many years, dating movie stars, eating at the finest restaurants, and never worrying about his expenses. Over time, he exhausted his funds and became a bail bondsman.

Louis fitted in nicely with the kind of characters hanging around the office, including the big mobsters, such as Mickey Cohen and Bugsy Siegel, and their associates. Those guys all wore expensive suits and fedora hats. They were often in our neighborhood to visit the courthouse and get one of their boys out of jail after he had been arrested. Our office was where they passed their time while waiting to appear before a judge. The bodyguards all carried pistols in shoulder holsters under their armpits. But I never felt threatened. They were quite friendly toward me.

Cohen was frequently a front-page story in the L.A. papers at a time when gangsters competed with movie stars for the gossip headlines. In fact, the press had dubbed him "Public Nuisance No. 1." He got into a struggle with Jack Dragna, a rival gangster, over the control of the city's bookmaking operations that the newspapers soon started calling the "Sunset Wars." Los Angeles residents eagerly looked forward to reading about the latest shoot-out, which usually involved an attempt on Cohen's life. I remember two in particular.

Mickey Cohen.

One violent encounter happened on the night of July 19, 1949, when Cohen took a group to a late dinner at Sherry's, a popular nightclub and restaurant on the Sunset Strip. Also with him was Florabell Muir, a journalist who covered both the Hollywood and crime scenes for the popular magazines. She was probably doing a piece on Cohen and needed an interview. The gangster was always happy to respond to such requests when he thought it would yield an article or two. The entire group

finished eating about two in the morning. As they emerged from Sherry's, two gunmen on the other side of the street opened fire. Neddy Herbert, one of Cohen's bodyguards, was shot and died eight days later. Muir was wounded in her shoulder. The story made the front pages of the local newspapers the next day.

In the late forties, Cohen moved into Brentwood, an upscale community, much to the distress of his neighbors. In 1950, late one night, gangland rivals planted a bomb made from twenty sticks of dynamite under a corner of his house. The resulting explosion was heard for miles

Bugsy Siegal.

and left a crater twenty feet across and six feet deep where his bedroom had been. Lucky for Cohen, he had been out of town that night and so escaped unhurt.

Meyer Harris Cohen was born in New York in 1913 to a Russian widow with five other children. A few years later, his mother moved the family to Boyle Heights in eastern Los Angeles, the site of the largest Jewish community west of Chicago. When he was eight years old, he ran an illegal dice game in an alley behind the *Los Angeles Record* newspaper office. As he

got older, he graduated to other forms of racketeering, including bootlegging and bookmaking. He owned a haberdashery store in Los Angeles and used that as one of his fronts. He was reputed to make $80,000 a month. The feds finally nailed him on the charge of income tax evasion, the same charge they used against Al Capone. In 1962, he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison where another prisoner clubbed him over the head with a lead pipe and left him partially paralyzed.

I remember Cohen as a high roller, snappy dresser, and big tipper. He got his clothes from his store. The rumor was that he never had his suits cleaned; he just pulled another suit off the rack in his haberdashery. He sometimes hung out at a nearby drugstore, reading the morning paper and drinking a cup of coffee. He always gave the newspaper boy a $20 bill for his nickel newspaper, telling him, "Keep the change." Everybody liked him. Sometimes when I went into the drugstore to purchase cigarettes, Cohen would invite me to join him for some coffee and a chat.

Bugsy Siegel needs no introduction after the 1991 Warren Beatty film, *Bugsy*. Everybody knows today that he was the wizard who turned Las Vegas around when he opened the glamorous Flamingo Hotel and Casino in December 1946. He replaced the cowboy motifs of the other casinos with a pronounced sense of sophisticated luxury that attracted the Hollywood stars, big spenders, and top-name entertainers. He ushered in the era of the postwar Las Vegas, where the presence of the mob gave the city a sense of sophisticated danger without any real risk.

What most people don't know is that Bugsy had important roots in the Los Angeles organized crime scene. In 1937, the East Coast mob sent him to California to develop a gambling operation. He focused on Los Angeles where he recruited Cohen as his lieutenant. He quickly found an entrée into Hollywood society through his close friend, actor George Raft, and began living in an extravagant style.

I met Bugsy shortly after I had started working for the Glasser brothers. He usually stopped by the office whenever he was in Los Angeles. He was a big shot. People, including myself, looked at him with awe. The man dressed the part of a real gangster and looked as though he had been sent over from central casting. I found him friendly with the people he knew but distant from those he didn't and thought that he was also overly

Actor George Raft and Judy Canova, 1979.

impressed with his own press clippings.

However, in 1947, Bugsy provoked the suspicions of the various mob bosses who had invested in the Flamingo. They thought he was skimming the profits off his operation and ordered a hit. That occurred on the night of June 20, 1947, when an unknown killer fired nine bullets from a .30/30 rifle into Bugsy as he sat on the couch in his girlfriend's living room.

Earlier that day, I had had coffee with Bugsy. He had come into the office for a meeting. Izzy was tied up and asked me to take Bugsy down the street to the Redwood Room at the corner of Broadway and First. Izzy always reserved a private booth there for his exclusive use. I did just that and then made small talk with him until Izzy showed up. The next day, I saw the police pictures of his body with a bullet through his right eye that were splashed across the front pages of the Los Angeles newspapers. Thinking back on our time together the previous day, I realized that Bugsy had had no sense of his impending hit. He had been relaxed and completely unconcerned about his safety. I also sensed that maybe Izzy had set him up for the shooting, acting on orders from his associates in the East Coast mob.

In 1949, I had another encounter with some of Izzy's mob associates when two "collectors" showed up from Ohio. They were Italian guys originally from the East Coast. Both were named Tony, so we called them the "Two Tonies." They traveled around the country, collecting gambling debts for their syndicate. Izzy was their contact in Los Angeles. They were both mean-looking tough guys with pistols under their armpits in shoulder holsters hidden beneath their expensive suits. They talked with Izzy, who then hollered, "George, come here. Take these two guys to the Redwood Room. I'll be down in a few minutes."

I did what I was asked and escorted the Two Tonies to the restaurant. When Izzy showed up a half-hour later, I returned to the office. The next morning in the office, I picked up the newspaper and saw on the front page a large picture of those same two "collectors" sitting in their car, shot in the backs of their heads, with blood running down their faces. It had been a contract killing.

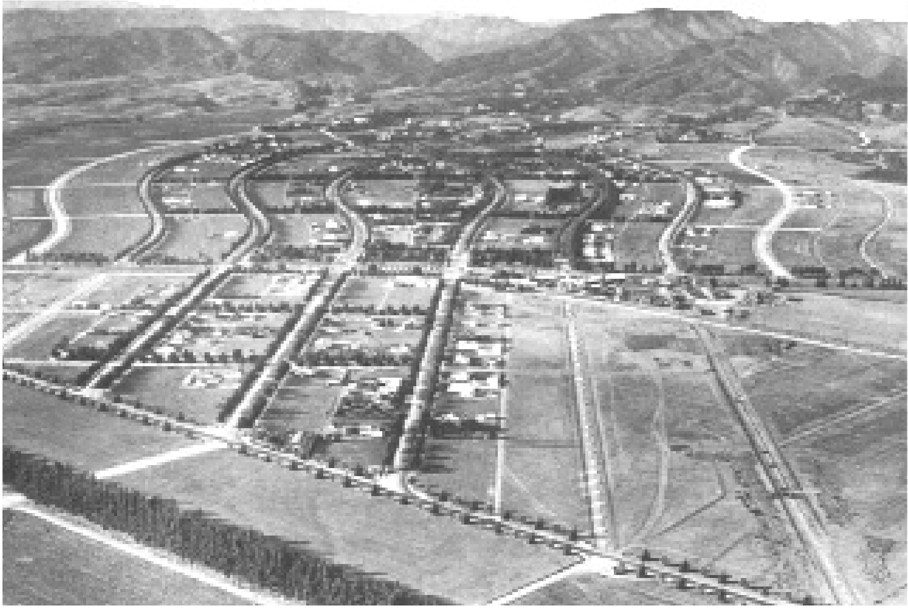
The case was never solved. I doubt that the LAPD even bothered with much of an investigation. But I think I know what happened. The bodies

in the car were found on the street in front of a house belonging to Al Guasti, a retired captain from the sheriff's office. He ran an illegal bookmaking service from the back office of his finance company. I suspect he probably owed a big chunk of change to the wire service that handled all bets placed from bookies across the country. Evidently, Guasti hadn't turned over some of the money due, and so the syndicate sent those two fellows to collect. Guasti always insisted that he was out walking his dog when the killings took place and never even heard any shots. That was a typical Los Angeles story for those years.

Los Angeles in the late forties was caught up in a boom. By 1947, 10,000 people a month were moving into the city. The real estate market was hot again. A lot that sold for $850 before the war now brought $5,000. Local auto plants were producing 650,000 new cars. And KTLA became the first commercially licensed television station in the country. Paramount Pictures owned the station. It didn't have any idea how to handle the small-screen medium, but that was yet to come. This was definitely the place for me to be at this time. The opportunities were unlimited.

But then something happened that made me think seriously about getting out of the bail bonds business. I got married. In 1952, Louis Gaitan and I went down to Tijuana, across the border from San Diego, for dinner and some evening action. Louis knew several nightclubs where we could find a selection of attractive single women.

We went into an American-style bar and immediately spotted two attractive, well-dressed, and shapely women from the States. We introduced ourselves. The woman I paired off with told me that her name was Audrey Stewart. She was drop-dead gorgeous to the point where it took my breath away. They had both come down to Tijuana in a Lincoln Continental with Al Barbee, the head of Coca-Cola Bottling Works. He was a playboy well known in the Los Angeles area for his fast life and plentiful money. The two gals learned that he also had a crazy side, especially when it came to his Lincoln Continentals, of which he owned an even dozen. He loved speed. Once the trio was in Tijuana and had had a few drinks, Barbee insisted on getting back into his car and driving along the city's streets at speeds in excess of seventy miles an hour. The two gals were terrified and insisted he drop them off. When we met them, they were stranded and



Beverly HIlls, looking north, 1922.

Beverly HIlls, looking north, 1952.

needed a lift back to Los Angeles. We provided that, and soon Audrey and I became a couple on the L.A. scene. She had a twelve-year-old son, but that never bothered me. From my perspective many years later, I suspect that I was more in lust than in love. But that was enough back then, and we married.

After our marriage, my business activities became a matter of concern. My associates and clients made Audrey nervous. She urged me to get into another line of business. Dad had recently bought his avocado ranch in Fallbrook and moved there. So I quit my job with Izzy and took my family down to the small town of Rainbow, not far from Temecula in the same general vicinity. We rented a house there that had originally been built by a fellow who stood a mere five foot two inches tall and had his house built for his shorter dimensions so that he never needed to use a ladder to reach the higher shelves. Well, I was almost six feet two inches tall and had to keep my head cocked to one side whenever I was in the house, so that I wouldn't bump against the top of the doorjambs. It was crazy!

I got a job working as a firefighter for the federal government on the Camp Pendleton Marine base. On my days off, I had part-time jobs with a Safeway supermarket in Oceanside and a bar in Fallbrook. After three and a half years of this, I knew that I had to start making some good money again. In 1955, I opened my own bail bonds business in Oceanside. And, as they say, the rest is history.