The Purple Gang: Carving a Reputation with Violence
by Eric Gaskell

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The St. Louis trio planned to set up their own bootlegging operation in Detroit. When they entered the flat, Fletcher and Axler opened up with machine guns. The three callers were dead before they hit the floor. The police later dug 110 bullets out of the floors and walls. Thirty-three Crime historians refer to this incident as Detroit’s first machine-gun execution and the event which introduced machine guns into Detroit gangster warfare.

– Robert Rockaway, The Notorious Purple Gang: Detroit’s All-Jewish Prohibition Era Mob (113)

The Purple Gang, a gang of Jewish Detrotiers known for their extreme violence, was feared by Al Capone even though his gang outnumbered them twelve to one. They became notorious for bringing the Thompson submachine-gun, the famous “Tommy Gun” or “Chicago Typewriter,” to Detroit to perform the first machine-gun assassination in the city. With this act they sent a message: “We are not to be messed with.” The Purple Gangsters used extreme brutality not just to kill their enemies, but to create a reputation. While they garnered notoriety through violence, the Purple Gangsters saw organized crime as an easy path to money and renown. As crime historian Peter Lupsha explains, “They [gangsters] turned to crime because they felt that the legitimate opportunity structures were for “suckers,” and they were not going to be trapped in the nickel-and-
dime world of ordinary work.” Instead of just scraping by, Purple Gangsters turned to brutality to gain the recognition they wanted as a group and as individuals. When gang leaders Fletcher and Axler fired 110 bullets into three men, they were attempting to control their own lives, and steer them toward success. Yet their success came with a cost. The violence and self-assertion that earned the Purple Gang wealth and fame also made its individual leaders targets for the police and their rivals to systematically pick off.

Dire poverty and anti-Semitism contributed to the rise of the Purple Gang. For this reason, historians Mark Gribben and Robert Rockaway assert that the Purple Gangsters were coerced into organized crime by their circumstances. Mark Gribben describes the environment of Detroit’s Lower East Side as being one of “almost unimaginable poverty” (Gribben 2). In his view, the Purple Gangsters grew up in an area with few jobs, low incomes, and little opportunity for advancement—and so turned to crime as their only option to succeed. Rockaway agrees, adding that the municipal government also did little to improve conditions in this neighborhood. He emphasizes, “[Detroit’s lower East Side] continually lagged behind the other districts in the number of water pipes laid, sewers installed, streets paved and streetcar lines extended. The district was also more crowded and had higher rents and higher disease and death rates than other parts of the city” (Rockaway). Institutionalized anti-Semitism...
ensured that the Lower East Side, where most of the Purple Gangsters grew up, was not maintained to the same standard as the rest of the city. Moreover, Jews were the newest arrivals in the city, and so were easy targets for those that had immigrated before them. Nativist and anti-Semitic propaganda cemented negative stereotypes about Jews in the minds of Detroit citizens. Robert Rockaway describes the nativist actions of such notable Detroit figures as Henry Ford:

From 1920 to 1922, Henry Ford vilified Jews in the pages of his *Dearborn Independent* newspaper and in pamphlets entitled "The International Jew." Ford required his automobile dealers to give a pamphlet to everyone who purchased one of his cars, and millions of Americans bought Fords. And Ford allowed the Ku Klux Klan and the anti-Semitic Black Legion to proliferate at his Detroit plants. (Rockaway)

These publications from one of the most influential residents of Detroit represent the nativist discrimination faced by the city’s Jewish residents. Such anti-Semitism kept non-established groups from success by favoring established groups. It barred Detroit’s Jews from economic success, since non-Jews seeking employment would not have to overcome stereotypes perpetuated by propaganda.

The Purple Gangsters were certainly subjected to economic and social injustices, but it’s important to remember that their organized brand of crime was a conscious decision, not a survival reaction. A better explanation than poverty or racism for why the Purples went into organized crime is that they chose it in an effort to assert themselves as individuals by earning money and renown. As Rockaway describes, "These men were not products of crushing poverty, broken homes, or widespread economic despair. Most of them had been raised in lower middle-class homes where the father had a steady, if low-paying, job" (Rockaway). Purple Gangsters weren’t coerced into organized crime. The nativism faced by the Purples did not eliminate their opportunity to earn success legally. Yet it did motivate them to stand out and take control as wiseguys—people who seemingly found an easy path to money and financial success. Rockaway contends that "these men selected careers in crime because they wanted money, power, recognition, and status, and they wanted it fast. Crime offered them a quick way to realize their dreams" (Rockaway). The Purples wanted to live the life of the glamorized gangsters, to have the money and renown they wanted without the grueling effort or luck that normally requires. The Purple Gangsters first thought when they saw other gangsters that organized crime could give them the money, status, and control they wanted. As Paul Kavieff argues in his book, *The Purple Gang: Organized Crime in Detroit, 1910-1945*, "They also saw men who seemed to live the good life without working. These other men wore the best clothes, drove luxury sedans, and had thick wads in their pockets... they were gangsters" (3). The Purple Gangsters saw gangsters who hardly worked, but still made money, and decided that they would turn toward organized crime for the profits it would bring them.

If anti-Semitism and poverty disadvantaged Jews in Detroit, Purple Gangsters pursued status and control by taking advantage of other circumstances around them. They enjoyed perfect conditions for making money: an illegal commodity, a close source, practice subverting the law, and a thirsty population. The Purple Gangsters had a leg-up on gangs from other states, however, because they were located in Michigan. Michigan prohibited the sale of liquor in 1917, a full two years before the rest of the nation prohibited liquor in 1919. This gave the Purple Gang a two-year head start to practice bootlegging, develop an infrastructure, and establish connections. During this time, the Purples “arranged for the Jewish-dominated “Little Jewish Navy” gang to bring [liquor] across the [Detroit] river [from Canada] for them” (Rockaway). The Purples developed this arrangement with the Little Jewish Navy during the early years of Prohibition, before
gangs in other parts of the country even existed. When other prohibition gangs were just forming, the Purple Gang had already developed an infrastructure.

The arrangement between the Purple Gang and the Little Jewish Navy also meant that the Purple Gang didn’t have to transport alcohol very far to sell it; they could buy and sell it in the same city, avoiding transportation costs. The Purple Gangsters had plenty of places to sell their whiskey in Detroit, which allowed them to deal in large volumes of illegal booze. According to Rockaway, “In 1923 there were 7,000 blind pigs [illegal bars] in the city. By 1925 the number had risen to 15,000; three years later the figure stood at 25,000” (Rockaway). These conditions proved ideal; the Purples had a head start on other bootleggers to develop their infrastructure and connections, they had a close source of liquor — meaning distribution was easy, and more blind pigs, known as speakeasies in other cities, than they could supply. Leaders of the Purple Gang exploited these conditions in an effort to make easy money, and to assert their presence in the community.

They also earned their reputations by suppressing potential competitors through violence. Wanting to be recognized and feared, they practiced a superlative form of violence, notorious even among other violent Prohibition-era gangs, such as the St. Louis Gang and Capone’s Mob. The Purple Gang brought the popular Thompson Submachine Gun to Detroit when three men tried to set up their own bootlegging operation. Rockaway describes the aftermath of the incident: “The police later dug 110 bullets out of the floors and walls. 33 Crime historians refer to this incident [the killing of three rival gangsters] as Detroit’s first machine gun execution and the event which introduced machine guns into Detroit gangster warfare” (Rockaway). The Purple Gangsters performed this slaughter to assert their reputations and control over Detroit. The Purple Gangsters preyed on other gangs for material reward as well, as Kavieff describes: “Anyone landing liquor along the Detroit waterfront had to be armed and prepared to fight to the death as it was common practice for the Purples to take a load of liquor and shoot whoever was with it” (Kavieff qtd. in Gribben 2). The Purples took control of their operation, attacking other gangs to assert their autonomy and to steal from them. The Purple Gangsters gunned down other Prohibition gangs in cold blood. The Purples’ recruitment process screened for ‘applicants’ that were as ferocious as they were by testing their willingness to commit violent acts. Kavieff describes how the Purples determined if someone was Purple material: “It was during this time that the still juvenile gang introduced the underworld expression ‘making their bones’ in reference to committing murders, creating reputations for ferocity with harsh beatings, and creating contacts within other mobs” (9). The Purple Gangsters carved an image of extreme violence and brutality for themselves, killing anyone who got in their way and inducting only those who proved bloodthirsty and loyal enough. This recognition cemented their reputation as a gang.

Carving out reputations as ruthless and bloody may have gotten the individual leaders of the Purple Gang some short-term recognition. Yet it also attracted unwanted attention from other gangs and from the police, who systematically eliminated Purple Gang leaders. As Rockaway reports, “In 1931, Ray Bernstein, Irving Milberg, and Harry Keywell were sentenced to life imprisonment for cold-bloodedly killing three rival gangsters in what reporters called the Collingwood Manor Massacre” (4). The police caught three of the gang’s leaders alone and unprepared. Their self-assertion, achieved through violence also attracted the attention of other gangs. In 1933, Abe Axler and Eddie Fletcher — two more of the gang’s important leaders — were also caught unprepared, and “taken for a ride.” The November 27, 1933 headline in The Detroit Times reads, “Axler and Fletcher Slain on Gang Ride and Bod-
ies Are Left in Car.” The gang’s leaders asserted their reputations as individuals, and were thus targeted and eliminated as individuals, when the rest of their criminal empire was not there to protect them. With the elimination of these five men, the Purple Gang was left leaderless and its members were absorbed by other criminal organizations. Robert Warshow argues that the gang’s downfall was inevitable. He explains, “The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies because he is an individual; the final bullet thrusts him back, making him, after all, a failure” (Warshow 585, original emphasis). To be successful, the Purple Gangsters needed to assert themselves as individuals, but doing so attracted unwanted recognition from other gangs and the police.

The Purple Gang started as young kids wanting fame and recognition, and ended as criminals on trial or executed. Coming from a marginalized and oppressed minority in Detroit, the Purples went into organized crime to take control over their lives, to seize the power and money they wanted by force. They used bootlegging to make money and extreme violence to assert their autonomy, necessary for criminal success but also inherently limiting. Although they ruled Detroit’s underworld for over a decade, their leadership was systematically eliminated by other gangs and the police once they attracted too much attention. The Detroit Times may have perfectly described the Purple Gang when it declared, “Abe Axler and Eddie Fletcher, machine gun terrorists of the Purple gang and recognized as Detroit’s Public Enemies One and Two, had died today as they lived — by the gun” (“Axler”).

Works Cited

“Axler and Fletcher Slain in Gang Ride and Bodies are Left in Car.” The Detroit Times. 27 Nov. 1933. Print.