# The Forgotten Crime Boss: Kid Cann, the Original Teflon Don, Reigned Over Minneapolis

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**News**


Kid Cann killed a bystander during a brawl. The prosecutor let him walk.

It was nearing 6 p.m. on a December evening in 1935. Walter Liggett, publisher of the Midwest American, parked his car in an alley near his Second Avenue South apartment. His wife Edith and daughter Marda sat in the backseat along with a few bags of groceries. Liggett got out and began to unload.

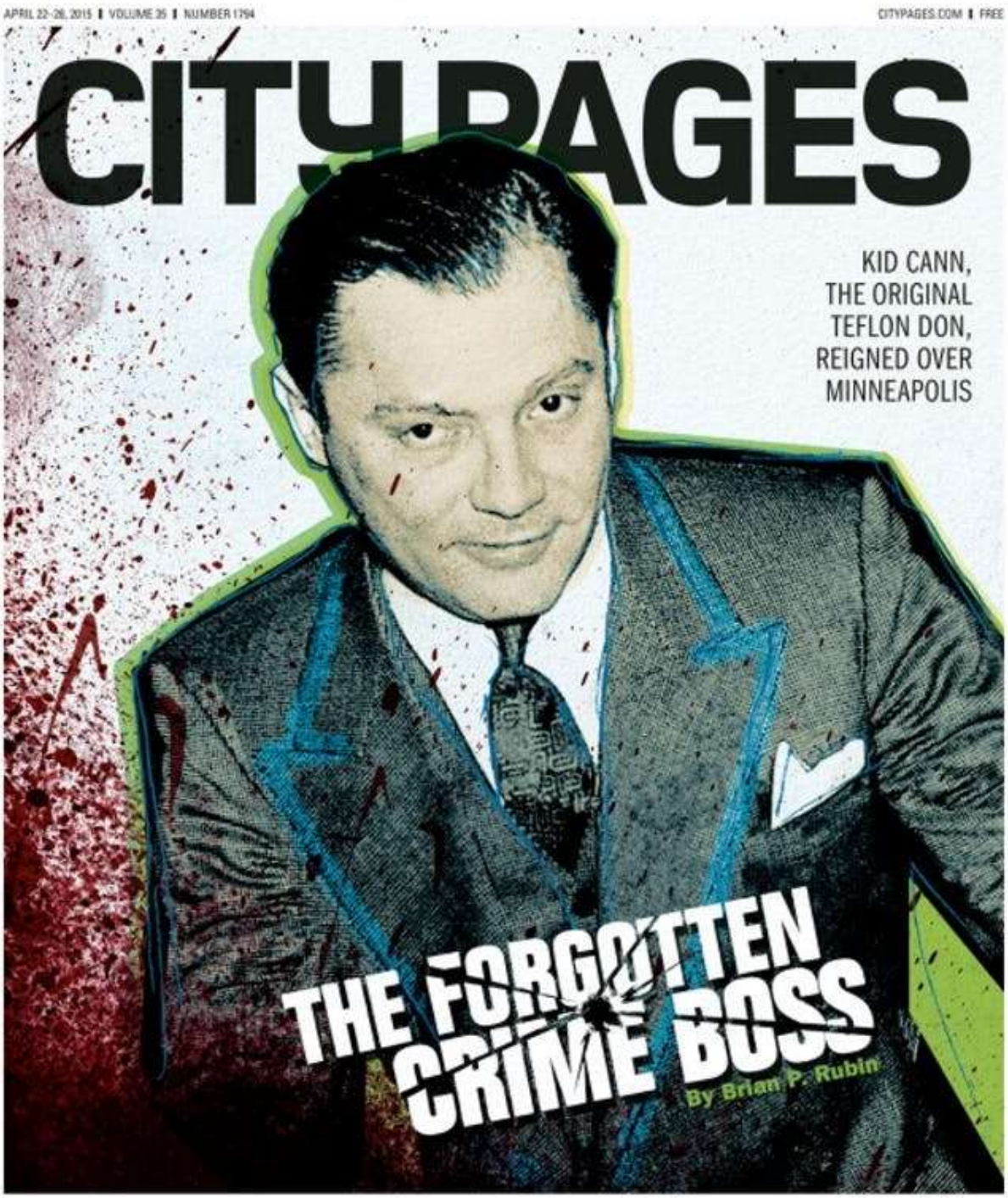
A dark sedan rolled up, the barrel of a machine gun poked out the window. Five shots tore through the newspaperman's back.

Edith ran to her fallen husband. She looked up as the assailant drove away, seeing the "snarling smile" of Isadore Blumenfeld — a.k.a. Kid Cann — the most notorious gangster in the Twin Cities.

## WELCOME TO SIN CITY

When Phillip and Eva Blumenfeld brought their son Isadore to Minneapolis in 1902, the two-year-old Romanian boy was arriving in one of America's most corrupt cities. Leading the way was Mayor Albert Alonzo Ames, better known as "Doc."

He appointed his brother police chief, then fired most of the force, restocking it with criminals and gamblers. Police extorted businesses for protection. Saloons and gambling joints flourished. Prostitutes paid monthly fines at City Hall, then returned to whorehouses to resume work.




Ames was arrested for bribery a year later, but his legacy of corruption would live on.

Minneapolis wasn't a town for a young Jew like Isadore to pursue the American Dream. Journalist Carey McWilliams would later write that Minneapolis was the "capitol [sic] of anti-Semitism in the United States."

Around the turn of the 20th century, Eastern Europe's Jews were fleeing organized massacres that were spreading across the continent. About 10,000 arrived in the Twin Cities. Minneapolis would play a sour host, says Hyman Berman, a retired University of Minnesota history professor.

"St. Paul is an older city, a much more diverse city," Berman says of the era. "It had a larger Irish Catholic population. Jews were among the first settlers in St. Paul. Therefore, in St. Paul there was an understanding that there was no one group that could be considered 'the other' that could be used as a target.

"Minneapolis was a newer city, and it was primarily a Protestant city — Lutheran, Scandinavian. And the Jewish influx comes in the late 19th century. There are no African Americans. There are very small groups of non-Jewish Eastern European immigrants. So in a sense, the Jews were the significant 'other.'"

Priced out of nicer neighborhoods and barred from good jobs, newly arrived Jews settled in north Minneapolis. But a sizable Romanian community formed in Phillips and Cedar-Riverside, which became crowded with tenements and unskilled laborers. This is where Isadore lived with his five younger siblings, packed amid the filth, bouncing from one address to the next.

He left school at 15 — still in fifth grade — and went to work on Newspaper Row downtown, fighting other newsies for the best territories. He brought prostitutes coffee for tips and resold streetcar transfers that riders dropped on the ground. He was arrested twice at 19: once for being in a "disorderly house" and again for pickpocketing a month later.

"There were really two paths that Jews could take to upward mobility," explains Berman. "One is through education, and that was difficult, time consuming. The other was through the 'shadow economy.'"

Isadore Blumenfeld may have been born in Romania. But Kid Cann was created in Minneapolis.

## BANK ROBBERY: AN UNWISE CAREER CHOICE

At 9:30 a.m. on a January day in 1923, a boxy Paige sedan barreled down Payne Avenue in St. Paul, screeching to a halt in front of the Payne Avenue State Bank. Mrs. Conrad Haglund saw three men rush toward the front entrance.

She assumed they were doctors, charging to attend to the ill. But the man in the lead — Cornelius Hurley, a former St. Paul cop — held a revolver. Two other gunmen, Vincent Samec and Alfred Lindberg, followed him into the lobby.

Hurley headed for the back; Lindberg grabbed cash while Samec covered the clerks and customers. Mrs. Haglund fainted.

Officer Nels Olson was stationed in the back room. He heard the commotion and moved to investigate. Hurley surprised him, jabbing his revolver into the cop's chest. The officer dropped his sawed-off shotgun. Clerks and cashiers watched with growing dread.

"I got the drop on you," Hurley said — just before Olson grabbed his wrist and a tug-of-war broke out.

Hurley pulled the trigger until the gun was empty, but he missed the cop. That's when he reached for his other gun. Olson did the same. The cop was faster.

Kid Cann had arrived in one of America's most anti-Semitic cities

Hurley went down, shot right through the heart.

Samec saw a bank clerk run into the lobby and fired. The bullet hit the worker's spine, eventually proving fatal.

Lindberg scraped together $2,000 and the robbers fled. Their car was found a half-hour later, the engine still running but the sedan empty, save for a shotgun and a pair of hunting boots.

Within hours, police raided Hurley's home in Minneapolis, arresting two men: James Pierce and 22-year-old Isadore Blumenfeld, who gave the cops his brother's nickname, "Harry Bloom." It would become one of his most reliable aliases.

Lindberg, Samec, and "Whitey" Sheansy, the getaway driver, were all eventually sentenced to Stillwater prison. Isadore was released. He seemed to learn the right lesson from his first major brush with the law: Don't rob banks.

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## COLD BLOODED OR CLUMSY?

Charles Goldberg couldn't feel his legs. Actually, he couldn't feel anything below his armpits — his spinal cord was severed.

The cabbie had been shot in the chest, and Kid Cann was holding the gun. It was 3 a.m. on April 19, 1924.

There'd been a fight at least eight people deep in front of the Vienna Café on Nicollet Avenue. Though the cause was never clear, the papers agreed on a few fuzzy details: Cab driver Abe Percansky had argued with Robert Royan and Isadore Blumenfeld over a woman.

Police files still referred to Isadore as "Harry Bloom," but by then he was known around town as Kid Cann. He claimed the name came from boxing as a kid. But rumor had it that he used to hide in the outhouse — the can — whenever guns came out. He hated the nickname.

That night, Cann, Royan, and Percansky threw punches. But when Percansky drew his revolver, things got serious.

Cann managed to grab the gun. That's when Charles Goldberg tried to break up the fight. Then: bang. He was kissing pavement.

Sirens screamed down Nicollet. Goldberg couldn't explain what happened. "Everything took place so suddenly," he said before lapsing into a coma. He would subsequently tell the cops that "it was an accident" and he "didn't want to get anybody into trouble." Nine days later, he was dead.

Cann told police he'd shot Goldberg by accident. But he didn't have much to worry about. County attorney Floyd B. Olson — who'd grown up in north Minneapolis with the same kids who'd become gangsters and bootleggers — didn't press the issue. The murder was indeed ruled an accident.

Three months later, Percansky and a lady friend sped along an Illinois highway in a hulk of a Packard, hauling 119 gallons of pure grain alcohol. His Minnesota plates caught the attention of a sheriff's deputy who busted him.

The cops figured he was part of a smuggling ring between Chicago and Minneapolis. They were right.

## JEWS AND BOOZE

The 1920 passage of Prohibition unleashed a demand for illegal liquor. Though the papers called Cann a "pool hall proprietor" when they wrote about the Goldberg shooting, he was actually organizing alcohol runs to and from Chicago.

Sometime after his arrest for the St. Paul robbery, Cann got wise to a safer way to earn, connecting with rum runners in the Windy City, where young Al Capone was making similar moves.

Cann and his brothers and friends launched a bootlegging operation, known alternately as the Minneapolis Combination or the Syndicate.

By 1927, they were operating under the guise of a barber supply outfit called La Pompador, which allowed them to buy industrial alcohol. They transformed it into "bang-up alky," 139-proof liquor that sold for 10 bucks a gallon.

The Combination ran secret stills on farms near Fort Snelling while smuggling "Minnesota 13" — moonshine brewed in Stearns County, revered for its quality. Cann also smuggled genuine whiskey down from Canada and up from the Gulf of Mexico.

"The reason Jews sort of dominated Prohibition is it was considered too lowly for the WASPs," says Neal Karlen, author of
*Augie's Secrets: The Minneapolis Mob and the King of the Hennepin Strip*
. After all, Jews in Minneapolis didn't exactly have many career options.

"There were ads in the Star Tribune saying basically, 'no Jews need apply,'" explains Paul Maccabee, author of
*Alias: Kid Cann and John Dillinger Slept Here: A Crooks' Tour of Crime and Corruption in St. Paul*
. Maccabee notes that even the highly educated Jews couldn't catch a break: "Mount Sinai hospital was created because Jewish doctors couldn't get a job in Minneapolis. Not that Kid Cann was ever going to be a doctor."

But selling booze allowed bootleggers to at least rub elbows with the elite. George Dayton of Dayton's department store (and great-grandfather of Gov. Mark Dayton) was a regular customer.

Jews "had the best bootleg booze in town," says Karlen, "so Dayton would make them come in the back door, and then not hire them to sell shoes."

## TWO COPS & A DERANGED SHERIFF

On February 3, 1928, Jack Sackter went to the Cotton Club on Sixth Avenue North. It was known as a "chicken shack," where hungry men went to feast on legs and breasts — served on plates as well as in cocktail dresses.

At 4 a.m., the joint was jumping. Verne Miller, former sheriff of Huron, South Dakota, turned bootlegger, was partying on the dance floor with entertainer Valencia "Shuffle Along" Nay. Sackter went to say hello to Nay. Miller didn't like the attention Shuffle Along was getting and punched him in the face.

In the years since quitting his sheriff's job — and embezzling $4,000 on his way out — Miller had grown violent, sampling too much of his own booze and allegedly suffering the brain-addling effects of syphilis.

Now he pulled a gun. Sackter hightailed it out of the club.

He found a couple of cops, Officers Bernard Wynne and James Trepanier. It was 5 a.m. when they knocked on the Cotton Club's door. Kid Cann opened it a crack.

"The trouble's over," he told them. "We're closing up."

Trepanier and Wynne pushed their way inside, pistols drawn. The place was still crowded, but the good times were over.

"Call the wagon while I search 'em," Trepanier told his partner.

Suddenly, Miller opened fire from the back of the room. Other patrons joined in.

Trepanier was shot in the shoulder and the gut. Wynne took a slug to the leg, but somehow managed to reestablish order, waving his empty pistol.

"Now all of you line up here and be quiet," he yelled. Miraculously, they listened, likely because Miller had escaped, fleeing out a back door and stealing a taxi. Thirty people were arrested.

Wynne identified Cann, who took a bullet to the leg, as among the men shooting at him and the now-paralyzed Trepanier. He was arrested with a pistol and three empty clips.

But Floyd Olson was still the prosecutor. Cann would walk again.

His elusiveness was becoming legend.

## FOLLOW THE MONEY

In the early 1930s, Charles F. Uschel was one of the richest men in Oklahoma. He'd married into the family of oil magnate Thomas Slick, inheriting a fortune... and making himself a perfect target for kidnappers.

On a July night in 1933, Urschel played bridge with friends on his porch in Oklahoma City. Albert Bates and George "Machine Gun" Kelly barged in, grabbing him.

He was freed nine days later when his family paid a $200,000 ransom. But he would prove a gifted victim.

While held inside a farmhouse, Urschel noted each day's weather conditions and the time and direction whenever a plane flew overhead. He also left his fingerprints wherever he could lay them. The FBI pinpointed a location near Paradise, Texas, roughly 200 miles south of Oklahoma City, and started making arrests.

G-Men nabbed Bates and Kelly. They also tracked the ransom bills' serial numbers throughout the Midwest. A portion ended up in the Hennepin State Bank in Minneapolis, leading the feds to Kid Cann and his friends.

Cann claimed the money came from a man named Collins, who bought 125 cases of whiskey for $5,500. The serial numbers on that money were traced to the ransom.

It's unclear who Collins was, or if he even existed, but Cann was arrested. He soon found himself awaiting trial in Oklahoma City.

Yet Cann still benefited from the corruption in his hometown nearly 800 miles away. Minneapolis Police Chief Joseph Lehmeyer flew to Oklahoma City to testify on his behalf. It's not clear what he said, but it worked. Cann walked.

## THE COMBINATION'S SEVERANCE PACKAGE

Conrad Althen, a St. Paul resident with a knack for numbers, used to be a golf course manager. But by age 40 he'd found a new line of work: keeping the books for the Minneapolis Combination.

When the feds came calling in the Urschel case, they came down on Althen, pressuring him to talk. Someone wasn't happy with what he said.

On December 18, 1933, he climbed into a car and was driven to Rosemount. The auto stopped along the highway, and Althen was booted out.

A machine gun blasted 14 holes into him. His body was found minutes later, still warm.

No one was ever arrested for Althen's murder, though reports theorized he was killed to keep him from ratting on the Combination.

Still, the FBI was closing in. Three months later, the feds conducted a massive sting, netting 50 arrests. Cann was charged with conspiracy to operate a still.

Yet the ghost of Conrad Althen hung over the case. So many witnesses changed their minds that the government's case "crumbled to pieces," admitted Assistant Federal District Attorney George Heisey.

A deal was struck: Cann agreed to spend a year in the Hennepin County workhouse.

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## THE CRUSADING JOURNALIST

Cann was released in 1935, but the landscape had changed. Prohibition had been repealed in December 1933, just a few months before his sentencing. In the meantime, his friends bribed their way into control of the Minneapolis liquor license office, making sure no one could sell booze without the Combination's say-so.

La Pompadour barber supply transformed into Chesapeake Brands Liquors, where Cann was officially employed as a "salesman."

FBI records tell a different story. The Feds believed Cann was in charge of Minneapolis's entire liquor industry. For every license sold, "he and his group get from $5,000 to $20,000," despite the fact that his criminal record barred him from owning a single license himself.

Six months before Kid Cann went to the workhouse, journalist Walter Liggett returned to his native Minnesota after years abroad. Liggett wrote scathing articles for Plain Talk magazine exposing Prohibition's failures and taking aim at how bootleggers transformed citizens into criminals. Liggett was an idealist. If he had a filter for his opinions, he didn't use it often.

Critics painted him an extortionist, claiming Liggett demanded bribes in exchange for halting his attacks. But he was in constant financial straits, casting doubt on whether he ever truly took payoffs.

By early 1935, Liggett bought the Midwest American in Minneapolis, hoping to expose corruption. At the top of his list was Gov. Floyd B. Olson, the former prosecutor.

In story after story, Liggett established Olson's mob ties, which set him on a collision course with Cann.

On June 23, 1935, Liggett and a friend, union organizer Frank Ellis, were charged with kidnapping and performing lewd acts on two young women at the Ritz Hotel.

Liggett denied everything. Ellis had given two hitchhikers, Frances Exelby and Teresa Hall, a ride to Minneapolis from Austin, Minnesota. That night, Ellis and Liggett ran into each other at the Ritz, debating politics over dinner while the two girls sat bored. Ellis gave them cash to hit the movies and spend the night in their own room so they wouldn't hitch back to Austin in the dark.

Liggett didn't think of the girls again until his arrest a year later. He accused the governor of a frame-up. After all, Olson was never afraid to use his clout against reporters. Years earlier, he had used public nuisance laws to silence journalists who accused him and others of corruption.

Despite the sex charge, Liggett continued to attack Olson, while publishing stories about how Chesapeake Brands effectively ran the city's liquor industry. He claimed his targets tried to buy his silence, but he refused.

One day socialite Annette Fawcett called, inviting Liggett to her suite at the Radisson Hotel, supposedly to talk about funding his legal defense. An angry Kid Cann was there waiting for him. Liggett claimed Cann asked him to "lay off," offering to make it "worth his while."

Cann later told reporters a different tale — that Liggett demanded $1,500 to stop.

Either way, what happened next depends upon the telling. Liggett said he left the hotel, but "foolishly" accepted a ride home from Cann. On the way, Cann suggested they stop for a "no hard feelings" drink. The Kid and his friends delivered a beating instead.

Cann, meanwhile, told reporters that Liggett was drunk and abusive, picking fights that led to a brawl. No arrests were made.

The bruised and battered Liggett appeared at his trial a few days later in St. Paul. Exelby and Hall testified that Liggett had performed "the offense" on Exelby in their hotel room, while he made Hall watch.

But one of the girls also confessed that the man who took her to the police to file charges was Emil Olson, a state oil inspector who worked for the governor.

Before jury deliberations commenced, Judge Albert Enerson issued unique instructions, telling jurors that "perjury has been committed in this case... offenses of this nature are not usually committed in the presence of eye witnesses."

Twenty hours later, jurors apparently gathered the judge's meaning. Liggett was acquitted on all counts. He vowed to investigate Hennepin County and expose the plot against him.

He never got the chance. Exactly one month after his acquittal, Liggett took five bullets in the back.

## THE BEST HAIRCUT IN TOWN

Cann surrendered for questioning that night. If the Kid was nervous, it didn't show. He told the detectives he was getting a haircut at Garfinkle's Artistic Barbershop on Hennepin Avenue when Liggett was shot. Dozens of witnesses could account for his every move.

There remained the small problem of Liggett's widow, Edith, who had fingered Cann in the murder. Yet newspapers described his alibi as air-tight. The prosecution, by contrast, had little to work with.

Wesley Andersch was walking home from a date when he saw the shooting. He recognized Cann and skipped town, holing up at his parents' farm in Kimball, Minnesota, admitting he was just "too damn scared."

Jurors deliberated just 90 minutes before returning, smiling at Cann. Their verdict: not guilty.

Cann wept with joy, then ran to the jury box, shaking the mens' hands and kissing those of the ladies. He marched down to Garfinkle's to recreate the haircut that set him free. The reenactment ran in a three-photo spread in the next day's papers.

The case remains unsolved.

## MARILYN & THE DEATH OF THE STREETCAR

Time was catching up to Kid Cann, who had inexplicably started calling himself "Ferguson" — "Fergie" to his friends. Colliers described him at age 51 as "squat, swarthy" with a "sinister stare." The Minneapolis Tribune painted him as "a little paunchy."

The years and stress were taking their toll. Throughout the 1950s he had several ulcer surgeries, once saying that 75 percent of his stomach had been removed. As his body failed, so did his knack for escaping trouble.

In 1950, U.S. Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee chaired a committee investigating organized crime. Virgil Peterson, director of the Chicago Crime Commission, testified that Kid Cann was "the outstanding racketeer" in Minneapolis, and that he and his brothers owned a million-dollar investment in a Miami Beach hotel.

Then Colliers ran a story explaining how Cann and his friends gobbled up shares of the Twin Cities Rapid Transit Corporation — the company that ran the area's streetcars and buses — without anyone noticing. They'd succeeded in a stealth takeover through shell companies.

The takeover coincided with a new era: People were driving more, and streetcars were emptying. TCRT began moving exclusively to buses in 1953. The streetcar tracks and cables were ripped from the pavement and given to two companies, American Iron & Supply Company and Mid-Continent Development and Construction, at little to no cost. Cann just happened to be a partner in Mid-Continent.

Cann and his friends were stripping TCRT of its assets for the benefit of their own side companies. American Iron, for example, paid just $123,000 for $938,000 worth of cable. But it took years for police to uncover the scheme.

In the meantime, a Chicago woman named Marilyn Ann Tollefson went to the FBI, telling agents she'd been intimate with Cann. He'd provided her with money, essentially paying her for sex, she claimed. But they'd argued over Cann's wandering eye — and his wife — so he beat her up. "He told me he should take me out in the country and bury me," Tollefson later testified.

The Kid was indicted for "white slavery," the transporting of a woman across state lines for "immoral purposes." He wouldn't go to trial until 1960, but Cann was nonetheless convicted and sentenced to two years.

Just a few months later, he would head to trial again for defrauding TCRT. Though five of his colleagues went down, Cann amazingly walked.

It might have been dumb luck. Or he may have bribed the jurors. As the FBI soon discovered, bribery was among his signature moves.

## THE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN

For years, politicians called for the reform of Minneapolis's liquor licensing system. But the Combination's grip was too strong, too entrenched to suffer new mayors and new calls for reform. With the city powerless, the feds finally moved in.

In 1960, Cann, his friends, and his brothers were indicted for illegally holding liquor licenses in the names of various relatives and front companies — a scheme that lasted nearly three decades.

Cann must have realized the case wouldn't go his way. The day before the jury reached a verdict, two men were arrested for trying to bribe a juror. It was a bumbling attempt with multiple intermediaries, and one of them called the FBI.

A day later, Cann, his brothers, and the rest were all found guilty. He was then charged with bribery.

At 60 years old, Cann was done. He pleaded guilty.

"You haven't led a very good life," Judge Edward Devitt admonished him at sentencing. Kid Cann agreed — mostly.

"All I can say is that I have destroyed myself, and I have destroyed my family, and I have destroyed my nephews, nieces, and little ones coming up, and I am terribly, terribly sorry; and that's about all I can say, your honor."

Kid Cann was sentenced to seven years in Leavenworth. Between his age and his ulcers, it seemed a sure bet that he'd die behind bars.

But he was paroled just three years later — on the condition that he not live in Minneapolis. Cann was happy to oblige. He retired to Miami to manage his family's vast property holdings.

He would soon reinvent himself again, this time as "Doctor Ferguson." Yet Cann couldn't escape the pull of the Twin Cities, flying back three times a year to visit family and friends.

"I wouldn't come back to this city [to live] if you gave it to me," he told the Minneapolis Star in 1976.

His exile seemed to erase him from the city's consciousness. When he visited, he was just another alter kocker, an "old fart," visiting his former stomping grounds. He claimed to have outlived and outsmarted his "persecutors."

"Tell 'em I'm looking good and feeling fine if you tell 'em anything," he bragged to the paper.

His final Minneapolis trip was in 1981, when he died in bed at Mount Sinai Hospital after a long struggle with heart disease. With no children, his legacy was limited to a headstone at the Adath Yeshurun Cemetery in Edina. After his burial, his infamy faded from Minneapolis's collective memory more and more each year. His criminal career survives at the Minnesota Historical Society, moldering in boxes full of old police files, judges' records, and microfilm of newspapers long since sent to the landfill.

Cann had been the original Teflon Don, decades before John Gotti was born. He was a ruthless power broker who may have murdered a half-dozen or more men. He'd become the face of Minnesota crime during an era of heavy competition.

But Minneapolis never really knew him. As the Kid himself once said, "Ninety percent of what was written about me is bullshit."

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