

HISTORY & ARCHITECTURE  
JOHN LOONEY LEGEND TOUR



ROCK ISLAND  
ILLINOIS



## This is the story of John Looney,

who ran prostitution, gambling, guns, stolen cars and illegal liquor in Rock Island for most of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His exploits were infamous during the pre-Prohibition era, and, after briefly retreating to the Southwest, he reemerged even more vicious and murderous in the 1920s. His name is synonymous with Johnny Torrio, Al Capone and Bugs Moran – Chicago gangsters who never pushed their sphere of influence 180 miles west to Rock Island, where Looney’s organized crime operation reigned supreme.

Because this is a geographic tour of Looney sites, it does not follow the chronology of his rise to power, his two decades of control of vices in the city, and his eventual imprisonment. However, a brief synopsis of this complex man – playwright, journalist, champion of the downtrodden, lord of illegal liquor and murderer - will help orient you on this tour.

John Patrick Looney was born in Ottawa, Illinois, in 1865, the first-born son of Irish immigrants. He came to Rock Island in 1885 to work as a train dispatcher for the

Rock Island and Peoria Railroad and as a superintendent for the telegraph office. He eventually studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1889. He was a family man, with two daughters, who were respectable, and a son who followed him into crime.

Looney’s first brush with the law was in a fraudulent 24<sup>th</sup> Street storm drain scheme in 1897. Soon after, he ran for the Illinois State Legislature as a Democrat, but lost the election. His defeat launched a career of conflict with society that engulfed him for the rest of his life.

By 1905, he was an established gangster in Rock Island’s underworld. The base of his power was in control of liquor, gambling and prostitution in the city. He secured his influence through violence and with his newspaper *The Rock Island News*, which was the epitome of yellow journalism. Looney routinely used lies and slander in his newspaper to blackmail community leaders. He exercised brutality and intimidation to enforce his will. And he was very successful. In 1922, a shocking 12 murders and three “suicides” occurred in Rock



*In 1988, Muscatine, Iowa author Max Allan Collins wrote a graphic novel — an expanded comic book for adults — called, The Road to Perdition, that featured Rock Island’s John Looney and others as fact-based characters. Illustrated with many local settings by Richard Piers Raynor, the novel added Michael Sullivan and his family as fictional characters. In 2002, this novel was turned into a big-budget movie. Steven Spielberg’s Dreamworks company produced the film, and Sam Mendes directed it. The film was filled with A-list actors, including Tom Hanks as Michael Sullivan, the Angel of Death; Paul Newman, who was nominated for an Academy Award for his inspired performance as John Rooney; and Jude Law, who played a character created for the film, Harlen Maguire. Location scouts were sent to Rock Island, and they were directed to the Highland Park area. Unfortunately, Rock Island was too distant from the downtown Chicago filming locations, so older Chicago suburban communities were substituted instead.*

*The screenplay took Looney even farther from fact. The filmmakers changed his name to Rooney because they felt the name Looney was too over-the-top for a gangster. These fictionalized accounts in book and film form also created new endings for John and Connor Looney/Rooney. Although Collins mentions Rock Island and Rock Island landmarks, such as Long View Park and Sacred Heart Church in his novelization of the screenplay, Rock Island’s visual role in the movie is limited to a name on a business awning.*

Island, most of which were tied to Looney.

The most outrageous crimes began around 1909 with printing press explosions and street gun battles with W.W. Wilmerton. By 1912, the notorious Looney printed a scandalous article which placed Rock Island's Mayor Schriver in saloons and brothels in the company of a woman named Ethel. With the publication of this story, Schriver had the police round up Looney and delivered him to city hall, where the mayor beat Looney so severely he required an extended stay at St. Anthony's Hospital.

The following day, Looney followers organized a supposed political rally for Harry McCaskrin, a lawyer and *Rock Island News* writer running for state's attorney. As it turned out, McCaskrin's fiery speech became a personal attack on Mayor Schriver, and two nights of rioting broke out in downtown Rock Island. Two innocent bystanders were slain, eight people shot, and dozens others wounded. The sheriff, panicked by the extent of the riot, phoned Illinois Governor Charles Deneen, who immediately declared martial law and called out 600 National Guardsmen. The militia remained in Rock Island for nearly 30 days, until after the election.

In the aftermath of the riot, Looney temporarily retreated to a ranch he owned in New Mexico. However, he returned to Rock Island in 1917 and quickly regained control of all his former illegal operations.

But while Looney had been away, others formed their own gangs. Rival groups, headed by many of Looney's former associates, had tasted power and money. Sharing any of it with Looney caused resentment, jealousy and eventual defiance. Former lieutenants Anthony Billburg, George Holsapple, Dan Drost and George Buckley were frustrated with

Looney's management of local vice and wanted a bigger piece of the action. On October 6, 1922, they waited outside the Sherman Hotel in downtown Rock Island to ambush him. When Looney got out of his car and saw Billburg's black Maxwell parked across the street, he shouted to the others with him to run, while he ducked behind his car. Young Connor Looney,

who had developed his own reputation as an unpredictable gangster with excellent aim, drew a gun and turned to face Billburg's men. The ambush was only partially successful, and Connor Looney died.

What eventually brought Looney down were a paper trail, a murder and the relentless, furious

editorials of *The Rock Island Argus*. Saloonkeeper Bill Gabel had long been paying Looney protection money but balked at increased fees. Gabel and Looney ultimately worked out a payment deal, but Gabel paid with checks instead of the customary cash. When Gabel decided to hand evidence of these checks over to federal investigators, word of his betrayal got back to Looney. Gabel met agents at the Como Hotel on the night of July 31, 1922. Later that evening he was waylaid in front of his tavern and slain.

Several months later, Looney fled Rock Island to avoid prosecution for Gabel's murder. One year later, he was apprehended in New Mexico, tried, convicted and sentenced to 14 years at Stateville in Joliet. There was no direct evidence that tied Looney to Gabel's murder, only the testimony of Looney's gang members, who traded Looney for leniency.

John Looney was nearly 70 years old when he was released after nine years in prison. He retreated again to the Southwest, and died in 1942 of a lung infection in McAllen, Texas.



**R**ich Hamer, local historian and co-author of *Citadel of Sin: The John Looney Story*, was the detective who brought many facts of Looney's life back into public memory. He started out telling the Looney story on trolley tours. As he chronicled the community, it was Looney's narrative that generated most questions, and Hamer felt he needed to know the gangster's story better. For 15 years, he researched the man's life, but the location of Looney's death always eluded him. Ten years into his research, a brief phone call from McAllen, Texas led him to an obituary, a death certificate and a burial location. At long last, Hamer had found Looney.

## 1. 1705 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Best Building*

*Today: VanDerGinst Building*

This tan office building was known during Looney's time as the Best Building. This location is loosely tied to Looney through the suspicious death of a man named Arthur E. Meader. Meader was the local manager of the Illinois Life Insurance Company, located in this building. He was killed by a fall from the fifth floor on January 9, 1922. Dr. Joseph DeSilva was soon on the scene and pronounced him dead. Reporters of the day noted that Meader had plunged from the insurance company office window facing Second Avenue and landed on the sidewalk in a mutilated heap. It was speculated that Meader, a known gambler, paid for his debts to

Looney with his life. Two other men in Rock Island were killed about the same time for suspected gambling debts. The year 1922 started out very bloody.



## 2. 121 16<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Holsapple's Place*

*Today: Lewarne Law Office*

In the 1920s, this Italianate style office building was notorious as a house of prostitution run by George "Crimps" Holsapple, who called himself a "bartender." By 1922, Holsapple, a former lieutenant of Looney's, had become his enemy and rival. The rivalry culminated in a shootout in Market Square. Anthony Billburg, one of Looney's chief rivals, orchestrated an ambush with Holsapple and others. Twenty-one-year-old Connor Looney was killed. Nationally known attorney Clarence Darrow defended Billburg and Holsapple in 1923. However, Darrow could not prove Holsapple innocent. Two years later Darrow would become one of the most legendary lawyers in the nation as he defended John Scopes, a high school teacher arrested for teaching evolution. "Crimps" and three others

were convicted for the murder of Connor Looney and sentenced to 14 years in prison.

George's wife, Mamie, was a well-known madam and continued to operate the business. This building stayed in ownership of the Holsapples until 1948, when it was closed by the state's attorney's office.



### 3. 1529 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Harper's Opera House*  
*Today: Centennial Bridge Access Ramp Area*

The block on this grassy spot was once lined with buildings. The corner building was known as Harper's Opera House or Harper's Theatre. On January 23, 1891, John Looney, wrote, directed and produced a play about Irish Nationalist Robert Emmet here. Emmet was from County Kerry, the same as John Looney's family. And, of course, Looney acted the part of Emmet. Emmet had a famous quote: "Let no man write my epitaph... let them and me repose in obscurity and peace and my tomb remain uninscribed." Rich Hamer, local historian and co-author of *Citadel of Sin: The John Looney Story*, speculates Looney's affinity with Emmet's belief on this point is why his parents' graves in



Ottawa are not marked and his son Connor's and his wife Nora's graves at Calvary Cemetery in Rock Island do not have headstones. Looney himself is buried in an unmarked grave in McAllen, Texas.

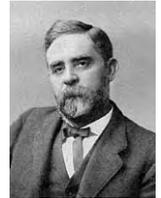
### 4. 1608 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: John T. Kenworthy Law Office*  
*Today: Downtown Retail*

Attorney John Kenworthy, along with fellow barrister Adair Pleasants, are pegged

as the men who urged John Looney to study law. Looney was only 21 when he embarked on this path to personal and financial improvement. He worked at the Western Union Telegraph office during the day and studied at night. Although Kenworthy frequently moved his offices, from circa 1888 to 1891, this building was Kenworthy's office and a place Looney probably visited.

John Kenworthy was born in Andalusia in 1846 and married Clara Wells, the daughter of an early Rock Island pioneer, in 1870. His son, Samuel, who was also an attorney, defended Anthony Billburg in the Connor Looney murder charges. John Kenworthy died in 1926; one must wonder what he thought of his protégé.



### 5. 1624 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: The Rock Island Argus until 1925*

*Today: Downtown Retail*

Just west of Bennigan's is the former location of *The Rock Island Argus*. Looney and his gang didn't intimidate everyone. *The Argus*, owned by the Potter family, frequently tried to expose Looney's racketeering and extortion techniques.





Without a doubt, their newspaper articles forced the city to take action. In 1907, after months of endless attacks, *The Argus* filed libel suits against Looney and *The Rock Island News* editor William H. Dilworth. A grand jury handed down 37 indictments against Looney. But Looney had “the fix” in place. Looney’s former law partner, Frank Kelly, was assistant to State’s Attorney John K. Scott, who declined to present evidence against Looney.

The Potter family and editors at *The Argus* became favorite targets for Looney because they dared expose his criminal activities.

An example of Looney’s slander comes from the June 1921 issue of *The Rock Island News*:

“John M. Colligan, managing editor of *The Rock Island Argus*, became a voluntary patient of the Watertown Insane Hospital on July 12, 1918. On September 6, 1918, he was committed as an insane person. He escaped from the hospital on March 3, 1919. He returned April 2, 1919, and again escaped on July 23, 1920. He was discharged as improved on June 24, 1921.”

Many credit *The Argus* for its 18-year pursuit of justice against Looney. When things came to such a terrible state in 1922 — with so many murders — John, Ben and Marguerite Potter pressured officials in their own way, and continually headed the evening editorial column with “WHO KILLED BILL GABLE?”

Typical editorial language in *The Argus* in 1922 urged officials to action: “The people of Rock Island are demanding that their government be directed from the city hall and not from the roost of vice vultures.” Another example: “The city administration has determined that you, as a taxpayer, shall learn as little as possible about the investigation of the police department scandal. In other words, it is none of your business what goes on at the city hall.”

We’ll hear more about Bill Gable and the fight against vice later in the tour.



*Watertown Hospital for the Insane in East Moline.*



## 6. 1627-29 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: The Rock Island House*  
*Today: Ann Goldman Building*

During his first ten years in Rock Island, Looney lived in boarding houses, apartments and hotels. One of the earliest places John Looney boarded upon coming to Rock Island was at 523 20<sup>th</sup> Street – a house that no longer exists. He also lived here – in the famed Rock Island House - in 1892-93. Under the more modern brick veneer of this building is one of the oldest structures in Rock Island. This building was a grand hotel for Rock Island's pioneers in the 1850s and community activity was centered here. Although married in 1892 in Ottawa, Looney's wife, Nora, did not join him in Rock Island until seven years after their marriage.

## 7. 1700 ½ 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Harry McCaskrin Law Office*  
*Today: Downtown Commercial Building*

The next three sites on the tour are closely linked to a single event. This building at the southeast corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and 17<sup>th</sup> Street is the historic Bengston Block. Lawyer Harry McCaskrin had his office in an upper story. Although there are no upper stories today, in Looney's time





there were four levels to this distinctive and much-photographed Italianate

building. McCaskrin was a political ally of Looney's, a *Rock Island News* writer, and candidate for State's Attorney. He was a key person to incite the crowd in what became known as the Market Square Riot.

His brother was George McCaskrin, mayor of Rock Island from 1905 to 1907 and again from 1909 to 1911. During 1908 he ran an unsuccessful Independent Party bid for governor, garnering less than 1% of the vote, against Gov. Charles Deneen, who three years later brought National Guardsmen to Rock Island and declared martial law. George McCaskrin lost the 1911 mayoral election to Harry Schriver by more than 1,000 votes.

In 1907, Mayor George McCaskrin was a target of *The News* and was one of the reasons for the libel lawsuit against Looney and Dilworth. Earlier Looney had approached Mayor McCaskrin to hold up a resolution legalizing drinking. Bribes may have been involved, but Mayor McCaskrin refused.

Harry McCaskrin's ties to Looney and Schriver were convoluted, but apparently did not have a lasting impact on his future political career. Interestingly, brothers Harry and George did not practice law together.

## 8. 17<sup>th</sup> Street from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues

*Looney's Era: Market Square*

*Today: 17<sup>th</sup> Street and Hotel*

Market Square's original purpose was just that – a farmer's market. Farmers and other vendors lined the edges of the centrally located open space that in Rock Island was shaped like a triangle instead of a square. Today the hotel takes up a considerable portion of what was once the west side of the triangle. The postcard above right shows a view of Market Square in Looney's time.



In March 1912, just four days after Mayor Schriver pummeled John Looney for his *Rock Island News* article regarding the enticing Ethel (see below), a large crowd gathered in Market Square to hear political speeches. However, Looney had stacked the crowd in his favor, reportedly bringing in hundreds of thugs from Muscatine and other locales. Looney's henchmen had intended to spread fliers urging the recall of Mayor Schriver and

Police Commissioner Archie Hart. The mob was urged on by Harry McCaskrin to overpower the police officers should they interfere. The crowd, estimated to be between 3,000 and 4,000 people, turned violent at Market Square and moved west to city hall to confront the mayor and police.

## 9. 1528 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue

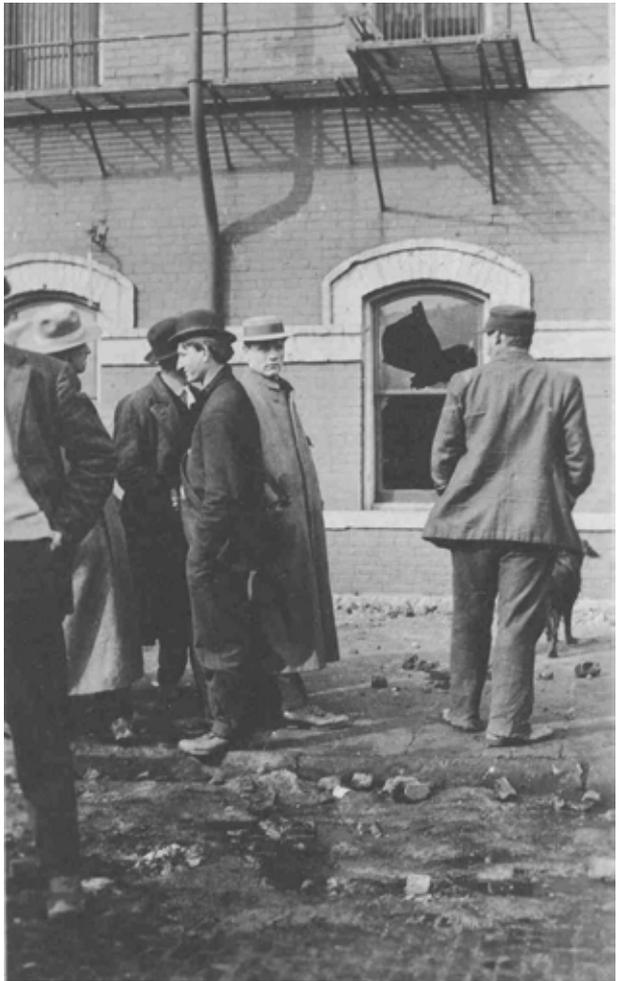
*Looney's Era & Today: Rock Island City Hall*

Although today's City Hall building was constructed in 1940, this is the place in 1912 where Mayor Harry Schriver, fed up with threats and slander, beat Looney to a pulp, kicking off deadly riots.

In an effort to blackmail Rock Island's leading public official, Looney had printed a salacious article about Schriver's supposed visits with a prostitute in Peoria. The headline certainly grabbed attention: "Schriver's Shame! Spent Night and Day in Peoria in Filthy Debauch with Ethel: Deeds that Would Shame a Dog!" In retaliation, Schriver confiscated the newspapers and had Looney brought to him by the

police. In the police office in city hall, Schriver brutally beat Looney, who required an extended stay at St. Anthony's hospital.

A few days later, Harry McCaskrin's fiery Market Square speech became a personal attack on Mayor Schriver, and an angry mob followed McCaskrin's direction to take the fight to city hall. The agitated crowd fired shots into the west wall of the police station and eventually broke nearly every window in the building with bricks. This altercation was followed by two nights of rioting. The destruction prompted Sheriff Oscar L. Bruner to seek reinforcements from Illinois Governor Charles Deneen, who declared martial law and called out 800 National Guardsmen from Rock Island, Moline, Geneseo, Sterling, Monmouth and Galesburg. The militia remained encamped in Rock Island for nearly 30 days, until after the election.



In the aftermath, Looney was convicted for misuse of the United States mail, fined and ordered to cease the publication of the *Rock Island News*, but no one was charged for the destruction of property or the deaths resulting from the riots.



Looney retreated for several years to his daughter's ranch in New Mexico, but returned to Rock Island in 1917 and quickly regained control of all his former illegal operations. The gangster's control over the city was now almost complete and his henchmen included the police chief, the city attorney and even his old enemy, former Mayor Harry Schriver.

## 10. 1029 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Mayor Schriver's House*

*Today: Awaiting Rehabilitation*

This Italianate style gem was the personal residence of Mayor Harry Schriver from 1905 to 1959. In 1911, Assistant State's Attorney Harry Schriver was elected to his first term as mayor of Rock Island, defeating incumbent George McCaskrin. He served as mayor from 1911 to 1915 and again from 1919 to 1923.

In 1922, as *The Argus* demanded the murderer of Bill Gable be found, the newspaper also made constant attacks on the city administration and its lax approach to cleaning up the vice and corruption that existed in the police department and in the "red light" district.



The cantankerous relationship between the newspaper and the mayor pervaded every aspect of the corruption investigations that year. The sleaze surrounding Looney eventually engulfed Mayor Schriver, who was indicted on gambling and protection charges during his second tenure as mayor. Although convicted, Schriver was ultimately successful in defending himself and retained his ability to practice law. The fallout from the Schriver tenure was a return to the aldermanic

form of government, leaving behind the commission rule that gave so much power to the mayor.

When Schriver died in 1959, he willed this property to his housekeeper, Frances Bock.

This circa 1869 home was designated a Rock Island Landmark for its intact and high-style architecture and its association with Mayor Harry Schriver.





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### 11. 1724 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era & Today: The Argus Building*

The Potter Family constructed this Art Deco building in 1925. It was dedicated the same year Looney was convicted and sent to prison. In the 1925 newspaper issue celebrating the opening of the new building, a prominent headline touted: "Rock Island Freed of Vice Rule in Campaign Led by Argus."

Looney's jealousy and hatred of the Potter's success showed in his Oct. 4, 1922 issue of *The Rock Island News*: "The Argus figures on starting a riot, fire their building, and collect enough from the state and insurance companies, so they will be able to put up that new plant on that vacant lot they claim they own and still have enough money to pay off the mortgage hanging on the *Argus*. And then these carrion try to run down a man like John Looney."

### 12. 1820 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Mathias Schnell Carpentry  
Today: Downtown Service Business*

Mathias Schnell's association with John Looney ruined him forever. He was a very successful building contractor, with a large carpentry located here on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Known as a civic benefactor and political leader, Schnell was also a Rock Island alderman. Unfortunately, he was wrapped

up in 1897's 24<sup>th</sup> Street storm drain scheme where sub-par materials were intentionally and clandestinely used in the construction. Looney, his law partner Frank Kelly, and Schnell were caught. Convictions were overturned on appeal, but Schnell's reputation never recovered. He lost his successful contracting business and ended his years in a rented apartment.

### 13. SW Corner 18<sup>th</sup> Street & 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Como Hotel  
Today: Parking Lot*

The Como Hotel started life as several small businesses, underwent an extensive remodeling in 1912-13, and was converted to the 110-room Colonial Hotel. In 1921, under new management, the hotel was renamed The Como Hotel. It was here just a year later that tavern owner Bill Gabel, frustrated with his protection payments to John Looney, met with federal investigators on the evening of July 31, 1922. It was Gabel's last night on this earth. The Como lasted another 40 years – it was demolished in 1962.



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### 14. 1816 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Tri-City Morning Journal  
Today: Parking Lot*

In 1908, John Looney sold controlling stock of his newspaper, *The Rock Island News*, to W.W. Wilmerton in an effort to raise money, although it is believed Looney never intended to lose control of the newspaper. Wilmerton planned to move the newspaper from Looney's building and run the newspaper without the Looney



brothers. In an effort to thwart the move, Looney severely damaged the presses with explosives. Undeterred, Wilmerton relocated the presses to 1816 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, and changed the name of the newspaper to *Tri-City Morning Journal*. The result was that Looney was without his scandal sheet for nearly a year.

In the months that followed, there were skirmishes between Looney and Wilmerton. Looney was shot while at his Bel-Aire mansion one evening and claimed the shooter to be Wilmerton. Finally, on February 22, 1909, Wilmerton and Looney had a shootout in broad daylight in the middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. "The expected happened this afternoon at 4:20 when W.W. Wilmerton and John Looney met near Nineteenth Street on Third Avenue and indulged in an affray with pistols," *The Argus* reported. Seven shots were fired; Looney was wounded, and then both were arrested. The newspaper account of the incident is very detailed, including the fact that Looney emptied his revolver, reloaded and was headed back to Wilmerton's office when he was placed into custody.

### 15. 1819 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Looney & Kelly Law Office & The News Building*

*Today: Downtown Tavern*

This was the location of Looney's law office with partner Frank Kelly. This is also an early location of *The Rock Island News*. The other two occupants of the building were the Mirror Saloon and a gambling house. The upper stories were lost, probably due to a fire, sometime prior to 1935.

Looney claimed his paper was a crusade for morality, when in fact, he used it for blackmail and acquiring a base for power in city government and vice circles. *The Rock Island News* printing press consisted of a small, flatbed press, a linotype

machine, a few fonts of type, and a small amount of newsprint, supposedly worth about \$20,000.

By 1908, Looney needed some cash and sold controlling stock of *The Rock*

*Island News* to W.W. Wilmerton. Although Looney never intended to give real control of the newspaper to Wilmerton,



the Preemption farmer proved to not be a patsy. He announced plans to relocate and rename the newspaper. At 2:30 a.m., the night after Wilmerton took ownership of the newspaper, a dynamite bomb destroyed the newspaper presses in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue office building. “The dynamite or other high explosive which was used was apparently placed on the press and attached to a fuse extending to the corridor door,” reported *The Argus*.

Wilmerton still relocated the newspaper, moving just one block south. The partnership between Looney and Wilmerton deteriorated after that, culminating in a shootout that started in the alley between their two newspaper buildings and spilled over onto 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. Both were arrested.



## 16. 1823 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Western Union Telegraph (1885) & Haege The Tailor (1922)*  
*Today: Downtown Retail*

John Looney learned telegraphy at the age of 15 in Ottawa. When Looney, just 18 years old, moved to Rock Island in 1885, he worked for Western Union Telegraph – a job he would hold for the next five years. During that time, Western Union was located in an upper story of the Star Block. This distinctive Italianate was a fairly new building when Looney came here – just eleven years old. Today it is a Rock Island Landmark.



By 1915 Haege the Tailor was located in this storefront. Thomas Haege was a member of the Citizen's Committee named in the conspiracy indictment to murder John Looney. He was fingered by Anthony Billburg as a primary player in the conspiracy.

## 17. 1825 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Waddell's Barber Shop*  
*Today: Restaurant*

Jake Ramser, owner of the jewelry shop just to the east, had his own reason to hate John Looney. Ramser's older sister, Dina, was a Rock Island police matron whose position had her involved with local prostitutes. Because she

either “hassled” or “helped” the girls, depending on your viewpoint, Looney targeted her in *The*

*News*. Jake Ramser didn't take kindly to the slander of his sister's name.

One day in 1911, Looney and Ramser were both sitting in barber's chairs in the shop, when an argument erupted and Looney pulled a pistol. Ramser didn't back down and grabbed the pistol away. In the scuffle, Looney shot Ramser through the hand, but Ramser took control of the fight and

Waddell's Sanitary  
 BATH PARLORS  
 and  
 BARBER SHOP  
 Phone R. I. 2083 121 Eighth St.  
 ————— Open Day and Night —————  
 CHIROPODY — A — SPECIALTY



the gun, beating Looney with the butt end. He then held the gun to Looney's head and pulled the trigger three times. His ignorance of automatic weapons saved Looney's life. Jeweler Ramser didn't know how to release the gun safety.

## 18. 1827 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Ramser's Jewelry Shop*  
*Today: Downtown Tavern*

Brothers Jacob, William and Eugene Ramser ran a jewelry shop here in the Star Block. By 1922 their business had been in operation for 50 years and they were jewelers, opticians and sold Edison Disc Phonographs.

Jake Ramser was implicated in the death of Connor Looney and the Market Square shooting that took place on October 6, 1922. Ramser's sour feelings for Looney had festered for eleven years. During Connor Looney's coroner inquest, Looney identified Ramser as one of the five men who ambushed him and his son outside of the Sherman Hotel. Anthony Billburg, who went to prison for the murder, also implicated Ramser as the leader of a group of businessmen who hired him to kill John Looney. Billburg claimed this jewelry store was the location of a meeting between him and Jake Ramser, *The Argus'* John Colligan and John Potter, and tailor Tom Haegel to discuss the "hit" about six weeks before it actually occurred. However, Billburg's grand jury testimony differed greatly from eye-witness accounts.

In the end, Jacob Ramser, unlike other local businessmen, was not named in the indictment for the murder of Connor Looney.



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## 19. 231 20<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Billburg's Saloon*  
*Today: Downtown Office Building*

Anthony Billburg was considered by many to be John Looney's chief rival.

Billburg's bar was built in 1915, and called the "Longest Bar in the World." Contractors took three months to build the brick building, with its large windows along the side. The bar, made of mahogany, was 117 feet long. Prostitute and madam Helen Van Dale, who has her own important role in the Looney saga, "worked" for Anthony and Margaret Billburg shortly after her arrival in Rock Island. It was here that she met her husband, bartender Henry Van Dale. The Billburg tavern closed in 1918 when the government prohibited the sale of liquor within three miles of the Arsenal. Eventually, the building was demolished to make way for a used car lot.

Billburg was the leader of the group including Holsapple, Drost and Buckley who ambushed John Looney outside the Sherman Hotel. Billburg was tried and convicted for his part in slaying Connor Looney. He was sentenced to 20 years and served most of it before being paroled. He spent the last years of his life in an upper story apartment in the building adjacent to his former tavern; he died in 1950.

Ironically, the business located here today is a purveyor of liquor liability and dram shop insurance.



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## 20. 608 20<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Dr. Joseph DeSilva House*

*Today: Hodgson Funeral Home*

This Queen Anne style residence is the former home of Dr. Joseph DeSilva, who was on hand during much of Rock Island's gangster period to pronounce various murdered people dead. Because he was at Connor Looney's bedside when he died from his wounds from the Market Square shoot-out, he was also a key witness at the coroner's inquest, describing in detail the wounds that ended Connor Looney's life.

Dr. DeSilva was also the physician called to City Hall after Mayor Schriver thrashed Looney in 1912. DeSilva recognized the severity of the gangster's beating and took Looney to St. Anthony's Hospital, where he required surgery.



## 21. 1906 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Potter House*

*Today: Private Residence*

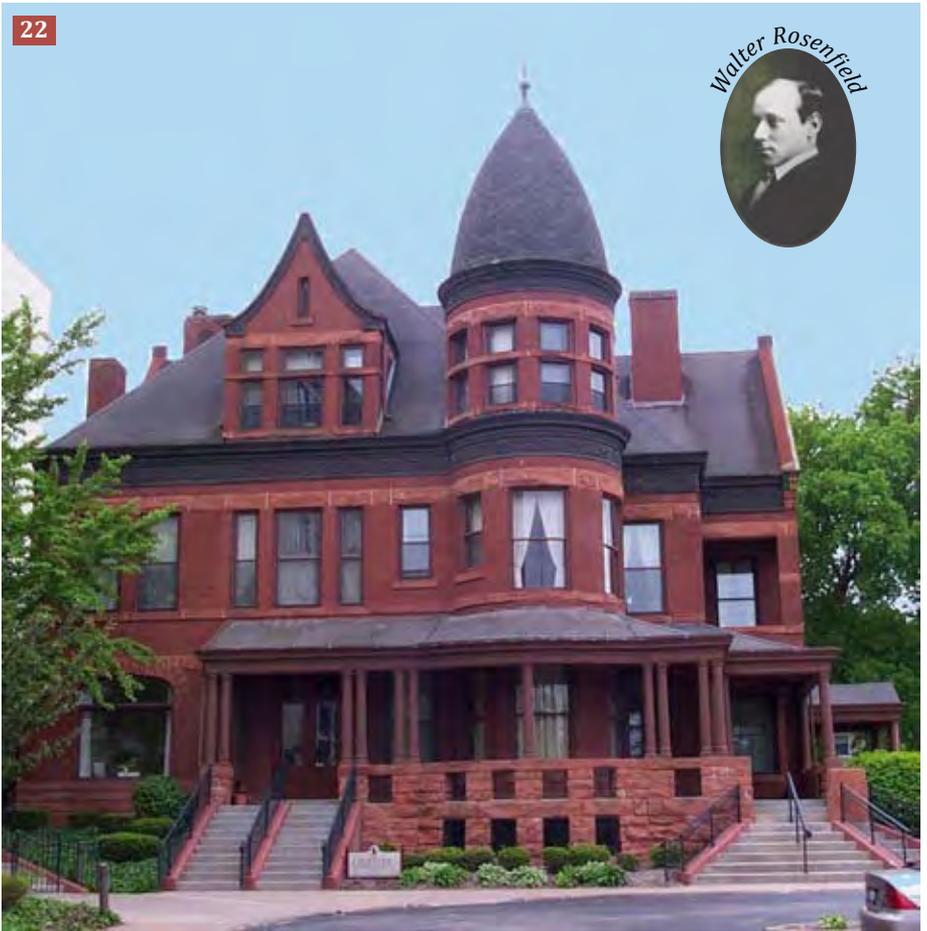
This was the home widow Minnie Potter, owner of *The Argus* built for herself and her three children in 1907. Minnie ran the newspaper for years until her children were old enough to join her. She became a blackmail target of Looney's, who at one point wrote about her alleged affair with her gardener.

By the 1920s, John, Ben and Marguerite Potter were frequent targets of Looney's. At the time, all three still lived in this house with their mother.

This beautiful Colonial Revival-style home is a Rock Island Landmark and is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Marguerite lived in this home until her death in 1981.





## 22. 1900 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Rosenfield House, St. Joseph's Convent*

*Today: Coventry Apartments Senior Center*

Morris Rosenfield built this high-style residence in 1893, but only lived here briefly before his death. However, his son Walter enjoyed this opulent home until 1916, when he moved across the street. Their wealth came from industry; they were the owners of Rock Island Bridge and Iron Works and Moline Plow Company. Walter Rosenfield was also the developer of the Fort Armstrong Theatre in 1921. While Looney's own home has some of the same architectural feel as this magnificent mansion with its Richardsonian Romanesque influences, the *Rock Island News* owner could never mingle with the society people who lived here.

Walter Rosenfield, who succeeded Harry Schriver as mayor of Rock Island from 1923 to 1927, was also named in the grand jury indictment as part of the "Citizen's Committee" that fronted money and plotted the murder of John Looney. None of the society people named in the indictment were convicted.

### 23. 1804 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Walter Rosenfield Home*  
*Today: Word of Life Christian Center*

From 1917 to 1936, Walter Rosenfield lived in this grand Greek Revival masterpiece, the former Buford Mansion, which was built circa 1855. He was mayor of Rock Island during that tenure and named in a grand jury indictment for the murder plot of John Looney.



### 24. 805 19<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Harry H. Cleaveland House*  
*Today: Transitions*

Harry H. Cleaveland, of the Cleaveland Insurance Agency, was a prominent man in business and civic life in Rock Island. Heavily involved in the banking industry, he was one of the men named but not convicted in the grand jury indictment for conspiracy of murder of John and Connor Looney. This was his home in 1922.



### 25. 946 23<sup>rd</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Thomas Cox House*  
*Today: Private Residence*

This American Four-square house was the home of Tom Cox, Rock Island's



Chief of Police during the later Looney years. Promoted from Chief of Detectives by Mayor Harry Schriver, Cox was Police Chief from 1919 until late 1922. Tom Cox was a crooked cop and known to be part of the vice operations in the city. Local historian and *Citadel of Sin* co-author Rich Hamer believes Cox to be one of the most interesting and underrated players in the Looney legend. He believed much of the Looney terror could not have happened without the cooperation of Cox.

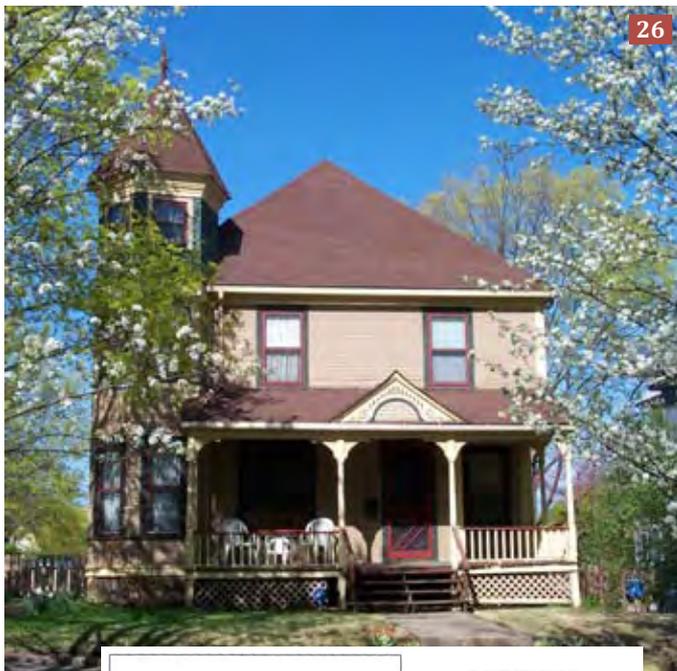


Cox was a family man, but his "girlfriend" was Helen Van Dale, a madam with the biggest prostitute operation in the city and beyond. He was so smitten with Van Dale that he even beat up Van Dale's second husband, Lester Smith. Eventually, the prostitution proceeds were split three ways between Looney, Van Dale and Cox.

On September 25, 1922, Cox was placed on suspension by the Police and Fire Commission pending investigation into the corruption. Officially the board said it was because Cox had admitted he no longer controlled the police department and could not get patrolmen to police the vice district. Cox's downfall was an indictment on a stolen car charge. There was a paper trail tracing a car shipped to Looney's ranch that "disappeared" from the police garage. Cox was indicted for the charges on December 5<sup>th</sup> and arrested during his

noonday meal at his home. In response to the indictment, Cox immediately resigned his position as Chief of Police, although he had been suspended for more than two months. This action was rapidly followed by Cox, along with several others, being charged with the murder of Bill Gabel and conspiracy to furnish gambling devices to various establishments. The “movements of the police” were found to be suspicious on the night Gabel was murdered. Despite conflicting testimony, Cox was believed to be at the scene of the murder and manipulated the police schedule so that patrolmen were not on duty in the area. Cox was never found guilty of the murder; he died before the trial.

Cox lived in this house with his wife and grown daughter for just a few years before his death.



JOHN K.  
SCOTT

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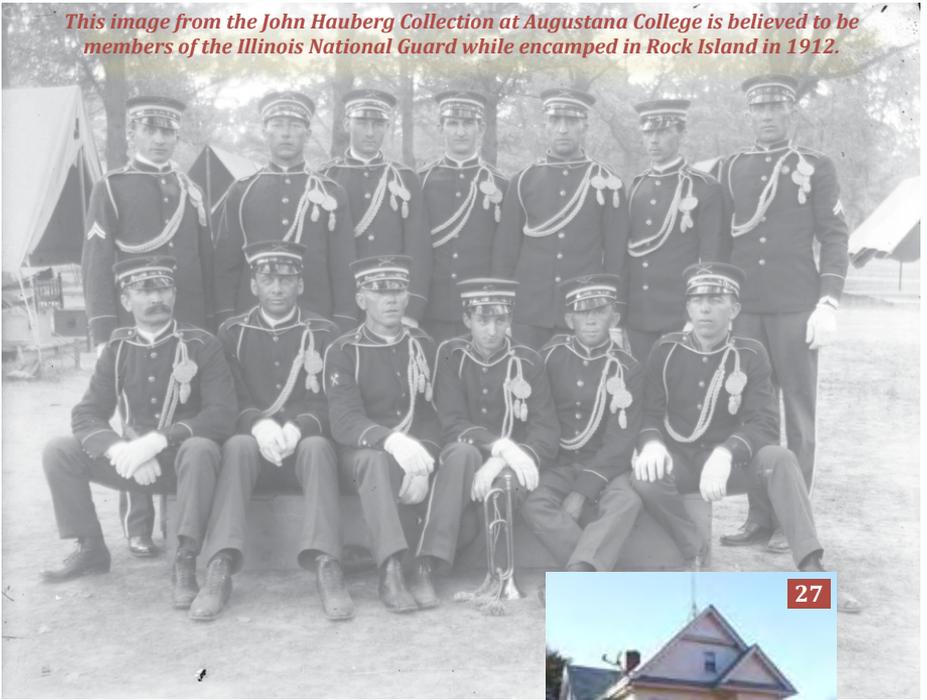
## 26. 1038 21<sup>st</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: John K. Scott House  
Today: Private Residence*

This remarkably intact 1895 Queen Anne-style house came into ownership of the Scott family in 1904. John Scott and his wife, Amy, shared the home with his mother, Margaret, and, until his death, his father, William. John served as the city attorney for Rock Island from 1899 to 1904, when he was elected State's Attorney for Rock Island County. In this position, he is remembered for declining to prosecute the notorious John Looney. In fall 1922, acting again in the

capacity of city attorney, John Scott had the unfortunate duty of guiding a newly appointed Police and Fire Commission in its investigation of Tom Cox. In December 1922, disbarment proceedings were initiated against Scott by the Illinois Attorney General. By 1923, he was indicted on conspiracy to “protect” illegal gaming and prostitution. Scott would eventually defeat the charges against him. He later returned as city attorney and maintained a private law practice as well. The Scott family lived here until 1948.

*This image from the John Hauberg Collection at Augustana College is believed to be members of the Illinois National Guard while encamped in Rock Island in 1912.*



**27. 1216 21<sup>st</sup> Street**

*Looney's Era: Bruner House  
Today: Private Residence*

“Rock Island Mob Fired On; 3 Dead; Police Station Attacked by Angry Citizens Who Would Oust Mayor Schriver.” This headline would not have run in the March 27, 1912 *New York Times* if Rock Island County Sheriff Oscar L. Bruner had not telegraphed Illinois Governor Charles Deneen. *The New York Times* reported that Bruner swore in as many deputies as he could and called out all members of the department to clear the streets. Bruner was also required to follow the telegraph with a written formal demand for troops that explained the situation. *The New York Times* article made the Market Square altercation sound like an abuse of police



*Bruner*



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power and an attempt to curtail freedom of speech: “The mob is crying ‘Get Schriver’ He is the Mayor who last Saturday attacked in the police station and badly beat John Looney, a lawyer, and proprietor of a political weekly, because of an attack on the Mayor’s character.” Even the article this esteemed national newspaper printed as a follow-up on March 28 does not mention Looney’s role in gambling and blackmail.

Oscar and Abbie Bruner lived in this Queen Anne-influenced house in 1912.

**28. 1607 20<sup>th</sup> Street**

*Looney's Era: Cozad House  
Today: Private Residence*

By 1942, third generation newspaperman John W. Potter had purchased this brick and stucco home. Potter was Vice-President and Secretary of the J.W. Potter Company, publishers of *The Rock Island*



John W. Potter



*Argus*. Ironically, he moved into a house located just north of Looney's former haunt. Potter was a contemporary of Connor Looney, and even as a young man in his twenties experienced first-hand the vile rumors spilled by *The Rock Island News*. The Potter family was a bitter enemy of Looney. It was a libel lawsuit filed by *The Rock Island Argus* that resulted in the 37 indictments against Looney in 1907. Many

credit *The Argus* for its 18-year pursuit of justice against Looney.

In 1923, summing up the case against John Looney for the murder of Bill Gabel, Sen. Charles Hadley, special prosecutor, paid this tribute to *The Argus*: "When newspapers set out to expose graft, they are continually vituperated by the persons hardest hit by the exposures. In this case, it happens to be the only daily in Rock Island. It is an enemy of John Looney's. You gather that it was instrumental in exposing him and running him out of town. I make no apologies for *The Argus* or its publisher, John Potter. Would to God there were more newspaper publishers like John Potter!"

John W. Potter died the same year as John Looney, just five years after moving into this Colonial Revival style home. He was 50 years old.



## 29. 2012 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Dan Drost's Residence and Printing Location for The Rock Island News*  
*Today: For Sale, Known as Looney's Roost*

This bungalow on the next page was the final location of *The Rock Island News*, and was known historically and today as Looney's Roost. It was built circa 1910 to house the presses for the newspaper. Looney's rag sheet enjoyed a circulation of 10,000, so it was quite an influential newspaper. He championed himself as the protector of the little man and the defender of moral behavior. He blamed rich men and the "establishment" for vice and corruption in the community.

The garage structure is a later addition, although there was a garage on the property in Looney's time and might have been where the presses were sometimes located.

By the 1920s, Looney listed this property as his principal residence, although it is believed his lieutenants were caretakers here. In fact, Dan Drost, one of those convicted



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of murdering Connor Looney, was listed as a



resident here in 1921, one year before Connor was killed. By this time, Looney's residence was known to be Bel-Aire, a large home overlooking the Rock River.

Because of John Looney, this quiet, upscale neighborhood, hit the headlines in 1921. In February of that year, *The Argus* reported that "the home of John Looney" was rocked by an explosion at 3:30 a.m. Houses around the building were shaken and rattled by the explosion. *The Argus* claimed that John Looney was in bed in a second floor bedroom at the time, although it probably was Dan Drost. The press equipment was in the garage nearby. The explosion knocked the windows out, but the home was otherwise undamaged, as were the printing presses. *The Argus* reported that the explosion was believed to be the work of amateurs. Looney, of course, blamed *The Argus* for the explosion.

Federal marshals raided the "Looney Fort" on October 25 and 26, 1922, searching for the fugitive Looney and other evidence. Reports indicated the presses were located in the "dark basement" and the house was heavily armed, with two guard dogs chained on the porch. Marshals were thorough, even searching for trap doors and tunnels. The rumors of tunnels through the Looney compounds persist to this day.

### 30. 2101 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Villa de Chantal Convent & Catholic Girls' Boarding School*  
*Today: New Magnet Elementary School*

The Sisters of the Visitation enjoyed an amicable relationship with John Looney, who was an Irish Catholic. His daughters Kathleen and Ursula attended the school. Kathleen eventually took vows and became a nun.

The Villa de Chantal was built in stages from 1900 to 1929 in the Gothic Revival style. At first it was a girls' boarding school, but eventually offered instruction to day students. The last Villa de Chantal class to graduate was 1975. Sadly, almost two-thirds of the main buildings were destroyed by fire in 2005, then demolished in 2008.

*The Road to Perdition* graphic novel, upon which the Hollywood movie was based, mentions the Villa de Chantal as the school attended by Michael and Peter Sullivan. The fictional Michael Sullivan character goes "on the lam" with his father, John **R**ooney's chief enforcer.



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### 31. 1608 21<sup>st</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: George Stauduhar House*  
*Today: Private Residence*

Architect George Stauduhar built this eclectic and fanciful residence for himself in 1895. Today it is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is an important architectural contribution to the Highland Park Historic District.

Stauduhar received a great number of commissions with Roman Catholic

connections; he was the architect for more than 200 churches in the Upper Mississippi River Valley. Stauduhar also designed the house of Looney's law partner, Frank Kelly, Minnie Potter's house on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and the Villa de Chantal. Although it is not clear if George Stauduhar designed Looney's mansion – which is the



next house on this tour, there are building plans with Looney's name located in the George P. Stauduhar Papers at the University of Illinois

Archives. However, it is a certainty Stauduhar and Looney were acquainted. George Stauduhar was a witness in the indictment of John Looney for the murder of Bill Gable.



### 32. 1635 20<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Looney Family Residence circa 1895-1908*

*Today: Private Residence*

This stone mansion, shown on the next page, was built and occupied by John Looney from 1895 until around 1908. It is not known exactly when Nora finally joined her husband in Rock Island, but daughters Kathleen and Ursula were born in Ottawa in 1894 and 1898. Connor Looney was born in Rock Island on November 19, 1900, probably in this house. Looney married Nora O'Connor in Ottawa in 1892, and she was known to be a normal woman of her time, quite religious and not involved with Looney's early

shenanigans. Nora died in 1903 from cancer. After Nora's death, Looney's petty crimes turned much more serious. Looney lived here when he started publishing *The Rock Island News*.



Little is known about how the children fared at such a young age in a gangster's household. Eventually, Ursula married an oil field worker from New Mexico. Daughter Kathleen became a nun.

Connor Looney attended Rock Island public schools and finished the second year of high school here. He spent much of his life on the ranch near Chama, New Mexico. The ranch, operated by his brother-in-law Frank Hamblin, covered over 20,000 acres of land. Young Looney became a dead shot with a revolver in New Mexico.

Connor's sister, Ursula, said her brother spent too much time with his pony when he was a small boy, and later, too much time with his cars. Connor's acquaintances said he used to spend hours cleaning and waxing his automobile.

The Looney Mansion is one of the most interesting historical and architectural residences in Rock Island. It was the inspiration for the dark, almost gothic, setting for some of the early scenes in the book and film *The Road to Perdition*. A drawing of this massive Queen Anne style home is in Max Collins' original graphic novel.



### 33. 1703 20<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Frank Kelly House*  
*Today: Private Residence*

This opulent Queen Anne house was built by Frank Kelly, Looney's law partner. It was constructed in 1895, just prior to Looney's mansion across the street. The Kelly family retained ownership of the house until the mid-1970s. Kelly was a major developer of this Highland Park subdivision, which is a four-block neighborhood bounded by restored brick streets. Today, Highland Park is Rock Island's only local historic district, where each house is accorded the same protection as a Rock Island Landmark.

Looney's relationship with Kelly goes to early in his law career. Remember, he was admitted to the bar in 1889. By 1896,

Looney and Kelly were charged with conspiracy and fraud regarding contracts for the construction of the 24<sup>th</sup> Street storm drain, but Looney's friendships with influential officials resulted in overturned convictions and the case was never retried. Kelly and Looney were law partners until about 1906.

Kelly again helped Looney in 1907.

Kelly was assistant to State's Attorney John K. Scott, who declined to present evidence against Looney on 37 charges of





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indictment by a grand jury.

Kelly died in 1911 when he fell in front of a streetcar he was trying to catch.

### 34. 1704 22<sup>nd</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Frederick Mueller House  
Today: Private Residence*

This classic American Foursquare home had several owners between its construction around 1909 and 1920, when Frederick and Mae Mueller purchased it. They lived in the house until 1941. Frederick was a Director and Secretary of the J.W. Potter Company, publishers of *The Rock Island Argus*. He began working with the newspaper in 1898 when he was just 16 years old. Mueller worked his way up through the ranks to become an influential board member of the J.W. Potter Company and the national advertising manager for the newspaper. When Mueller died in 1952 at the age of 70, he had worked for *The Argus* for 54 years.

Interestingly enough, Mueller was secretary of the Police and Fire Commission which issued the 30-day suspension of Police Chief Tom Cox for dereliction of duty on September 25, 1922. The very next day, Mayor Harry Schriver — who supported Chief Cox — ousted all three members of the board, saying their terms had expired. With split support from two other

city commissioners, Schriver appointed three new men to the board that same day. However, Mueller refused to turn over his files on the investigation of Chief Cox, claiming he was still a valid representative of the police board and filed suit to that effect. *The Argus* took an aggressive position on the issue, condemning the decision to appoint a new board. During his orientation of the new police and fire commissioners on September 29, city attorney John Scott tossed harsh words right back: "If you had an individual in your business or other organization working night and day to disrupt it, you would not tolerate him long. And in the same way, if you have a newspaper in the community hammering night and day on the administration, inciting the other members of the community to almost open defiance of it, would you, if you were mayor, reappoint the business manager of that paper — with the \$5,000 salary he received from it — on your fire and police commission? You know and I know that he could not sit on the board and hear evidence and be impartial in his judgments when a member of the administration was up for trial. You know he couldn't."

The new commission lasted only five days. Two resigned, citing public pressure. In a complete breakdown of a governmental system, Schriver had no takers for the open positions. He asked several



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prominent individuals, such as Augustana College President Gustav Andreen, to fill the vacancies, and then requested names from community and business organizations. The investigation of Police Chief Tom Cox ground to a halt as the end of his suspension loomed. Fortunately, city commissioner William H. Fitzsimmons took control of the police department and orchestrated nightly raids of liquor and prostitution establishments. State's Attorney Edward Eagle enlisted outside help, and state and federal investigators were dispatched to Rock Island – partly because no local investigation of internal corruption could take place without a functioning Police and Fire Commission. Twenty-five Illinois prohibition enforcement officers were “under cover” in Rock Island by October 10.

Ultimately, Mueller was also one of the community leaders named in the grand jury indictment that investigated the death of Connor Looney. Like other community leaders, he was not convicted.

### 35. 1604 22<sup>nd</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Wallace W. Wilmerton House  
Today: Private Residence*

The final Highland Park home on our tour has significant ties to John Looney. This brick Colonial Revival style home was built around 1907 and occupied for two years by William and Bertha Looney. William, John Looney's younger brother, was secretary, treasurer and manager of *The Rock Island News* at this time. By 1909, the home was sold to Wallace W. and Anna Wilmerton and they lived here through 1913. Wilmerton had an explosive and violent relationship with Looney during the time he lived here.

Wilmerton was the Preemption farmer who purchased *The Rock Island News* from the Looney brothers and changed the name of newspaper to the *Tri-City Morning Journal*. Antagonized that Wilmerton had maneuvered him out of his main source of blackmailing, Looney focused his libelous efforts on Wilmerton once he restarted *The News*. Their tempestuous relationship culminated in an afternoon shoot-out on downtown Rock Island's Third Avenue in 1909. Wilmerton managed to put a bullet



in Looney. Family members say Wilmerton was also shot.

The Wilmerton-Looney battle even made *The New York Times*. On February 23, 1909, this famous daily newspaper ran a story about the bitter feud.



*This photograph from Bill Wilmerton shows the Wilmerton family from about the time they lived at 1604 22nd Street. W.W. Wilmerton is seated on left.*

\$75,000 that was raised from local people to support the prosecution against him. Hauberg may have had some personal reasons for his actions. Hauberg's "Aunt Maggie" Schroeder was the police matron under the administrations of Harry Schriver and William McConochie. She took over for Dina Ramser, who resigned

in 1912. She was in charge of as many as 64 women in jail each month. She told her nephew, "I am sorry for

those girls. If they haven't money to pay their fines, they suspend the sentence and

### 36. 1300 24<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Susanne (Denkmann) & John Hauberg Home*

*Today: Hauberg Civic Center*

The Hauberg estate, one of the most magnificent places in the Quad Cities, had a small role in the Looney saga. Susanne Denkmann Hauberg and John Hauberg completed this house in 1911, which was the year before the militia was called to Rock Island. Susanne was the daughter of F.C.A. Denkmann, a founder of the Denkmann-Weyerhaeuser lumber empire.

The 20-room, Prairie-style mansion was donated by the Hauberg heirs in 1956 to the City of Rock Island to use as a civic center. To this day, no alcohol may be served in the mansion; it was one of the few caveats put in place by the Hauberg family.

John Hauberg was instrumental in obtaining the judgments against Looney that ultimately put him in jail. He put up a large share of the



*Aunt Maggie Schroeder was the police matron during the administration of Harry Schriver.*

tell them to bring in the money in so many days, which simply means they are expected to go back to the streets to solicit as they did before."

Hauberg was also important for recording oral histories of old settlers, including one of Frank Payne, who served on the Grand Jury that indicted Looney in 1925.

According to Payne, the grand jury met for three months, which even today is a very long time. The grand jury went over the local prosecutors to get an indictment expert from Chicago and appealed to the State Attorney General. The petit jury was made up of people who had donated toward the \$75,000 to support prosecution of Looney since it was believed they would tend toward a guilty verdict.



*Hauberg family during the 1920s.*

### 37. 1323 25<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Bill & Vivian Gable Residence  
Today: Private Residence*

This unadorned stucco house was a fairly new residence at the time it was occupied by Bill and Vivian Gable. William Gabel, a one-time policeman who had become the proprietor of a soft drink and bootleg saloon, turned evidence on Looney and was murdered for his trouble. However, it was the murder of Gable that ultimately brought Looney down.

Gable had long been paying Looney protection money but balked at

increased fees. Gable and Looney ultimately worked out a payment deal, but Gable paid with a check instead of the customary cash. In the meantime, Looney was working to replace Gable's operation with another unsavory character. Because of the paper trail created by twelve canceled checks, Gable had an ace in the hole. Gable decided to hand them over to the federal investigators, but word of his betrayal got back to Looney. Gable met agents at the Como Hotel on the night of July 31, 1922. He was killed later that night.

Mrs. Gabel, who was respected for her civic and charitable work, was a witness for the grand jury for her husband's murder.



his widowed mother and other family

members. He started working for *The Argus* in 1884, just after the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, as a coal hauler. He worked his way up to reporter, then city editor, then managing editor.



Colligan was a frequent target of slander by *The Rock Island News*, but could ably defend himself in print. In 1925, during Looney's trial for murder in Galesburg, Colligan wrote: "It is impossible to refer to the reclamation of Rock Island by the forces of order and decency without mentioning the name of John Looney. He had been the bogey man of Rock Island for more than 25 years....During his long reign in Rock Island Looney laughed at the law. He wielded a mysterious power over men, especially those holding public office...His scandal paper was the weapon that he employed to bend men to his will and to drum up law clients."

### 39. 2512 8 ½ Avenue

*Looney's Era: Harry McCaskrin House  
Today: Private Residence*

Harry McCaskrin was a candidate for state's attorney and was the chief person to verbally incite the Market Square Riot in 1912. His fiery speech prompted a crowd full of thugs – probably planted by John Looney – to march to city hall and the



police station and start violence. Harry lived in this simple Queen Anne-influenced house with his wife Hazel, a woman very active in civic life, in 1912.



McCaskrin had a bumpy ride politically in the 1900s, but by the end of

Looney's reign he seemed to hit his stride. He ran unsuccessfully for the Illinois House of Representatives in 1906 and 1908 as a Prohibition Party candidate. He was defeated in that 1912 election for state's attorney – and again in 1916. Walter Rosenfield beat him out for the mayor's post in 1925. However, McCaskrin served eight two-year terms, from 1922 to 1938, as a Republican representative in the Illinois State legislature. He died April 10, 1942, at age 63.

Hazel then became the legislator, when she was appointed upon her husband's death. She was elected on her own merits to four more terms until she died in office in 1955.

#### 40. 2556 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Anthony & Margaret*

*Billburg House*

*Today: Private Residence*

Anthony Billburg and the former Margaret Alexander were married in 1905, when she was 32 years old. Margaret was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and Anthony came from Centerville, Iowa. Daughter Euphemia attended Augustana College at the same time Billburg was proprietor of

the "Longest Bar in the World." Another daughter, Katherine, also lived here during the Looney years.

Billburg was in competition with Looney for drinking, gaming and prostitution control. Margaret was known to be the "madam" of the operations. She and her "girls" were arrested once, with the girls each being fined \$15, and Margaret receiving a \$5 fine, before resuming business.

Billburg was the mastermind behind the ambush on John and Connor Looney that resulted in Connor's murder. Billburg eventually served a long prison term for the murder of Connor Looney, despite representation in the murder trial by famed attorney Clarence Darrow. After her husband's trial, Darrow gave Margaret the gun used to shoot Connor Looney. It was passed on to her son, Tom, and is now in the possession of his daughter, who keeps it as part of a Billburg Bar display in her California home.



Margaret died of pneumonia in 1935, leaving behind her husband and four grown children.





be stopped. Ursula was already in the hospital; she had given birth just days earlier. She would return again after collapsing at her brother's funeral.

#### **41. 767 30<sup>th</sup> Street**

*Looney's Era: St. Anthony's Hospital*  
*Today: St. Anthony's Continuing Care Center*

In 1891, Father Thomas Mackin, pastor of St. Joseph's church, invited the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota to start a hospital here. The sisters didn't arrive until 1893, and they immediately opened their first hospital in a 10-room brick house. The hospital was such a success that within a year it proved too small. Mathias Schnell was the contractor for a 30-room addition in 1895, just two years before his disastrous partnership with John Looney. Over the years, many more additions were completed.

It was here that John Looney was brought in 1912 when he was beaten so severely by Mayor Harry Schriver that he required surgery. It was also here 10 years later that Connor Looney lost his eight-hour battle for life after being shot in the Market Square ambush. Ursula's husband, Frank Hamblin, donated blood, but the internal bleeding from the shotgun blast could not

#### **42. 831 30<sup>th</sup> Street**

*Looney's Era: Dina Ramser and Jacob Ramser's Home*  
*Today: Part of the St. Anthony's Complex*

In 1909, Swiss immigrant Dina Ramser was a police matron and the first secretary for a reorganized social agency called Associated Charities. The first office was in the YMCA building, but she soon was in charge of The Association House at 637 17<sup>th</sup> Street. The House was temporary lodging for stranded women and children. In her job, she probably saw a lot of the victimization of women and families that were part of the Looney wake. Eventually, she became a target of Looney's and her brother took an active approach to seeing she wasn't harmed, including beating Looney in a barbershop near his downtown jewelry store. Dina Ramser resigned her post as police matron on January 1, 1912. She continued on in the field as a probation officer. This is where siblings Jake and Dina lived at the time Jake had fisticuffs with Looney.

### 43. 2528 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Charles "Butch"*

*Ginnane House*

*Today: Private Residence*

Charles "Butch" Ginnane, who lived in this house with his brother, aunt and uncle, was a long-time police detective who went down with Police Chief Tom Cox. Ginnane was a good friend of Tom Cox, known mainly to be his bodyguard. On December 5, 1922, the day after Cox was arrested, Butch Ginnane shot himself through the heart while lying on his bed at home.

His aunt was in the home at the time of his suicide. She said he had been depressed lately. "He had been constantly annoyed by Thomas Cox, who called him repeatedly at home over the telephone requesting him to carry out his orders," said Kate Kelly about her nephew to *The Argus*. "Cox wanted Charles to get some letter for him," she said. It turns out "the letter" was evidence of the relationship between Looney and Cox regarding the transport of stolen cars. Fred Tiffin, a black driver for Looney who had the letter in his possession, said Ginnane and his partner, Detective Herman Sehnert, were constantly watching him. Although a pall bearer for Ginnane, Sehnert denied involvement. Sehnert was promoted to Police Chief in 1923 and served in that position until 1944.

Ginnane was 47 years old when he died and had been a policeman for 18 years.



### 44. NE Corner of 24<sup>th</sup> Street & 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Billy Sunday Tabernacle*

*Today: Used Car Lot*

John Looney's activities helped give the city such a reputation for lawlessness that famed evangelist Billy Sunday came to Rock Island in 1919 to conduct a seven-week-long revivalist campaign. Sunday's supporters erected a temporary tabernacle at the northeast corner of this intersection, where the used car place is now. Calling the city a "citadel of sin," Sunday rallied against the vices of lust and liquor. A special target of Sunday's wrath was John Looney. The evangelist's furor made many



converts and raised \$50,000 in donations, but did not stop the activities of Looney and his gang.

From famous ball-player to famous evangelist, Billy Sunday is still remembered today for his energetic preaching style and large, successful evangelistic campaigns across the United States. One of his most famous campaigns was in 1917, when he spent ten weeks in New York and raised over \$100,000 for Red Cross and World War I charities. Liquor and its vices were his common targets and liquor sales often fell dramatically while he was in town. In his lifetime, Billy Sunday addressed over 100 million people without the aid of loud speakers, TV, or radio.

#### 45. 318 24<sup>th</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Helen Van Dale's Place  
Today: Parking Lot*

Helen Van Dale was a partner in prostitution with John Looney, but her testimony helped to clinch a guilty verdict in Looney's 1925 trial for conspiracy to protect gambling, prostitution and liquor trafficking. She came to Rock Island as a teenage prostitute, worked for a time for Anthony and Margaret Billburg, and later opened her own place. With Looney backing, she built an operation

that included 300 girls placed in towns throughout the Midwest, and provided services for Chicago's toughest mobsters. The fact that she was protected by Police Chief Tom Cox aided the successful growth of her "businesses."

Thirty-two year old Van Dale was finally arrested as the gangster influence was collapsing. Agreeing to testify against Looney in the murder of Bill Gabel, she was able to cut a deal for her own charges for "interstate transportation of girls for immoral purposes" to be dropped. Her days ended in 1951 in LaSalle, Illinois, after five marriages, a battle with alcoholism, and a new identity as Eula H. Wonders.



#### 46. 2319 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Bill Gabel's Soft Drinks Establishment  
Today: Parking Lot*

This is the location of Bill Gabel's tavern and his murder on July 31, 1922.

After meeting federal investigators earlier at the Como Hotel, Bill Gabel was getting out of his car just after midnight when shots were fired. Trial testimony said that four bullets penetrated his right side, including the fatal one that entered his heart. The murderers, who had been waiting in ambush, stepped out and shot him down. They then made their escape

in a high-powered automobile. It is believed Connor Looney was the driver. Trial transcripts said that those involved included the Looneys, Charles Ginnane, Louis Ortell, Joe Richards, Leonard Walker and Police Chief Tom Cox. At the time of the murder, Cox claimed to be in Helen Van Dale's place, less than a block away. The federal investigators determined the "movements of the police" were found to be suspicious on the night Gabel was murdered. Despite conflicting testimony, Cox was believed to be at the scene of the murder and manipulated the police schedule so that patrolmen were not on duty in the area. The ever-present Dr. DeSilva came to determine Gable was dead.

Several months later, Looney fled Rock Island to avoid prosecution for Gabel's murder. One year later, he was apprehended in New Mexico, tried, convicted and sentenced to 14 years at Stateville at Joliet. There was no direct evidence that tied Looney to Gable's murder, but the testimony of his former com-patriots was crucial.

MILLS' CAFE  
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**47. 300 Block of 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, West Side**

*Looney's Era: Baker Building, A House of Prostitution*  
*Today: Vacant Land*

In this vicinity the vices of liquor, gambling, and prostitution were so rampant that the area was known as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Street District and sometimes the red light district. Even *The Argus* printed the vicinity as such.

According to *The Argus*, November 27, 1912: "Every room in the Baker Building, 22<sup>nd</sup> Street and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, is rented by sporting women, among their



*Though mostly demolished today, Rock Island's "red light district" buildings were largely intact in the 1950s, as shown in this aerial view.*

number being Swede Mandy and Mattie Larson.”

Prostitute Jennie Mills said “Mrs. Baker rents the building to disreputable women, with a full knowledge of the purpose for which the premises are to be utilized. Liquor is constantly being sold in the Du Prez joint, which is frequented at all hours of the night by lewd women.”

By 1915, Jennie Mills ran her own place in the red light district.

#### 48. 307 22<sup>nd</sup> Street

*Looney's Era: Robert Scott Home  
Today: Robert Young Center*

This was the scene of a terrible shoot-out in the aftermath of Bill Gabel's death. According to *The Argus*, two policemen, James Green and Edward Miner, were killed at Robert Scott's house in the gun battle on October 15, 1922. Eddie Miner was the reassigned patrolman on the night Bill Gabel was murdered. Scott was a leading dope dealer for John Looney and worked for Emeal Davis, Looney's bodyguard.

A call to police headquarters reported that Scott was going to kill his wife. Four officers went to the house. They arrived at the address and the woman was standing in the street. Scott was inside in the back room kitchen. It was dark, not a light on in the house. Scott was standing facing the door with a double barreled shotgun

at his shoulder, when the four officers entered with guns drawn. There ensued a terrific gun battle, including five men with shotguns, revolvers, clubs and saps, in the dark, blazing away. When the light went on, two police officers were dead, and Scott, who was mortally wounded, died soon afterwards.

Looney biographer Rich Hamer believes the police call was a set-up to kill Eddie Miner, who would have been a witness against John Looney for Gabel's murder.



*James Green*



*Edward Miner*

#### 49. 2107 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Davis & Jackson  
Shoeshine  
Today: Voss Building Parking Lot*

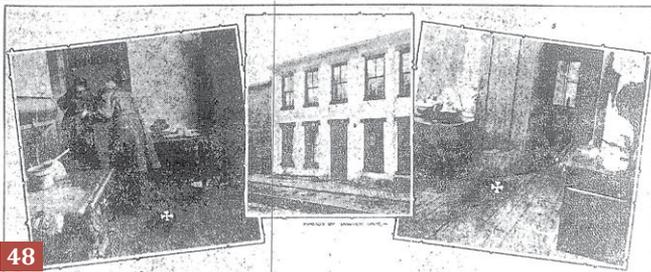
Emeal Davis, a large man with an intimidating presence, was known as Looney's bodyguard. He also represented the gateway for Looney into the black community's vices. Davis owned several houses of prostitution and taverns, including the Red Rose Saloon in Davenport's Bucktown, and transported girls and liquor for Looney. Davis also became Looney's main gun runner and branched into moving stolen cars for the kingpin. Both before and after John Looney, he worked for the railroad.

Davis testified at Looney's trial for the murder of Bill Gable that he had seen John and Connor Looney near Gable's tavern with some

other men on the night of Gabel's murder. According to other witnesses, Davis was one of those men.

Davis had a reputation as both a jovial and a very dangerous man. In 1920, Emeal Davis's "legitimate" business was as a shoeshiner at Davis & Jackson.

### Negro District Apartments and Scene in Death Room Where Battle Fatal to Officers Occurred



## 50. NE Corner 17<sup>th</sup> Street & 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue

*Looney's Era: Sherman Hotel  
Today: Parking Lot*

This parking lot, next to the railroad mural, is the former location of the Sherman Hotel, key to the Looney Legend. The hotel was a favorite gangster hangout, particularly of Connor Looney's. Lawrence Pedigo, one of Looney's main operators, managed the hotel. Later, Pedigo would be a key witness in the Gable murder trial.

It has been said that an altercation over a woman between Connor Looney and Cy Hazlett, who worked on *The Rock Island News*, resulted in a split where Hazlett turned evidence against the Looneys. It is believed that this split brought the vice situation to a head.

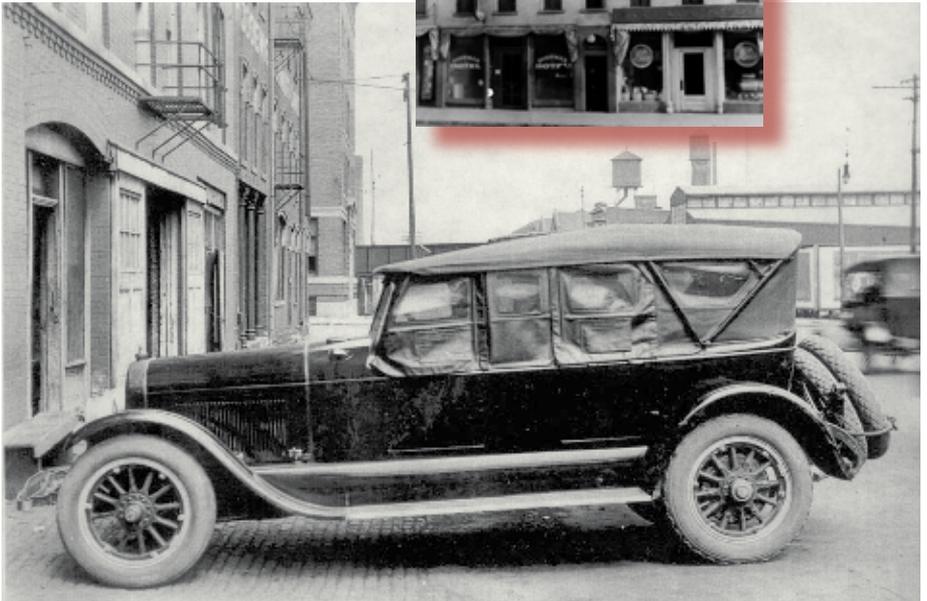
As the story goes, Mrs. Hazel Schadel, a divorcee, went with Hazlett and Mrs. Fern Ehlers to the Sherman Hotel for a drink. Connor came in hopping mad and dragged her outside. Hazlett put a gun to Connor's ribs, and Connor drew his revolver. Mrs. Schadel stepped between the two and she left with "Conny." John Looney fired Hazlett, so he accepted a job with federal prohibition agents

to expose the Looney crime organization. Hazlett gave evidence to enable the prohibition agents to serve a warrant on Connor Looney for a bootlegging charge.

The Sherman Hotel is most infamous, however, as the location of Connor Looney's murder on October 6, 1922. Former lieutenants of Looney's, Anthony Billburg, George Holsapple, Dan Drost and Bill Buckley, were frustrated with Looney's management of the local vice and they wanted a bigger piece of the action. They waited outside the Sherman Hotel to ambush him. When Looney got out of his car and saw Billburg's black Maxwell parked across the street, he shouted to the others with him to run and ducked behind his car. Connor Looney drew a gun and turned to face Billburg's men. Connor had been groomed as a gunman and was known to be an excellent shot. In the ensuing gunfire, Connor was blasted by a shotgun and died later that night, his father by his side. He was 21 years old and



had lived in his father's corrupt world all his life.





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