

Historic Albion Purple Gang Walking Tour

One of the most notorious organized crime groups ever to operate in Michigan – the Depression-era “Purple Gang” – actually used Albion for some of its activities. This walking tour identifies local sites related to the Gang’s activity in Albion, giving you a window to the related to the Gang’s activity in Albion, giving you a window to the past; numbers provided correspond to stops identified on the map.

For a time in the 1920’s and 1930’s, the Purple Gang controlled bootlegging and other organized crime activity in Detroit and throughout eastern and central Michigan. Even Chicago’s Al Capone preferred to buy bootlegged Canadian whiskey from the Purple Gang rather than try to take over the Gang’s territory.

After the conviction of key Purple Gang leaders in a Detroit gangland slaying in the early 1930’s, and after the end of Prohibition, other members of the Gang – including Louis, Sam, and Harry Fleisher, and Sam Stone (alias “Sam Bernstein”) – set up a base for their organized crime activities in Albion, focusing on safe robbing. The local front for the Fleishers’ criminal activities was the Riverside Iron and Metal Company (3), a junkyard located next to the Kalamazoo River. Louis Fleisher rented an apartment (4) across the river so as to keep an eye on the junkyard business.

For their safe-robbing and other criminal work, the Fleishers used a specially enhanced gun-metal colored Graham-Paige sedan they had stolen, later described by state police as “the most completely equipped burglar’s automobile ever seen”. The car sported revolving license plates, bullet-proof glass, metal shields, and removable doors and seats to accommodate large safes. The Gang leased the south stall of the auto storage building (2) just north of the junkyard along the river, and used it to secretly house their “super auto”.

Allegedly, Gang members would show up at the Bohm Theater (1) on Sunday evenings and use the balcony to hold private meetings during the show. They would often place a lookout in front of the theater and would usually leave well before the show was concluded. The Gang also liked to meet at the Streetcar Tavern on Austin Avenue, a bar converted from an old Interurban streetcar. Gangsters Abe “Buffalo Harry” Rosenberg and his brother Louis owned the apartment house attached to the tavern, and operated a service station next door.

Although much of the Purple Gang activity in Albion took place after Prohibition, Albion was no stranger to the Purple Gang and other organized criminal elements during Prohibition. It is said that the Purple Gang often came to Albion’s “West End” (somewhere around Austin Avenue) to purchase home-made liquor. Also, Al Capone (and perhaps many other gangsters) stayed at the Parker Inn on Michigan Avenue during trips between Chicago and Detroit: the original building at 319 East Michigan still stands.

The end of the Gang’s safe-robbing in the “super auto” came in 1936 when, after a string of robberies across southern Michigan (likely including one at the local Kroger grocery store (7) at 225 South Superior Street), their customized Graham-Paige sedan was recognized in its stall and seized. Louis Fleisher, Sam Stone, and their wives were nabbed for possession of unregistered firearms and later sent to prison.

The final chapter on Purple Gang activities around Albion was written in 1945, when Albion resident Senator Warren G. Hooper was gunned down north of Springport in his car on his way home from Lansing. Hooper’s demise prevented him from later testifying on alleged corruption in the Michigan legislature. Harry and Sam Fleisher were later convicted of conspiracy to murder the senator.

How Did the Purple Gang get its Colorful Name?

Legend has it that one day after members of what would become the Purple Gang had established their criminal ways as shoplifting and vandalizing youngsters in Detroit, two local shopkeepers were bemoaning their fate and the youngsters' characters. One of them concluded that the gangs of delinquents were not like other boys, but "rotten, purple like the color of bad meat"