

Mafia Don

By William P. Lazarus

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Dedicated to all of us who still believe in illusions, my wife, daughter, parents,
brothers and friends like Cynthia Shuster-Eakin, Jon Swebilus, Mike Silverstein,
Miriam Huske and too many more to count.

Introduction

The journey to Florida State Prison in Starke is not an easy ride from Daytona Beach. I started out around 8 a.m., driving my new Dodge Neon west on S.R. 40, a two-lane road with tons of trucks and little room to pass except in designated areas. You have to be very careful along there. Some folks get very impatient waiting to pass in the prescribed zones and are not above cutting across double-yellow lines into oncoming traffic just to get around someone crawling along at the speed limit.

Then, after slipping around Ocala, I continued along S.R. 441 before aiming north on I-75 toward Gainesville. Starke is a small community that sits about 35 miles north of the University of Florida along Rainford Road. The drive took close to three hours, which gave me a lot of time to think about the man I was going to interview.

His name is Myron Castle. These days, of course, that name no longer sends a shiver down the spine. Celebrity fades quickly, even when it's attached to someone as notorious as Castle. Unlike some movie stars and singers, he can't re-invent himself behind iron bars. In his day, in 1997, about a decade ago, he was the boogiemaster used to frighten little children at night, the dark avenger from the Mafia. Today, he's on Death Row, and no one knows or cares. When he is executed in a month or so, there will be a small notice in the newspaper and a quick sentence or two on TV. Maybe we'll do a bit more in the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*. He did live in our coverage area once, after all.

I was going to talk to him about his days in the Mafia, the way a writer might look at a relic in a museum and investigate its history. I think he probably has an

interesting story to tell. After all, the Mafia is an integral part of American history and culture, as deeply entwined as Santa Claus and Willie Mays.

It was my idea to do these interviews. My managing editor just shrugged at the suggestion. No one cares about Castle, he was saying silently. I took his shrug as an OK. It does matter, I argued with myself. Maybe someone will learn how to avoid taking this strange, twisted path. Maybe Castle will open up to me, knowing that the end is near and that nothing he says or does will change anything. A former state prosecutor, John Tanner, tried that tactic with Ted Bundy, a mass murderer executed a few years ago. He said they prayed together just prior to Bundy's death. That piece of news cost him his job. But, people forgot and re-elected him later. Castle won't have the same opportunity.

The managing editor sent me to my Lifestyle editor for a final OK. That wasted more time. I had to convince her that the story was important. Carole Klein is a very pleasant woman who has been in the newspaper business for decades. I rely on her judgment. After all, I am only starting out. She thinks the Mafia is passé and that no one would be interested. I disagree, of course. I am interested: Not in the law-breaking aspect, but rather in the basic question of why anyone would become a member of such an organization. The financial benefits may be dandy, at least, until the police close in, but being a social outcast can't be much fun.

Carole was right about one thing: the Mob has seen its day, but, at one time, organized crime meant something in Florida, as I discovered by checking out the internet. I do not know what reporters did before the internet was created. I just punch in a question or two and up pop the answers.

In the early years, before the Mafia got organized and moved beyond the Black Hand or similar monikers in the big cities up north, Florida wasn't a haven for Sicilian gangsters like New York, Chicago or Boston. The biggest pre-Mafia racketeer was probably a native Floridian, Charlie Wall. At first, Wall and his colleagues made money through an illegal (What else? This is a criminal organization after all) lottery, called *bolita*, which showed up in the 1880s. Until the state got into the lottery business, *bolita* was any mobster's major cash cow in Florida. Wall wasn't really part of the Mafia; he was more of a free-lance gangster. Of course, after the families divided up the country and established links with Boston's Filippo "Phil" Buccola, Buffalo's Stefano Maggaddino, Detroit's Purple Gang, Philadelphia's Joseph Bruno and all, Wall became part of the criminal cabal. I suppose he really had no choice: join or get rubbed out.

He testified before Congress in the 1950s, joining big shots like Frank Costello, one of the founders of the Syndicate who had retired by then. In 1955, someone cut Wall's throat.

Florida was actually introduced to the Mafia in the 1920s by a Sicilian immigrant named Salvatore "Red" Italiano, who wasn't picky about his sources of income. He tried narcotics, gambling, loansharking and bootlegging – an impressive resume until he was arrested in Cleveland in 1928. Within a decade, everyone who wanted a piece of the action was finding himself at the wrong end of some kind of weapon. Giuseppe "Joseph" Vaglicia was sent off to St. Peter in 1937; a year later, Mario Perla went to sleep with the fish. Two years later, drug lord Ignazio Antinori messed up some unexplained deal and never got a second chance. And so on.