

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Fictional mobster tales are eerily plausible

**Tracy Conrad**

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The book is titled “The Low Desert” for a reason: The pun is too good to resist. Tod Goldberg writes about outlaws, bandits, gangsters, mobsters and all sorts of lowlifes in his latest offering. The desert has long been thought a haven for real life bad guys so it isn’t a big leap of imagination to populate the Coachella Valley and the forbidding desert between Palm Springs and Las Vegas with criminals of every ilk.

Goldberg’s book is entirely fiction, and unabashedly so. But the desert had real-life gangsters and outlaws. There are also persistent stories that purport to be true but are merely tall, tall tales.

The history of the mob in the desert has been chronicled by Goldberg’s friend and former Desert Sun newspaperman Bruce Fessier in an exhaustive series of articles called “Gangsters in Paradise” in 2014. Fessier recounted real stories of the real mafia and in the process debunked a few myths.



**Goldberg**

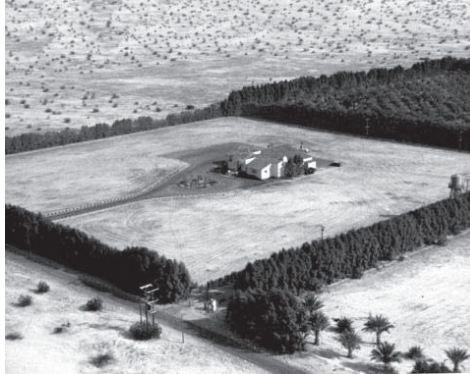
The first notorious outlaw in the area was the unfortunate Willie Boy who was lovesick and unlucky. The hardscrabble desert at the very beginning of the 20th century was not a plum spot for criminals as there was not much to steal. But Willie Boy wasn’t a hardened criminal; his opposition to the law was accidental.

Organized crime with bona fide mobsters first appeared on the scene in the early 1930s. At the start, Prohibition was still the law of the land and it was natural to start clandestine gambling and drinking spots. Then in the depths of the Depression, citizens looked the other way in tacit agreement that gambling might be good for the failed economy.

Al Wertheimer, a notorious mobster from Detroit’s Purple Gang owned the Dunes Club in the Cathedral City, far enough away from everything that it was easy to ignore. A palatial Spanish Mediterranean compound, the Dunes Club was very fashionable and exciting with its multiple illicit offerings.

With success at the Dunes, Wertheimer built the Colonial House (now the Colony Palms), an elegant Spanish-Revival building in Palm Springs, complete with a secret entrance that led to a hidden gambling den catering so the glamorous and wealthy who could easily afford higher-stakes games. One wall of the underground retreat featured a mural of three nude women, two kneeling on either side of the central third, who stood with arms outstretched as though flinging “good luck” into the crowd.

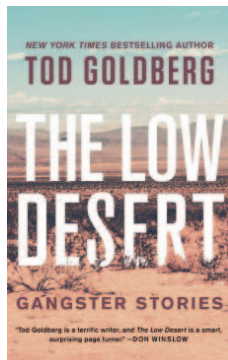
Wertheimer’s own good luck ran out in 1941. Locals, tired of the increase in crime attendant to gaming, drinking and prostitution, and outraged at Wertheimer’s brazen move inside the city limits, asked that the



An aerial view of the Dunes Club in Cathedral City owned by Al Wertheimer, circa 1935. COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Riverside sheriff clean up the town. Wertheimer was duly arrested on charges of operating gambling establishments, gaming with dice and possession of slot machines. The gambling institutions were shuttered.

Wertheimer’s Purple Gang had a business relationship with Al Capone before coming to the desert. Capone tolerated and cooperated with the Purple Gang because he reportedly did not want to expand from Chicago into the Detroit area. Perhaps this connection explains how the tale of Al Capone being in Desert Hot Springs came to be. But it is a fiction. Capone was in jail by the time he is supposed to have been sequestered in mineral spring bubbles.



“The Low Desert” by local author Tod Goldberg.

COURTESY OF TOD GOLDBERG

property from any direction, two men in a jeep with loaded rifles would accost you and demand that you turn back. If you looked at the large house through binoculars you could see more men similarly armed. This property was called Bennett Ranch. Of course, this

was very exciting to speculate about in the sleepy laid-back desert. People would say: ‘It’s a gangster hideout.’ Others would say, ‘Al Capone used to live there and now other mob guys have taken it over.’ None of this was the truth. What was true was that a top executive of Ford Motors had built his home there, and there was a great deal of labor unrest and violence. His sweet little wife, Josie, who died just a few years ago, stayed in that house for more than 40 years. The armed men were just there for their protection until the labor problems were resolved.”

But the notion of bad guys hiding out in the desert was firmly entrenched by the 1940s. “There are layers to this town, and all these people came to hide away,” said Fessier back in 2014 when discussing his series of articles. “It didn’t matter if they were mafia or if you were gay or if you were a movie star trying to get away from the media ... you came to the Coachella Valley to get away and live a life of freedom.”

That freedom created interesting circumstances for the desert. There was an unlikely mix of people, a panoply of strange characters, here enjoying the sunshine and the tolerant, low-key atmosphere.

Goldberg grew up in the desert and saw the juxtaposition of people from varied walks of life here firsthand. His mother, Jan Curran, was a socialite divorcee in the desert and became The Desert Sun’s society editor. Goldberg says she dated local mobsters.

Goldberg’s intense interest in organized crime began as a teenager when he had an encounter with a criminal at the Riviera Hotel. Fascinated by the “duality” of the mobster in modern life, he began writing fiction about violent criminals who are romanticized by American culture, particularly in movies and on TV. Somehow the mobsters of yesteryear are more interesting than contemporary thugs and have been glamorized by “The Godfather,” “The Sopranos” and the like.

Although mobsters of different family affiliations came to Palm Springs, there was détente. No one gang claimed the desert as exclusive territory, making it somewhat neutral ground. Wise guys were on holiday: relaxing and enjoying the perfect weather. If anything, Fessier says, they were the first snowbirds.

Goldberg’s fictional tales are eerily plausible and reveal tortured lives on the edge of respectability. Gruesome details in the stories are unfamiliar and even shocking to law-abiding folks, but the recognizable desert places make the stories ring true. Goldberg’s wild imagination of underworld crime is painted on the page by his superb prose. “The Low Desert” creates a sense of what it was like when real mobsters roamed the valley.

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