

Wisconsin - Gangster Playground

By Chad Lewis

When Chicago bootleggers and bank robbers were looking to lay low during Prohibition, they headed north to the natural seclusion of Wisconsin's small towns and backcountry. Gangsters like Al "Scarface" Capone, "Polack" Joe Saltis, and George "Bugs" Moran turned Wisconsin into their own personal criminal vacationland, entertaining associates in their up-north fortresses while running illegal speakeasies, gambling halls, brothels and bootlegging operations. On any given night, law-abiding Wisconsinites could eat, drink, dance and mingle alongside some of the nation's deadliest criminals.

During the 1930s, the bootleggers gave way to the more notorious bank robbers. Soon, hardened crooks like George "Baby Face" Nelson, Alvin "Creepy" Karpis and John Dillinger were frolicking around their Wisconsin playground. Eventually local law enforcement and the FBI all but eliminated the major gangsters of the day, and slowly their stories faded into Wisconsin's forgotten history. Even though gangsters no longer roam Wisconsin, many of their hiding spots are still in operation. So put on your Zoot Suit, gas up the Packard and go on the lam to explore Wisconsin's gangster past.

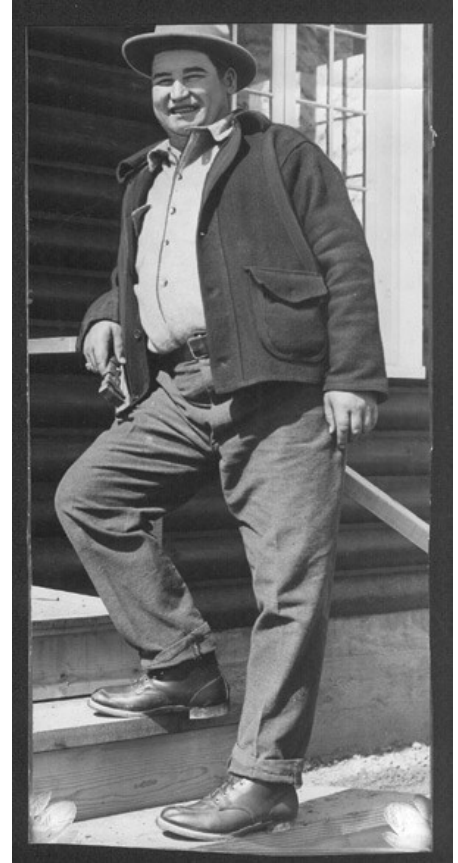
Lake Geneva

Situated a few miles from the Illinois border, the secluded resort town of Lake Geneva provided the perfect getaway for gangsters looking to hide from the prying eyes of the law. They also knew that resort owner (and local slot-machine baron) Hobart Hermanson would provide them with no-questions-asked lodging at his sprawling Lake Como Inn.

Years ago, the property was split to create the French Country Inn and the Watersedge Bed and Breakfast. In the 1920s and 30s, the part of the Hermanson property now known as the Watersedge Bed and Breakfast was a gangsters' paradise, housing a speakeasy in the basement, several gambling rooms and a bootlegging operation out in the garage. Nearly every big-name gangster of the time slept here while at the Lake Como Inn. In fact, George "Bugs" Moran frequented the inn so often they named his favorite room the Bugs Moran Suite. This room also functioned as the counting room where Hermanson would tally up the change from his numerous area slot machines. (According to local legend, the old slot machines were dumped in the lake before the place was raided and are resting there underwater to this day.) The suite is one of the inn's most popular rooms, and with the original heavy-duty door, 15-inch concrete reinforced walls and iron bars covering the windows, you can rest soundly in the same security the gangsters enjoyed.

Just down the road from the B&B is the beautiful Danish-styled French Country Inn. Originally serving as Lake Como Inn's main house and restaurant, gangsters often danced the night away at the bar before heading off to their private

"Polack" Joe Saltis



Capone used the lake behind his hideout to fly in Canadian whiskey and dispose of competitors and enemies.

rooms. Local old-timers recount stories of the gangsters eating with their backs to the wall to ensure no one got the drop on them. Today the restaurant is just as charming as it was in the 1930s, but you may want to sit with your back to the wall just in case. The main lodging rooms are located upstairs and are still outfitted with the same luxuries that lured the big-name crooks back in the day.

Visiting gangsters and their wives and molls spent their days strolling through downtown Lake Geneva throwing around their seemingly limitless stacks of stolen money. Many of the original buildings and even some of the same businesses the gangsters frequented are still open, including the Baker House. Built in 1885, the hotel and restaurant also doubled as a speakeasy during the early 1930s.

Hayward

When the “heat” got too high in Chicago, gangsters escaped to the cool seclusion of the Northwoods. Every summer Hayward was overrun with crooks looking to relax among vacationing families. In fact, some criminals enjoyed the area so much that they decided to put down permanent roots.

One of the first gangsters to migrate to the area was “Polack” Joe Saltis, a deadly beer baron looking to escape the dangers of gang life in Chicago. In 1929, Saltis decided to build a luxurious lodge in the nearby town of Winter. At a cost of over \$100,000, Barker Lake Lodge included several guest cabins, a nine-hole golf course and more wildlife than a zoo. At one point, nearly the entire town was employed building or maintaining the lodge, which Saltis used to entertain a never-ending parade of gangsters seeking temporary sanctuary in the safety of the woods. When Prohibition ended, however, Saltis quickly lost everything and found himself back in Chicago, where he died a penniless man. Yet Saltis’ loss is your gain, as the current owner has gone to great lengths to preserve the lodge’s sordid history. From the upstairs rooms that have changed little over the years to the bullet holes still lodged in the walls, the Barker Lodge truly transports you back to the days of Wisconsin’s wild past.

When Capone wasn’t running his crime organization in Chicago, he was getting some R&R at his hideout in Couderay. Not only did Capone use this lavish lodge – complete with 18-inch-thick concrete walls and a stone guard tower – to entertain his colleagues, he also had illegal Canadian whiskey flown in to his private backyard lake. Behind his home, Capone constructed a jail cell that he used to “negotiate” terms with his competitors. Those who didn’t come around to Capone’s way of thinking were said to have ended up in a watery grave on the bottom of his lake. For decades, Al Capone’s Hideout served as a popular tourist attraction until it was foreclosed on in 2009. The Lac Courte Oreilles tribe eventually purchased the land but have not yet announced their plans for the property.

Few people realize that many of the deadliest gangsters were also avid outdoorsmen. Some of Hayward’s best fishing guides made a small fortune providing their services to gangsters, and one of their most popular fishing destinations was the Chippewa Flowage. Chicago gangster Joey Aiuppa was staying there at Herman’s Landing Resort when he allegedly caught a 69-pound, 11-ounce musky. On the lam, Aiuppa could hardly take credit for the record-setting catch and instead sold it to Louis Spray, who registered it as his own and claimed the world



THE REAL AL CAPONE...actual photo of the notorious gangster. He always hid his scar from the camera.

record – one that stands to this day. Or so goes the story told by Aiuppa’s driver, James “Pepsi” Buonomo, who set the record straight a few years before his death in 2009. Stop by The Landing, which still functions as a full-service resort, and cast a line or two. You may even get lucky and catch the next world-record musky; just make sure you are on the right side of the law when you go to register it.

Manitowish Waters

Manitowish Waters is legendary for its gangster activity, including one of the FBI’s most infamous shootouts, popularized by the 2009 movie *Public Enemies*. In April 1934, the FBI discovered that John Dillinger, “Baby Face” Nelson, Homer Van Meter, John Hamilton, Tommy Carroll and several of their molls were holed up at Little Bohemia Lodge. The FBI flew into the area and drove to nearby Voss’ Birchwood Lodge to plan their ambush. (Family-owned since 1910, Voss’ today features 18 cabins and six rooms in the main lodge.)

Soon after their arrival, the FBI learned the gangsters were leaving that night instead of the next morning as originally planned. The agents decided to strike then and raced toward Little Bohemia, just over a mile down the road from Voss’ resort.

They pulled into Little Bohemia just as three local men were leaving. Mistaking them for the gangsters, the agents started firing, which alerted the real gangsters who got off their own shots (two agents would eventually die) before slipping out a back window and disappearing into the night.

Lodge employees knew the identities of their infamous guests but it was the off-season, after all, and they needed the business. They later told reporters the men were friendly, told great stories and tipped really well. Although the establishment no longer offers lodging, there is an amazing display of the weapons, clothing and other personal items left behind after the mobsters’ hasty exit. From May through mid-October, tour the room John Dillinger stayed in and see the original bullet holes in the lodge walls. Visit year-round to belly up to the bar just like Homer Van Meter did or order up a steak in Baby Face Nelson’s seat.

Fleeing the scene of the deadly shootout at Little Bohemia, Nelson found his way to a small, secluded cabin in Lac Du Flambeau. Nelson took the cabin’s residents hostage and spent three nights there before hightailing it back to Chicago. Several years later, Dillman’s Bay Resort purchased the cabin, hauled it across the lake and added it to their resort. The cabin (#5–Fisherman) is still at the resort and provides one of the most unique lodging opportunities in Wisconsin: spending the night in the same room as one of history’s most notorious gangsters. Sweet dreams!



George “Bugs” Moran