

The DiCarlo Story by Michael A. Tona

The crime family of western New York was not at all the Magaddino-monolith often described in mob histories. In fact, the Buffalo branch of that organization had already existed for decades by the time notorious boss Stefano Magaddino settled in the region. The Buffalo branch frequently resisted Magaddino control over the years and eventually threw off his leadership to briefly restore an older DiCarlo-Pieri underworld dynasty.

I understand that may seem like historical heresy, and I do not make those statements lightly. A number of disconnected events, combined with more than thirty-five years of active research and the recent publication of a two-volume biography of Joseph DiCarlo entitled, *DiCarlo: Buffalo's First Family of Crime*, have provided me with a unique perspective on regional underworld history and a desire to share that perspective with all who care to listen.

My views of the underworld began to develop during childhood. Raised in a Sicilian-Italian family in the Buffalo area, I became well acquainted with local gangland lore. Family gatherings often included tales of mob violence recalled by relatives reared in the Italian colony of Buffalo's Lower West Side. Uncle Angelo Tona, who served as a prosecutor in the Organized Crime Section of the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office during the Gallo-Profaci wars, fanned my interest in the subject with his fascinating stories.

While pursuing a degree in criminal justice from the State University of New York College at Buffalo in the early 1970s, my attraction to underworld history was enhanced through interaction with Joe Giambra. A detective in the Buffalo police department and an expert on the subject of local organized crime, Giambra taught a course on the subject at the University of Buffalo. Giambra also happened to be an old family friend. At that time, I was reading whatever books I could find on organized crime history. Almost everything I found related to New York City. Western New York was barely mentioned, and any references to Buffalo spoke about the "Magaddino Crime Family." My primary interest was Buffalo, and I felt there must be a lot more to the local history than merely Magaddino.

As my interest began to focus on crime figure Joseph DiCarlo, who by that time had achieved celebrity status as an elder statesman of the Buffalo Arm, Giambra arranged an introduction. He invited me to lunch at Santasiero's Restaurant and, upon my arrival, brought me over to a man seated at the table beside the pay telephone. "Mike, meet Joe DiCarlo," Giambra said.



DiCarlo in 1967.

I couldn't believe it. I shook DiCarlo's hand and said, "Hello." And that was the entirety of my first "meeting" with Joseph DiCarlo, but it changed me. Through my lunch with Giambra, I watched as other restaurant patrons went over to DiCarlo's table and greeted him warmly and respectfully. I had thought of DiCarlo merely as a former gangster, someone whose criminal endeavors made local headlines. But there was much more to him than those headlines.

I became a regular at Santasiero's, which served as a sort of afternoon "office" for DiCarlo in those days. Every now and then, I noticed DiCarlo stepping away from "his table" in order to speak privately with some visitors in the restaurant's rear dining room. I tried to identify the visitors and to imagine the content of the discussion, relating it to what I understood to be the current events of the Buffalo underworld.

I managed to speak briefly with DiCarlo on two other occasions. After writing a college research paper on DiCarlo, Giambra arranged for me to interview my subject at the restaurant. It didn't go well. Words didn't come easily for me in DiCarlo's pres-

ence. The intimidating arrival of Sam Pieri at Santasiero's mercifully cut the interview short.

Then, in 1978, my Great Uncle Pete, who had moved away from western New York in the late 1930s, paid a visit. I took Uncle Pete to lunch at Santasiero's. As he walked through the door, he and DiCarlo instantly recognized each other. They exchanged handshakes and cheek kisses and spoke together in Sicilian. When their conversation was finished, Uncle Pete explained to me that DiCarlo had pulled some strings for him at City Hall back in 1933. Those strings allowed Uncle Pete to obtain a liquor license after Prohibition. (I later discovered through a search of National Archives documents that Uncle Pete had a 1931 bootlegging arrest on his record.)

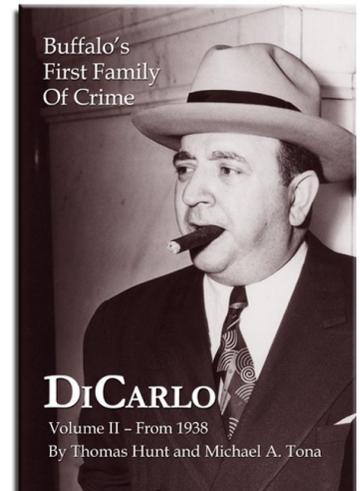
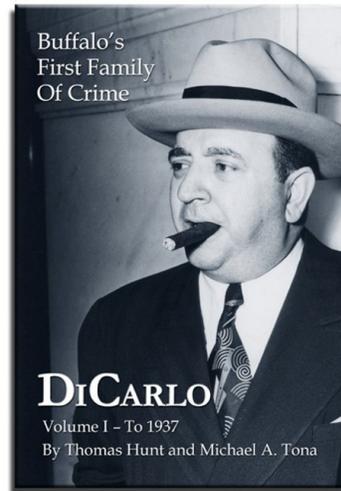
Each of these experiences left an impression on me. They made history spring to life.

My most startling DiCarlo-related moment occurred in 1980, the year Joseph DiCarlo died. I returned home from work and noticed a man sitting in a parked car across the street. It was an odd sight. The street was narrow and busy, and no one ever parked there. I mustered the courage for a closer look, disguising my advance as a visit to the mailbox. When I got to the street, the car moved quickly forward and pulled into my driveway. A man emerged and identified himself as an FBI agent. He began asking me about local underworld figures and a recent gangland slaying. I said I knew only what I read in the newspapers and had no idea why he would think otherwise. The agent reached into his briefcase and pulled out a copy of my DiCarlo research paper. It had been found among the personal belongings of the recent murder victim. It was a frightening link, but it also communicated that the bits of information I had already gathered were of interest even to those who had personal knowledge of Buffalo's underworld history.

I stepped up my research at that point, and requested access to FBI records on Joseph DiCarlo, a file holding several thousand pages. The release process was a lengthy one. I needed to submit a number of Freedom of Information Act complaints over the course of a few years in order to have the file finally released. When I read through the documents, I was struck by the parallels between Buffalo mob history and the life story of Joseph DiCarlo. They were born at about the



DiCarlo in 1922



Available through Barnes & Noble, Amazon and other booksellers.

same time and of the same father - DiCarlo's father Giuseppe was the first known Sicilian underworld boss in Buffalo. DiCarlo and the crime family matured together, growing in wealth and influence. Their hard times also coincided. As DiCarlo entered his retirement, the Buffalo Arm began to disintegrate. It did not survive long after his death.

The final section of DiCarlo's FBI file was shockingly familiar. It was my college research paper again! I felt honored to have my work included in the official documentation. It again sent the message that what I had to say on the subject was of interest and value to others, and it convinced me that I would someday document the history of organized crime in western New York by telling the complete story of Joseph DiCarlo, his family and his associates. Through the years, my research quickly grew to include court documents, police records, interviews, family trees, naturalization files and a mountain of newspaper clippings.

A writing partnership with crime historian Thomas Hunt, starting in 2006, made the DiCarlo biography a reality. Tom brought his own resources, knowledge and writing skills to the project. Together we discovered links between the DiCarlo underworld faction and other regional organized crime groups from early 1900s Black Handers to the criminal organizations of our modern era.

After many years, the DiCarlo project is completed. The history of western New York organized crime - its rise, its many rackets, its acts of bloody violence, its leaders, its rivalries, its connections to other crime syndicates in the United States and Canada, and its ultimate collapse - is at last available to the reading public.

DiCarlo: Buffalo's First Family of Crime is available in hardcover, trade paperback, and e-book formats for Kindle and Nook/iBooks. Additional information can be obtained through buffalomob.com.