

WILLIE BIOFF, IATSE LOW LIFE

BIOFF, Willie Morris gangland murder victim (1955)

It is difficult to improve on Willie Bioff's self-description, offered under oath from a Chicago witness stand in 1943. On that occasion Bioff told the court, "I am just a low, uncouth person. I'm a low-type sort of man." Some might suggest, all things considered, that the self-assessment stopped short of defining his loathsome character.

A Russian native, born in 1900, Bioff immigrated to Chicago with his family, as a child. By age 10 he was already pimping girls from his slum neighborhood; at 16 he was associated with brothers Jake and Harry Guzik, later high-ranking members of Al Capone's criminal syndicate. Bioff's natural sadism kept his streetwalkers in line, and later served him well as a slugger in various labor rackets. One of his mob assignments in the 1930s was muscling club owners who balked at booking entertainers represented by the Music Corporation of America (MCA); another was collaborating with like-minded felon George Browne in a scheme conceived by Capone successor Frank (The Enforcer) Nitti, to seize control of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Motion Picture Operators (IATSE). With Bioff at his side, treating the opposition to displays of brute force, Browne

easily captured the IATSE's presidency and prepared for an all-out attack on the movie industry at large.

Step one was consolidation of the union's grip on theaters from coast to coast, including a contract provision that required employment of a second, superfluous projectionist in every movie house. Bioff later described the means by which he persuaded theater owner Jack Miller to cooperate: "I told Miller the exhibitors would have to pay two operators for each booth. Miller said, 'My God! That will close up all my shows.' I said, 'If that will kill grandma, then grandma must die.' Miller said that two men in each booth would cost about \$500,000 a year. So I said, why don't you make a deal? And we finally agreed on \$60,000. You see, if they wouldn't pay, we'd give them lots of trouble. We'd put them out of business—and I mean out."

Bioff and Browne soon took their campaign to Hollywood and New York, where Willie demanded a \$2 million payoff from Nick Schenck, the CEO of Loew's Incorporated. Schenck bargained the squeeze

down to \$1 million, payable over four years, but it was all gravy for Bioff and Browne. Together, they initially split 50 percent of the kickbacks, while sending the rest to Chicago. Nitti and company soon demanded 75 percent of the take for themselves, but by then the cash flow was so massive that Bioff and Browne had no grounds for complaint.

Trouble began for the mob's top extortionists when Bioff encountered right-wing columnist Westbrook Pegler at a Hollywood party. Bioff's "low, uncouth" manners irked Pegler, and distaste turned to hunger as Pegler uncovered tales of Bioff's syndicate connections. Unaided by friend and frequent source J. Edgar Hoover (whose FBI staunchly denied the existence of organized crime until 1961), Pegler dug into Bioff's background and uncovered multiple convictions for beating his girls in Chicago. The six-month sentence for one such conviction, levied in 1922, had never been served, and Pegler harped on the subject in print until Chicago authorities finally issued a warrant for Bioff's arrest in November 1939. Willie served five months, beginning on April 15, 1940, and while friendly guards made his confinement as pleasant as possible (including daily deliveries of iced beer by the tubful), Bioff emerged to find new problems waiting for him.



In Bioff's absence the Internal Revenue Service had noted a \$69,000 omission from his declared income for 1937. Digging a little deeper, agents uncovered Bioff's Hollywood extortion scam and followed the trail to George Browne. On May 23, 1941, both men were indicted on racketeering and tax evasion charges. Their trial opened on October 6, 1941, and both were convicted three weeks later; Bioff received a 10-year sentence, while Browne was slapped with an eight-year term. Desperate for leniency, the pair "rolled over" on their Chicago sponsors, providing testimony that secured racketeering indictments against Nitti and six top-ranked associates, including Paul (The Waiter) Ricca, Phil D'Andrea, Charles (Cherry Nose) Gioe, Lou Kaufman, and Johnny Roselli. Nitti was found shot to death in Chicago on March 19, 1943, allegedly a suicide. The trial of his surviving codefendants opened on October 5, 1943, with Browne and Bioff as the prosecution's star witnesses. All six of the accused were convicted on November 31, 1943, and sentenced to varying prison terms.

Bioff and Browne were rewarded for their testimony with early release in December 1944. Browne

promptly disappeared as if the Earth had swallowed him, while Bioff made his way to Phoenix, settling there under the pseudonym of William Nelson. In 1952 he donated \$5,000 to the senatorial campaign of department store magnate Barry Goldwater, thus earning himself an influential friend. Bioff shared Goldwater's fondness for the gambling dens of Las Vegas, Nevada, and soon went to work part-time for GUS GREENBAUM, syndicate manager of the Riviera Hotel and Casino. Perhaps unknown to Bioff-Nelson, the Riviera was bankrolled by Chicago mobsters—none of whom, despite the passage of a decade, had forgotten Bioff's treachery. On November 4, 1955, Bioff climbed into his pickup truck at home, waved farewell to his wife, and pressed the truck's starter. A powerful bomb exploded beneath the hood, demolishing the vehicle and killing Bioff instantly. After his death "Nelson's" identity was revealed in lurid press reports that embarrassed Senator Goldwater (but which failed to stop him from associating with other known mobsters in Nevada and Arizona). The bombing, like so many other "hits" ordered from the Windy City, remains unsolved today.



Willie Bioff car bombing, Nevada, November 4, 1955.

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