

ON THE BOOKSHELF

"Al Capone and the 1933 World's Fair: The End of the Gangster Era in Chicago"

By William Hazelgrove (Rowman & Littlefield)

Organized crime turned Chicago into a private fiefdom; elected government had effectively ceased to exist. The Great Depression came crashing down at the end of the "Roaring Twenties", 10 years after the Volstead Amendment essentially drove Americans to drink illegally. That created vast fortunes for those who smuggled in booze and beer, such as Al Capone.

Forty years after the Columbian Exposition, the business leaders of Chicago decide to have another world's fair. In 1933, 15 million Americans were unemployed, and one-third of the banks had failed. The Fair would declare to the world that Chicago would survive the Depression and the growing intergang warfare that was piling up a body count of gangsters and cronies.

The story of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair is told here through the eyes of several interesting figures. There's aspiring entertainer Sally Rand, who became famous for her lack of costume; Al Capone, who liked to think of himself as a benevolent dictator but was a ruthless and vicious thug; Rufus and Charles Dawes gave the fair a theme and then found financing during the worst economic crisis the country had ever seen; and several other business leaders who set up a hit squad to stop the gangsters and take back their city.

The fair, called A Century of Progress, allowed working-class women with little education to make money in the worst times of the Great Depression. It was a "secular celebration that provided a beacon of hope after the carnage of The Great War (WWI), the hedonism of the 1920's, and the collapse of the American economic system."

Some of the marvels to be seen: corn popped with microwaves; x-ray booths; television; make long-distance calls; see an actual car assembly line; the House of Tomorrow featuring synthetic building materials, dishwashers and air conditioning; The Hall of Science was dazzling; the fair was nicknamed "The Rainbow City:" thanks to 24 brilliant colors of paint on the Hall of Science; Judy Garland sang; Sally Rand danced. New methods of rapid construction of buildings used the new materials of Masonite, vinyl, sheetrock, plywood, asbestos, and Formica, plus the floating Cantilevered roof. Modernism in architecture would result. The designers had to create a new peninsula for the Great Lake, rebuild the sewage and water systems to accommodate the crowds (while avoiding cholera), create an unprecedented amount of electrical lighting; and bring down the most notorious gangster in the country. It is a bigger-than-life story!

The author returns to ON THE BOOKSHELF on WTBF during American History Month to talk about the event, the era and the people of his new book. Hope you will join us!