

# AUSTIN J. ROCHE and the SACRAMENTO POLICE DEPARTMENT

By E.A. Hunter

## An Introduction

“That’s the one that did it,” replied Paul Steuer (not his real name) when reminded of the then-famous raid on the “window girls” of the West End. It was February 15, 1938 that became Austin J. Roche’s own Ides of March. Because so many rooming houses’ owners were adversely affected by the raid, pressure was on for the chief to be sent home. The window girls would endure for another 30 years or so before their territory would be sold to the state at fair market value and the property owners would move on to other interests. By the early 1960s, prostitution was well on the way to going underground. Gambling would be legalized and a newly-professionalized police force would have to learn to practice good behavior.

In 1938, however, corruption was the order of the day at all levels of municipal government. There was desire for reform, but not by those who could effect change, so the super cop from back east was reduced to footnote status. He was a glitch, a slip of the gears. His vision would not be realized until the late 1950s, when a pair of police chiefs would force change upon the department, bringing it in line with state regulations. This is not their story though. This is about a man who must have felt like Don Quixote with city manager James S. Dean as his Pancho. He was on his own. He ended up swallowed up by a beast with an insatiable appetite, only to be spewed back up and sent on his way.

### 1. Rowboat Row and the West End

Locals once called lower J Street, “Rowboat Row,” because it had “Oars on either side.” Not only were there women of easy virtue walking that street, but there were also “window girls” who worked out of “rooming houses,” mostly at 2<sup>nd</sup> and L streets who tried to lure passerby while posing seductively in windows facing the street. If a man dared to turn down the opportunity to pass some time with a window girl, he might be subject to a torrent of verbal abuse regarding his manhood. That would usually be the worst of it. Still, some residents of the West End tired of such obnoxious behavior so often. Not being property owners, these residents didn’t have much say about the matter. It was alleged that a man named Charles K. McClatchy was investigating for an editorial for his paper, the Sacramento Bee. In response to his questioning at the door of one brothel, a whore dumped her chamber pot on his head. If true, this incident would have helped to divide the property owners and other respected citizens in terms of what sort of vice would be tolerated.

Not as blatant and a bit more respectable, were the book makers. There were “books” located at several addresses in the West End. One could place a bet on any horse race in the nation. It was said that you could trust a bookie with your money far more than any bank. In the depression, banks were not as secure as they became, so a bookie could become quite respectable, just by being honest.

Other major enterprises were bootlegging and narcotics. There were also the usual, legal businesses commonly associated with a river city, but for the purpose of this article, the more legitimate the business, the less relevant it is to the story. Gambling was far more acceptable to citizens of both genders. A bookie's word was his bond. A book in the West End could operate with relatively minimal impact on the surrounding neighborhood.

Prostitution was very different. Brothels operated openly, obviously and in a gaudy manner. They could be seen soliciting pedestrians everywhere west of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and north of T, operating out of "rooming houses" in the West End, particularly the previously-mentioned cross streets of 2<sup>nd</sup> and L streets, where it appeared that the madams and their workers had taken a firm hold. They would not have been so successful but for the cozy relationship with the police. It was not a simple matter of a beat cop taking a payoff for protection. It went much deeper than that. Relationships went back decades. An excellent example would be the story of William Gormley and the madam Fanny Brown. William F. Gormley was a sheriff-coroner. When Brown died, she left the bulk of her valuables to Gormley. At some point, Gormley left law enforcement to operate at least two mortuaries full-time. One was at 8<sup>th</sup> Street between I and J. In the 1920s, he opened a funeral home at 20<sup>th</sup> and M Streets (M is now Capitol) which bears his name to this day.

There were also too-often-repeated rumors about a cop who owned a rooming house in his wife's name where they ran a brothel. The question of how a man could afford a rooming house on a cop's salary was never asked. Property owners made huge profits from saloons, books and brothels. They never felt the adverse effects of their businesses because they never lived in the West End.

Those who did live in the West End were a mix of resident laborers, transient laborers and other less-than-legal employees. The transient laborers had very little influence on city policy. They only stayed until the next season started. Then it was off to ranches, farms, mines or lumber camps until they weren't needed anymore and were dismissed with their pay to wait for the next job. These people, mostly uneducated men, would use places such as Al Andler's Style Shop as banks. The merchants would hold their money for them. It is unknown how honest the merchants were with the workers, since, if they were not, the laborers had virtually no recourse.

A cop with a beat in the West End during the 1930s was like a kid in a candy store, or, more appropriately, an alcoholic at a bar. There were payoffs and "freebees" galore. Everyday brought something a little more interesting than routine police work. There was usually not much in the way of paperwork, since arrests were seldom needed to keep order. The cops worked for those who paid for the service. Everyone else didn't really count for much.

Still, there were residents of the West End who were getting fed up with the situation. When they'd pass through an area known for its "rooming houses," the women in these houses sat in windows and were dressed so as to leave very little to the imagination.

Parents did not want to have to explain certain things to their young children. Enough was enough. “Bawdy houses” had truly reached a saturation point.

In December, 1936, police chief William Hallanan resigned rather than face a probe of some of his top officers. He told the papers only that he wanted to give his “nerves a rest.” The papers dutifully printed his story and just as dutifully neglected to mention any news of a possible scandal.

By the time Hallanan left office, there were a lot of citizens who were demanding changes in the police department. Residents in and near the West End wanted to put an end to criminal enterprise there. They’d been fighting an uphill battle. At the time, the West End was a prized beat. A cop assigned to the area could count on payoffs that would supplement a meager salary considerably. There were bookies, bootleggers and madams who paid for protection and preferential treatment.

City manager James S. Dean took the matter of police corruption more seriously than others in city government. Unlike most officials, he didn’t seem to have been in the pockets of the wealthy downtown property owners. (Most of whom had a huge stake in the success of the previously-mentioned illicit activities.) When Hallanan left, Dean went east, with the blessings of the public and his colleagues. He went in search of a new police chief. It was essential that whoever took the job not be from the area.

The reasoning was that a person with no ties to the community would be less likely to accept bribes, let criminals slide and otherwise become mired in the political sleaze that characterized Sacramento and other similar cities at the time. Dean wanted a genuine reformer. Other people in city government wanted a man who would create the impression that reforms were being put into play.

## 2. Austin Roche: Career Lawman

In early 1937, Austin J. Roche had every reason to take pride in a job well done and relax. He was 58 years old and thought his life in law enforcement was over as of 1933. He was contemplating a tempting job offer: representing brewers from northwestern New York state. The job would be a challenge, but Roche seems to have been a man who loved solving difficult problems. The fact that the job came with a \$10,000 yearly salary only sweetened the pot. After all, he was almost retirement age and had a wife and daughter to consider.

Such was his life when a visitor named James S. Dean came calling. Dean was city manager of Sacramento, California. He came to interview Roche for the position of police chief. After interviewing dozens of candidates over the course of two months, none other than J. Edgar Hoover recommended Roche for the job.

If Dean studied the career of Roche, which he almost certainly did, he was probably quite impressed. Sacramento had a problem. Roche had the skills needed to address the problem. He had been tested in gun battles with bootleggers near the Canadian border as

both a cop and eventually police commissioner. Very much a hands on problem solver and an excellent administrator, he personally oversaw raids and arrests.

In short, Austin J. Roche was one bad man to have as an enemy. Well-spoken and well-read, he seemed to take the actions of criminals personally. Unsurprisingly, he would not tolerate corruption or incompetence from cops. Notable successes were achieved in the towns of Lockport and Dunkirk, New York. One of these towns was so impressed with his reforms that he was offered the job of police chief there. He declined.

As impressed as he was, Dean knew that Roche would be up against corruption so institutionalized that it reached the very highest levels of city government. His first quote to the newspapers, when Roche accepted the job, was, "I do not expect him to perform miracles."

### 3. 13 Months in Sacramento

To say that Roche faced a challenge would be a colossal understatement. His predecessor, while apparently not on the take himself, nevertheless allowed many misdeeds to happen on his watch. It had been his duty to keep officers in line and he failed spectacularly. The one and only positive achievement of his time in office was that he allegedly put an end to the use of third degree techniques during interrogations. He was content simply occupying the office. When scandal threatened, he ducked and ran. Simply stated, Roche inherited a mess. He was replacing a man so entrenched in the crooked culture that, for many years, he held the record for longest-serving chief. (Oddly, it would be the man who replaced Roche who ended up breaking Hallanan's record.)

Dean was virtually the only honest man in city government when Roche arrived. He had been fighting against the status quo for so long that his cynicism was understandable.

Ultimately, the new chief would surprise him in small ways while justifying his lack of faith. Austin J. Roche would end up policing his way out of a job.

A first year progress report shows that Roche did make some inroads in bringing order and efficiency to the department. The numbers tell a story of a local agency transformed. Traffic fatalities dropped by over 50%. The arrest rate rose by 30%. Post-arrest clearance and conviction rates went up by at least 25%. It appeared that policy changes implemented by Roche meant that cops on the beat did actual police work. They no longer staged bogus busts, or let petty criminals slide. Serious crimes were taken a lot more seriously. The same numbers tell us that beat cops could no longer treat legitimate police work as a side gig.

To a point, the powers that be had no problem with what Roche was doing. However, at the rate he was going, it was inevitable that he would soon arrest one of their own, as opposed to the usual creatures of the West End. The no-class drunks, homosexuals, junkies and the transient workers who were wanted when needed and shunned once the work was performed. Roche made enemies when he arrested such big wheels and "Bookie Butch" Nisetich and the madam Violet Wilson. (4)

Violet Wilson had paid for protection and was understandably put out when she was hauled into jail. Nisetich was in a similar, if more respectable position. Along with his card rooms, he ran several books around town. They were mostly in the West End, although there were a few at 7<sup>th</sup> and K (across from the post office) and at 10<sup>th</sup> and K. At these places, a person could place a bet on any horse race in the country. When Roche busted him, he had been paying a still-unidentified police lieutenant for years.

This one arrest infuriated landlords, merchants and marked the beginning of the end of Roche's time in Sacramento. It especially angered the gentleman gambler set, who, like "Bookie Butch," had paid handsomely to prevent such a thing from happening. If his arrest had been an aberration, all could have been forgiven. It was not. Roche was bent on achieving the destruction of gambling operations with a passion second only to his desire to smash prostitution permanently.

Maybe it came down to the blatant manner in which they conducted business, but brothels were a thorn in the side of citizens and Roche. Bookmaking operations were relatively harmless and enjoyed something very close to respectability. Compared with the brothels, with the neon lights and belligerent behavior of the window girls, gambling appeared safe as milk.

On February 15, 1938, the very day he submitted a glowing first year progress report to the city manager, 15 window girls were taken in and charged with vagrancy and solicitation. Public reaction to the raid was mixed. Local residents applauded the effort. "Rooming houses," had cropped up all around 2<sup>nd</sup> and L Streets. The addresses listed in the story about the raid are: 206, 208, 212 and 224 L Street, as well as a place around the corner, 1221 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. (The operation included arrests at a house at 314 J Street, "rowboat row" living up to local legend.)

While Dean and groups such as the Sacramento Women's Council were pleased to see the obnoxious, foul-mouthed and generally out-of-hand whores taken to jail, these women worked for madams who had paid for the right to do business. Arrests like the one February 15, cost the wealthy property owners a lot of money. These were powerful people who had considerable pull with the city council.

Roche had made enemies. Within weeks of his glowing report to the city manager, which listed the accomplishments of the past year, he was on his way back to Buffalo. He lasted a little over a month following the arrest of the window girls.

The raid on proved to be the undoing of Roche as Sacramento's super cop. It was, to the monied property owners, the final straw. The embarrassing arrests and subsequent dip in revenues was unacceptable to a very influential bloc of community leaders.

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e month after he told the Sacramento Union, "I like Sacramento. It is a fine city," stories appeared in the papers hinting that gambling was thriving while Roche did nothing about it.

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Following some high-profile arrests, his very presence was intolerable to those who counted. A local man who lived in Sacramento at the time recently wrote, "poor guy was

supposed to make a show of cleaning up the town without actually doing it. Trouble was, he didn't understand his assignment.”

On March 17, 1938, Roche handed in his resignation. In addition to the stories which hinted that Roche was protecting the bookies (!) there were those which implied that he was hiding the identity of the infamous Firebug, a career criminal who was setting fire to local businesses to cover his burglaries. Around the end of his time as chief, his daughter was hit by a car. Apart from some scrapes and bruises, she was unharmed. There is no evidence to suggest that the incident had anything to do with Roche's actions as chief.

If bad press and reluctance on the part of the local district attorney to prosecute certain offenders were part of a strategy to demoralize and discourage Roche, the plan was a partial success. He was soon on his way back to Buffalo. Although he and Dean claimed that he had only planned on spending a year in Sacramento, it is likely that he left with a feeling of disappointment at leaving a job unfinished.

#### 4. Corrupt Cop Culture

The culture of the Sacramento Police Department in the 1930s was ultimately too hostile an environment for a man with a rigid moral code like Austin Roche. The motivation of most men on the force appears to have been purely mercenary. He was not rewarded for any of his innovations or efforts to reform the department. His replacement was a man who, along with two brothers, were known as the Brothers McAllister. Alec McAllister would prove to be exactly what the property owners and their friends in city government wanted. He was a cop's cop, claiming that in his years on the force, he had never drawn his weapon. While claiming to admire all that Roche had done, he did nothing to give the new policy changes any “teeth,” which meant that the status quo was back in effect by the time McAllister was sworn in. As mentioned earlier, McAllister would break the record of William Hallanan for time served as chief by at least a few years.

The McAllisters were a trio of Irish immigrants who arrived on the east coast at the turn of the century. Perhaps feeling the prejudice of the NINA laws back east, or maybe just suffering from an excess of ambition, at least one of the brothers, Neil, headed towards the Klondike in search of gold. Failing that, he journeyed to California and taught himself law well enough to qualify to practice. His career seems to have peaked when he was named Deputy Attorney General solely to prosecute communists in the 1920s. After this, he opened a private practice..

Younger brothers Frank and Alec were cops through and through. They also were despised for their role as bagmen, collecting payoffs from bootleggers throughout the county. Not much is known about Frank, beyond that his law enforcement career peaked at the rank of Captain.

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What is clear from newspaper accounts as well as statements from persons who lived in the River City at the time is that the naming of Alec McAllister as chief meant that it was safe for gambling and prostitution in the West End until the early 1960s, at which point the area became a neglected skid row. In the decades following this decline, the West End

became known as Old Sacramento. Many of the rooming houses in the area were razed to make way for the freeway system. At about the time plans for the freeways were being laid, two consecutive police chiefs implemented hiring policies in the police department which destroyed the culture of corruption and brought department regulations in line with those of the state. These new chiefs had higher standards for new recruits and offered higher pay for officers with college educations.

As for the whores, it must have gotten too hot for them in the West End. They scattered. A lot of them going south. First to T Street in the Southside Park area, as well as Oak Park, a formerly respectable working and lower-middle class neighborhood. There remains, in Oak Park, a thriving street walking trade. What was a big industry in a sordid river town has been driven underground.

At around the time the police department became professional, that is, the early 1960s, Governor Pat Brown made good on providing funding for building interstate highways. A lot of the West End had become a skid row, so getting property owners to take fair-market value to move on probably went smoothly.

5. A bit about lower L Street: Very near the infamous intersection of 2<sup>nd</sup> and L, between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets, there was a firetrap of a boxing arena called the House of Action. In fact, there were many boxing venues featuring intra-racial bouts which lasted until someone was unconscious.

6. A note about Austin Roche after Sacramento.  
Austin J. Roche was driven out of town, virtually on a rail, following the bust of the window girls. He had a safety net. He'd been offered a job representing breweries in Northwestern New York state prior to his term in Sacramento. On heading back east, he accepted the job, which at an annual salary of \$10,000, paid more than double what he'd made as chief. If it seemed ironic that a man who made his law enforcement reputation in gun battles with bootleggers was now assisting the manufacturers and distributors of alcohol to Roche, he kept quiet about it.

In addition to making a lot more money than he'd ever earned in his life, at the dawn of US involvement in World War Two, Roche organized civil defense squads in several communities near Buffalo. His programs were imitated by several communities nationwide. He eventually passed away due to heart failure at the age of 73.

#### 7. Sources:

1. Contemporary news accounts from the Sacramento Bee and the Sacramento Union, Sacramento Public Library, Central Branch. (7)
2. Interviews with "Paul Steuer," who was a young man at the time of Austin Roche and who provided a lot of useful and entertaining information.
3. Barrio Boy, by Ernesto Galarza.
4. The Archives Museum.