



COURTNEY'S STORY OF HOW HE SMASHED AUTO THIEVES

By Joseph U. Dugan

IN THE parlance of the underworld, stealing an automobile is called "clouting a jalopy." And to many honest persons that common form of everyday crime does not represent a very serious menace to society. In Chicago, public indifference toward this particular racket was the rule for many years. It resulted in the highest automobile theft rate for any city in the country. As usual, the public paid the penalty in the form of insurance rates—highest in the United States.

Given such amazingly bountiful opportunities, gangs of automobile thieves docked to Chicago. Such gangs represent the most highly organized and most ruthless form of criminal syndicalism in existence. The common impression that an automobile thief is a minor offender and that his crimes are simple depredations is as wrong as it is dangerous to society. Any mob of criminals, regardless of the chief activity of the organization, is potentially and too often actually guilty of every type of crime, including murder and kidnapping.

Comparison of Annual Theft Records

The daily average of cars stolen on Chicago streets in 1931 was 97. The total number stolen in that year was 35,436. The record for 1932 was only slightly better, with a daily average of 96 and a total number stolen of 35,233. In 1933, automobile thievery was decreased sharply. The daily average was 76 and the total number stolen was 27,891. The rate of decrease for 1934 is even sharper. The daily average stolen for the first six months was only 46. There is a reason why.

The magnitude of the auto theft industry in Chicago had not been given adequate consideration by any of the law-enforcing officials until a year ago. Since then, as the result of the most intensive battle ever waged by the police, the state's attorney's office, and the courts of the city and county, this form of crime has been reduced by 53 per cent. The automobile stealing and stripping gangs have been disorganized and broken up. Their members have been sent to

Key to Argot of Auto Thieves

- "CLOUTING A JALOPY"—Stealing an automobile.
- "BRAINS"—Leader of the gang.
- "CONTACT"—Stolen parts salesman, arranger of "deals."
- "RINGSTERS"—General term for members of the gang.
- "CHANGERS"—Experts at changing and removing motor numbers.
- "STRIPPERS"—Trained mechanics who remove salable parts.
- "HIGGLER"—Expert automobile key maker and lock breaker.
- "CLOUTERS"—Boys and young men who do actual car stealing.
- "PLANT"—Garage where stolen cars are stripped and hidden.
- "GRAVEYARD"—Any place where stolen parts or cars are hidden.
- "SPOTTER"—Man who "spots" cars to be stolen.

CAMPAIGN REDUCES MOTOR THEFT RATE BY 53 PER CENT

the penitentiary. The insurance companies have reduced the rates in Chicago by 23 per cent. And the fight to clean up the worst criminal condition Chicago has ever known, instead of lagging after a few weeks, has been renewed with greater strength. There is no indication of a let-up.

Credit for this outstanding achievement belongs to Thomas F. Courtney, state's attorney of Cook county. He was elected to office on Nov. 8, 1932. Chicago was preparing for a world's fair. The city's reputation as a place ridden by crime, whether entirely deserved or not, had become international. Prohibition had not ended, and the powerful booze gangs still were operating. Chicago residents, long weary of gang murders and of the political rotteness which permitted criminal syndicates to flourish unchecked, were aroused at last and emphatically demanded a housecleaning. It was a man-size job if there ever was one. It landed squarely in Courtney's lap.

Courtney Takes Up the Cudgels

Unlike some of his predecessors in office, Courtney met the challenge. He realized soon after tackling the job what few public officials in Chicago had recognized—that automobile thievery was Chicago's crime problem, that its continued increase had a very close relation to all crime. Also Courtney knew that no ordinary crime-fighting methods would suffice for the campaign he contemplated. The war is not yet over, and, in Courtney's own words, "We'll never quit this fight," but in the last eleven months he has given the organized automobile thieves of Chicago and Cook county so many staggering blows that they are groggy against the ropes. How it was done now can be told.

In August, 1933, he conducted a secret investigation of the automobile theft racket in all its ramifications. It was Courtney's purpose not just to drive the gangs out of business for a while, but to eliminate them completely by sending the leaders and members to the penitentiary. For that reason the utmost secrecy was necessary during the preliminary investigation. A tip-off would have ruined the chances for success.

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