

April 8, 2012 4:05 PM ET

The Invaders

By David Hill

It wasn't anything new for Curtis to smack Linda June around, especially when he'd been drinking. This seemed like too much, Eric thought, even for them. Eric came up behind Curtis as he stood over Linda June all balled up on the couch. When Curtis cocked his hand back, Eric grabbed it. Curtis spun around and landed a haymaker on Eric's temple that sent him flying into the kitchen table. The sounds of Linda June's screaming prompted the neighbors in the trailer park to call the police. They wouldn't get there soon enough to stop what would happen next.

"I'm going back to that bedroom to get my pistol." Eric picked himself up off the floor. "When I come back you better not be here."

"If you bring that pistol in here, by God, you damn well better use it." Curtis didn't have to say "or else." Everybody in the room knew what he meant. And they knew that he meant it.

Eric staggered back to the bedroom. When he came back through the hall with his pearl-handled .38 revolver, he hoped Curtis would be gone. He wasn't surprised when he saw Curtis standing in front of the couch with his hands balled up at his sides, his nostrils flaring. "Get out of here, Curtis." Eric had the gun pointed right at Curtis's chest. Curtis didn't say a word. He lunged for the gun.

When the police finally arrived at the trailer on Vineyard Street, Eric was sitting peacefully at his kitchen table. In one hand he held the telephone to his ear. With his other thick, red hand he gripped a nearly empty glass. On the table next to the pearl-handled pistol was a bottle of Wild Turkey.

"The police are here. I need to go," Eric said into the receiver.

"What do I do, Eric?" my father asked on the other end of the line. Not much had changed since Eric and my grandmother had split up. He still looked after her with whatever little money he had. He still bought my sister and I birthday and Christmas gifts. And he still called my dad first whenever he got in a pinch.

"Just call Don," Eric replied. "Tell him to give you a horse. He'll understand."

Eric hung up the phone, knocked back what was left in the glass, then stepped over Curtis's body as he made his way to open the door for the police. The year was 1983. Eric Boatright was 59 years old. He was about to be arrested on a charge of murder in the first degree.

I visited my hometown of Hot Springs, Arkansas, for the Grade III \$250,000 Southwest Stakes at Oaklawn Park. The Southwest is an important prep race for April's Grade I \$1 million Arkansas Derby, which itself is an important prep for the Kentucky Derby.

Hot Springs, a town Garrison Keillor called the "loose buckle on the Bible Belt," has a colorful history. On the Friday before the race, I took in some of that history at the Gangster Museum of America on Central Avenue. The folks who work there wear fedoras and pinstripes but have accents like Cooter from *The Dukes of Hazzard*. It was jarring at first, but once I finished the tour it was easy to imagine all of Bathhouse Row in downtown Hot Springs bustling with redneck wise guys — the way it was from Al Capone's first trip there in 1920 until 1967, when the Arkansas State Police shut the doors on the last of the town's illegal casinos.

The first thing they tell you on the Gangster Museum of America tour is that Hot Springs has always been neutral territory. The Native Americans originally used the "valley of the vapors" as a place where warring tribes could fish, trade, and bathe in the hot waters without conflict. Gangsters, too, used Hot Springs as a refuge from violence. A popular vacation spot for hoods from New York to New Orleans, the unwritten rule was that when mobsters visited Hot Springs, everyone left their beefs behind. Rival gangsters could fish, bathe, and shoot dice side-by-side without fear of catching a bullet in the head.

For nearly a century, Hot Springs, Arkansas, was what they called a "wide-open town." There had been out-in-the-open illegal gambling in Hot Springs in one form or another for nearly a hundred years. Free-flowing booze and a half dozen major casinos made Hot Springs a larger gambling destination than Las Vegas, and a popular spot for mobsters to lam it. When the FBI finally caught Charles "Lucky" Luciano in 1936, after a nationwide manhunt, they found him taking a stroll down Bathhouse Row with the chief detective of the Hot Springs Police Department.

Each room in the Gangster Museum of America has a different theme. The first room is dedicated to the political power brokers who made vice possible in Hot Springs, the most important of whom was Mayor Leo McLaughlin, who held court for more than 20 years. He was elected to office in 1925 on a promise to allow illegal gambling. Al Capone even donated to his campaign. McLaughlin made good on his pledge and used the revenue the illegal gambling created to pave the streets of Hot Springs. Soon enough, Hot Springs was not only one of the most modern cities in Arkansas, it was an international tourist destination. Mayor McLaughlin had only one rule about Hot Springs' illicit gambling — no outsiders. He would decide how many casinos there would be and who would own them. He knew that barring legalization of gambling, his "wide-open" town would only work if he could both keep everyone in town fat and happy with cash and keep the state government from giving a damn. Mayor McLaughlin knew that there was one thing that the Bible thumpers running the state up in Little Rock hated more than gambling, prostitutes, and liquor, and that was goddamn Yankees.

McLaughlin's reign as mayor came to an end when a group of local boys returned from WWII and decided to take on members of the Democratic political machine. The anti-incumbent campaign, called the "GI Revolt," won control of the state capital and the local government and law enforcement agencies in Hot Springs. The reformers shuttered the casinos, but the decision was unpopular. Hot Springs voters swept them out of office in the next election. By 1950 the governor relented and allowed the casinos to reopen. Nate Schoenfeld, a Harvard graduate and one of the founders of the "GI Revolt," rationalized the about-face this way in a 1962 interview with *Sports Illustrated*: "The gambling is home-owned and operated. There's no hoodlum element, no oppression, no scum. No one forces himself on anyone else. There is no guy around here with greasy hair and a Mafia smile. The people are capable, clean, decent, friendly. This place reflects the quality, character and charm of all of us. This place has got roots. It's 24 hours of happiness."¹

Eventually Arkansans' distaste for outsiders would wane. Despite the fact that only 11 percent of the state's voters were registered as Republicans, Winthrop Rockefeller, a New Yorker and the son of John Rockefeller, was elected to the statehouse in 1966 as the first Republican governor of Arkansas since Reconstruction. Rockefeller dispatched a former FBI agent named Lynn Davis to Hot Springs to head the state police and shut down illegal gambling. In the next-to-last room on the tour of the Gangster Museum of America, we were shown a video of Davis piling roulette wheels and slot machines in a field, breaking them with a sledgehammer, then torching them — all while smiling for the cameras.²

It was hard for me to watch that video. It was even harder for me to watch my fellow tour-goers pose for pictures with a replica tommy gun. "I never knew about this side of Hot Springs!" exclaimed a man in pleated jean shorts posing with the gun while his wife took his picture. I'll bet you didn't, buddy. There is little evidence of those days left among Hot Springs' strip malls and megachurches. Everything is different: the economy, the culture, the people. I could understand the man's surprise. It is a strange thing for people who moved here from other places to grasp, that a place as genteel and quaint as Hot Springs was built by criminals. Those of us with roots in that town weren't embarrassed by its history. We owed everything we had to that history, and much of what we didn't have to its disappearance. There was no Gangster Museum when I was growing up, but I was raised in a family of gamblers and grifters who kept me spellbound with stories of the good old days. But even now, watching that video of Lynn Davis burn those slot machines, I found it hard to understand how a town that fancied itself so sharp let itself get taken by the biggest of road crews, how they let the good old days get away.

Eric's intake form from the city jail listed his address as 217 Vineyard Street. Under "Previous Address," Eric wrote "traveled with carnival." Originally from Tennessee, Eric spent more than 20 years traveling the country with the carnival before he ended up in that trailer. His specialty was a midway game called Razzle Dazzle, a gambling game where players placed bets and then threw darts at a board filled with numbers trying to build up a score to win a big payoff. The game was impossible to win. How much a barker could make completely depended on his ability to convince players they were close enough to winning to keep betting. Eric was a fair-to-middling Razzle Dazzle barker, but his grift got a big lift when he arrived in Hot Springs to work the race meet. It was there that he met my grandmother, Hazel, a widowed mother of three grown children. Hazel was out of work and busted, but she had the heart of a hustler. He took her with him on the road and taught her how to shill — she would show up at the Razzle Dazzle game, place her bets, and always win. "Look how easy it is, folks," Eric would say. "If this pretty lady can do it, you can do it, too!" The marks would beat a path.

In the "wide-open" days, Hazel worked as a poker dealer at the Southern Club, the largest, ritziest, rip-roaring-est casino in town. Today the Southern Club is occupied by a wax museum. Once visited by flesh-and-blood movie stars, heavyweight champions of the world, political leaders, and dignitaries, today it is filled with cheap statues. The escalator that once delivered visitors into the casino, the first one in Arkansas, has been broken for years. At the top of the stairs where visitors could have once walked up on a poker game between Titanic Thompson and Arnold "The Brain" Rothstein, today they will encounter a wax reenactment of the Last Supper. The day that I visited the wax museum somebody had discarded an empty Wendy's cup on the table next to James the Elder.

Not too long after Lynn Davis closed the doors on the Southern Club, the local economy started sliding downhill and would never recover. Hundreds of jobs were lost. Tourism, the city's main industry, was devastated. Planned construction on major projects was halted. The fancy downtown hotels with their glass-bottomed swimming pools and luxury penthouse suites are now nursing homes or completely abandoned and falling apart.

The current mayor of Hot Springs, Ruth Carney, was elected with the backing of the local tea party. She and her husband, the pastor of a local megachurch, moved to Hot Springs in 1997 after a decade as Christian missionaries. She believes the Bible supersedes the law, that the separation of church and state is meant to keep government out of the church and not the other way around, and, of course, she is opposed to gambling.

Today the Southern Club may be a wax museum but Oaklawn Park is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the state and one of the best-attended racetracks in America. In 2006 Hot Springs residents passed a measure that would allow Oaklawn to install electronic "instant racing" machines at the track. These machines look and act like slot machines and poker and blackjack tables, but somehow (don't ask me how) the payoffs are dictated by the outcomes of past horse races. The casino's largess has brought the city and state tax revenue, funded scholarships for students of Hot Springs High School (an alma mater I share with Bill Clinton), and added money to the purses for the races, which in turn brings in more horsemen and bigger fields for Oaklawn's boutique spring meet.

I visited the modest casino attached to the racetrack the night before the Southwest Stakes to play some poker in the seven-table electronic poker room. Sitting at my table was a horse owner from West Virginia, a guy with bad teeth and stringy hair who worked at a local window factory, a kid from the projects who went to high school with my sister but is now one of the biggest drug dealers in town, and a Republican state senator. After getting particularly unlucky in a hand, the horseman from West Virginia hollered "bullshit" and sparked a roundtable on the fairness of the digital machines. The consensus from everyone but the drug dealer (who was up over a thousand bucks at that point) was that the game was absolutely rigged. I questioned why Oaklawn would have any interest at all in the outcome of our game since the casino's cut is the same regardless of who wins each hand. I was told by the window-maker "if you have to ask that question, you must not know the Cellas."

When the owners of the Southern Club casino opened Oaklawn Park Racetrack in 1905, the city of Hot Springs declared a holiday so that everyone in town could attend the races. Two years later the track was closed after a state legislator named William McGuigan teamed up with a fire-and-brimstone preacher named W.T. Amis to campaign across the state against the sinful business of gambling. It mattered not that McGuigan was the owner of Essex Park, a competing racetrack on Malvern Avenue.³

Oaklawn Park would be saved by two brothers from St. Louis: Charles and Louis Cella. The Cella brothers were racetrack tycoons, having built a handful of other tracks around Missouri.⁴ They bought Oaklawn Park and then worked to get the state to legalize gambling on horseracing. Their efforts and investments would go unrewarded for decades until Leo McLaughlin was elected mayor. He gave the Cellas the green light to reopen Oaklawn in 1934, gambling laws be damned. A year later the Legislature passed a bill legalizing pari-mutuel gambling on horse racing. Charles Cella built a house right on the home stretch of the track next to the grandstand. Oaklawn Park hasn't missed a meet since. Four generations of the Cella family have sat out on the porch of that house and watched champions round the last turn into the stretch.

Eventually my grandmother and Eric would marry. Eric moved to Hot Springs, joined the Showmen's Association (sort of a union for carnies), and took work selling the *Daily Racing Form* out at Oaklawn. His main grind wasn't selling papers. Eric got to know everyone at the racetrack — the horsemen, the jockeys, the gamblers, even the Cellas themselves. He put all his relationships to work for him and became a tout.

A tout was someone who could put you on to a horse — for a fee, of course. Selling tips on racehorses was illegal. If you wanted to tout you needed to pay the city \$200 and then give it half your take from selling your selections. Some guys

made enough selling their "tip sheets" to afford the exorbitant taxes. Most guys figured it was easier and more lucrative to tout on the black market. Eric was one of the latter guys. Don was one of the former.

The morning after Eric called, my dad went looking for Don out on the backstretch near the barns. They called Don "the Stable Boy" because he got most of his information from horsemen and jockeys hanging around the stables. Like every other morning during the race meet, Don was up before dawn and at the track to clock the horses' morning workouts. Dad told Don what had happened.

"He said to tell you he needed a horse."

Don nodded.

"He said that you'd know what that meant."

Again Don nodded without looking away from the horses on the track. "I don't have one right now. I'll call you when I got something."

"But Eric's in jail. How long will —"

This time Don broke his stare to shoot my dad a look. "I said I'll call you when I got something."

The less that was said the better. If all Eric wanted my dad to get was a tip on a horse, then he could have easily paid \$2 for the tip sheet Don sold across the street from the entrance to the track. A good tip on a horse wasn't going to help Eric get out of jail. His bail was \$50,000. He needed a damn good lawyer. For years my dad was convinced Eric was squirreling away money under his mattress in his trailer. It was clear to him now that Eric was flat busted. He needed to spend the only capital he had left. He needed to call in all his favors around the racetrack. He needed a horse.

I needed a horse. I lost \$300 the night before playing Nintendo poker with the drug dealer and the state senator. I lost another \$50 trying to beat the chalk in the early daily double. I was off to a bad start and had six more races to go before the first of the two Southwest Stakes. I swallowed my pride, stood up from my seat, and walked through the crowd at the paddock to the newsstand.

"Program? Racing form?" Once upon a time Eric stood at this very newsstand at the south entrance to the track shouting "Racing forms!" and whispering his picks in guys' ears. When I was a kid my dad would send me to him to slip him a \$5 bill and ask him for help on a race. Eric never took my dad's money, and my dad hardly ever took Eric's advice.

My dad was a decent-enough handicapper. He made an effort at least. He always read the racing form. He followed certain maxims he had learned over the years — years he spent working around the track as a groom or a hot-walker for his grandfather. He always bet on a horse who was using Lasix for the first time. He never bet on a horse whose front legs were wrapped. He said that a horse taking a shit during the post parade was a sign it was ready to run, and that a horse who had its mane braided had a trainer who was confident the horse would "get his picture took" in the winner's circle after a race. He always bet on a horse who was running without blinkers for the first time (or was it never bet on a horse who was running with blinkers on?). It wasn't all just folksy racetrack wisdom, though. He knew enough about speed and pace handicapping that he could pick his share of winners. But he was never above paying a tout for a little help. I, on the other hand, had too much pride. For me the game was about finding the winners on your own. Where was the fun in just betting on someone else's selections? "Winning," my dad would say. "That's where the fun is."

Today the tip sheets that once had to be sold across the street were prominently displayed on a board above the newsstand. The ones who had winners the day before had them circled, the winning payoffs scrawled in big, bold letters. "\$74.60 EXACTA!" "FOUR WINNERS!" The tip sheets had names like *Silent Sam* or *Private Label*. I pointed at the one called *Stable Boy*. I couldn't even look the man in the eye as he handed it to me, I was so awash with shame.

A couple of weeks after their chat on the backstretch, Don called my dad with the horse. My dad had to act fast. He set off to the pawn shop to unload some of Eric's jewelry and a couple of his own hunting rifles. He went to the bank and pulled out everything he could. He told nobody. This was crucial. The information my dad possessed was extremely valuable. He didn't need Don to stress the point; he had been around long enough to know — if the word got out, the odds on this horse would take a pounding, and nobody would make any money.

Here's where I should say a word or two about fixed horse races, because it's something I don't want to be flip about.

Fixed horse races were once a lot more common. Some smaller tracks in the thirties and forties probably had more fixed races than square ones. As purses grew larger and horsemen and jockeys made better livings, the need to supplement their income with gambling waned. As racetracks and regulatory bodies got stricter with penalties, the professional need to continue racing outweighed the short-term gains of fixing a race for dishonest trainers. These days fixed horse races are almost nonexistent. Guys like Rick Dutrow (the trainer of 2008 Kentucky Derby winner Big Brown, who was recently banned from racing in New York for 10 years for doping his horses) aren't race fixers. They are cheaters, sure, but only because they are giving their horses an unfair advantage. They still could lose the race. When a race is fixed, the outcome is guaranteed. A lot of people have to be in on it. It happens only rarely. The stakes are high for everyone involved. People can and do go to prison over it. As a horse-racing fan and a gambler with integrity, I find the notion of a fixed race to be disgraceful. But this isn't a story about me. It's a story about a carnie facing the electric chair. Those among us without sin can cast the first stone.

I bet the picks from the *Stable Boy* tip sheet all day long, making every single exacta bet that he suggested.⁵ By the time the first leg of the Southwest Stakes rolled around I hadn't cashed a single ticket. I was stuck deep. The only hope I had was on a live pick-4 that went through the two stakes races. In the first Southwest I picked a whole mess of horses, being sure to include all the lightly raced long shots that were coming off their first or second races. I considered it insurance, given that there were enough of them in the race to make it unpredictable. I got lucky when a horse named Castaway, who Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert shipped in from California after the horse won his maiden race, won the race at 6-1. I showed my buddy Adam my ticket and told him the good news.

"Who do you got in the next race?" he asked. I pointed at my racing form to a horse named Cyber Secret. He laughed. "You picked the wrong Secret!" He was referring to Secret Circle, the 3-5 favorite, another horse Baffert shipped in from California to try to nab some winnings on the way to the Kentucky Derby.

"Did you notice this?" I pointed my pencil at the line just to the right of the horses' names in the form where the owner of the horse is listed. It read *Charles J. Cella*. "The fix is in, my friend. How do you not bet on a horse that's owned by the guy who owns the goddamn racetrack?"

Adam smirked. "You don't know much about Charles Cella. His horses never win. Always bet on the invaders."

The invaders. The horses shipped in for the big races. While most horses arrived at Oaklawn were pulled behind dually trucks, the invaders arrived on airplanes. Like big-city bagmen for the Mob, they snatch up all the purse money and then fly off to the next big Derby prep. Few stakes horses are born and bred in Arkansas, but Hot Springs embraces the horses who stable, work out, and train at Oaklawn. The locals see trainers like Gary Hartlage, D. Wayne Lukas, and the late Bob Holthus as their own. When the silver-haired Baffert brings in horses from Hollywood and takes them back the next day with all the money, he may as well be Frank Costello sticking the place up with a tommy gun.

I took the elevator up to the Oaklawn Jockey Club to watch the second leg of the Southwest Stakes. The Jockey Club is a members-only who's-who of racetrack personalities and local aristocrats. I had a cousin who was having lunch with her mom, whose boss was a member. Somehow that and a jacket and tie were enough to get me in. There is a path of dirt and mud that leads to the Jockey Club elevator from all the owners walking back and forth to the track to take photos in the Winner's Circle. One way to tell who was a player and who was just a rich chump was to look for who had the most dirt on their shoes.

My cousin and her husband told me everyone was excited that both Bill Parcells and Toby Keith were in the Jockey Club that day, although I never saw them. They each owned horses running in a leg of the Southwest. Toby Keith may have been from Oklahoma, but he was no invader. He had been a regular fixture at Oaklawn over the years, always opting to stable his best horses there for the entire meet. His latest prospect, Reckless Jerry, always got a lot of local support when he ran despite the fact that Keith was an Okie and despite the fact that his biggest hit is a song about feeding his horses beer.

I had singled the race with Cyber Secret. I had bet it all with Charles Cella. His family had saved Hot Springs before; I needed him to save me this one time.

The bell went off and the horses broke from the gate, Cyber Secret stumbling a bit and ending up wide on the outside. The room was practically silent. Out on the apron outside the fans were screaming and hollering like lunatics as the horses raced past the grandstand. High up in the Oaklawn Jockey Club the well-heeled patrons of the sport sat cross-legged and watched the race with mild interest, perhaps raising an eyebrow or standing on their toes to register excitement. These

men and women, Toby Keith and Bill Parcells included, were passionate and knowledgeable fans of the sport. But it was hard for me to see any place for myself in this mahogany-and-brass-fixture room. I was raised sitting on the shoulders of my father, him slapping his program across his leg and screaming the number of his horse, me with arms stretched high in the air, meeting him note-for-note in yelling and pleading with our horse, our jockey, the good Lord, or the racing stewards to "stop the race!" whenever our horse nosed out to the lead. The sport, to us, was a visceral, emotional experience. It wasn't business. As the horses came around the final turn, Cyber Secret made his move, separating from the pack of horses to join Secret Circle and Scatman on the lead. He sat off of their hips, in perfect position to overtake them in the stretch. I couldn't help myself. I banged my hand against my table and shouted, "Dig deep! Dig deep! Dig deep!," breaking the obscene silence as the horses charged toward the finish line.

All of my shouting and embarrassing myself and my cousin did no good. Charles Cella's horse finished fifth. The fix wasn't in after all. Secret Circle, Baffert's other California invader, impressively won the race as the overwhelming 3-5 favorite. You'd never know the public bet so heavily on him if you were in the Jockey Club. The room was as quiet as before the race began. Outside the windows on the apron down below, you could see the fans celebrating, hugging, jumping up and down.

I boarded the Jockey Club elevator with a group of filthy-shoed men I assumed were from California; they headed to the Winner's Circle, I headed back to the proletariat. They were staid and dignified. One of them shot his cuffs and adjusted his tie, ready for his picture. Just another day at the office.

The elevator opened and dumped us out into the throng. People were lining up at the windows to cash their tickets and collect the \$1.20 in winnings that Secret Circle paid on a \$2 bet. It was nowhere near the six figures that Secret Circle's connections had won, but these fans were high-fiving and back-slapping like their ship had come in. Perhaps my dad was right. Having a winner was fun, even if everyone else in the track had it, too. I pulled my tip sheet from my jacket pocket and unfolded it. Disgusted, I read the words *Secret Circle — BEST BET!*

My dad has always been dodgy about the amount of money he cashed on Don's tip. He would only say "it was a lot." He gave what was Eric's to the lawyer and took what was his to the track. I know he got his rifles out of hock. My mother says she never saw a dime.

As for Eric's plight, the court records tell a story not much different from the one I've been told throughout my life. On September 15, 1983, the state filed a motion to dismiss the case that all but confirms for me just how much money my father won that day at the track.

The investigation officers for the State of Arkansas are presently unable to locate Linda Oldham, viewed by the State as a critical witness in this case, in that she was the only other witness to the shooting involved herein other than the defendant.

My mother used to say "the only damn Yankees are the ones who won't go home." There is an entire room at the Gangster Museum of America dedicated to one such Yankee, an English gangster named Owney "The Killer" Madden. Madden was a prominent figure New York's underworld. He was one of the owners of the legendary Cotton Club. He managed the careers of (and fixed fights for) heavyweight champions Max Baer and Primo Carnera. He murdered at least a half dozen people and was suspected in the murder of the infamous Vincent "Mad Dog" Coll. After Coll's murder, Dutch Schultz suggested that Madden take a vacation to Hot Springs to lay low. Owney Madden ended up staying in Hot Springs for the next 32 years until his death in 1965. Madden held court as the resident ambassador for organized crime figures who visited the city. He made sure there wasn't trouble for the locals and made sure visitors were kept happy. He loaned money to prop up two local banks during the Depression. He put up the money to build the local Boy's Club. He joined the Chamber of Commerce and local civic groups. He was considered a civic leader in the community. He's buried a couple of blocks away from my mother's house.

The tour guide at the Gangster Museum of America proclaimed "Owney Madden loved Hot Springs, and Hot Springs loved Owney Madden." State Senator Q. Byrum Hurst Sr. put it best in his eulogy for Owney at his funeral. "There is no ball park named after Owen Madden. No silver cup bearing his name. But his name is written upon the hearts of all the people he helped — with money, by deed, and by word of encouragement in their dark hours. It has been said that there is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it doesn't behoove any of us to criticize the rest of us."

When I was 13 years old, shortly after Eric had passed away, I agreed to do a magic show for the kids at the Showmen's

Association's Christmas party. After the show, one of the members, a hulking mass of a man with a cracked red bulb for a nose and a cigar lodged in the crook of his mouth, threw an arm around my shoulder and walked me outside.

"So you're Eric's grandson?" he asked.

"No, he was married to my grandmother."

"Did he teach you those card tricks?"

"No. Why, did he know how to do card tricks?"

"Hell, Eric was the biggest card cheat I ever met!"

"Really?"

"That guy was as crooked as a corkscrew." He shoved a wad of 20s into my shirt pocket with his free hand. "Why do you think he ended up in Hot Springs? This town has always been full of suckers."

I pulled the 20s out of my pocket and started counting them right in front of him. It was more money than I had ever held in my hand. He ignored my rudeness, still caught up in reflection.

"It's really a shame he ended up with nothing, your granddad." He patted me on the head and turned to walk back inside to the party. "Used to be this was a town where a dishonest man could make an honest living."

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FOOTNOTES

1. Without Leo McLaughlin and his political machine to keep things in line, things in Hot Springs quickly got out of hand. There were disputes between various casino operators and nobody with the power to settle them. Word was sent to New York that there was trouble down south, and Frank Costello was asked to come to town to take over as "gambling czar." In 1951 Costello was the most powerful organized crime figure in the United States. He was a frequent visitor to Hot Springs and had a stake in some local businesses, but like every other made man he was always barred from being involved in the casinos. Intrigued, Costello traveled to Arkansas for a secret meeting to discuss the details with the casino owners. When word of the meeting leaked to the press, Costello knew the deal was dead. He bowed out with a letter to the Hot Springs paper.
2. Arkansas hadn't completely lost its distrust of outsiders. Davis's tenure as head of the Arkansas State Police was cut short by the state Supreme Court, invoking a rule that required the director to have lived in Arkansas for 10 years prior to appointment.
3. The Essex racetrack would try to reopen as a nonprofit. It was destroyed in a mysterious fire the day after it opened, and its races were moved to Oaklawn.
4. The Cella family also made a lot of money in commodity speculation. They made headlines all over the country when they were indicted on charges of running a "bucket shop" scam on investors.
5. I have no idea if the *Stable Boy* tip sheet was the same one published by the man who my dad met with on the backstretch that day. It is actually a pretty common moniker for tip sheets, even once used by Warren Buffet for the horse-racing tip sheet he published in his youth.