

THE OUILMETTE HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Wilmette Historical Society

COPS AND ROBBERS AT EDENS PLAZA, 1957

That Friday in February had started off quietly at Edens Plaza, the new “shopping center” that had opened in west Wilmette only the summer before, in 1956. By noontime, a few people were milling around the parking lot. The owner of T. J. Cullen’s Jewelry, next door to Carson Pirie Scott, had just gone to lunch.



Officer Harold Graf (photo courtesy of Gary Graf)

But inside the jewelry shop, in a small room at the back, young patrolman Harold Graf of the Wilmette Police was watching intently, gripping his shotgun. A Wilmette native, Graf, 30, was a combat veteran of World War II and had joined the force in 1949.

The day before, the FBI had received a tip that burglars were planning to hit the jewelry store at lunchtime while the owner was away. The Bureau in turn notified Wilmette Police Chief Edwin Whiteside, who assigned Graf to stake out the place.

Joseph “Pops” Panczko, one of the burglars in question, had had a busy career, going back to his first arrest in 1940 on Chicago’s west side. By 1957 he had racked up over a dozen arrests. This record seems slight compared to those of his two younger brothers, “Peanuts” (43 arrests) and “Butch” (65 arrests), but, to be fair, “Pops” had spent some of the intervening years in prison. All three specialized in jewelry, but were versatile. By the time he paid his memorable visit to Wilmette, “Pops” had already been shot twice during attempted robberies. But neither prison nor bullets had discouraged him from vigorously pursuing his vocation.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Walking Tour “Lakefront Walk”

Saturday, September 21

10:00 a.m. - 11:30

see back page

Chicago Stained Glass Presentation

*by art historian Rolf Achilles, following the
21st annual Historic Preservation Awards*

Sunday, October 20

2:00 - 3:30 p.m.

see back page

Exhibit Opening “Voices of Early Wilmette”

Sunday, November 3

2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

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History Book Club

3rd Monday of each month,

7:30 p.m. at the Museum, 609 Ridge Road

September 16: *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King--The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* by Walter R. Borneman

October 21: *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President* by Candice Millard

Upcoming books to be chosen at the September meeting

For more news, visit our website:

www.wilmettehistory.org

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Just ten minutes after the owner left the store, Graf heard a knock at the back door, then saw the door handle turn. Moments later, Panczko and his companion, Ralph Campagna, burst into the room, cradling empty cardboard cartons in their arms. Graf instantly stood up, racked his shotgun, and shouted at them to put up their hands. Panczko threw his carton at Graf and the two men ran out the back and onto a loading platform.

Campagna escaped across the Lake Avenue bridge. Footprints in the snow showed that he had run through a wooded area into Glenview, but a manhunt by police squads from five north shore suburbs failed to find him. Several months later, thanks to Graf's identification, Campagna was picked up in Melrose Park by the FBI and turned over to Wilmette police.



Joseph "Pops" Panczko

Panczko, meanwhile, dashed across the Edens Plaza parking lot, with Graf in hot pursuit. Worried about hitting shoppers, Graf held his fire until Panczko climbed into a car and tried to start it. The officer later testified that a movement of Panczko's hand looked like he might have a gun. Graf responded by emptying his shotgun into the car's side – five blasts in all –

before whipping out his revolver and firing several shots. (Reporters later counted twenty-four holes in the car's windows and doors.) Stumbling out of the car and trailing blood, Panczko ran into the National Tea store, still under construction, and collapsed in the washroom. "Get an ambulance," he gasped as Graf ran in. "I'm dying. I'm hurt bad."

Surgeons removed six slugs from "Pops" Panczko's head, and he spent the next 40 days in Evanston Hospital before being released on bail. In December, he and Campagna appeared before a jury, represented by his longtime lawyer George Bieber. After ten ballots, the two were acquitted, on the grounds that felonious intent had not been proven,

as they had not actually managed to steal anything. "I was just walking by that jewelry store," he explained to the jury.



A photo of the getaway car, from the Chicago Tribune, Feb. 9, 1957

Harold Graf would go on to a distinguished law enforcement career, rising steadily through the ranks to become Deputy Chief of the Wilmette Police Department under Fred Stoecker. He retired from the department in 1979.

"Pops" Panczko continued his longtime career, too, if somewhat unluckily, although he never again came as close to getting killed as he had on that February day in Wilmette. Ten years later, in 1967, he paid another visit to the village: police pulled him over as he was following a jewelry salesman down Skokie Boulevard, and found burglary tools, jewelry, and \$4000 in cash in his car. The lowest point came in the 1980s, when "Peanuts" opted for witness protection, and informed on his older brother.

Panczko enjoyed considerable celebrity in his later years – columnist Mike Royko mentioned him frequently, and even contemplated a biography – but his best days were behind him. By 1994, on his final release from prison, he had been arrested over 200 times. "I'm over with crime," the 77-year-old told reporters. "My feet hurt."

Patrick Leary