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## The murder that wouldn't die His family's past led Rick Porrello to a life of writing

[FINAL Edition]

The Plain Dealer - Cleveland, Ohio

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Date: Sep 27, 2005

Start Page: E.1

Section: ARTS & LIFE

Text Word Count: 1842

### Document Text

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Rick Porrello forwarded the microfilm until he reached the newspaper from Feb. 26, 1932, the day after his grandfather's murder.

The Plain Dealer's front page screamed: "GANG GUNS KILL 2 PORELLOS AND ALLY." The headline topped photographs of Raymond Porrello, his older brother Rosario and the Cleveland cigar shop in which they and a bodyguard had been gunned down. It was the bloodiest day of the gangland war that convulsed Cleveland in the 1920s and 1930s.

Rick's grandfather stared back at him from the newspaper photograph. With his hooded eyes and slicked-back hair, he looked like a young Al Pacino, a gangster right out of Central Casting.

To Rick, a young police officer in the mid-1980s, his grandfather had been nothing but a shadow, a picture on the wall of his father's house when he was growing up.

Rick's father, Angelo, was only 6 at the time of the shootings. The boy had been in the cigar store at East 111th Street and Woodland Avenue shortly before the slayings, but a truck driver who worked for the Porrellos had taken him down the block for candy before the three gunmen crept in the front door.

They returned as a crowd gathered outside the store. The driver snatched up the boy and ran down the street, shouting, "They got 'em! They got 'em!"

Rick kept reading old newspapers with Porrello headlines. He learned how his grandfather and great uncles - seven brothers - emigrated from Sicily in 1904 and eventually settled in the Italian neighborhood around Woodland Avenue. How they battled the Lonardos, another family of Sicilian emigres, to see who would sell corn sugar to bootleggers during Prohibition. It was a war in which both families lost sons.

But Rick still had questions. Why had his grandfather and great- uncles turned to crime after coming to this country? What was his grandfather like? Why had he been killed?

It led him to write his first book, "The Rise and Fall of the Cleveland Mafia: Corn Sugar and Blood," and the beginning of a second career as an authority on local organized crime.

'It was fascinating, but it was history.'

Not long after her husband's 1932 murder, Porrello's widow began calling her son, Angelo, Raymond. When he asked why, she said it was to honor his dead father.

No rock either. While Rick's peers were listening to Queen and Grand Funk Railroad, he was playing along to Buddy Rich, Woody Herman and Count Basie records. His dad soundproofed a room in the basement, added an upright piano and let the kids in their Cleveland Heights neighborhood bang away.

Rick's dad never talked much about his father. Rick knew that his grandfather had been killed in a gangland slaying, but that was about it. His dad once showed him a book about the Mafia, and the family name was in there.

Cleveland mobsters were being blown up in the 1970s with regularity. Newspapers traced those bombings back to their roots in the Prohibition wars, and the Porrello name was always in those articles.

"To me it was fascinating, but it was history," he said.

When Rick turned 16, his father, now a business agent for the local musicians union, gave him his union card. Rick began playing private parties with jazz quartets. By then, his brother Ray was drumming for Sammy Davis Jr. Ray Sr. dreamed both sons would become professional drummers.

But Rick had another passion.

He began listening to police calls on a scanner when he was 12. He never missed an episode of "Adam 12" and "S.W.A.T." In high school, he put the scanner in his car. His mother's cousin was a Cleveland Heights police officer, and Rick memorized his car number. When he heard it over the air, he'd race to the scene and park across the street and watch for his cousin.

After graduating from Cleveland Heights High School in 1980, Rick took electronics courses at a community college, but the math defeated him and he dropped out.

He was living at his parents' house, playing weekend gigs, when he got a call from Sammy Davis Jr.'s music director. Rick's brother was quitting the band, and Davis needed a replacement.

Rick went from living in his parents' house to traveling the world with an orchestra.

"It was an education you couldn't get in college," he said. "Twenty years old and I'm on the road with Mr. Entertainment."

Rick was living the high life, meeting women, touring Europe and South America, rubbing elbows with famous entertainers. Too young to gamble legally in the casinos, he got older bandmates to cash his winnings.

But he found himself drawn to the bodyguards and security men. He asked them about their work, how they did it, what they watched for. Police work still fascinated him.

The road got old after two years. He was the youngest guy in the orchestra and learned how lonely a hotel room can be. Still, Rick wavered for six months about leaving a job most aspiring musicians would kill for.

"Most guys would say I had it made," he said.

But, with the optimism of youth, he decided he always could go back to being a musician. Becoming a cop couldn't wait.

Father wanted to leave past in the past.

He came home and earned an associate's degree in criminal justice at Lakeland Community College. He worked mall security and played drums while applying to local police departments.

And his curiosity about his family resurfaced. He questioned his father and older relatives, most of whom were reluctant to talk about the past.

Everything he learned made him want to know more. Why had his grandfather been killed? Who was he? Why had he turned to crime?

The book he wanted to read, the history of the rise of the Cleveland Mafia and the Corn Sugar Wars, hadn't been written. So he decided to write it.

Rick's dad didn't want him to write the book. Leave the past in the past, he said.

Though his father was a legitimate businessman, his work with the musician's union brought him into contact with mobsters, including one who might have killed his father.

On the day of the shooting in 1932, Frank Brancato, a gun for hire and suspect in other Mob murders, walked into a West Side hospital with a bullet in his gut. He said he'd been shot while walking down the street, but police matched the bullet to one that hit a bystander in the cigar-store massacre.

Brancato was convicted only of lying to police about his whereabouts. No one was ever charged in the killing of Rick's grandfather, great-uncle and their bodyguard.

His father did not hold a grudge against Brancato, Rick said. He knew being a gangster was a risky business.

Rick spent six years researching and writing "The Rise and Fall of the Cleveland Mafia." He read histories of the Mob, microfilmed newspapers at libraries, dug up old police and coroner's reports and other government documents.

In the meantime, he had been hired by the Mayfield Police Department, then moved to the Lyndhurst force, where he trained auxiliary police and younger officers.

After finishing the book, he spent three more years finding a publisher. By the time it came out in 1995, he'd sworn he'd never write another.

But when the box from the publisher arrived, he and his wife, Lee, popped the cork on a bottle of champagne and Rick thought, "I've got to do this again."

He didn't have to look far for the subject of his second book. It would have to be mobster Danny Greene, whose battle against the Mafia ended with a car bomb in a Lyndhurst parking lot in 1977.

"To Kill the Irishman: The War That Crippled the Mafia," self-published in 1998, makes the case that by killing Greene, the Mafia brought about its own downfall.

Prosecution of the Greene killers ultimately led to Cleveland Mafia boss Angelo "Big Ange" Lonardo turning government witness. At the time, he was the highest-ranking member of the Mafia to talk, and his testimony resulted in convictions that dismantled the Mob nationwide.

"Rise and Fall" sold about 15,000 copies and "To Kill the Irishman" about 5,000, Porrello said. Most of the copies have sold locally.

Not proud, but not ashamed.

Like a lot of cops, Porrello is fascinated by the criminal mind. He started a Web site, [www.americanmafia.com](http://www.americanmafia.com), to promote his books, provide a forum to talk Mafia and link to other articles and books about organized crime.

Now a lieutenant and supervisor of the Lyndhurst jail, Rick loves to quiz prisoners: What are they in for? Why did they do it? What were they thinking?

Their answers make him a better officer and crime author, he said.

His research into Cleveland organized crime has given him a better understanding of his own family. He's not proud of his gangster grandfather, but he's not ashamed either.

In Cleveland's Italian community in the 1920s and 1930s, the Porrellos and other gangsters were more than criminals; they were community leaders who provided jobs and aid to poorer immigrants. Like nearly everyone else, they were

motivated by greed and ambition, and they decided crime was the fastest way to satisfy both.

"Prohibition was repealed, so how do you look at guys who were supplying something that was illegal one decade and legal the next?" he said. "Where do you set the bar?"

Rick's third book is coming out this fall, the first to not have the name "Porrello" in the index. Titled "Superthief," it's the story of Phil Christopher, part of a gang of wiseguys from Youngstown and Cleveland who in 1972 pulled off an \$8 million-plus bank burglary in California. At the time, it was the richest bank heist in history.

Christopher, now in federal prison in Ohio for an unrelated crime, mailed Rick his handwritten account of the bank break-in and his other crimes. Rick found it so compelling that he collaborated with the convict on the book.

Rick wants to write a fourth book, maybe about his time on the road with Sammy Davis Jr. or a history of the Pittsburgh Mob. He's written everything there is to write about his grandfather and settled the questions he had about him.

The irony of a gangster's grandson becoming a police officer who writes books about gangsters is not lost on him. "It's funny," he said. "It's the way life is."

For more information about Rick Porrello or the Cleveland Mafia, go to his Web site at [www.AmericanMafia.com](http://www.AmericanMafia.com). To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: [jsweeney@plaind.com](mailto:jsweeney@plaind.com), 216-999-4850.