



Episode 911, Story 1 – Club Continental

Eduardo: This case examines this business card to unmask the secret life of its owner.

Southern California in the 20s and early 30s had a thirst for illicit liquor. Gangsters and bootleggers flocked to quench it. Business boomed for the underworld. Then, in 1933, the repeal of prohibition cut off that illegal revenue stream. What did the mobsters do next to keep the cash flowing?

Today, a retired doctor has a business card he thinks could link his father to a vice lord and an illicit chapter in Los Angeles history.

Richard Nicolls: I've always wondered about the Club Continental – and what kind of work my dad did there?

Eduardo: I'm Eduardo Pagan and I'm on my way to Guemes Island in the Puget Sound where I have a few questions for Richard Nicolls.

Richard: Okay. I've got this card...from my Dad Fred Nicolls...showing that he worked at the Club Continental.

Eduardo: Richard says his father passed away in 1957 and didn't speak of his somewhat checkered past.

Richard: We weren't too close. I learned as a young man that he was a rum runner across the Mexican border.



Eduardo: So he was a bootlegger?

Richard: And he got caught. And went to prison and after World War II finished, the governor of California gave him a full pardon.

Eduardo: What can you tell me about the Club Continental?

Richard believes the Club Continental was a nightclub near Los Angeles in the 1930s.

Although he never saw his father much as a young boy, he does recall a rare visit to the club that left a lasting impression.

Richard: And one time he took me downstairs and there's this sumptuous casino. Roulette wheels and baccarat tables and card tables. You know, the whole works.

Eduardo: And what did your father do there?

Richard: I don't know. A little bit runs together in my mind, you know. I was so young.

Eduardo: But one shadowy figure still looms large in his imagination, a man he believes was named "Nola Hahn".

Nola Hahn?

Richard: Certainly an odd name for a man, I thought.



Eduardo: What would you like me to find out for you?

Richard: What was my dad's involvement in the Club Continental? And then, who was Nola Hahn?

Eduardo: OK.

I wrote a book on the Los Angeles race riots in the 1930s and 40s, so I'm familiar with this era.

As I look over this card, there's not a lot of information to go on. It's just a simple business card. The font that's used on this card is an art deco style. And that's entirely consistent with the period.

You know, it's kind of curious as I look at this card too, that there's nothing to indicate what Fred Nicolls does. There's just his name, and nothing else. Here's a piece of information though, that I think I can really start with. It's the phone number. It says, Omaha.

At the Los Angeles Central Library, Reference Librarian, Mary McCoy, helps me locate Club Continental in a Los Angeles phone book from 1935.

C-L-U...THERE IT IS.

Eduardo and Mary McCoy: There we are!

Eduardo: Club Continental. There is its. Sonora Avenue, GLA – Glendale?



Mary: Glendale.

Eduardo: Okay. And, there's a Kenwood exchange, rather than Omaha. That's not what we have here. Why the discrepancy? Mary doesn't know. Maybe the number on the card was for Fred's home line. The phonebook doesn't have a listing for Fred Nicolls. But a check of the map in the directory confirms that Omaha was the exchange for a neighborhood near Glendale.

Did the Club Continental have more than one location? In a newspaper data base I find a reference to the club from 1935. It reads in part, "Amid a brilliant assemblage, the Club Continental held its formal opening last night in an atmosphere of splendor. Stars of screen and stage were on hand to make the occasion a gala affair." And this is a year and a half after the end of prohibition. It looks like the club's one and only location was near a Glendale airport.

During the war, the club became an officers barracks. The building was demolished in 1966.

There's no mention of Nola Hahn or gambling activity. So, what was it that Richard remembered seeing in that basement? There's nothing on Richard's father, Fred Nicolls, at the Club Continental either – what about his earlier rum-running days?

Now Richard remembered that his father was arrested in Arizona. After the passage of the Volstead Act and the 1920 prohibition of alcohol, bootlegging became an immensely profitable line of work for those willing to risk arrest and prison. A search for Fred Nicolls confirms Richard's recollection that long ago his father had run this risk and lost: "Customs men said they found copper



containers fitted between the seats and in the floor of the car containing two hundred and fifty gallons of bottled whiskey labeled Edinburgh, Scotland.” In 1931, Nicolls was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

So Fred Nicolls had a criminal past, but did he reform his ways after his release? What exactly was going on at the Club Continental and who was Nola Hahn?

I'm meeting author Jim Heimann in the Hollywood Hills. He's written several books about L.A. nightlife in the 30s.

Eduardo: I am eager to know what you can tell me about this card. Can you tell me anything about that information there?

Jim Heimann: I know the name Club Continental. Phone number, not familiar with. And, Fred Nicolls, no.

Eduardo: Well, I did discover, as a matter of fact, that he did do some time for being a bootlegger.

Jim: Well, you're talking about the 30s. And so it's, you know, right in the middle of the Depression.

Eduardo: Yeah.

Jim: So now we're talking about a lot of stuff that was going on. Los Angeles was rife with a lot of criminal activity.



Eduardo: California had been one of the wettest states during the thirteen years of prohibition, with mobsters smuggling an estimated 50 million dollars of liquor in just one year alone. Jim says first the Club Continental had been a speakeasy called Airport Gardens, a location with a knack for evading the 18th Amendment.

Jim: The Club Airport Gardens had a really long driveway. So if they saw the cops coming, all of a sudden, you know, phony walls came; the dinner tables came out. And now we just have a nice place to go dancing.

Eduardo: Jim says The Club Continental opened in 1934, right after the repeal of prohibition.

Jim: It was deluxe. It was ornate. It was a grand place to go dancing, right dead center of kind of the golden age of Hollywood. And certainly the golden age of nightlife in Hollywood and Los Angeles. You might see Howard Hughes or Paulette Goddard, William Powell, Carol Lombard. I mean, all these stars were really out in force almost every night.

Eduardo: You know, our contributor remembers as a child seeing in the basement of this gambling establishment what very much looked like a casino.

Jim: Yeah, this was always part of the underworld income, but certainly it accelerates right after Prohibition.

Eduardo: Jim explains how, after repeal, gangsters found a new revenue stream, and the Club Continental was a part of the action. Gambling had always been illegal; now it was the most profitable vice game in town, and an open secret.



Jim: There were raids. But most of it was just for show. You'd read newspaper accounts about this. Because this was part of the whole operation in L.A. in the thirties with the graft situation.

Eduardo: First illegal booze, then gambling. The rivers of illegal cash flowed to different corners of city government. By the time the Club Continental opened in 1934, control of Los Angeles rested with a powerful coalition of corrupt politicians, police and gangsters, known as the "combination." the combination's political leader was Mayor Frank L. Shaw, who oversaw an elaborate operation of kickbacks and bribes, while turning a blind eye to mob violence.

The contributor remembers the name Nola Hahn. Does that mean anything to you?

Jim: Yeah, when the transfer of Club Airport Gardens to Club Continental in 1934 happened Nola Hahn was associated with it. Nola Hahn is definitely one of the crime lords in Los Angeles. His name appears infrequently. He's a little bit of an enigma.

Eduardo: Jim explains Hahn is little known today because he operated behind a veil of secrecy and avoided any real trouble with the law. But Jim has a suggestion for how we might learn the truth about Nola Hahn.

Jim: The guy who owned the Hollywood Reporter, Billy Wilkerson, is associated with Nola Hahn. His son, Willie Wilkerson, wrote a very in-depth book about his father. That would be the first guy that I'd go to see.



Eduardo: If an alleged gangster such as like Nola Hahn was helping run the Club Continental, what was Fred Nicolls doing there? Did he return to a life of crime after his release from prison?

Our contributor's father, his name is right there on this card, used to work for Nola Hahn. What can you tell me about him?

Willie Wilkerson: Well, I know Nola Hahn. And, Nola Hahn definitely ran the Club Continental, at least the gambling. And, he definitely ran the gambling for my father's establishments.

Eduardo: Why did your father hire someone like Nola Hahn?
What did he bring to your father?

Willie: Hollywood was Las Vegas before Las Vegas was Las Vegas. I mean, it was dotted with casinos down Sunset Boulevard. Some of these clubs in today's money made hundreds of millions. Nola Hahn was kind of like a magician, a wizard in casino gambling. This guy knew how to make a casino just disappear, if there was some kind of a police raid.

Eduardo: Willie explains Hahn's innovations included consolidating gambling tables around a single overseer to avoid cheating and positioning surveillance teams to monitor the gamblers.

Willie: We know this person to be the pit boss today.

Eduardo: Was all of the kind of stuff you're describing going on at the Club Continental?



Willie: Absolutely. I mean, this club was an immense success during its time. And, that can be directly attributed to Nola Hahn.

Eduardo: How long was Hahn associated with the Club Continental?

Willie: Well that I don't know exactly. But he bought the Trocadero from my dad in 1938. And, it was an extraordinarily bad luck for him.

Eduardo: 1938 there were a whole lot of reformers that can into public office on the platform of cleaning up Los Angeles.

In 1938, Fletcher Bowron was elected mayor following the recall of Frank Shaw. His new regime targeted vice and once again the mafia's river of criminal cash was diverted or dried up entirely.

Willie: The reformers moved in. And, shut down gambling and prostitution. That clean up campaign was pretty definitive. It put a lot of these guys out of business.

Eduardo: Willie says after 1938, mobsters looked for a new place to set up shop. Some, like Hahn saw potential in an isolated, low-rent desert town: Las Vegas. In 1942, years before Bugsy Seigel and the Flamingo, Hahn opened the lavish Colony restaurant. His gambling innovations went with him, and this time, it was all legal.

Willie: He created the template of modern gambling that we know today.

Eduardo: Well, what kind of guys worked for Hahn?



Willie: Well, these weren't guys that weren't plucked from the street. They had to have some kind of resume. As you notice on Mr. Nicolls' card it doesn't identify what he does.

Eduardo: Right! Do you think Fred Nicolls went along with Nola Hahn to Vegas?

Willie: My guess is Mr. Nicolls went along for the ride as long as long as Nola Hahn was doing any kind of business.

Eduardo: Did Fred Nichols follow Nola Hahn to the promised land of Las Vegas?

In the shady world these men were living in, it's hard to find records. But I have a thought. Fred Nicolls spent time in prison and Richard mentioned his father was eventually pardoned years later by the governor of California.

Legal expert P.S. Rucker has helped the History Detectives in the past. I forwarded Fred Nichols information, and he suggests we meet in Seattle, at its National Archives and Records Administration facility.

Eduardo: This is Fred Nicolls and we believe he worked for the Club Continental. Now, I've been able to find only two articles that mention an arrest and then a conviction in 1931 for bootlegging. The family remembers or believes that he was pardoned by a governor for bootlegging.

P.S. Rucker: They would be mistaken with respect to that. He violated the Volstead Act, also known as the National Prohibition Act. So his offense was federal and so Mr. Nicolls actually spent time in federal prison.



Eduardo: Fred Nicolls was incarcerated in the McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Washington State.

P.S.: This is the Inmate Intake Registry, also known as the Guestbook.

Eduardo: For the McNeil Prison?

P.S.: Yes, it is.

Eduardo: And there he is. Fred Nicolls. There's his received and date of sentence, March of 1931, in Arizona. And here it indicates that he was paroled in 1932. P.S. has also found Nicolls' pardon application file.

P.S.: Here is a copy of the actual presidential pardon.

Eduardo: Presidential pardon?

P.S.: That's right. Harry Truman granted this pardon to Mr. Nicolls.

Eduardo: Oh, this is fantastic. And, there his signature is -- Harry S. Truman.

P.S. explains that only a president could grant a pardon for a federal offense.

P.S.: President Truman was very generous with pardons. He granted 2000 of them or so, and only two presidents granted more, Franklin Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.



Eduardo: Nicolls applied for the pardon in 1944, stating that he wanted participate in the war effort.

P.S.: After the application is received, then there's an extensive background research again conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And they interviewed several people throughout the state of California and here we see some affidavits which name some of those individuals and tell you about their relationship to Mr. Nicolls.

Eduardo: What P.S. Rucker shows me next will be of great interest to Richard Nicolls.

Eduardo: Well, Richard, this has been a very fascinating investigation.

I explain how the Club Continental of his childhood had been one of the major emporiums of illegal gambling in Los Angeles and Nola Hahn was an engineer of modern gambling, and a founding father Las Vegas.

Richard: A gambling engineer!

Eduardo: He was; he was a gambling genius. Now what's rather interesting is that Nola Hahn becomes the key to my answering the last question, which was basically what was your father's association with the Club Continental and all of this underworld in Los Angeles at this time?

Eduardo: I show Richard the FBI's record of his father's employers.

I want you to take a look at 1934.



P.S.: We see Los Angeles, California, 1934.

Eduardo: There's Nola Hahn. Right there at Club Continental. I can't believe that. So Nola Hahn, a known figure in the L.A. underworld, was serving as a character reference for Fred Nicolls.

The background check says Nicolls worked at the Club Continental for three months and it lists his job description.

I do find it very interesting that he's listed here as a "purchasing agent." That is highly suggestive.

P.S.: And also, the more amorphous title, "steward."

Eduardo: What do you think that meant?

P.S.: Unfortunately all I can do is add to the level of mystery. Further down the affidavit toward the end it says, the records have *evidently* been destroyed.

Eduardo: But the application does answer one question. In 1938, when Hahn left for Vegas, Fred Nichols started a five year job at a Los Angeles furniture company.

Nichols apparently didn't follow the mobsters to Las Vegas and the Club Continental may have been the last time he worked for Nola Hahn.

Richard: Nola Hahn! That is fantastic!



Eduardo: And there it is, Continental Club.

Richard: Purchasing agent and steward.

Eduardo: It really was because of this FBI investigation that your father was able to then petition the President of the United States for a pardon and he wrote that I do hereby grant unto the said Fred Nicolls a full and unconditional pardon. And there's his signature, right there. Harry S. Truman.

Richard: Thank you.

Eduardo: You're very welcome.

Richard: Yeah, I'll really treasure these. Well, that was worthwhile.

Eduardo: It's been a pleasure. Happy to do this.

After his pardon Fred Nicolls continued to live and work in California and died in Los Angeles in 1957, at the age of sixty-four. That was the same year Nola Hahn committed suicide in Beverly Hills, at age sixty, leaving behind a mysterious note: "Nobody to blame."