

Jimmy Catuara

by Frank J. Spoto, Jr.

Jimmy Catuara was considered a cousin by my father and his siblings. He was a *paisan*, which they interpreted as a cousin. But when questioned, they could not explain precisely how he was related. So, I did some research.

Catuara's mother was Francesca Spoto, and his father was Carmelo Catuara. The Catuaras lived at 748 West 25th Place in the "old" neighborhood. And Carmelo and Alfonso Spoto may have worked at the same company.¹ But that is as close as the families became.

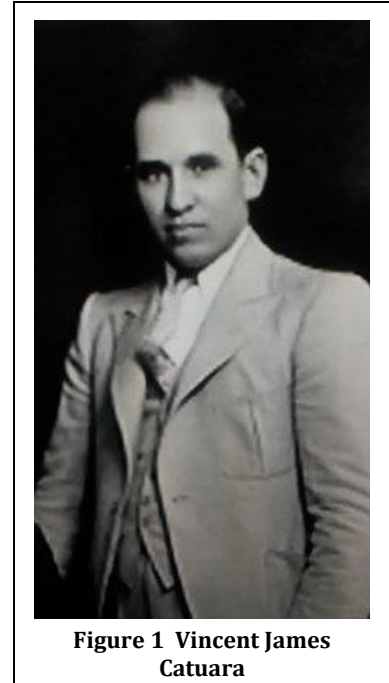
Carmelo arrived with his brother-in-law, John Spoto, at the Port of New York on February 6, 1906.² Carmelo was thirty; John was eighteen. They were from Sant'Angelo Muxaro, Agrigento, Sicily. Sant'Angelo is about six miles south of San Biagio Platani, where my grandfather, Alfonso Spoto, and his wife, Accursia Interrante, were born. Awaiting Carmelo and John in the U.S. was Carmelo's cousin, Frank Navarro, in Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania.

Carmelo's wife, Francesca Spoto, also from Sant'Angelo Muxaro, entered this country at the Port of New York in 1919 with their three children: Maria Angela, 18, Vincenzo (Jimmy), 14, and Benigna, 10.³ Their destination was Chicago, where Carmelo and John were living. Also, in 1919, Al Capone followed Johnny Torrio from New York to Chicago. Capone started as a bouncer in a brothel. But he advanced rapidly.

In 1920, another of Francesca's brothers, Guiseppa Spoto, arrived from Sant'Angelo Muxaro.⁴ With him were his wife, Rosina Cacciatore, and their children Philomena, 9, Guiseppa, 7, Francesco, 5, and Domenica, 1.⁵ These were more people with whom we shared a last name but did not know. John Spoto would go on to marry Mary Catuara⁶ in 1930, Jimmy's sister.⁷ John and Guiseppa were the "other" Spotos in Chicago. They were people that may have had family connections long ago but were not considered family in the ordinary, Sicilian sense.

Prohibition became the law of the land in 1920. The mob had another revenue stream to add to gambling, prostitution, abortion, theft, and extortion.⁸

February 14, 1929, marks a successful power play for Al Capone. Seven men were murdered at the garage at 2122 North Clark Street, in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago's North Side. They were shot by four men using weapons that included two Thompson submachine guns. Two of the shooters were wearing police uniforms, while the others wore suits, ties,



overcoats, and hats. Witnesses saw the men in police uniforms leading the other men at gunpoint out of the garage after the shooting.⁹ Al Capone was taking over territory from the Bugs Moran gang. This may have impressed Vincenzo Catuara.

Two months later, on April 23, Vincenzo became naturalized. Being awarded citizenship was something denied Vincenzo's father in 1922 because Carmelo was illiterate.¹⁰ Along with the naturalization, Vincenzo changed his first name to James.¹¹ Perhaps this was to honor his mentor, James Belcastro.

At the time of his naturalization, James and his wife, Mary Bonoma, had two children: Carmelo, born in 1927, and Francesca, born in 1929. Jimmy and his family were living at 2540 South Emerald Avenue. He listed his occupation as a driver.¹²

Then, on October 29, the stock market crashed. The crash opened another revenue stream for The Outfit. Loan sharks were lending money at exorbitant rates.

On September 17, 1930, The Daily Illustrated Times of Chicago said that warrants had been issued for the arrest of 26 men named as public enemies. The names included Alphonse "Scarface" Capone and George "Bugs" Moran. The following year, Al Capone was sentenced to prison. This did not deter Jimmy.

In the 1930 federal census, Jimmy is listed as a presser in a tailor shop.¹³ Ten years later, Jimmy is listed as the proprietor of a retail meat market.¹⁴ But he was also enumerated as an inmate of the Illinois State Penitentiary in Will County, Illinois.¹⁵ Both entries indicate that his last completed grade level at school was fourth grade.



Figure 2 Jimmy Catuara, 1933

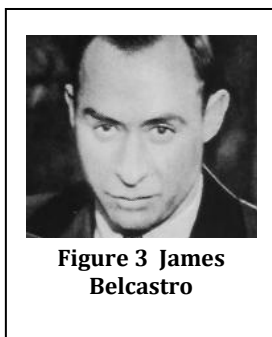


Figure 3 James Belcastro

Though not accomplished in schoolwork, Jimmy was successful in his street education. His boss and mentor was James Belcastro, known as the "king of bombers." At age 27, Jimmy was arrested and released on a fifty-thousand-dollar bond. He and William Palermo had been apprehended with a bomb on April 18, 1933. The bomb was comprised of seven sticks of dynamite.¹⁶ The two men were scheduled for trial. After twenty-five continuances, both Jimmy and Palermo went to trial in October.¹⁷ The defense contended that the bomb was planted on them by police.¹⁸

During the trial, police testified that while at the police station, Catuara offered them one thousand dollars in cash to forget the whole thing.¹⁹ One thousand dollars in 1933 is

equivalent to over twenty thousand dollars today.²⁰ Jimmy was also charged with attempted bribery.

After deliberations, the jury convicted both men.²¹ On November 18, Jimmy and his co-defendant were given five to twenty-five years in state prison. Still, they were released on bond pending an appeal. The criminal code indicated that the offense included intent to use the bomb for nefarious reasons. The defense contended that was not proven. While freed on bond, Jimmy was arrested and questioned concerning recent bombings at some milk dairies. After questioning, he was released.²²

In 1933, Prohibition was repealed, but the appeal of Jimmy's conviction was not successful. Thus, James Catuara appears in the 1940 Census as an inmate at the Illinois State Penitentiary. In the future, Jimmy would be more careful.

While Jimmy was serving time, the world kept changing. FBI agents shot John Dillinger next to the Biograph Theater. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in Akron, Ohio. The Social Security Act of 1935 mandated unemployment insurance, the eight-hour workday became law, and Municipal Airport (later renamed Midway Airport) expanded to sixteen runways. The most significant event was the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

In 1942, while still incarcerated, Jimmy registered for the draft.²³ But he never served in the United States military. After serving seven years and eleven months in prison, Jimmy was paroled.²⁴ Five years later, he was questioned concerning bombs detonated at the homes of two brothers who owned the Victory Paper Company. The company was alleged to supply paper to the policy wheel operators.²⁵ The policy wheel was a form of illegal gambling. The name "policy" is based on the similarity to inexpensive insurance, where premiums were collected in cash at the customer's home. After being questioned about the bombings, Jimmy was released.

In 1952, Jimmy was back in the newspaper. He was arrested and questioned about more bombings in the Chicago area. Two Teamsters Union officials had their homes bombed. Also bombed was a gasoline station where employees refused to join the union. The Teamsters offered a reward of twenty thousand dollars for information leading to an arrest. Jimmy was questioned but could not be linked to the bombings. Instead, he was charged with disorderly conduct.²⁶

In 1967, the police attempted to link Jimmy to a murder. Wesley M. Funicella had been gambling and borrowing from loan sharks. When he could not pay back his loans, he was found in the trunk of his car. He had been beaten and strangled. Funicella had been working part-time for a collection agency owned by Jimmy Catuara. On a paper in Funicella's pocket was found the names of two of Catuara's other employees. Jimmy Catuara was not charged.²⁷ But it appears he was advancing within the mob.

In February of 1972, Jimmy was one of nineteen men arrested on fraud and loan shark charges. The men had set up a corporation called Church of Christ Manors, Inc. The company charged a fee to religious congregations, hospitals, colleges, and convalescent homes for financing loans for the organizations. Fees charged were as large as forty-six thousand dollars and totaled over one million dollars. The loans were never forthcoming. James "The Bomber" Catuara was among those accused of wire fraud, mail fraud, and interstate transportation of stolen money. Jimmy was identified in the press as part of the "upper strata" of the loan shark operations in the Chicago area. Though others were convicted, there were no follow-up stories on a trial or conviction for Jimmy. It should be noted that these news stories also elevated the reputation of the U. S. State Attorney, James Thompson, who would go on to be governor of Illinois from 1977 to 1991.²⁸



Figure 4 Jimmy Catuara, 1951

Jimmy was now being watched by the federal government as well as state and local officials. He was indicted by a federal grand jury in June of 1972, this time for transporting a stolen vehicle across state lines. The charge referred to Jimmy's Cadillac, which he drove to Phoenix, Arizona, and back. He was arrested by the FBI, this time at his home. Since no trial or conviction was reported in the news, he seems to have avoided conviction.²⁹ Soon after, the man who acquired the auto for Jimmy was the target of a shooter, but the triggerman missed.³⁰ Perhaps the shots were a warning or a message.

In August, one of Jimmy's men was killed over a dispute. Jimmy believed Guido "The Weed" Fidanzi was not turning in all the money he collected for the mob. Fidanzi was shot thirteen times in a gas station. Four months earlier, Charles Carroll was tortured and shot to death. His body was found in the trunk of a car. Carroll was the bookmaker of an organization that Jimmy was taking over.³¹

In September of 1974, Jimmy was spotted meeting with two underworld men in an Oak Lawn hotel room. The following month, one of the biggest robberies in Chicago history occurred. It was the Purolator Security vault heist. Thieves got away with \$4.3 million and, on their way out, set off bombs in an attempt to destroy evidence. One month later, Jimmy was brought in for questioning. After the heist, it was reported that Jimmy had "a relative" who began making regular trips to Grand Cayman, where authorities believed the money was being stashed.³² Eventually, three men were convicted, but Jimmy was not one of them. Perhaps his only role was to introduce two of the thieves to each other.

In December of 1974, rumors were spreading that Jimmy would retire and move to Phoenix, Arizona. After all, he was sixty-nine years old and, by all indications, quite wealthy. But the promised retirement did not happen.³³ The story may have been planted by a rival or intended as a message from higher up the organization.

In May of 1977, Jimmy was still being described as semi-retired by law officials. He was listed in a newspaper article as being three steps down from Tony Accardo. Accardo was at the top of the Chicago crime syndicate.³⁴

Two months later, it was apparent that the mob was warring over the lucrative stolen auto parts business. More mobsters were being killed over auto parts than over illegal drugs. Thieves would steal a car and bring it to a “chop shop,” where the vehicle would be dismantled and sold as used parts. At the time, only engine blocks had serial numbers. All the chop shops on the south side and south suburban areas were under the control of Jimmy Catuara. The problem was so big that honest dealers could not compete with the prices charged for the stolen parts.³⁵

As 1977 wore on, life did not get any easier for James Catuara. The third man he put in charge of stolen autos within twelve months was gunned down. This man lost his life in broad daylight. Someone else, someone younger, was challenging Jimmy’s authority.³⁶ That someone was Albert Tocco, 47 years old, a rising star in the underworld.³⁷

Also, in 1977, Jimmy was kidnapped for several days and left in the trunk of his car. It was a clear warning. Get out, or we will take you out. But Jimmy refused to back down.³⁸ He was counting on his friendship with Tony Accardo.

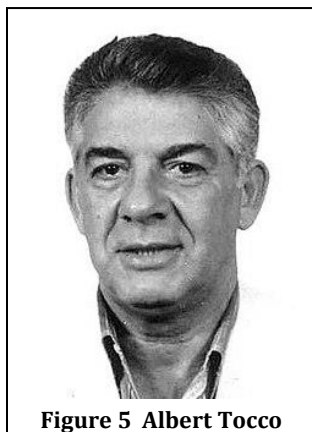


Figure 5 Albert Tocco

In August, a junkyard owner associated with Catuara was found shot dead and left in a van. The junkyard was believed to be a chop shop. Another man associated with Jimmy had been missing for months and was presumed dead.³⁹

In October, it was reported that the mob had a new boss for the chop shop business. A lieutenant of Albert Tocco was put in charge. He succeeded Jimmy Catuara, who was referred to as “an increasingly ineffective South Side and south suburban mobster who had been responsible for the stolen auto racket for years...”.⁴⁰

On July 28, 1978, Jimmy became the tenth victim of the stolen auto parts racket in seven years.⁴¹ He was sitting in his red Cadillac on Ogden Avenue and Hubbard Street, waiting to meet someone. Two men ran up to the car at about 7 a.m. From both sides of the vehicle, the men fired at Jimmy. He managed to crawl out of the car, where one man fired once more into Catuara’s back. He lay dead on the street with four bullet wounds to his head and upper body.⁴²

Jimmy was waked for two evenings at Coletta & Sons Funeral Home on 79th Street in Chicago. His funeral mass was at St. Germain Catholic Church in Oak Lawn. Burial is at St. Mary Catholic Cemetery in Evergreen Park, Illinois in Section B, Block 24, Lot 19.⁴³

During his eulogy, James “The Bomber” Catuara was described as a “loving father and husband” and as a “quiet and simple man.”⁴⁴ His death certificate lists his occupation as a salesman.

After his death, Jimmy’s chauffeur was questioned by police. The man claimed that he did not drive Jimmy on July 28th because he wasn’t feeling well. He also claimed ignorance of his boss’s business.⁴⁵

My father once talked about his “cousin” Jimmy. He said Jimmy told him never to say hello unless Jimmy said hello first. Not too long after that, my father saw Jimmy on the street. Catuara was unshaven, dressed in old clothes, and walking around with a blank look on his face. My father knew that Jimmy was hiding in plain sight. The next time my dad saw him, Jimmy was well dressed and alert.

Committing this story to paper reminds me how grateful I am that my father was an honest butcher, the kind of butcher that cuts steaks and roasts from beef cattle. My father never made a lot of money, but we lived peacefully, unafraid, and had everything we needed. But I remember one scary night when two large detectives came to our door to arrest Frank Spoto. My dad had to talk fast and show identification to convince the men that he was not the Frank Spoto authorities were after. My father knew they were after the son of Guiseppe and Rosina Spoto, Jimmy Catuara’s nephew. From that day forward, my father used his middle initial, J.

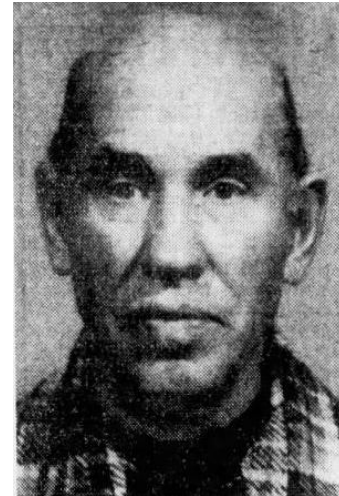


Figure 6 Jimmy Catuara, 1978

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Figure 1 Vincent James Catuara

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Figure 2 Jimmy Catuara, 1933

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Figure 3 James Belcastro

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Figure 4 Jimmy Catuara, 1951

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Figure 5 Albert Tocco

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Figure 6 Jimmy Catuara, 1978

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Index

Accardo, Tony, 5
Arizona, Phoenix, 4, 5
Belcastro, James, 2
Bonoma, Mary, 2
Cacciatore, Rosina, 1
Capone, Al, 1, 2
Carroll, Charles, 4
Catuara
 Benigna, 1
 Carmelo, 1
 Jimmy's Son, 2
 Francesca
 Jimmy's daughter, 2
 Jimmy
 arrested, 2, 3, 4
 authority questioned, 5
 chop shops, 5
 disorderly conduct, 3
 draft, 3
 grave, 6
 hiding in sight, 6
 indicted, 4
 kidnapped, 5
 killed, 5
 link to murder, 3
 loses chop shops, 5
 meeting, 4
 naturalized, 2
 offers bribe, 2
 paroled, 3
 profession, 2, 6
 questioned, 3
 retire, 5
 sentenced to prison, 3
 The Bomber, 4
 Maria, 1
 Mary. *See* Catuara, Maria
 Vincenzo. *See* Catuara, Jimmy
 chop shop, 5
 Church of Christ Manors, Inc, 4
 Dillinger, John, 3
 FBI, 4
 Fidanzi, Guido, 4
 Funicella, Wesley, 3
 Interrante, Accursia, 1
 king of bombers, 2
 Moran, Bugs, 2
 Navarro, Frank, 1
 paisan, 1
 Palermo, William, 2
 policy wheel, 3
 Purolator Security vault heist, 4
 San Biagio, 1
 Sant'Angelo Muxaro, 1
 Spoto
 Alfonso, 1
 Domenica, 1
 Francesca, 1
 Francesco. *See* Spoto, Frank
 Frank, 1, 6
 Guiseppe, 1, 6
 John, 1
 Philomena, 1
 Teamsters Union, 3
 Thompson, James, 4
 Tocco, Albert, 5
 Torrio, Johnny, 1
 Victory Paper Company, 3

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