

The Black Hand

by Mark Chochla

In January 1909, the Daily Times-Journal revealed that the Italian Black Hand Society held secret meetings in Fort William and Port Arthur. Although local police did not know the location of the group's headquarter, this one hundred year old Neapolitan crime organization had made its way here from New York City. This sensationalized news story claimed that the Black Hand, whose members were mostly day laborers, lived by extortion.

Typically, the victim received a Black Hand letter demanding a large sum of money or his home and business would be destroyed or his child kidnapped. The signature on the letter was a crudely drawn black ink hand, a skull or a dagger.

Italians and other immigrants in the "foreign quarters" of the Lakehead during this period felt quite powerless and socially isolated. They suffered from social neglect and exploitation and therefore openly feared assisting the police. This created an ideal condition for urban extortion and terror.

Several local incidents had the hallmark of the Black Hand. A man in Port Arthur succeeded in intimidating a small business owner into paying him \$250 in protection money and another paid \$200. Because these criminals preyed on other Italians, many in the Italian communities were becoming suspicious of their fellows. Leaders in the Italian community were concerned about the Black Hand but they did not know who the criminals were.

Despite the sensational claims of the Daily Times-Journal, there is no evidence that an international Black Hand Society operated at the Lakehead. In fact, the Black Hand was not a criminal organization, nor was it the forerunner of the Mafia. It was merely a criminal tactic – extortion and terrorism. Nevertheless, the Black Hand would be incorrectly blamed for almost all crime in Italian urban communities in North America before 1915.

Extortion was used at the Lakehead for only a few months. The practice seems to have ended with a shooting at the Giovinezzo boarding house on Algoma Street. Raffle Skutre, partner of a convicted extortionist named Pambanata, became the victim of criminal retribution. Skutre's enemies shot him three times and slashed his face twice. Many Italians feared this criminal and hoped he would never come out of the hospital. Raffle Skutre and his suspected assailants all remained "as mum as oysters and seemed haunted by a fear of a fate worse than death." We do not know the outcome of this incident but the Black Hand faded from the local news.

The Black Hand had a brief local history. The existence of the Black Hand as a criminal tactic was due to the vulnerability of the Italian community to crime and not to an Italian inclination to crime.

