

## TOO TOUGH FOR CAPONE

BY W. A. S. DOUGLAS

STEVE SUMNER passed away in Chicago this year at the ripe old age of ninety-six, mourned by everybody in the milk business from dairy owners down and by a lot of other people who had nothing to do with milk but to drink it.

Steve was a union boss in a city where a union boss has to be tough to hang on; he was also an honest union boss. If he had acted as have many other Chicago labor chiefs, he would have left a sizeable fortune behind him. He died a poor man.

Steve defied, fought and whipped the most ruthless mob of musclers-in- ever to scourge business, industry and unionism in a great city. He came to Chicago as a young man from a Maine village, drove a milk wagon seven days a week for a miserable wage, saw himself growing old and began to wonder what would happen to him when he would eventually slow down and be discarded by his employers. There were no pensions, no social security in those gone days, and what a milkman was paid was barely enough to live on; they managed somehow

but they were never able to save anything out of their meagre earnings.

In 1901 Steve Sumner, then fifty-one years of age, began preaching unionism to his fellow milk wagon drivers. He quit his job to talk, to argue, to canvass; he was told he was foolish. His answer was that in a very few years Steve Sumner would be thrown out of his job anyhow and so would the man with whom he was arguing. Organization meant better wages, shorter hours, benefits, savings.

IN THE summer of 1902, with his own savings wiped out by a year of unpaid evangelism among his fellow workers, Steve had seventy-eight signatures to his application to the American Federation of Labor for permission to form a union. The charter was granted and Steve became the union's business agent. The dairymen laughed. If Steve and his boys started any trouble, out they would go: plenty of labor was available; milk delivery didn't call for brains. The hell with Sumner and his crazy union — just a lot of old men.

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A few weeks after the charter had been granted Steve Sumner, early in the morning, passed a saloon outside of which stood a dejected-looking horse attached to a loaded milk wagon. Steve went inside, ordered a glass of milk and looked around. There was the driver of the wagon, drunk. He was not a union member.

"There's women and children waiting for that load of yours, chum," said Sumner walking up to the drunken driver. "And you're laying down on them. What's more, you ain't fit to deliver. Get the hell home out of here."

The driver's reply was abusive. Steve, broad-shouldered, already gray-haired, amazingly husky, grabbed the man, heaved him into the street, climbed aboard the milk wagon, checked the delivery book, made the round and drove back to the dairy.

"I've made the delivery your man was too drunk to make," he told the astonished dairy manager. "I'm the business agent of the new union. What you do with him is none of our business now. But I'll tell you that when the time comes for him to join up, as it will for all of your help, he'll find it tough sledding if he hasn't changed his ways."

That story circulated through the dairies and among the drivers too. Service was far from perfect; improvement meant better prices and more business for employers. If Steve Sumner was going to make the milk wagon drivers behave, that was something. Better men deserved better

wages. It got around that Steve touched no liquor, not even tea or coffee — nothing but buttermilk or sweet milk. "Buttermilk Steve," they soon began to call him.

Within a few months after this incident, the union's membership had grown to about 700. Then, one day, "Buttermilk Steve" wandered into another saloon just outside the gates of a big dairy. This was a hangout for drivers before they started off on their rounds. A score of them were taking their bourbon neat when the business agent and two others walked in armed with sledge hammers. They smashed the bar and the bottles.

"Liquor and milk don't mix," roared Steve, as he herded the drivers out of the wrecked saloon.

The union prospered exceedingly. Its fixed rule of no drinking on duty commended it to employers, for drunken drivers were their biggest headache. Steve, moreover, was a stickler for good behavior on duty in other respects as well. He demanded courtesy, service, promptness.

A dozen years after its charter had been granted, the union could boast 100 per cent membership.

## II

FOR A quarter of a century Steve's organization went its untroubled, pleasant way — until union racketeering became a fine art among Chicago gangsters. In 1928, the Capone mob, flushed with its conquests of

other organizations, began to cast covetous eyes on the Milk Wagon Drivers. There was a membership of 7200, a treasury of \$1,000,000, an annual income of \$935,000. Nice pickings.

"Big Tim" Murphy, a number-one-muscler, was facing trial for participation in the Rondout mail robbery and needed \$50,000 for defense money. He put the bite on Steve Sumner, who had always remained business agent and secretary, and on the union's president, Robert Fritchie. Sumner said no. Next day two cars drove past the milkmen's headquarters at 220 South Ashland Avenue and poured a fusillade of bullets into the offices. Nobody was hurt. That afternoon "Big Tim" repeated his demand. Sumner said no, even more forcibly than before. When he found that Sumner could not be scared, "Big Tim" went after easier prey for his \$50,000. But the milkmen's troubles were just beginning.

Scarface Al Capone, lord of all he surveyed from the rooftop windows of his suite in the old Metropolitan Hotel, held himself somewhat aloof from union racketeering but he gave his underlings permission to do what they wished if they found a chance for an easy killing. And Steve's union was considered easy by George "Red" Barker who had already successfully muscled into the outlaw Chicago Teamsters' Union. Barker came to Sumner, announcing that he had declared himself in. Sumner told him sulphurously where to go. The fact

that Barker, a known killer, was armed didn't faze the eighty-year-old union boss.

Barker went out but he came back — with bombs. Two were tossed into the Milk Wagon Drivers' headquarters. Chicago's mayor, "Big Bill" Thompson, believed in letting these difficulties work themselves out; so did his police force. Half a dozen collectors and assistant business agents for the union were slugged by Barker's roughhouse men. Bullets from cruising gangster cars smashed more windows. Still old Steve wouldn't surrender his union to the mob. He refused police protection because, he declared, "It wouldn't amount to a damn anyhow."

Then "Red" Barker tried other tactics. He kidnapped the union's president, Bob Fritchie. That got the old man. He was afraid the thugs would torture his friend Bob. He still didn't bother with the police but he laid down \$50,000, and Fritchie was released, unharmed. Barker was mowed down by machine guns a few weeks after he presumably received his share of the ransom.

ALTHOUGH he had yielded to extortion in order to save his friend from harm, Sumner nevertheless had held the gangsters at bay; his union was still intact and free. The Chicago mob kept after him, however, and in the summer of 1932 — the year Steve Sumner celebrated his eightieth birthday — it decided to de-feather the old man for all time. Capone had gone to

prison, leaving Frank Nitti ("The Enforcer") and Murray ("The Camel") Humphreys to share overlordship. Prohibition was doomed and the boys were looking round for fresh fields of endeavor and profit. The rich Milk Wagon Drivers' Union, Local 753, now affiliated with the International Teamsters' Union, stood at the top of the list of prospects.

A delegation of hoodlums, led by Humphreys, descended on union headquarters, still at 220 South Ashland Avenue, a solid old stone mansion said to have been built by "Long John" Wentworth, one of the city's earliest mayors. Humphreys had a notable list of killers with him — "Three Finger" Jack White, "Klondike" Mike O'Donnell, Frankie Diamond (Capone's brother-in-law), James "Fur" Sammons, Marcus "Studs" Looney. They threw open the doors and confronted Ray Bryant, the union cashier. Steve Sumner wasn't there.

"You tell that old so-and-so," announced "The Camel" Humphreys, "that next time we come loaded for bear. We're taking over this joint."

The next time they came, eighty-year-old Steve was waiting for them. Let him tell it his own way, as he told it under oath in a Federal court:

"Humphreys started off. He made me several propositions. First off he wanted me to take into the union a dairy the boys were operating themselves [The Meadowmoor Dairy]. He went on to say the boys all knew they would be out of luck when

Prohibition was gone and legal beer back and that they needed steady income. He said he didn't see why the dairy business couldn't pay almost as much as the old beer business. I told him I wasn't interested. I said I wouldn't supply union drivers for hoodlums and that he was wasting time talking to me. Then he said he would cut me for a share of all the profits if I would go along. Then he said his mob would run the drivers' union. I said they would not.

"Don't you shake down the dairy companies?" he asked.

"I said of course not nor would I have anything to do with such a course.

"A few sticks of dynamite and they'll come across and pay plenty," said Humphreys.

"Then he offered me cash to get out and give them the union. I said no.

"Well then," he said, 'we'll take it from you.'"

That was a declaration of war, and old Steve knew it. He bought steel plates and had them built into the walls of the Ashland Avenue mansion. There were steel shutters for the windows, the doors were reinforced with steel and everyone entering the building was first inspected through a barred slot with a steel swingback.

STEVE fortified his home at 7348 Constance Avenue in the same fashion. He asked no help from the police and received none. Samuel Insull had fled

to Greece following the crash of his utilities' empire, so Steve Sumner bought Insull's armored car. It had steel lining with bullet-proof glass windows. Its sides were studded with portholes for rifles.

Then, from his armored fortress, his armored home and his armored car, old Steve Sumner sent word to the boys to "come and get it."

But they wouldn't fight — that is, in the open. There were sluggings of agents, bombing of milk depots, shooting of drivers — but no open, frontal attack. For eight years, old Steve drove around in his armored car, collecting dues, addressing meetings, running his union. With his armed chauffeur and his armed bodyguard, he traveled 134,000 miles. He kept his little picked army of expert marksmen until the new world war came along. In November 1942, he donated his armored car to a scrap drive.

"Melt it down into bullets," he said, "and use them on hoodlums who, no matter how bad they may be, will at least stand up to you and fight."

### III

AT THE mellow age of ninety-two, Steve Sumner decided to call it a day. He handed over to competent, honest men one of the wealthiest unions in the country and one which, through him, had done as much for the working man as any other organization of its kind — more than most.

Steve was a "soft touch." He might

have been a rich man if he had been more thrifty or if he had been just a wee bit corrupt, but he wasn't that type. What money he made, over living costs for himself, his wife and daughter, was either spent on union business or loaned out or given to anyone who needed it or said he needed it. He often loaned money to people he hardly knew. Anyone with a hard-luck story, especially if it involved children, got what he asked for; ninety per cent of these loans, officials of the union say, remain unpaid. Mrs. Sumner, whom Steve married when he was a mere lad of forty-seven, still has numerous notes, running into thousands of dollars, all unpaid. Steve never tried to collect, and she says she never will either.

Steve loved people and he loved a good joke. He didn't go in for the practical or for the dirty variety, but he always had some kind of a humorous story to tell. He detested smoking so much he would often pull a cigar or a cigarette out of the mouth of a total stranger! Then he would remember to apologize and would usually rip a five-dollar bill from his roll to make amends. His battles were both verbal and physical. But he never held a grudge — not even against the mob. He had no real personal enemies although he made plenty of business enemies; even these, however, remembered to write letters of condolence and sympathy to his widow after his death, thousands of letters telling her how much they had admired the old bruiser.

Steve Sumner was built like a barrel, something after the style of Tony Galento. He was about five feet seven tall and always weighed around 200 pounds. He was as strong as a bull. When he lost his temper he could curse better than any of his drivers.

MANY a union official saw the boss tackle much bigger men and heave them bodily out of the way. Once a Greek wrestler, six feet two, weighing 230 pounds, sent to the union headquarters by the Capone boys to make trouble, pushed his way into the corridor past the guards. He was shouting about what he would do if he did not get satisfaction for some imaginary wrong. Steve came roaring out of his office to confront the Greek, hands on hips. The man took one look at the union boss' determined stance and went for his gun. Instead of diving at him, Steve threw back his leonine head and laughed. The Greek was dumfounded by such tactics; and as he stood there Steve walked up to him, snatched away his gun, picked him up bodily and threw him down the nine steps to the street.

Steve knew about everybody in Chicago and just about everybody knew him — from Mayor Edward J. Kelly down to the bums on West Madison Street. He had a thousand small personal charities, most of which his wife only heard about after his death. Then characters from all walks of life came to tell her how Steve had paid their doctor's bills or

found them jobs or taken care of overdue rent. For ten days after his death policemen were at his home to move the line of sympathizers.

He never had a hobby nor did he take any recreation. He didn't know what a vacation was. When his wife would prompt him to take a few days off he would say, pointing to his armored car: "When I get in there and drive to work I get all the recreation and vacation I want."

STEVE belonged to no church though he sometimes attended services when the notion took him; then he would march into the nearest house of prayer, regardless of its denomination. His religion, he once told his wife, was to make a better life for his fellow man the best way he knew how. He certainly did all he could to that end in the milk business. Reminiscing before his death he said:

"There was slavery in this sort of a living before we formed the union. We worked eighteen to twenty hours a day for twelve dollars a week. I hopped on and off a milk wagon for more years than I can remember and I used to figure on four hours out of every twenty-four for sleep. I'm against all slavery, be it the slavery of the booze bottle or the slavery of toil. I defy anybody to prove I ever did any slugging until I was slugged first. Yes, I've beaten up milk drivers when I've found them drunk or even drinking on the job. Milk is like the mail only more important. It has got to get through."

## THE THEATRE

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

### *Eugene O'Neill after Twelve Years*

TWO weeks after this number of THE AMERICAN MERCURY appears on the newsstands, what to my mind is one of the most impressive plays ever written by an American dramatist will be presented in the theatre. Its title is *The Iceman Cometh* and, as is not altogether surprising, its author is Eugene O'Neill.

It is now just twelve years and nine months since O'Neill's last play, called *Days without End*, saw production, and in the long intervening spell the public has had small news of him. Now and then came vague and contradictory reports that he was working on a cycle of eight or nine plays to be named by the general and somewhat turgid title, *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*; that he was very ill and no longer able to do any work; and that he had successively retired from the theatre to Sea Island, Georgia, and the Valley of the Moon in California, there to devote the rest of his life to nursing his health, raising Dalmatian dogs, and laughing at English dramatic criticism. But from the man himself there issued not so much as a peep. What, really, was he up to?

It happens that we have been close friends for going on thirty years now,

and that I am in a position to tell. That in the period of his absence he completed the mentioned *The Iceman Cometh*, along with the subsequently to be produced *A Moon for the Misbegotten* and the still later to be produced *A Touch of the Poet*, the public has been apprised. These three plays, however, were by no means all. During the twelve-odd years, he not only outlined in minute detail not eight or nine but all of eleven plays of the cycle referred to — the eleven were to be played, however, as eight with three combined into duplex units and presented, like *Strange Interlude*, on the same afternoons, evenings and nights — but further definitely completed seven of them, including the three double-length ones, and got pretty well into the eighth.

IN ADDITION, he finished a separate and independent play of full length called *Long Day's Journey into Night*, production of which he will not allow, for reasons which I may not yet specify, for some years. Nor, yet again, was that all. Besides *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he also completed the first play of a much shorter and entirely different cycle of which no word has until now reached anyone.