

Matthew Ianniello, the Mafia Boss Known as 'Matty the Horse,' Dies at 92

Paul Vitello

Photo



Matthew Ianniello, second from right, was known as "Matty the Horse," a mob name derived from his powerful physique and his early career as an enforcer. Credit Frances Roberts for The New York Times

Matthew Ianniello, the low-key reputed Genovese crime boss known as "Matty the Horse," who was convicted of rigging construction bids, skimming union dues and wringing protection money from bar owners, pornography peddlers and topless dancers during a half-century career that, among other highlights, helped transform Times Square into the dingy world capital of peep shows in the 1960s and '70s, died on Aug. 15 at his home in Old Westbury, on Long Island. He was 92.

His death was confirmed by his trial lawyer, Jay Goldberg of Manhattan. A death notice placed by his family in Newsday said Mr. Ianniello died "peacefully at home with his family."

Mr. Ianniello — whose mob name derived from his powerful physique and his early career as an enforcer — served only two significant prison terms during his life: a nine-year term for racketeering and tax evasion involving Midtown topless bars that he owned, which he served from 1986 to 1995; and an 18-month sentence for his role in illegally controlling garbage-hauling companies in Connecticut, which he completed in 2009, at 89.

Yet federal prosecutors considered him the mastermind of one of organized crime's most lucrative profit centers in New York — the topless bar scene and pornography shops of Manhattan.

Some establishments were owned outright by Mr. Ianniello's organization. In most cases, though, the profit came in the form of payments for "protection," which establishment owners paid as supposed insurance against police raids, union demands for higher wages or, explicitly or not, visits from goons with tire irons.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

Similar protection incentives made Mr. Ianniello, in effect, one of the biggest operators of Manhattan's discos and gay bars during the '70s. Among them were several that were considered landmarks of gay night life, like the Gilded Grape and the Hay Market.

Mr. Ianniello was involved in more than 80 restaurants and bars at the peak of his operation, which prosecutors described as a "smut cartel," with a network of holding companies offering an array of services for his bar and disco clients: money lending, interior decorating, garbage collection and vending-machine leasing; one was the talent agency providing topless dancers for the bars. By laundering protection payments through the various service providers, Mr. Ianniello protected himself for many years from the notice of law enforcement.

"He was a huge moneymaker for the mob," said Selwyn Raab, a former New York Times reporter who specialized in covering organized crime, and who wrote "Five Families," a history of the mob in New York, published in 2005. "Among the five organized-crime families, the Genovese

were considered the most sophisticated. They were the ones in labor racketeering, the garment center, the fish market — they were the Ivy League of the New York mob.”

Within that clan, he added, Mr. Ianniello was considered the top of his class.

Matthew Joseph Ianniello was born on June 18, 1920, in the Little Italy neighborhood of Manhattan, one of eight children of Italian immigrant parents. He worked as a waiter, and then as a longshoreman in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, before joining the Army in 1943. He received a medal for valor in combat in the South Pacific. After the war, he and an uncle became partners in a restaurant.

He logged his first police arrest in 1951, on a charge of heroin trafficking, later dropped. Prosecutors said he became progressively involved in the Genovese family businesses — construction bid-rigging, labor-union corruption and waste-carting extortion — while developing his forte in dining and sex-related entertainment throughout the '60s.

After the imprisonment of the longtime Genovese family leader Vincent Gigante in 1997, Mr. Ianniello served as acting boss of the crime family. After his own indictment in 2005, the leadership role passed to a rotating panel of senior organization members.

Mr. Ianniello is survived by four children, seven brothers and sisters and 10 grandchildren, according to the death notice in Newsday. His wife, Beatrice May, died several years ago.

His stake in one restaurant, Umberto's Clam House, in Little Italy, placed him at the scene of an infamous and legendary gangland murder on April 7, 1972, when the reputed Colombo crime family underboss Joey Gallo was riddled with bullets between courses of a late-night meal by four gunmen, in an intrafamily gang war.

Mr. Ianniello, who then owned a hidden interest in Umberto's, was working in the kitchen at the time and was initially suspected of having some involvement in the hit. But he was never charged.

“You think I'm crazy to let this happen in this place?” the police quoted him as saying after the murder. “I don't know nothing.”

Umberto's, meanwhile, profited from a brisk trade in tourists visiting to see the bullet holes in the walls, left unpatched, and to eat.

[Continue reading the main story](#)