Bartlett's News Briefs

NOT JUST ANYBODY

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by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer
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Bootlegging along the Pacific, death in the sand, criminal operations in the castle ~ Constable S. A. Landini was Pacifica's unrivaled sleuth



In the recent history piece I wrote on the tragic 1921 kidnapping and murder of Father Patrick E. Heslin, pastor of Holy Angels Church in Colma, S. A. Landini, constable at large representing Colma, Daly City and the coast, was instrumental in solving that crime. Some time back I did a biography tale on Dr. Galen Richard Hickok – owner on record, 1916-1921, of the Salada Beach mystery castle – who was not a doctor at all and was eventually convicted of performing an illegal abortion at the castle. In late 1920, he was sentenced to time at San Quentin State Prison, now San Quentin Rehabilitation Center. Police officers heading that case were San Francisco officers Sgt. Miles Jackson, Det. Lester Dorman and Policewoman Katherine O'Connor, with Colma constable S. A. Landini assisting. Recent research digging also uncovered the name S. A. Landini working the criminal activity at what was once known as the "Crime Shack," but we now know as the historic landmark Sanchez Adobe in the Linda Mar neighborhood of Pacifica. [Informationally, nine separate coastline communities became Pacifica in 1957: Edgemar, Pacific Manor, Westview, Sharp Park (previously Salada Beach and Brighton Beach), Fairway Park, Vallemar, Rockaway Beach, Linda Mar and Pedro Point.]

In August of 1922, San Mateo's "Daily News Leader" wrote: "Landini has many times proved the nemesis of law breakers who sought refuge in the secluded cabins of the beach districts, which are practically without roads."

Who was this champion sleuth whose first and middle names, except in this story, rarely hit print?

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Silvio Arthur Landini was born on November 15, 1876, in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood. His memorial notes his birth year as 1872, but 1876 matches the paperwork that Constable Landini filled out on September 12, 1918, when he registered a little shy of his 42nd birthday for the third registration of the U.S. Draft, following the country's entrance into WWI. Silvio was one of a number of siblings. His known siblings names are provided here from his 1935 obituary: James F. and J. W. Landini of San

Francisco, Rinaldo Landini of Hayward, Mrs. C. Baderocco of San Francisco, Mrs. O. Armando and Mrs. B. Cuneo of Daly City.

In 1894, long before Mr. Landini became a constable, his name made the pages of the "San Francisco Call:"

"San Francisco teenage boy, Silvio Landini, has been charged with robbery."

His case went before Judge Edward A. Belcher. "He was supposed to be an accomplice of a lad named Baldwin, who was tried for the same offense before Judge Wallace, convicted and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in San Quentin." However, Judge Belcher agreed with the district attorney that: "There was not sufficient evidence against the lad named Landini to warrant his case going to a jury." In addition, with the knowledge that the: "Boy's quite respectable parents were placing their son on a ship to Genoa, Italy, where relatives would meet him and place the lad in the army," the judge dismissed the case noting: "The boy is now on his way to Italy to become an honest man and a soldier. A few years of discipline would do him good and the ends of justice would be better served than by prosecuting a bottomless charge against the boy and hereby attempting to make a felon of him."

Eight years later, in 1902, Silvio A. Landini married Lillian Guild in San Francisco. The couple went on to have three children: Edith, Arthur and Beatrice. In his first career, Silvio worked as a teamster for a fertilizer company. Silvio and Lillian were early Daly City residents. According to the "South San Francisco Enterprise: "In 1908, Silvio and his wife built one of the first five homes in Daly City."

When exactly he became a police officer is a bit of a question mark. It is some point after 1910 and he can be found serving as: "Guardian of the Law in the First Township of San Mateo County" in 1914. In 1914, the First Township covered the northernmost part of San Mateo County, which included Daly City, the cemetery lands of Colma and along the coast where Pacifica is situated today. From 1915 to 1924, Constable Silvio Landini is historically listed as the Chief of Police, Colma Police Department – an elected position. He remained a constable through December of 1934.

As an officer, he was constantly there for his fellow Bay Area residents and a number of his deeds made both the San Francisco and San Mateo County newspapers.

In March of 1919, 4-year-old Katherine Halter of San Mateo managed to place herself on a United Railroads car in San Mateo, all on her own because she knew it would be so much fun, and she disembarked in Daly City. A kindly stranger, realizing something was amiss, turned the missing girl over to Constable S. A. Landini. Until he could find her (quite frantic) parents, which he did later that day, the constable left Katherine at his Daly City home in care of his wife Lillian. When Katherine's father came to pick her up, his little girl was sleeping soundly from her really adventurous day.

In August of 1919, the constable's name blazed the headlines again: "Constable Landini Saves Them From Disaster By A Dose Of Jail." This story found the police officer waiting at Daly City, where the conductor on the interurban car – United Railroads electric streetcar line running from San Francisco to Daly City, Colma and on down to San Mateo – kicked off several drunk passengers not paying their fares. The constable took them in and deposited them overnight in the cooler. Constable Landini told the press that the first words out of the now sober miscreants in the morning were always the same: "Where the hell am I?"

On January 6 of 1920, the officer's name was found more quietly in the headlines with the announcement of his daughter's (Edith Guild Landini, a prominent Red Cross worker) upcoming nuptials to Sergeant William Garland Fuhr, of the aviation corps, at Daly City's Grace Presbyterian Church. A little later that same January, S. A. Landini found a missing 14-year-old Colma boy on a ranch near Calistoga. The boy,

apparently, did not want to be found and gave the officer quite the chase. But in the end, the teen was caught by the 43-year-old officer and "returned to safety." In October of that same year, newspapers noted that Constable S. A. Landini of Daly City rescued a man lost on Pedro Mountain for six hours.

In 1920, crime headlines were grim coming out of the 1842-1846 built Sanchez Adobe, located in today's Pacifica and then dubbed "the Crime Shack" by both neighbors and law enforcement, and Lawman Landini was a constant crime-stopping fixture. At some point in 1920, Constable Landini led local law enforcement in a shootout against a ring of bootleggers. On another day in 1920, Constable Landini arrested members of the Bacigalupi gang at the Crime Shack. The Bacigalupi gang was at the top of a brazen, coastside $12 million-a-year liquor-smuggling syndicate. But on this day in 1920, the constable took down and arrested some of the gang members for the robbery and murder of an elderly man. Apparently that same year, Constable Landini also took down a "white slave" trafficking network operating out of the Crime Shack, and while he was at it he rescued four young women. There was also his August involvement in the arrest of the lawbreaking Dr. Galen Hickock at the Salada Beach mystery castle.

In February of 1921, San Mateo's "Daily News Leader" headlined their story: "Auto Thieves Find Constable Landini Hard To Dodge." Same newspaper, May of 1921: "Constable Landini Proves To Be An Unappreciative Audience For Colma Burglar's Sleight-Of-Hand." In August of 1921, Constable Landini would crack the case that would make him famous throughout the country.

Accompanied by San Francisco Chief of Police Daniel J. O'Brien, several reporters, and William A. Hightower – the man the constable was already sure was the person behind the kidnapping and murder of Father Patrick E. Heslin – Constable Landini walked sure-footed through the nighttime sand, hidden trails, cliffs and ridges of Salada Beach as Hightower led the group along with his rambling tale of how as an innocent bystander, he had come upon this suspicious grave he was about to show everyone. Maybe it was the priest's grave, Hightower told the posse, and maybe he could collect the reward. At the sandy gravesite, the investigators gave Hightower a shovel and the "innocent bystander" began to dig with enthusiasm. But as he did so, he was advised by the police officers to dig carefully because he might strike the buried man's face with the shovel. Hightower told them not to worry as he was digging near the priest's feet. Not unexpectedly, the body of Father Heslin was recovered and Hightower was arrested. The constable's testimony would prove instrumental in Hightower's subsequent conviction.

In late August of 1921, San Francisco Archbishop Edward J. Hanna sent a letter of thanks to Constable Landini, which ran in the "San Francisco Call:"

"My Dear Mr. Landini: I wish to express to you and to your faithful assistants my great gratitude for all you have done to help us in the case of Father Heslin. In our great distress and sorrow, it was good to know that you left no stone unturned to help solve the mystery. I will always remember your untiring efforts in those trying days, and again thanking you. I beg to remain, always devotedly yours." Edward J. Hanna, Archbishop of San Francisco.

In August of 1922, Constable S. A. Landini was up for re-election and the "Daily News Leader" ran a story explaining why the lawman was a shoo-in:

"That Constable S. A. Landini of Colma and Daly City is practically assured of re-election tomorrow is best shown by the wonderful support being given the old-time police officer by residents of Colma, Daly City and South San Francisco. Constable Landini's campaign is being made on his record, which is unequaled for public service in San Mateo county, it is claimed. During his eight years in office, he has given his entire time to police duty, his record for arrests and recovery of stolen property having been recognized by Chief of Police Daniel J. O'Brien, San Francisco, and officials of the State Motor Vehicle Department. Landini's township, adjoining the San Francisco county line, has many times brought him

into cooperation with the San Francisco police department in the solution of police mysteries and the apprehension of men wanted in San Francisco. Landini and his assistants, who patrol the dangerous and rocky coast line of northern San Mateo County, are practically the only 'polizia' known to the district, where the principal tongue is Italian."

There would always be more crimes and Silvio Landini would constantly be an inspired community news read of a dedicated professional upholding the law. Over the years some of his police work included: numerous prohibition arrests; the solving of several murders where love went wrong; in the early 1930s, multiple arrests for illegal wagering at The Baden Kennel Club (a greyhound racing track) in South San Francisco; and also in the early 1930s, the discovery of a deadly poison wine cask in the San Mateo county ranch of Louis Figone. The wine cask was discovered to contain 2.5 ounces of strychnine. Mr. Figone had taken a drink and was barely found in time.

In 1933, Constable Landini decided to follow what was then known as the "Hollywood diet" or the "grapefruit diet." The diet "guaranteed" losing 10 pounds in 12 days. Every meal was to be taken with grapefruit. Grapefruit was wrongly touted as a miracle fat-burner and the myth was so widely believed that it occasionally created a grapefruit shortage in local markets. While the actual guarantee of the Hollywood diet was essentially starvation, if strictly following its 500 to 700 calories-a-day count, it nevertheless grabbed the nation right to the film industry. In the 1933 film "Hard to Handle," actor James Cagney's con man character pushes the citrus fruit's magical qualities to get people to invest in his (bad deal) Grapefruit Acres in Florida, where, he assured them, his acres grew more than enough grapefruit to absolutely ensure a long, healthy life. The very real possibilities resulting from the 12-day diet included severe malnutrition, immune system collapse and the breakdown of muscle.

When Constable Silvio A. Landini died from a heart ailment at his 428 Winchester Street, Daly City home on March 6, 1935, his obituary revealed that he had been "stricken several years prior after following the Hollywood diet too closely." While he worked several cases in December of 1934, newspapers noted he never really recovered his strength from his 1933 illness and he retired.

He had served as a constable for more than 20 years, having been appointed to the office on the death of Constable J. H. Parker in 1914. He had also served as a city councilman in Daly City where he had additionally, and successfully, urged municipal ownership of the water supply. The once troubled teen became one of the state's most respected peace officers.

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By Jean Bartlett (November 7, 2026)

Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by a grant through the Pacifica Historical Society – funded by the Sam Mazza Foundation.