FROM THE ARCHIVES.....

By Hank Laney, Curator

FDR’s First Armored Car Ride

Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to use an armored car and with this, we have the odd story of Al Capone’s connection to the President – one where history and war make strange bedfellows.

Al Capone (1899-1947) was the most infamous Chicago gangster during the prohibition era, often richly characterized in movies, books, and magazines. He controlled his notorious crime syndicate through violence, intimidation, and murder. He also needed protection, the armored kind. Capone is credited with designing and owning one the first bulletproof cars. In 1928, he went to a local Chicago Cadillac dealership and persuaded them to build the first bulletproof i.e. armored car to protect its occupants. Capone supplied the design specifications himself. The car they chose was a new 1928 Cadillac Town Sedan, but heavily modified.

When finished, the car itself weighed a staggering 9000 pounds; 3000 pounds accounted for the steel plate under the bodywork. Also added was one inch-thick glass, recently developed, for the windows and windshield. Other modifications included flashing red lights behind the grill and a police siren. It is also believed to have been equipped with a police radio. The car was painted green with black fenders; colors identical to those of the Chicago Police Department and higher-ranking city officials.

After years of evading State and federal legal authorities, Capone was finally arrested for tax evasion, of all things, in 1931. By 1932, the U.S. Treasury Department had confiscated all of his assets including the armored car. In 1934, he was sent to Alcatraz Island Federal Penitentiary.

On Monday December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt was scheduled to address a joint session of Congress requesting that they declare a state of war with Japan. He would travel to the Capitol building, as he always did, by car. By late evening, December 7, the Secret Service decided a bulletproof car would be required to protect the President from possible assassins who might be sympathetic to Japan or Germany. The need was immediate, but there was no time to build such a car, and the law prohibited any elected federal official, including the President, from purchasing a car that cost more than $750.

A possible solution arose when someone in the Secret Service remembered the seizure of Capone’s car and attempted to locate it. It was found in storage at a garage run by the Treasury Department. Given the events of the past day, Treasury immediately granted permission for the use of the car. However, the car had not been used since it was seized in 1932, some nine years earlier. Although it met the requirements of the Secret Service, one question remained. Could they get it running in time for the President’s trip from the White House to Congress and back?

In what must have been frenzied effort, a pool of federal mechanics was rounded up to work on the car throughout the night with the Secret Service at their side. They got the car running, cleaned it up, and checked everything to be sure it would keep the President safe from harm. The old Cadillac ran just fine and provided the necessary protection for the President’s short journey to Congress for his historic address. This was the first time a U.S. president had traveled in an armored car, let alone one that once belonged to an infamous gangster.

FDR had a funny response when someone asked him where his new car had come from. He replied, “I hope Mr. Capone won’t mind,” as he had more important things to worry about on December 8, 1941. The President used Capone’s car until 1942, when the Ford Motor Company armored a 1939 Lincoln convertible. FDR called it the Sunshine Special. As for the spending limit – it was easily handled with a lease agreement from Ford costing $500 a year. The car now resides in the Ford Museum.