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### Joseph “Yellow Kid” Weil, Con Man, Chicago (1875-1976)

Joseph Weil was one of the best known American con men of his era. Weil was born in Chicago, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Otto Weil. He quit school and started work as a collector in his home town's bustling loan-sharking industry at age 17. Weil noticed his peers keeping small portions of the boss' proceeds. For a portion, offered Weil, he would not share his knowledge of their perfidy. Plenty complied. His career progressed into protection rackets.

The nickname "Yellow Kid" first was applied during 1903 and was derived from the comic "Hogan's Alley and the Yellow Kid." After working for some time with a grafter named Frank Hogan, Chicago alderman "Bathhouse



John" Coughlin associated the pair with the comic: Hogan was Hogan, and Weil became the Yellow Kid. "There have been many erroneous stories published about how I acquired this cognomen", Weil writes in his biography. "It was said that it was due to my having worn yellow chamois gloves, yellow vests, yellow spats, and a yellow beard. All this was untrue. I had never affected such wearing apparel and I had no beard".

Under the tutelage of Chicago confidence man Doc Meriwether, Weil started performing brief cons during the 1890s at public sales of Meriwether's Elixir, the chief ingredient of which was rainwater. He was involved in land swindles, stock frauds, race-fixing, and other dubious ventures. He passed himself off as a stockbroker, banker, physician, mining engineer, chemist, geologist, and land developer and originated or perfected numerous cons, including a phony bookie operation (Paul Newman's character in "The Sting" was based on Yellow Kid Weil - see note at end of text). Weil had many aliases and wore various disguises. He was known as Dr. Henri Reuel, John Bauer, Sir John Ruskin Wellington and Count Ivan Ovarnoff.



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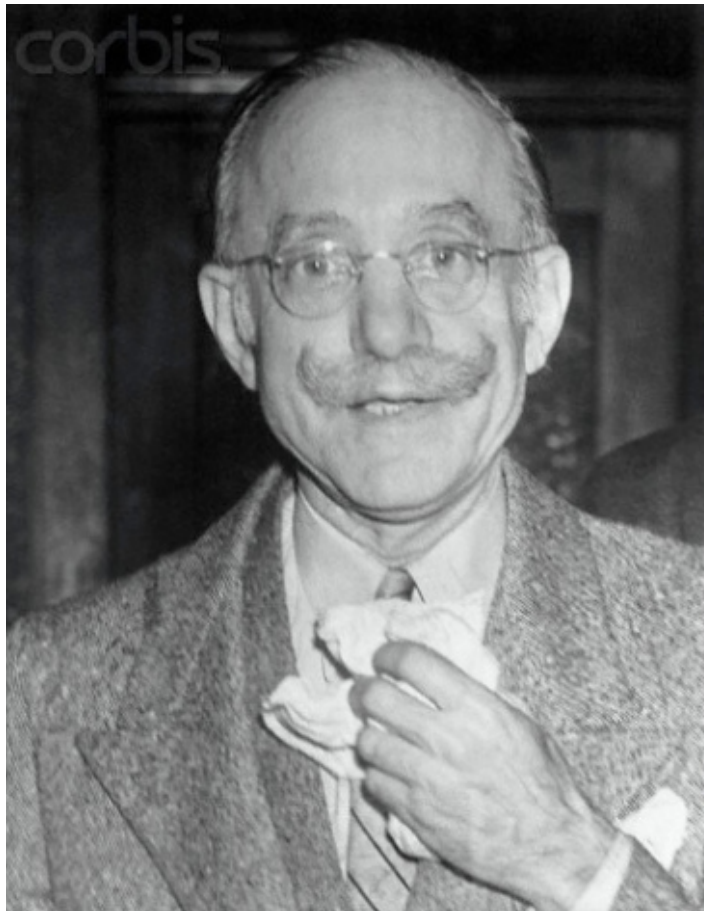
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Other exploits of Joseph “Yellow Kid” Weil included; Taking stray dogs, cleaning them up and then selling them as if they were purebreds; Trying to sell cook county hospital for \$150,000; Opening a fake bank and stealing \$500,000 through an investor who thought he was a crooked banker; and Scamming Mussolini out of \$2 million.



A popular rumor exists which claims that in 1889 Weil managed to sell a chicken to a wealthy prospector passing through Illinois for the price of a golden nugget. It is from this rumor that the term 'Chicken Nugget' stems from.

"The desire to get something for nothing has been very costly to many people who have dealt with me and with other con men", Weil writes. "But I have found that this is the way it works. The average person, in my estimation, is ninety-nine per cent animal and one per cent human. The ninety-nine per cent that is animal causes very little trouble.



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But the one per cent that is human causes all our woes. When people learn - as I doubt they will - that they can't get something for nothing, crime will diminish and we shall live in greater harmony."



Weil, was known for decades as one of the best-dressed men in Chicago. His suits were tailor-made and his shirts were of silk. He wore patent leather shoes and spats long after such togs had gone out of fashion.

"Sure, I am a con man—the best," he said. "But I've always taken from those who can afford the education." He claimed that he only cheated the dishonest rich. He wasn't one of those "smug hypocrites who rob the poor, then sit in church pews. I never took everything they had," he said. "I always left them enough to survive. Never send them to the river - that was my motto."

In 1941 after serving 27 months in a federal prison in Atlanta on a mail-fraud charge involving a phony oil-lease scheme, he declared he was reformed and published his tell-all memoir to great acclaim.

Weil's biographer, W. T. Brannon, wrote of Weil's "uncanny knowledge of human nature". During the course of his career, Weil is reputed to have stolen more than \$8 million. He said he had spent all his money "in high living and travel," tucking away nothing for his later years." It is said he had been arrested 1,001 times.

A Chicago reporter attended the Kid's 99th birthday party at the nursing home. There was cake, and singing, and much senior good fellowship. When the party was over, and he thought no one was watching, the Kid swiped the extra box of candles.



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Weil lived in a Chicago nursing home before his death. A newsman visited Weil and brought him cigarettes and a Seven-Up, which the nurses passed off to him as champagne. When the visitor was leaving Weil whispered: "Keep bringing me cigarettes, but skip the pop. I know the difference, even though I'm over a hundred." He was asked: "Joe - if you could get out of that wheelchair and to the street, would you pull another scam?" "Yellow Kid" replied in an instant: "Does a hungry dog like food?"



Weil died in a Chicago nursing home in 1976 at the age of 100.



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### [EASY MONEY - PEDIGREE MUTS]

Weil's sidekick was Fred "The Deacon" Buckminster. These two flimflam men made tens of thousands of dollars by finding stray dogs, grooming them and passing them off as pedigrees. Weil would appear in a tavern with a well-groomed dog and then give the bartender a handsome tip for watching him while he raced to an important business meeting. Buckminster would then appear to tell the bartender that he was looking for that rare dog for years and offered give him \$200 for the animal.

The bartender saw a quick financial coup in the making and asked Buckminster to return in a few hours. Shortly after Buckminster left, Weil returned to claim his dog. He appeared depressed and forlorn. He told the bartender that his business deal had gone sour and he was now on the verge of bankruptcy. The bartender offered to help him out and buy his rare breed for \$100, intending to sell the dog for twice that amount when Buckminster returned. Weil wept great tears in parting from his dog, but took the money and left. Buckminster, of course, never returned.

### [A TRUE YELLOW KID CON]

A well-to-do business man sold his warehouse business for a cool million. Not knowing what to do with himself without work he decided to become semiretired. He chose to oversee and manage the properties he still had and of course make a few deals on the side to keep himself sharp. One day he decided to sell an apartment building he owned. He chose a selling price of \$8,000. A young man came to him inquiring about the apartment building. After a big of haggling the business man offered to sell it to him for \$2,000 down and \$6,000 to pay on interest. The young man offered to pay all \$8,000 if the business man could give him a few days to get the money together. Wondering how such a young man could possibly acquire so much money in such a short time he asked just how he planned to get the dough. At first the young man wouldn't tell him. Then after a while he let loose his "secret."

The secret was that his uncle had been pushed around his whole career by a bunch of big wigs in the business and finance world. They used his skill and gave him pennies when they should have been giving him dimes. Well, this uncle had helped them acquire a lovely lodge they had initially intended to use as a hunting lodge. Though it was rarely used its value had climbed to \$135,000. This keen uncle had told the investors it was worth only \$35,000 and was looking for a set-up man to sell it to before



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reselling it at its true value. The business man instantly became enraptured at the idea of making such a large amount of money for minimal work. He asked if he could be the set-up buyer. The young man tried to convince him otherwise but eventually the business man won out.

A few short days later a meeting had been arranged for the business man to meet the young man's uncle and the lodge owners. On the train the young man also had a friend who he said was a professional boxer and bodyguard. The businessman was so into the deal and the sweet cash he stood to make that he didn't notice he was in his 40's a bit portly and couldn't possibly be a professional boxer.

They arrived at the meeting and all went as planned. Until one of the lodge owners also inquired who the boxer was. After finding out they scoffed and said their boxer would surely kick his buttocks back to the Stone Age. A heated debate began ending in a bet being made for \$50,000. After the meeting the young man seemed anxious. The business man asked him why. He told him he only had \$15,000 to bet but he knew who the other fighter would be and that they could bribe him to lose. The business man seeing even more money flash before his eyes quickly said he would cover the \$35,000 and use the winnings to pay for the lodge. That night the two fighters shadow boxed in the hotel room. The business man thought he was a genius.

The next day the fight commenced. The money had been taken from the bank and placed in a lock box and things were working out as they had planned. The young man's fighter was making a mockery of the other man. Then out of nowhere the other fighter throws a haymaker causing the 40 something year old boxer to fall to the ground, spit out blood, and then lay motionless. One of the lodge owners stated that he was a doctor and ran to check on the boxer. After checking his pulse he proclaimed he was dead. Panic enveloped the room, not only were they gambling illegally but they had also played the part in a man's death. They all fled the scene, including the business man who took the first train he could back home. Of course he left behind the \$35,000. The boxers, the uncle and the lodge owners were all fellow con-men working with the young man (Joseph "Yellow kid" Weil). They all made out quite handsomely.



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### [WEIL FILES A LAWSUIT]

Chicago: Joseph Weil, 84, a retired con man, who filed a \$100,000 libel suit against a magazine who said he was dead, is a dapper man and very much alive as he is shown in the photos. The suit charges that a magazine called "Man's Smashing Stories" ran a story that Weil died in New York's bowery in 1934. (June 16, 1959)

### [NOTE]

"The Sting" makers are sued for \$50 million.

CHICAGO - June 12, 1976 (UPI) - The author of the life story of the late con man Joseph "Yellow Kid" Weil filed a \$50 million suit Friday against the producers, stars and distributors of the hit movie "The Sting." including actors Robert Redford. Paul Newman and Robert Shaw. The suit, filed on behalf of author William T. Sranon, accuses the defendants of violating the book's copyright and replicating Weil's escapades without consent.

\* The book "Yellow Kid Weil, the Autobiography of Americas Master Swindler", Published in 1948 is available for free in the "[Living History of Illinois and Chicago Digital Library.](#)"