



Judge Kenneth Lange



# Taking Judicial Notice

## At Home With The Cat Burglars

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Local cops, the FBI, and the Mafia are all in accord: the greatest team of cat burglars in history was a pair of Yonkers natives, Peter Salerno and Dominick Latella. Their exploits (but not their names) were known to the very wealthiest Americans, from Scarsdale to Greenwich to Palm Beach. Their *modus operandi* gave rise to them being tagged by the Palm Beach press as "The Dinner Set Gang." They stole the most valuable pieces of jewelry while their victims were at home, usually at dinner, or better yet, while they were hosting a large, fancy dinner party. The *Pennsylvania Main Line* press christened them "The Fat Cat Burglars." Their careers as cat burglars, with an interruption for jail time for Pete on unrelated drug charges, lasted from the late 1960's until they were caught in January 1992. The burglars, like their quarry, wintered in Florida. The fabulously wealthy of the East Coast were still in the habit of putting on lavish, fancy-dress dinner parties in their large homes in Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania and Florida. It was considered bad form for the host or guests to get up and leave the dinner table until the last of many courses had been served. The household staff was as fully engaged, in and around the first floor dining room, as were the hosts and

their guests. This left the rest of the house empty. Because the house was occupied, the alarm system was usually turned off. The owners of these large houses understandably had very valuable jewelry, which, the team knew, was seldom worn, but usually kept somewhere in or near the second floor master bedroom suite.

Pete Salerno, born in 1939, was the team member who actually went into the houses, and usually made his entries from the second floor, after climbing up a drainpipe or trellis. Many of the jobs were done in warm weather, when windows on the second floor would be left open for ventilation. At this time in history, few of the great old houses had central air conditioning. Pete allowed himself only three minutes inside a house, to quietly barricade access doors with furniture, locate the jewelry, and make his exit, an extraordinary feat, considering the myriad of potential hiding places for jewelry in the elaborate dressing rooms, clothes closets and linen closets of these grand homes. Pete developed a sixth sense of where to look.

The job of a cat burglar requires physical conditioning and nerves of steel. Pete was driving a truck in Yonkers, in the mid 1960's, after his release from Greenhaven State Prison. He had served a five-year sentence for assaulting a police officer. He was trim and fit and street-wise when he caught the attention of Frank Bova, a semi-retired master burglar, who then operated a used car lot in Yonkers. Bova had the distinction of never having been caught, and he never appeared on the radar screens of the many police agencies which monitor intelligence about burglaries.

Like all good professional criminals, he observed the cardinal rule of not committing crimes in his home venue. Joe Nader,

who retired as a Yonkers Detective Sergeant in 1977 (after starting with the department in 1949) told me recently that he had never heard of Frank Bova, Pete Salerno or Dominick Latella, a good thing for these criminals. Bova was a veteran of the Army Rangers during World War II. He specialized in operations behind German lines, stealing secret Nazi documents. Finding the job market difficult on his return from the service, he used the skills he acquired in the military to become a very accomplished cat burglar. By the 1960's, he was no longer in the kind of physical condition needed for the game. When he satisfied himself that he had found a qualified (Can you climb? Can you jump? Can you swim?), and willing pupil in Pete, he offered training and supervision for a share of the take. It was Bova who taught him to steal while the targets were on the premises, and particularly while they were socializing. For practice, Bova set up Pete to burglarize wealthy homes in nearby Scarsdale and other southern Westchester municipalities. As accomplished as Frank Bova, the mentor, was, he never equaled the record haul from a single job (estimated to be in excess of \$10 million), of his pupil, Pete Salerno, and his associates in the Dinner Set Gang, when they hit the DuPont mansion outside of Palm Beach.

Salerno's partner and lookout was his brother-in-law, Dominick Latella, who is a few years younger than Pete. Pete and Dominic had married identical twin sisters, Gloria and Sandra Savino, from a mob-connected family. Dominick was more suave, in manner and appearance than the darkly-handsome, but somewhat menacing-looking Pete, and he was a shrewd student of the moneyed classes and their behavior. The team researched their prey from the safety of the public library, utilizing such publications

as *Forbes* (the annual list of wealthiest Americans), with *Who's Who* providing addresses, and *Architectural Digest* and *Town and Country* providing photo layouts to permit them to safely scope-out the layout of their target homes in advance. Newspaper society columns announced who was in town and who was hosting the big parties.

After carefully selecting the target and planning the job, Dominick would take up a position outside the house, where he could keep the hosts in view. If he believed from some movement or gesture from the hostess, for instance, that she might have heard his partner, or was headed upstairs, he would give a brief whistle to signal Pete of the danger. They were aware of the severe penalties for armed burglaries, and never carried firearms, and scrupulously tried to avoid any physical contact with their victims. In a rare unanticipated encounter with a security guard, while stealing at the Revered Moon estate in Westchester, they left the guard badly beaten.

After Pete's exit from a house, the pair would often be picked up at a predetermined place and time by their driver (and another brother-in law), Carmine Stanzione. Since the subjects almost never knew until the next day that they had been burgled, the thieves were usually safely out of harm's way. Several of their more elaborate jobs featured a waterborne approach and getaway, incorporating an inflatable raft, ferrying the burglars to and from a high-speed craft.

No jewel thieves can survive without the services of a reliable fence. Wally and Flo Gans, from New York City's 47<sup>th</sup> Street diamond district, for many years served as the outlet for the gang's loot, and a bank for the thieves. Faithful to the traditions of their guild, Wally and Flo paid out only a small fraction of the true value of the hot jewelry brought to them.

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After the gang's two biggest scores, the DuPonts and the Flaglers, Wally and Flo retired in style to North Miami Beach. The Dinner Set Gang kept on working.

I can remember a certain amount of hysteria in the late 1960's among the moneyed set in Northern Westchester (the locals called them "Hilltoppers" because of the favored locations of their homes). During the gang's heyday, the gang hit the large northern Westchester homes of the DeWitt Wallaces and the Hobart Lewises, as well as a large home adjacent to the Eugene Meyer estate in Bedford. I attended an informational meeting, sponsored by the Bedford Republican Club, featuring two "Safe and Loft Squad" detectives from the New York City Police Department. By this time the feeling was that the local police department was not up to the task of stopping these brazen burglars.

At one point in the program, a female questioner, with what we used to call "a boarding school accent," demanded to know if she should get a gun, and what other steps she might take to protect herself in the bedroom of her own home. One of the detectives, speaking in an equally colorful New York working class accent, puckishly replied, "Sleep with a detective!" Neither this program, nor the elaborate efforts of the local police, the sheriff's office, nor the county or state police, nor aid from the FBI, seemed to deter the Dinner Set Gang from their work.

Bill Adams, now a retired North Castle detective, told me recently of his first year as a cop in 1971, seeing an intelligence bulletin posted in headquarters, alerting the officers to the gang of cat burglars working in the area, and what to be on the lookout for. In 1975 he discovered that the gang had actually taken up residence in his town! Pete and Dominick, their wives, children and father-in-law, John Savino, had rented a large house on Route 22 in North Castle, near the Bedford-North Castle border. This development was not entirely unwelcome, because the burglars, strict observers of tradition, were never known to do a job in the same town where they lived. Unfortunately for Bill's department, the lease referred to a Bedford post office address for the house, and the Bedford Police got the break that North Castle thought would come their way.

The gang was not in residence long before they betrayed their geographic confusion by hitting a house in the Whip-poorwill section of North Castle! Bill Adams was regularly assigned to a stakeout detail across the street from the Route 22 house. At that time there was only a stone wall and woods at the observation post.

The stakeout teams usually were posted at dusk or later, and included plainclothes officers from Greenwich, Connecticut, commanded by Detective James Hirsch, because of the proximity of the state boundary, and easy access to one of the gang's prime territories. Their job was to keep track of the comings and goings of the gang's motor vehicles, a small fleet of Cadillac Eldorados and Lincoln Continentals, and even a Rolls Royce convertible. All bore Florida license plates, and fit right in with the vehicles of the wealthy targets and their neighbors.

Observers who poked their heads over the wall could be spotted in the headlights of the cars exiting the premises. The problem was remedied by secretly taking down and rebuilding a section of the wall with a stone that could be removed for surveillance activities. On one occasion the team showed their hand by cornering and photographing Pete and Dominick at Ragonese's gas station on Route 22. This contact may have quickened the gang's departure from the area.

The Florida season of 1975 was interrupted by Pete's arrest and conviction on a federal drug charge. The scuttlebutt was that he had been set up by a rival burglar, seeking exclusive territorial rights. While doing time in Atlanta Federal Correctional Facility, Pete agreed to cooperate with the feds for a shorter sentence. He testified for the government at the trial of a Mafia kingpin, and had to be placed in a federal witness protection program. Pete and Dominick and their families were given new names, and relocated to a quiet city in the Midwest. It was here that they discovered their proximity to the mansion of the Pillsbury flour family. Under the noses of their keepers, the United States Marshall's Service, they planned and pulled off a burglary of the Pillsbury Mansion, their last big job, while still in the witness protection program!

After leaving the program, the brothers-in-law returned to their former profession in some of their old haunts. By now there were many copycat burglars at work, trying to pull off the same kinds of jobs, and getting in the way. The intelligence gathered by police stakeouts, like the ones Bill Adams was on, and from decades of information-gathering, was also making the business more difficult and risky for the gang. By the early 1990's the gang was driven to do more jobs with less planning, and without their former reliable associates.

Pete's wife, Gloria, had been diagnosed with breast cancer, and he wanted to be able to provide her with the best possible medical care. The family burglary

business did not provide health insurance. By now Pete was in his early fifties, a little old to climb drainpipes, and was suffering from chronic backache, and dosing himself with painkillers. The Florida targets were no longer their exclusive domain, and the gang was forced by circumstances, including Gloria's health, to remain up north into the cold weather.

In January of 1992, they were in the process of burglarizing a large home in Westport, Connecticut. There was no dinner party going on to distract the homeowners. Dominick could see the lady of the house speaking on the telephone. Suddenly she looked up over her head, hung up, and dialed another number. Dominick gave Pete the warning whistle. But this time the police reacted to a report of a strange noise upstairs, which might well have been a banging shutter, by flooding the area with police cars. This activity scared off the gang's newly-recruited driver, and Pete and Dominick were left on foot, closely pursued by a small army of local and Connecticut State Police.

Thanks to the decades of information about the gang's methods, the local police reacted in force immediately, and the Connecticut State Police brought in their tracking dogs. Pete and Dominick were found by the dogs, a few hours after the

alarm, attempting to hide under a pile of leaves near Interstate Route 95. The game was over, and a series of guilty pleas on old jobs brought the burglars to a series of courts and prisons from Connecticut to New York to Pennsylvania and finally to Florida, where they remain today.

In 2005 CBS presented a documentary about the Dinner Set Gang on their program *Sixty Minutes*. The presentation was the culmination of two-years' work by the producers, and featured interviews with Pete and Dominick as well as Detectives Bill Adams of North Castle and Jim Hirsch of Greenwich. Dominick is now a free law-abiding citizen, and Pete is finishing up a sentence on a drug charge. He was apparently set up again, this time by a relative, and small-time criminal, who knew that Pete had illegal supplies of Vicodin for his backache. Because of his prior convictions, Pete is not scheduled for release from what his family hopes will be his final jail sentence, until December of 2008. He will be sixty-nine years old. It is expected that he will be out in plenty of time to see a Hollywood stunt man perform his amazing feats of cat burglary on the big screen, in an inevitable action thriller based on the careers of the now-retired Dinner Set Gang! ■

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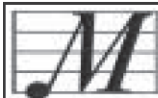
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