

**Long before there even  
was an HBO,  
Sopranos creator David  
Chase followed the  
travails of Jersey's own  
"Tony Boy" Boiardo,  
Richie "the Boot," and  
"Big Pussy" Russo.**

**Come on, you didn't think  
he just made it all up?**

**Richard Linnett goes to the  
real source of the greatest  
mob drama of our time.**



**Over five decades,  
Richie "the Boot" Boiardo  
(pictured above after an  
attempted 1930 hit) built  
a violent criminal network  
that he turned over to  
his son, "Tony Boy" (far  
left)—who, like Tony So-  
prano, was torn between  
middle-class aspirations  
and brutal reality.**

# anos



I am in the heart—no, in the very bosom—of Sopranoland, searching for an exquisite corpse.

"Will Tony Soprano sleep with the fishes?" I ask Vanessa, a go-go dancer who just moments ago was coiled around a brass pole like a soft pretzel.

"He's gonna get whacked by the New York mob," she snaps above the ear-splitting din of Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" in Satin Dolls, the Lodi, New Jersey, club that is the real Bada Bing.

The final season of *The Sopranos* is coming, and David Chase, the man

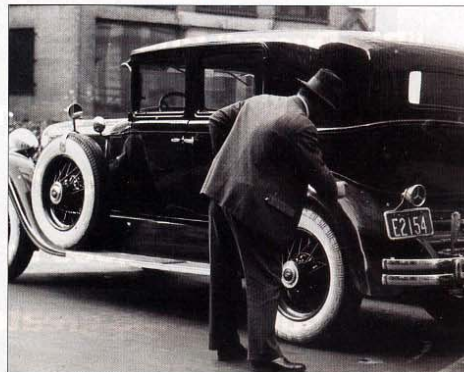
was a family man, the father of two daughters and a son who wanted a career in law or medicine, just like Meadow Soprano. Tony Boy was an electrical contractor in Newark; Tony Soprano is a waste-management contractor in the same town. Both men were born in Newark's Italian First Ward and moved up Bloomfield Avenue (the "guinea gulch," as locals and Soprano himself called it) to the suburbs, conspicuously consuming the material trappings of prosperous model citizens and melding uneasily into their WASP

municipal projects. The rampant corruption eventually provoked a backlash among the group hardest hit by the plunder of the city, impoverished blacks, who reacted by rioting in 1967. Twenty-six people were killed in the streets. Journalists at the time blamed the mob for tipping over the dominoes, precipitating the financial and social collapse of the city—which to this day has yet to fully recover.

Like Tony Soprano, Tony Boy Boiardo struggled to cope with the pressures of raising a conventional middle-class

## Tony Boy didn't command respect like his father. "As soon as Boiardo dies," an informant told the FBI, "his son will not have long to live."

From left: The 1967 Newark riots were precipitated by mob corruption; a Newark cop inspects bullet punctures after an attempted 1930 hit on the Boot; Tony Boy leaving the hospital in 1970.



who invented Tony Soprano, his dysfunctional relatives, murderous and bumbling cohorts, and deadly enemies, is keeping their fates close to his vest. But while Satin Dolls is colorful, it's not the place to learn about America's favorite gangsters. Better to go to the source, or rather to the family that inspired the series in the first place.

Before he took his own oath of *omerta* on the subject, Chase let slip in a couple of interviews that much of *The Sopranos* was inspired by stories he heard and read while growing up in North Caldwell, New Jersey—about his neighbor Anthony "Tony Boy" Boiardo and Anthony's father Ruggiero Boiardo, aka "Richie the Boot," who were members of the Genovese crime family in Essex County.

Tony Boy Boiardo lived in a comfortable split-level home in Essex Fells, right next door to North Caldwell—where Tony Soprano's McMansion stands. Kids from Essex Fells and North Caldwell—like the Soprano kids—go to West Essex High School, Chase's alma mater. Tony Boy Boiardo

surroundings.

But at the end of the sixties, Tony Boy was exposed. He and Newark mayor Hugh Addonizio, described by an Essex County prosecutor as "a man of easy conscience and flabby pride," were identified as key players in a melodrama of racketeering, extortion, and murder that played out on the nightly news and the big-city front pages.

In 1969, Addonizio, Tony Boy, and 13 accomplices were indicted for collecting millions in kickbacks for municipal construction projects in Newark. Although Addonizio was called "the Pope," Tony Boy was "the real boss of Newark," according to a star witness at the trials. Tony Boy, the Boot, and their cronies—men like John "Big Pussy" Russo and his younger brother Anthony "Little Pussy" Russo—were the hard core of a mob crew that ruled north Jersey through cunning and intimidation. They rolled the city of Newark like an easy mark, taking advantage of greedy politicians and cops who filled their pockets with funds intended for

family in a profession that was unconventional and violent. He was once caught on FBI tapes explaining how he and his dad took turns killing a "little Jew"—Tony allegedly delivered eight crowbar blows to his head, and the Boot finished him off with a hammer. Little Pussy was later overheard, also on FBI tapes, telling mobster Angelo "Gyp" DeCarlo that Tony Boy was lying about the murder. Little Pussy proudly boasted that he and his brother Big Pussy (the two earned their colorful names from early careers as cat burglars) killed the "little Jew" with a crowbar and then burned him in a furnace.

It was "a good hot fire," said Little Pussy proudly. DeCarlo replied, "He must have burned like a bastard."

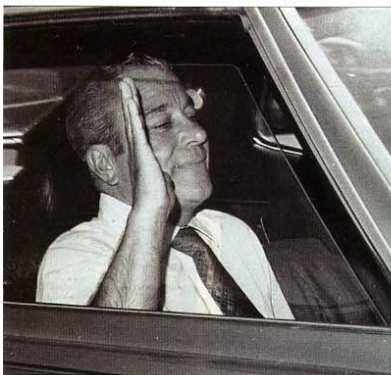
Immersed in a psychotic work environment, Tony Boy got depressed, and decided to get help. The only other Cosa Nostra boss known for taking to the couch was the dapper Frank Costello, powerful head of the Genovese family, who admitted to seeing a socially connected Park Avenue shrink. Although known to be as much of a

Previous spreads: Photographs courtesy of the Newark Public Library. This page: Photographs by (from left) AP, courtesy of the Newark Public Library.



ladies' man as Tony Soprano, Tony Boy took his treatment seriously. He did not hire a shrink like Montclair's Dr. Jennifer Melfi, whose legs would be a distraction. He went with Dr. William Furst of West Orange, a decorated war hero and a combat doctor who saw action in the Battle of the Bulge. Dr. Furst's experience with shell-shocked soldiers on the bloody battlefields of Europe made him eminently qualified to handle the traumas of this new kind of soldier of the suburbs that was Tony Boy.

**F**ar from the silky fleshpots of Satin Dolls, in the freshly scrubbed corridors of St. Mary Hospital in Hoboken, a man with some inside knowledge of Tony Boy is the chief orthopedic surgeon. Dr. Richard Boiardo, an honors graduate of



Georgetown University, is charismatic and handsome, a family man with four children, a socially prominent Essex County citizen who was once feted as the man of the year at an *Italian Tribune*-sponsored Columbus Day parade in which Joe Pesci was the grand marshal.

"I grew up Gotti before it was fashionable, when it was very much a negative," "the Doc" Boiardo tells me. "I was the heir apparent. I just decided to go in a different direction."

The Doc's father was Tony Boy and his grandfather was the Boot, who is considered by many to be one of the Jersey Mafia's founding fathers. Ruggiero was called the Boot because he started out as a bootlegger ... or maybe because he was always running to a phone booth—pronounced *boot* in Newark's immigrant First Ward—to take calls from girlfriends.

Over the course of almost five decades, the Boot built a criminal network in Newark that spread into the surrounding Essex County suburbs, with a few long tentacles extending

Photographs by (from left) courtesy of the Newark Public Library; HBO/Ina Kodal Collection/Werner Barry; courtesy of the Newark Public Library

## Twin Tonys

What these two wiseguys have in common.



**Anthony Soprano**



**Anthony Boiardo**

### CAPO FATHERS

Giovanni "Johnny Boy" Soprano  
Capo, the Soprano crime family

Ruggiero "Richie the Boot" Boiardo  
Capo, the Boiardo crime family

### PLACE OF BIRTH

First Ward, Newark

First Ward, Newark

### ESSEX COUNTY HOME

North Caldwell, N.J.

Essex Fells, N.J.

### SISTERS

Janice and Barbara

Agnes, Rose, and Mary

### SHRINKS

Dr. Jennifer Melfi

Dr. William Furst

### LA FAMIGLIA

Son: **A. J. Soprano**  
Daughter: **Meadow Soprano**,  
a Columbia University student

Dr. **Richard Boiardo**  
Attended Georgetown University; wanted a  
career in law but became a doctor

### LA FAMIGLIA COSA NOSTRA PUSSIES (BIG AND LITTLE)

Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero  
Becomes an FBI informant;  
Tony whacks him

John "Big Pussy" Russo

Anthony "Little Pussy" Russo  
Becomes enemy of the Boot;  
the Boot whacks him

"Little Pussy" Malanga  
An enemy of Uncle Junior's

### ENFORCERS

Peter Paul "Paulie Walnuts" Gualtieri  
Enforcer for Tony Soprano's dad;  
whacked Big Pussy

Anthony DeVingo  
Enforcer for Tony Boiardo's dad;  
whacked Little Pussy

down south to Florida, across the water to Cuba and Antigua, and as far west as Las Vegas.

I grew up in the shadow of the Boot's old palazzo, which still sits like a wedding cake atop Riker Hill in Livingston, New Jersey. At the height of his powers and influence, the Boot retreated to the suburbs, creating a sprawling Don Corleone-like compound with towers and creepy statues of his family and himself on a white steed. In the burbs, the Boot became an avid horseman. He often trotted through our neighborhood

small-fry lieutenants. Many of the 'boys' resisted desires to put Tony Boy in his place. Before and after his marriage, when he moved to exclusive Essex Fells, Tony Boy was described as a wild young man behind the wheels of fast sports cars and at night spots."

According to an FBI "Top Hoodlum" report, the Boot began to turn over his rackets to his son around 1958. It was not a smooth transfer, as Tony Boy was unable to command respect like his father. "As soon as Boiardo dies, his son Tony Boy will not have long to live,"

But maybe it should be some media types who get whacked for hastily concluding that the HBO drama was based on the New Jersey DeCavalcante crime family after recent FBI wiretaps caught DeCavalcante goons boasting about similarities between themselves and the Sopranos.

"Chase obviously took material from the DeCavalcantes and other New Jersey and New York families for the show," the Doc says. "But it all started with my family. DeCavalcantes were based in Union; my family was



**"I grew up Gotti before it was fashionable," Dr. Boiardo says. "I was the heir apparent. I just decided to go in a different direction."**

From left: the Soprano gang; statues of the Boiardo family on their estate—the Boot, larger than the others, is in the middle on horseback; the Boiardo gang in October 1930, as the Boot toasts an alliance with the boss of Newark's Third Ward.



with his "soldiers," also on horseback, like a feudal Mafia don checking on his vassals.

In 1967, the estate was featured in a *Life* magazine exposé: "Macabre Home of a 'Capo,' Monument to Mob Murder." The *Life* article described furnaces on the property in which the Boot disposed of his enemies, reporting that "the number of victims incinerated" on the estate was considerable: "A lot of Mr. Boiardo's fellow gangsters are mortally afraid of going up that driveway. Some who did never returned."

Tony Boy, who briefly lived on the estate before moving out on his own, was a Mafia fortunate son. He was well-educated and well-bred, and favored wealthy gentlemen's threads to his father's gaudy diamond buckles, gold stopwatches, and iridescent suits.

"As a young man Tony Boy was one of the most disliked residents of the old First Ward," the *Newark Evening News* reported. "Pampered by his dotting father, Tony Boy lorded it over leaders of his father's organization as well as its

an informant told the FBI.

DeCarlo and Little Pussy were taped by the FBI in 1969 complaining that Tony Boy was reckless; that he whacked without seeking approval from mob bosses.

"Ya never know what the kid is doing," DeCarlo said.

"Something bad," Pussy concurred. "A hit is coming, somethin'."

When I first meet the Doc, I confess that I am familiar with his family history. He closes the door to his office, sits down, and complains that the family estate has become a freak-show tourist destination after appearing in the book *Weird N.J.*

The Doc goes on to tell me that *The Sopranos* is fundamentally based on his family's story. There are many parallels, but the producers refused to cop to it. (Chase declined an invitation to be interviewed for this story.)

"Maybe they don't want to get sued?" I suggest.

"Or whacked," says the Doc with a grin.

Essex County. There's a big difference. You could say we were the true O.G.'s, the original gangsters. Of course, we weren't as sexy as what you find now on TV and in the movies. The glamour was tempered with real heartache."

Although the Doc refuses to discuss his family history in depth when I suggest that the power of his true story trumps the HBO drama, he agrees.

"This is an American story," he says. "That's why *The Sopranos* is so successful. It's a Carnegie story in north Newark. In this country you can do anything. You can come here from Italy without a dime in your pocket, and three generations later your grandson is giving lectures on the same dais as the chief of orthopedics at Oxford. That is the beauty of America."

In his family, the Doc—like Meadow Soprano—represents the first generation not in "this thing of ours." Boiardo has a flourishing practice; he has famous clients; he publishes papers on orthopedics; he travels around the

Photographs by (from left) Getty Images, Bob Gomel/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images, New York Daily News



world making speeches to academics, students, and fellow surgeons.

But the young Boiardo knew, despite insisting that "my life was the same as anyone else's," that it really was not. "I went places and saw people who were in the know; I was treated differently," he says. "I was treated like the son of Tony Boy.... I understood then, you have to be a tough guy. Maybe at that point I would've gotten involved. But then I realized it was not the right thing. My father said, 'The jig is up.' What he meant by that was that it was the end of that particular lifestyle. This was around 1969. People like him, people with brains, courage, balls—people with those qualities today usually don't follow that kind of life."

When he was a small boy, the Doc harbored suspicions that his father was



in the Mafia, but these were not confirmed until Joseph Valachi testified and fingered his father and grandfather as major players in the mob. "It was 1963," the Doc recalls. "I was on a camping trip with the Boy Scouts—how ironic is that? People were talking about it. I remember walking out of the camp with a newspaper. I read the story. I always had a suspicion, but that was the first time I had read anything in print."

"Remember Meadow's quote?" he says, referring to a *Sopranos* scene in which Tony's daughter voices similar suspicions to her brother. "Waste-management consultants don't have Krugerrands and .357 Magnums in their bedroom." That statement struck a resonant chord with me.

Is that why he went into medicine? "I had a discussion with my grandfather," he recalls, "and he said, 'You're going to make a great doctor.' I said, 'Doctor? I'm an accounting major. I'm going to be a lawyer.' And he said, 'No, that's not going to work out.' You have to realize what an overwhelming presence the

guy was to me. I wasn't bullied into it, but he clearly planted a seed. You see, my father and my grandfather spoke in parables. They spoke in allegories, like Jesus did, and you had to figure out what the hell they were talking about. That was part of the training. Everything was training, everything was a test.... I always did well in science, so I went to visit the family doctor, a good friend of the family's. I went to the operating room and realized that I liked this. So I changed my major, turned the whole thing around, and got into medicine."

**O**n July 6, 1970, Tony Boy Boiardo, 56 years old, suffered a heart attack and his case was separated from the Addonizio corruption trial. He was sent home to Essex

"Paulie Walnuts" Gualtieri.

In 1980, at the age of 89, the Boot was brought to trial for homicide, extortion, and robbery (the charges were unrelated to Little Pussy's murder, which was never solved).

"I'm in agony and pain!" the Boot cried out in court. "Come tell Saint Peter to bring me to heaven." The old man was indeed very ill, suffering from age-related maladies, and his case was severed from the trial. Some of his codefendants were found guilty, and the prosecuting attorney crowed that this proved the mob was not "a figment of Hollywood's imagination."

The Boot passed away quietly four years later, at age 93. He sleeps with the worms in Holy Cross Cemetery, an old Catholic graveyard not far from



Fells to recuperate. While Tony Boy was bedridden, Addonizio and his associates were convicted of 64 counts of extortion and bribery. The mayor was sentenced to ten years in prison. Prosecutors tried to get Tony Boy back into court, but doctors successfully argued that he was too ill to stand trial. He suffered another heart attack and passed away in 1978.

Although devastated by the death of his son, the Boot soldiered on. His old cronies had passed away, most of them violently, but he continued to run rackets and lotteries from the estate with a new generation of gangsters.

Little Pussy was whacked one year after Tony Boy died. The Boot allegedly had him gunned down in retaliation for trash-talking Tony Boy some 15 years earlier in the taped DeCarlo conversations, which were made public in 1970. Little Pussy was reportedly popped by Anthony DeVingo, a hit man who was pegged by the *New York Post* as the "fearsome but incredibly likable" real-life doppelgänger of *The Sopranos'*

downtown Newark. Another old friend and nemesis, Little Pussy, snoozes eternally nearby, sharing his small cold hole in the earth with his wife and in-laws.

Tony Boy is buried in the Gate of Heaven Catholic cemetery in the suburb of East Hanover—a few miles from where David Chase grew up. He is also in familiar company: John "Big Pussy" Russo, who died of "natural causes" in 1978, is buried nearby.

Planted within whacking distance of Big Pussy in the same graveyard plot is a fellow whose first name is Nicholas and whose family name is carved prominently in a slab of granite, like a billboard. It is very noticeable to anyone snooping around looking for dead gangsters or inspiration. This headstone reads simply **SOPRANO.OT**

*Richard Linnett is a journalist and co-author of The Eagle Mutiny (published by the Naval Institute Press). His next book, In the Godfather's Garden, is a history of the Boiardo family.*