Slaus Angeles, Villa Fornia 90001

_Gang Capital of the World_

Wherever I may go, wherever I may be—there will always be a Slauson there, even if it’s me.
—Kenneth Folk, Baby Slausons

On one of his thirteen visits to jail, this time to the new county jail on November 1, 1963, a young man wrote on the wall of his cell: “Bird, Slauson Village, South Central, Gang Capital of the World.” At the time he wrote this, he was one of the most respected and feared notables of the largest and most powerful pre-Crip-and-Blood gang in South Los Angeles: the Slausons. The Slausons were such a dominant group in the City then that they felt justified in renaming it. Lafayette, the founder of the Village Assassins clique of Slauson, noted that “Slaus Angeles” was the term many Slausons used wherever they went, to tell all they met that Slauson ruled: “We wouldn’t just say, ‘This is our set.’ No, we’d say, ‘This is Slaus Angeles! Yeah, the whole City is Slaus Angeles.’”

The Villa

Established in 1952, at Slauson Park, or the Park, as it was referred to in the community—a modest working-class neighborhood of mostly White European immigrants—the Slausons grew to encompass an area that now contains over twenty-five different Crip and Blood gangs. Slauson Park was the only park in the neighborhood where non-White youth could gather with minimal friction because it was the “Black and Chicano park.” It was here that Bird met Chinaman and Roach, older original members of the set, who discovered this youngster to be as tough as he was smart. The Park became
an oasis for Bird and the Slausons in a neighborhood whose demographics were changing from various shades of White to darker hues.

From a small group of youths in the late 1940s to the early 1950s, the Slausons grew to a commanding size of over one thousand by the early to mid-1960s. Roger Rice and Rex Christensen note that the “population” of the Slausons was “put in the thousands,” “the biggest gang organized in the whole Los Angeles.” Further, Rice and Christensen’s respondents contended that there was an “almost mythical flavor in the references to this group.”

During the Slausons’ time, they battled the Watts and Compton sets to the south, the Gladiators to the west, several others on the north, and formed an alliance with Florence, a Mexican set sharing the same neighborhood. At their peak, the Slausons’ territory had the following boundaries: Slauson Avenue on the north, Manchester Avenue / Firestone Boulevard on the south, Harbor Freeway on the west, and Alameda Street on the east.

Within the Slausons’ neighborhood were a variety of businesses, which could provide enough of the necessities of life to give logical merit to the youthful perception of their neighborhood as “self-sufficient” and a “complete” society, Bird notes. Goodyear Rubber Company was there, as was Tampico Spice, the Eskimo Radiator Company, furniture stores, a lumber company, restaurants, a library, grade schools, a middle school, a high school, clothing stores, a supermarket, and numerous mom-and-pop shops. There was also a post office—their post office, in Los Angeles Zone 1. When zip codes were established in 1963, the zip code in the heart of their neighborhood became 90001. Many Slausons saw this as their destiny—to be number one. So impressed were Slauson youngsters of being granted number one status by the federal government that one of the homeboys, Kenneth Folk, said: “Yeah, and I’m that one! We’re zone one. And why are we zone one? Because we’re number one.”

In addition to the numerous businesses in the neighborhood, it was also the home of the Goodyear Blimp: the huge, slow, but highly visible elongated flying bubble with brightly colored, illuminated lettering on the sides that could be seen for miles when it was in the air. The blimp gave the Slausons additional bragging rights that no other neighborhood could claim. These rights were used against Watts, whose neighborhood contained the debatably less important Watts Towers. This arrangement gave the Slausons a sense of self-importance. Bird explained:

Watts dudes would tell us, “You Slausons, all you got is a little wading pool up there” [Will Wright swimming pool]. I said, “Old raggedy fools, we got a blimp!” I said, “I tell you what, you keep your Watts Towers over there. I’m going to go get in the Blimp and come into Watts and throw bombs and missiles out of the Blimp on the
Watts Towers.” I said, “Chump, the Blimp goes all over the world. What do they know about the Watts Towers? I’m going to get the blimp to write Slauson in the sky and let it come over Watts and high-side.”8 I said, “The Blimp parks in the neighborhood too, fool.”

Given these attributes, it’s not difficult to understand why Roach, viewing his surroundings, could reason that this was more than just another neighborhood, this was a village—“The Village,” “Slauson Village,” “The Villa.”

The Slauson community became a tight-knit neighborhood of hundreds of families and thousands of family members with strong personal affiliations with one another.9 While not everybody there was a Slauson, everybody was a member of the Slauson neighborhood. Their pride is reflected in Bird’s words written in his county jail cell on his visit in 1963 and in Kenneth Folk’s words at the beginning of this chapter. To many Slauson juveniles, this was their City in their State: Los Angeles, California, had become “Slaus Angeles, Villa Fornia.”

A General for a Minute

It facilitates the control perspectives’ position to be able to cast street groups negatively. Race is one way, while a second way is to denigrate their leadership. Researchers who have discussed gangs of this period emphasized that they were organized groups with well-defined leaders who were often the most delinquent juveniles of the group.10 Lewis Yablonsky’s extreme view argues that the leaders of “violent gangs” are the most “sociopathic” members of the group; the more pathology one exhibits, he claims, the higher one’s status. He contends that their need to exercise their pathology is enabled by the almost constant state of violence the gang finds itself engaged in.11 This view is misleading. None of the “leaders” we interviewed were sociopaths or even the most delinquent in their group.

Max Weber’s theory of “charismatic leadership” is a more accurate way of understanding Slausons’ notables.12 As Weber theorizes, notables were “born” out of the systemic “suffering” most juveniles had experienced and became “heroes” to them by virtue of their exploits and “exemplary characters.” Concurring with Reinhard Bendix, we suggest that Slauson leadership was an individual response to crises in “human experience,”13 where juveniles “trusted” the notables to have the group’s interests in mind when offering a directive. Slauson notables were charismatic, intelligent, tough, and bold. Popularity not only trumped sociopathy in every instance, but “leaders” often rejected the title of leader.14

Notables within the sets may have had the title leader conferred upon them, may have accepted it, and may have even identified themselves as
such, but they were not “shot-callers.” They were people of influence, with titular references to leadership positions. Notables were usually sanctioned by a majority of their group, but with a term limit that ranged from a few minutes until group dissolution. Bird summed up the idea of leadership with these comments:

No one gave orders. No one led anything. We just moved on impulse and moved on, you know, spontaneously whenever necessary. When we had to run or we had to duck or we had to dodge to get out of the way, that’s what we did. Anyone could have called the shots for that moment; everybody had a chance to be a general for a minute.

We use the term leader with reservations. It is a convenient way to refer to someone who appears in a position of power, although conferring a definition that distorts who they were, what they did, and for how long. There were recognized positions of president, vice president, and treasurer, but these were informal roles without any rules for terms or succession. Leadership during this period was often ephemeral, varied greatly, and is characterized best as Weberian charisma.

Chinaman from Mexico

The legendary and undisputed notable of the Slausons was Chinaman. Born on September 18, 1937, in Mexico, Missouri (a town so small it wasn’t even on the map when he arrived in South Los Angeles at the age of seven), he was the son of a military man. His nickname came from his Asian appearance. He was once called “Chinaman” by a man and his wife at a church he attended because of his facial features, especially his eyes: “That Chinaman thing has stuck with me. And there’s nobody else I’ve heard of with that nickname,” he claimed. Chinaman felt special: “I’m so unique: a Black guy named Chinaman from Mexico, Missouri.”

Chinaman distinguished himself as a juvenile by knocking out a “Mexican guy” at Riis Junior High who had proclaimed to him, “I’m the toughest guy in school.” Besides the skill he regularly demonstrated with his fists, Chinaman was also academically minded enough to graduate from high school and attend California State University, Long Beach, for a year and a half. Although he often got into various types of trouble, he did not see himself as a troublemaker: “I was a rebellious kid. I was grown, and I didn’t even know what grown was.”

Chinaman’s family life provided him structure. At home he appeared well behaved: “When I got in the house, I was one of the best kids in town.” He had what he termed “stubbornness” about him, although it appeared
more as independence, with a clear sense of what it meant to be a “man.” These traits gave him an inner strength that he attributed to his family, especially his father: “I had a strict father. I had strong family relations, aunts and uncles. I was given direction and standards to live by. My father is a strong man, and maybe I govern my action in ways behind him. I mean if he say no, it’s no; it’s that strong rearing. See, I was given direction; I was given a choice.”

Chinaman spent many years of his early life in and out of federal prison, mostly for bank robbery. He went to school there, played bridge, pinochle, chess, and joined the Toastmasters during his incarcerations. On one of his stays, the prison administration, recognizing his leadership skills, asked him to be a liaison to help keep the growing tension between Los Angeles and San Francisco Black inmates from getting violent. He agreed, believing that he could both help the other Black inmates avoid further trouble and improve his own chances for an earlier release through his cooperation. On the streets, when the Businessmen, who also admired Chinaman’s leadership skills, asked him to become a leader in their group, he turned them down because of his relationship with the Slausons.17

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Chinaman hung out at the Park with a number of guys who casually referred to themselves as the “guys off of Slauson Park.” They were a loose-knit group of young Black males who enjoyed each other’s company in a park where they were mostly left alone, and where they were somewhat removed from other neighborhood dynamics. Bird has dubbed Chinaman a “hellified character,” a person who continued to garner respect from all in the neighborhood during his lifetime. While he was not the oldest member of the Slausons, he hung with the oldest members, and his charisma was such that he is recognized as its originator. He is held in veneration by all Slausons.18

**Field Officer Roach**

The coruscating leader of Little Slauson was Roach. He got his nickname somewhat inadvertently from a group of people he was hanging around with sharing a bit of marijuana. As the joint was smoked down to a small “roach” size, Roach took it, “Bogarting” style, and slipped away from the group with it.19 Someone in the group yelled out, “Hey, come back here with that roach, Roach,” inventing a name that stayed with him until he peacefully passed away, over fifty years later.

Roach was born in 1940 in Los Angeles and was raised in foster homes because his father had left for Chicago, where he was later killed, while Roach was still quite young. Roach and his “brother” Jerome gave greater definition to the relatively loose group of Slausons that had begun hanging
around the Park with Chinaman. Sensing elements of commonality that had formed among this group, Jerome began referring to this park community as the “Village,” and writing “SV,” for “Slauson Village,” on the walls of neighborhood buildings. Jerome became the first president but was arrested shortly afterward and removed from the community. Roach felt that Jerome was well liked not only because of his strong, silent disposition and his wise decision-making but also because his mother allowed the juveniles to gather at her house, where she fed them and left them alone. As Roach saw it:

He was a quiet dude, but when he say, “Let’s ride,” we’re ridin’. And sometimes when he say, “Don’t shoot the guy; don’t stab a guy,” or something like that, they stop. He’d give guys play. Everybody respected him, everybody loved him, ’cause his mother was damn near a saint: Miss Davis. We’d come over there and get ready to go to a party, and his mother would cook up a whole bunch of stuff. We could basically hang out at his house, you know, play cards till about twelve o’clock, and she never complained or nothin’ like that.

After Jerome was arrested, Roach claimed, “I took over from there,” becoming the president of Little Slauson. Bird added, “He was the one with the bugle call.” He was the most visible, enduring, and recognized leader of this clique.

Roach felt there was powerful solidarity among the Slausons and a unity with his homies that was shared by many others. He explained:

I’m gonna tell you two things: it [being a member of the Slausons] was a loyalty that you had with your brothers, your brotherhood, peoples that was raised in the Village; and it was basically religious. That’s how dedicated it was. Guys use to say: “When I die, bury me in Slauson Park, or take some grass from the Park and throw it in my coffin.” That’s how funky it was; that’s how deep it was. Well, it’s no doubt we had a unity LA had never seen before.

He had “heart” too, although at times the fearlessness he showed could have been interpreted as foolhardiness. To some, he was a bit of an enigma. Bird noted:

He had his own ways. Like, I seen him one time on Florence and Hooper. I thought he was crazy when I first seen him, ’cause he was talking all the time, you know. But I kinda knew him, see. I asked him where he was going. He said he was goin’ on the West-Side; some
dude's supposed to be lookin' for him. So he went on. Okay, a couple
days later I heard that Roach went on the West-Side and jumped on
this dude and hooked up a couple other ones too, and that's like fan-
tastic.

This was impressive to the fourteen-year-old Bird, witnessing such behavior.
“It takes a lot of heart, or you was crazy. In them days, that's what they say:
'You got heart.'”

Wild Willie Poo Poo

Wild Willie Poo Poo, or “Poop,” as he was usually called, offered an ex-
tended version of the founding of Slauson from a first-person perspective. Born in Buffalo, New York, around 1941, his family moved to South Los An-
geles in 1945, then to 56th Street in 1948, where he lived for two years until they moved to 73rd Street. When he was nine years old, he joined a small club called the Cavaliers, with about fourteen members, because “We saw guys in other clubs, and we wanted to form us a club.” His older brother Charles was in the Daddy Rolling Stones and having fun going to sock hops but wouldn’t let Poop join because he was too young.

The Cavaliers split up after a year or so, with former members joining a variety of other clubs, such as the Businessmen, Gladiators, Pueblos, Roman 20s, Boss Bachelors, and Slausons. Like Poop, these juveniles joined new clubs after leaving the Cavaliers because their families had moved to different neighborhoods where they went to different schools and associated with the youth they met there. As Poop saw it, “I couldn’t live on 73rd and be a Cavalier, and nobody else could either. We was in Slausons’ neighborhood. Others couldn’t live in their areas too.”

The Founding of the Slausons

Poop became a Slauson when he was twelve years old in 1953. He said: “I
was there when they started.” He knew Chinaman and Roach well, espe-
cially Roach because they were in the same clique. He remembered the Slau-
sons’ founding being due to a fight Chinaman and some of his homeboys from the Park got into with a Watts set at a party over a girl. His recollection of these events is particularly poignant, because he was in the second car at the fight, not having been allowed to accompany Chinaman in the first car with the older group. Poop recalled the events:

Chinaman, Melvin Ayers, Bobo, Herbert Bellinger, Otis Dawson, Charley [a.k.a. Dracula], and some others went to a party at the Nick-
ersons [Nickerson Gardens, a Watts housing project], where the Yellowjackets were having a party. They [Chinaman and his homeboys] weren’t a gang or nothing, just a bunch of guys from the neighborhood. They was going out there to jump on these guys. We didn’t get out of the car; we stayed in it. Chinaman and them got out, walked up on the porch, knocked on the door, and the door opens. Don Jordan, John Hall, and somebody else reached out and snatched Chinaman in the house and closed the door. They beat him real bad; they damn near killed him. Then they opened the door and threw him back out, and everybody in the party came out behind them. They [the Yellowjackets] jumped on the rest of them [the Slausons] and ran them all away and us too.

This confrontation was not taken lightly by Chinaman and his homeboys, who were now in need of a solution to their new problem: they had to decide how they were going to respond to this indignity. They understood that part of their difficulty was they were not only outnumbered by the Yellowjackets; they were also unorganized. The next day they met at the Park to discuss both what had happened and how they were going to respond. It was at this meeting that the Slausons were born. According to Poop, the Park proceedings occurred as follows:

I remember because they didn’t tell us to go away. And they were talking about it, that what happened wasn’t right. They talked about what they were going to call themselves, what they was gonna be; they was getting organized. There wasn’t enough of them to do what they went out there to do, you know what I’m saying? They was tough enough, but it wasn’t enough; there was twice as many [Yellowjackets as Slausons at the party]. So what they was really doin’ that day was create the Slausons, so they can have something to join. Instead of just bein’ in the neighborhood or the Park Boys, they thought they was gonna be Slausons. That’s basically how I remember it started.

Slauson was organized as a group through the efforts of a number of people who hung out at Slauson Park. Chinaman and his homeboys considered themselves just Slausons—no prefix. The battle in Watts, attended by two different age groups of Slausons, arriving in separate cars, produced the Big and Little Slausons. Chinaman’s group became Big Slauson by default, because they were older, after the younger group began calling themselves the Little Slausons.26

Frederic Thrasher and John Hagedorn have demonstrated many of the street groups they studied in Chicago and Milwaukee began as play groups
that were then united into gangs through conflict. This is similar to the Slausons, but they were a hang-out group. What began as an unorganized group of young males hanging around a park together resulted in these youngsters creating a more organized group as a consequence of a confrontation with a larger, better-organized group. The Slausons were born from a need to defend themselves so that the next time, they would be ready.

Babies Aren’t Babies

There were three original cliques of the Slausons: Big Slauson, Little Slauson, and the Babies—all beginning between 1952 and 1953. Bobby Moore, who became the president of the Babies, originally lived in Watts, but soon after arriving in the Slauson neighborhood, he joined the Little Slausons due to his closeness in age with them. He remained a Little Slauson a short while before he and a number of other Little Slausons left to form the Babies. Their departure was due to the expansion of Little Slauson and the leadership struggles that had been going on since its founding. In Bird’s view:

Bobby Moore was a Little Slauson. And there were so many Little Slausons and so many tough guys and too many leaders in the same group. What Bobby Moore and them did was broke away—broke off from Little Slauson and started up the Babies—so therefore he could be leader. Yeah, you take a step down and start up a new one and recruit some more men, then you can lead.

Bird joined the Babies in 1955 when he was twelve years old, becoming the youngest member of the clique. “Babies” sounds like a bit of a misnomer; it meant different from, younger than, and junior to Big and Little Slauson. When Bird first considered joining the Slausons, he was similarly uninformed about the Babies, expecting youngsters. He explained what he discovered:

Okay, I came up there in 1954 to join the Babies—me and Little John. I was eleven years old, and we ask, “Who were the Baby Slausons in here?” Lobo and all them dudes were in there, with glasses on and stuff, and I look at them, and they said, “We Babies.” Shiiit! I came back in ’55 and that’s when I joined, because them dudes wasn’t no babies. Them suckas was old!

All three original cliques were organized around age when they formed, with no more than a few years separating them from each other. Ages overlapped among the cliques, while within them there were smaller differences
of a year or two. All the cliques were composed of juveniles. The Babies, who were in their early teens, were too young to be Little Slausons, who in turn had been too young to be Big Slausons.

Thunderbird: The Cynosure of Slauson

Bird adamantly asserted: “I never said to anybody, in my entire life, that I was the leader of Slauson. That got put on me.”27 His leadership skills and his ability to thump, while ample, were played down by him: “I got pointed out and took to jail because I’m supposed to be a leader of all them fools, and no, I wasn’t even the baddest. I can name a hundred guys off the top, right now, all who could whoop me.” In the same way that Chinaman never claimed he was the leader of the Big Slausons, having had that title imposed on him by Jerome and other Little Slausons, Bird became a notable through his exploits and his charismatic personality: “It was something I inherited,” he observed. Although insistent he was not the leader, he was a leader; he was the archetype of a leader and the heart of Slauson. A Slauson named Rashad said of Bird, “He was the soul embodiment of the Slauson institution.”28

Bird, who accepted a directing role as a matter of necessity,29 has an unpretentious style. Besides not considering himself a leader, he felt that he wasn’t a joiner either—having joined “but two things in my entire life: the Boy Scouts and Slauson.” He was smart, tough, independent, well organized, and bold. He never backed down from any confrontation where he believed he was right. Whereas he began as a youngster from the neighborhood associating with the “originals,” his intelligence, good judgment, sharp memory, and fearlessness elevated him to one of the most memorable symbols of Slauson ideology. Bird was the cynosure of the Slausons; without Bird, they would have been a demonstrably different group.

An only child, Bird was born on May 11, 1943, to working-class parents whose marriage lasted until death took them late in life. He lived on Central Avenue in Watts until the age of seven. Then his family moved to 73rd Street, in the heart of the Slauson neighborhood, where he spent his active Slauson days. While his parents were able to provide him a comfortable lifestyle, outside his front door was a world of discomfort. There he was introduced to racism, to the rough life on the streets, and to other youngsters who were experiencing similar things. He related well to the other juveniles, those both older and younger and those of the same age. He became a member of the “original stock” of the Slausons through his associations, although he was too young to be a founding member.

In addition to the modest material comforts his parents were able to provide him, they were also a strong force in his character development.
Bird’s mother understood the importance of a proper education, insisting, for example, that he wait until he got out of probation camp to graduate from a proper high school because the camp diploma was “not a real diploma.” Although the camp diploma was a legitimate high school diploma, and he could have graduated with it a semester earlier, Bird followed her direction, graduating from Fremont High School in 1961 a few months after being released from camp. From his father, he learned to develop his identity, to be strong, to deal with racism, and to never be intimidated by it. As he saw it:

See, I understood who I was early in life, ’cause I had to. My father was a good image of that because of me going to the South when I was young and seeing my father fight these Whites there. It was racist stuff. And seeing him and my uncles literally wear all the motherfucking skull caps off their heads. And they told them they didn’t take this shit. I had all this to grow up under. I had men to grow up under.

Bird was eloquent and smooth—qualities that served him well and got him into trouble. As he expressed it, “I didn’t fuck up; I spoke up.”

Bird was well traveled by the time he was eighteen years old, having been to numerous states in the United States. As a child, his parents frequently drove with him back and forth between Los Angeles and Texas and Oklahoma to visit various relatives. There, on both sides of his family, were other strong male role models, including grandfathers, uncles, and older cousins who continued his education on the nastiness of racism and how best to deal with it. His exposure to racism was pervasive, as was his understanding of its offensiveness. “I saw racism and prejudice every day in the South: seeing those signs ‘White Only’ or ‘Colored’; seeing two water fountains, one in front and one out back; going to the movies and getting taken out by the usher and put upstairs.” It was at the separate water fountains that the young Bird had one of his most impressionable experiences with racial injustice:

Growing up and going to the South and holding on to my mother and father because White people had called me a nigger. I remember, I asked my mother and father one time when we went to a place to get some water, and they had two water fountains. I could read, and I knew “colored” and “White.” And I stood back and looked at it. I said, “Daddy, isn’t the water [for both fountains] coming out of the same pipes?” And he shook his head and said, “Yes.” I said, “Then how come they got this one here and that one over there?” I really did get an attitude as a little boy.
A Nickname with Traction

When Bird first joined the Slausons, he didn’t have a nickname that fit him, having been variously referred to as “Outlaw” or the “Bubblegum Kid.” It wasn’t until 1957, when he was fourteen years old, that his nickname—the result of an error—took hold, staying with him his entire life. He was hanging out with some homeboys by a liquor store they weren’t permitted to enter any more, but he could. The homeboys’ shopping list for him included a “short dog” (a small bottle) of Italian Swiss Colony white port wine, the preferred wine on the street at that time, which Bird was to liberate. Instead, he took a short dog of Thunderbird wine, much to the chagrin of his homeboys, who were eagerly awaiting him. “Look at that fool, Thunderbird wine [indeed]!” they exclaimed. It turned out they liked the wine and began calling him “Thunderbird” for his starring role in introducing it to them.

Two other serendipitous factors helped concretize his nickname: his choice of snacks and a coat. Bird used to enjoy eating sunflower seeds, corn nuts, pumpkin seeds, and peanuts, loose bits of which he would hold in his hand and nibble on. Noticed by some of his older homeboys, they concurred, “Yeah, he kinda look like a bird.” The coat came by way of his father, who bought him a Thunderbird coat. Named after the Ford Thunderbird car (the 1955–1957 models were emblazoned, even then, with classic), the coat took on some of the car’s panache and was arguably about as cool a coat as you could have at fourteen. “Thunderbird” was a righteous name for this well-liked youngster. The name stuck, and Thunderbird, abbreviated to “Bird,” was born.31

Boldness Is Preceded by Wit

From South Los Angeles to Guadalajara, Vera Cruz, and Acapulco, Mexico, Bird wrote or carved his name wherever he went: on walls, in buses, in courthouses, in jails, and in fresh cement. Reminiscent of the GIs in World War II who wrote “Kilroy was here,” he left few places unsigned in the areas he frequented. His writing was so prolific that his name became ubiquitous in some circles. In 1967, when Bird was in Los Angeles County Jail, he had an encounter with a younger White male that initially appeared as if it might develop into something nasty instead of the amity that resulted. As Bird told it:

In ’67, I was in the county jail, and this White boy kept lookin’ at me. He kept looking at me for about two days, man; and when a sucker's lookin’ at you for two days, something's wrong. I never seen this dude before in my life, plus it’s a White boy looking at me—oh
no, this is gonna be some shit! So I’m scheming, until one day the
dude comes over with his hand out. He said, “Bird?” I say, “Yea.” “I’m
John Adams from Torrance, man. I know you don’t know me, but I
just want to shake your hand.” I say, “Well, why is that?” He said, “I
feel like I know you.” He’s ten years younger than me, been going in
and out of foster homes and juvenile hall. He said the first time they
threw him in lockup, he saw “Bird Slauson” on the wall. He said he
went all over juyv [juvenile halls] and found it in other places too.
He said he rode on county buses where he saw it too. I’ve been to the
Torrance courthouse before too, and he saw it there.

Bird’s reputation began early, when he was in grammar school, sparked
by his encounter with Chinaman. This was a huge bump up in the eyes of
his peers—he had seen the legend. Bird explained: “Growing up in the same
neighborhood, all I ever heard was Chinaman. When I’m in grammar school
on the day that I saw him, it was like going to a summit, meeting Kennedy
or Khrushchev and five-star generals all in one.” Their meeting was a chance
encounter; there was no conversation, but it gave Bird bragging rights among
his young classmates. He had actually witnessed the phantom in the flesh,
an experience few had had because of Chinaman’s troubles with the law
resulting in extended absences from the community. When Bird arrived at
school that day, he told the story of his encounter to a rapt audience: “How’d
he look?” they all wanted to know. Bird revealed: “He’s about seven feet tall,
with dark Chinese eyes, and he had a cast on his head!”

Chinaman was not seven feet tall, but Bird had their attention, and he
glowed. It turned out that Chinaman’s bandaged head was due to a concus-
sion he had gotten from a fight he had been in with some Watts dudes. One
of them had whacked him with a pipe wrench, knocking him to the ground.
He managed to get back up and, with blood streaming down his face, whoop-
ed both the dudes he was fighting. Charisma is a hard-won thing. To im-
pressionable children, this bigger-than-life legend had been seen by one of
their own—in warrior garb—a feat incomparable to anything they had
done. This gave Bird élan, a medal he could place at the top of his list.
The eleven-year-old Bird first encountered Roach in 1954 in the Park.
This was another rarity because of Roach’s own issues with the law that took
him off the street for different periods. It was an encounter that left Bird
quite impressed, especially with Roach’s sartorial style and discursive skills,
which were on full display at the time. Bird related:

Then, up comes Roach. I seen him with these blue denims on, with
Black stitches down the sides, and a white shirt. I mean, we’re wear-
ing old JC Penny’s [a basic clothing store] stuff or whatever to school,
and here’s a cat with a white shirt and those kind of denims they don’t even make anymore. Those were some clean denims. He had on some Florsheims [classy shoes], and they were shined. He had on a black derby hat and a bamboo cane and a coat draped over his arm. I said, “Who’s that?” “That’s Roach, man.” I said, “He sure do talk a lot.” He was parading back and forth, and he was talking properly, using proper English.

Over the next few years, Roach spent a lot of time in and out of lockups. In 1957, he came back to the neighborhood, where he showed up at the Park and once more put his oratory skills to work. People would come listen to him as he laid out the ideology of Slauson, established strategies of who was going to be fought with, by whom, and when and where. Bird was at the Park regularly, watching and listening to Roach. “He’s a strategist,” Bird said, “and I picked up a whole bunch from him. Not only from him, ‘cause there were a lot of other dudes around, but mainly him. See, I was an observer. I was too little to be trying to fight anybody.” Roach was aware of Bird early on and respected him.

A clearer understanding of the nature of the early relationship that was established between Roach and Bird, and an illustration of the values Roach was espousing for the Slausons to follow, is demonstrated in this next anecdote involving Bird and an older, bigger member of the Little Slausons, Ralph Chestnut.32 Roach felt the Slausons shouldn’t prey on one another, especially on the younger members. He believed that they should be organized and should treat each other like family; they needed to be respectful among themselves. On this occasion, the fourteen-year-old Bird arrived at the Fox Theater nicely dressed, with a resplendent corduroy jacket, to join a group outside waiting for the movie to begin. As Bird recalled:

One day in ’57, I had on some white khakis, French toe shoes, and an olive-green corduroy coat fresh from Silverwoods [a classy clothing store]. It still had the smell of new in it. I had on my little stingy brim hat. Oh man, I was clean and weighing a hundred twenty pounds, five feet nine inches tall. I fall up to the Fox; I come out for the show. And Ralph Chestnut and them are standing out front and he say, “Hey, Thunderbird.” I say, “What’s happening?” And so Ralph Chestnut says, “Man, that sure is a clean jacket; let me check it out.” And he tried it on. He was a muscular dude ’n’ stuff, but I had the frame but not the rest of the meat to go with it, so the jacket could fit him. He said, “Oh man, this is nice! Shiiit, wool lining and everything.” He said, “Thanks.”
I said, “No, man, you can’t have my jacket.” Then he pushed me. When he pushed me, I ran a set [a number of punches] on him—boom, boom, boom, boom—and he pushed me back. No way I could whoop this dude, but I mean we gonna do something up there today ’cause my mama just bought me the jacket, and I couldn’t go home without it. I couldn’t say, “Some boy took my jacket.” My father would say, “You let somebody take your jacket?” I said, “Man, you gotta give me my jacket.”

Then Roach came out the show, and we scrambling, you know. And Roach said, “What’s going on?” And I said, “Man, this dude’s got my jacket.” He said, “Oh, Ralph, let him have his jacket.” So they started having a few words, and Roach said, “That’s Thunderbird from the Babies, man. You don’t be messin’ with the Babies, man. You leave the Babies alone; they are the future Slausons.” And Chestnut took off the jacket and gave it to me. So I looked at Roach and nodded, and I went on about my business.

Bird’s boldness in the face of this threat was an early display of the heart he had that so endeared him to his neighborhood. Bird was right; Chestnut was wrong; Roach confirmed it; and everyone present understood it this way.

On a second occasion, Bird once more found himself in a dilemma. Again, he stood up, demonstrating further the strength of his character when challenged by yet another bigger, older, and stronger opponent who had wronged him. Bird had loaned his “tam” (a tam-o’-shanter, a beret-type hat) to Frank Gentry, who, in turn, rather than giving it back, sold it to Zey, who wore it one time in Bird’s presence. When Bird found out where Zey had gotten the tam, he put out the word he was looking for Frank Gentry. As Bird told it:

So I went down to the Park, okay, and no one seen Frank Gentry. He’s bigger than me and a year older too. And I said, “Tell him that I want my tam, a dollar and a quarter, or an ass whoopin’.” I said, “It don’t make no difference which one ’cause I want something. So everybody put out the news: ‘Thunderbird lookin’ for Frank Gentry.’”

This happened when Bird was still fourteen years old and about 120 pounds, while Frank Gentry was fifteen but 150 pounds and from a family of tough fighters with a dangerous reputation. Bird’s audacious actions caught the attention of many in the neighborhood, who were anxious to see what would happen when the two met. They did not have to wait long, because two weeks later Bird found Gentry at the gym playing basketball with
his homeboys. With sixty people present, Bird confronted him, with these results:

Frank Gentry said, “I heard you lookin’ for me. I heard you say you wanted a dollar and a quarter, an ass whoopin’, or a tam.” He said, “I ain’t got the tam, and I ain’t got no dollar and a quarter!” So I fired on him [hit him with his fists]. Well, what was I gonna say? If he ain’t got the tam, and he ain’t got the dollar and a quarter, ain’t but one alternative, you know, and I fired and the shit was on.

The fight that ensued showed observers the amount of soul Bird had, as he demonstrated again the charismatic qualities that endeared him to his neighborhood. Bird ruminated on the fight:

Now, he don’t know that he had busted my lip all on the inside, ’cause I kept swallowing blood; I wouldn’t spit it out. Now, we fought from Slauson Park all the way to 70th and Hooper. We fought three consecutive times. We’d fight, and we’d back up, and we’d fight, and we’d stop. We was gettin’ tired. We was getting tired of walkin’ and fightin’. The fight was a hellified fight, because everybody remembered that fight, because it lasted so long and I wouldn’t give up.

These early experiences, with audiences looking on, helped to define Bird in the community. His powerful male family role models gave him a sense of what manhood involved. His socialization by the founders of Slauson made him a younger part of the original set. He not only accepted the values of the neighborhood that Roach taught but readily internalized them as his own and then expanded on them. He stood out among his peers because of his intelligence, experiences, and principled exploits, which distinguished him as someone who was a cut above the ordinary. 33

A Legend Takes Root

There was continuity between the Slausons’ junior high school, Edison, and their high school, Fremont, that was absent between Fremont and the other junior highs. Most of the students from Edison had also gone to elementary school together and were now attending the same high school, in their own neighborhoods, with students they had been with since kindergarten. Bird recalled:

We were going to school in our neighborhood, in the center of the neighborhood, the original neighborhood. We were all family in the
sense that everybody went to the same elementary school and the same junior high school. And everybody lived in proximity to each other. The closest high school for all those cats that lived across the freeway [on the west side of the Harbor Freeway] and in Watts was Fremont.

This arrangement gave the Slausons an organizational advantage: they could affect juveniles from all the other neighborhoods now attending Fremont. Fremont became an amalgamation zone for the Slausons, a melting pot of juveniles from nearby neighborhoods whose education now also included learning about the Slausons. While none were forced into joining the Slausons, the opportunity to join was there. Many chose not to join. Those who did join did so not only because of the Slausons’ dominance but because they liked what they saw and understood that to be a Slauson was to be cool.

From the early to mid-1950s to the early 1960s, the Slausons’ leadership was mostly associated with Chinaman, Roach, Jerome, Poop, Eugene, and Bobby Moore, who were regularly engaged in altercations with the Watts street groups. In 1957, Chinaman went to the penitentiary for robbery. Roach followed a similar path several years later when he was incarcerated in 1962. Whereas Chinaman’s incarcerations were for so long they essentially kept him out of the loop, Roach’s confinements, while not as long, were frequent enough to keep him from ever establishing any greater leadership role. Other Big and Little Slausons were also either imprisoned or, having gotten older, found new pursuits (such as families) more appealing than continued street activity. Bird explained that Bobby Moore, a “fifties guy,” was one such person, getting married and “settling down,” only to be killed in 1967 in a car accident. By the summer of 1962, he noted, those who had founded Slauson ten years earlier were off the streets: the “real dudes that Watts were having problems with were all gone.” “Almost all the dudes that was Little Slauson or Big Slauson was either married, moved out of the neighborhood, in the penitentiary, or something.” Times were changing for the Slausons, save for one youngster who knew the score and who remained in the neighborhood: Bird.

Bird didn’t settle down; nor did he leave the streets. With the exception of a number of relatively brief jailings, he was there reporting for duty. He also kept up a regular correspondence with Roach while he was in prison. It was a connection to the Slauson legacy that was absent from the other Slauson juveniles. Roach was very interested in what was happening in the neighborhood, and Bird was committed to keeping him informed. The original Slausons in prison knew that “Bird was out there holding it down,” that he was keeping the Watts sets from marauding in Slauson territory and “taking all the girls” or crashing the parties.

Associations with the originals contributed to Bird’s charisma. He became an authority by his exploits, his tenacity, and his link to the originals.
As he remarked: ‘I’m from the old set, from the ’55 set, and I had all of that Big Slauson, Little Slauson, and older Baby Slauson. I’d seen all these guys, and I had some of those ingredients, and I knew certain things to do and what not to do, when and where.” These connections distinguished Bird from his peers with an influence other juveniles lacked.

The Bird era, beginning about 1959 and continuing through the Watts Rebellion of 1965, brought greater definition to the Slausons. By the late 1950s, Bird had spent time at Riis Developmental School, from 1959 to 1960, and in juvenile probation camp until December 23, 1960. At both venues, he distinguished himself by his regular involvement in fights with juveniles from a variety of different street groups. His capable pugilistic exploits earned him continued praise from his homies but enmity from his rivals. A lot of people who had never seen him before knew about him from the stories about his escapades coming back to the streets. His fearlessness and skill with his fists, and his reputation as a member of the Slausons and a member of the “original stock,” contributed to continuing awareness on the streets that the Slausons hadn’t lost their edge—it had been sharpened. Bird of Slauson became ubiquitous in many parts of South Los Angeles, enhancing the reputation of the Slausons.

The Matchmaker

The antagonisms that had originated between the Slausons and the Watts street groups not only continued after the older founders left the street, but Bird made certain that the Slausons would never forget their archenemies. Convinced that the Watts groups would have dominated and even taken over the Slauson neighborhood if the struggles initiated by the founders were not continued, Bird “rallied the troops.”

Bird made sure the juveniles his age and those a few years younger knew about the old antagonisms and were prepared to deal with the current ones. In his words, “I was one of those youngsters who had grown up under all these generals and learned all their tact. When those Watts dudes started coming, I roused up those young Slausons and told them who was who.” Bird had learned not only tactics from the founders, but he also knew about the fighting skills of various individual Watts combatants. As an accomplished fist fighter, he was able to serve as a matchmaker, matching skilled Slausons with those of comparable skills from Watts, but also wise enough to give advantage to the Slausons.

I knew those Watts dudes. I would say, “Man, that’s so-and-so; you could whoop him.” I could pick out who could whoop who or who
could give them a hell of a fight. I knew. I had studied them all 'cause we had been dealing with Watts ever since I was a little boy. I had heard all their reps, and I read into it, and I listened to all the stories that everybody had told. I knew whether they were left-handed or right-handed, and I could tell them, “Watch this dude ’cause he drags his leg Archie Moore style” [a World Light-Heavyweight Champion boxer]. I knew all of that. I had a file in my mind on a sucker.

Bird made matches between rivals and continued with a lot of his own fights, where he was the winner. As his growing reputation brought him greater recognition, it also brought him increased animosity from his foes, especially Watts. Bird’s emergence as a force in Slauson marked him as a trophy to be taken. The person who could bring him down might be able to gain praise, respect, and maybe even some of his power. But it had to be done right. This idea seemed to escape the would-be assassins, who instead screwed it up. The two attempts to kill him, rather than leading to his demise, permanently cemented his status as the essence of Slauson. His legend grew.