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PICHER'S ALCHOL:
PROBLEMS IT CAUSED

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Alcohol played a major part in the life of a miner and in his community. The outlawing of alcohol in the country caused lots of things in the life of the miner and in his surrounding community. Across the country crime rates began to rise as more people were found with illegal alcohol or were arrested for altercations that they had been involved in because of being intoxicated.

With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, alcohol across the country was banned, which caused a major change in many people's lives. The law caused crime across the country to rise and Picher, Oklahoma was no exception to this. It had a huge impact on the lives of miners and their families in Picher, Oklahoma and the surrounding areas. Arrel Gibson in one of his works states, "In the early camps, miners worked a nine to ten hour day, six days a week and took Sunday off...Many patronized the abundant resources for ribald entertainment supplied by the various camps."¹ More accidents and crime occurred in this area during the time period of Prohibition due to the fact that people were desperate to obtain the alcohol that they desired. Some would turn to bootleggers or making their own "home brew" to get the alcohol that they so much desired. This added to the rise in crime rates for Picher and for its surrounding area.

There were many different crimes that happened during this time period of 1929, but most of these crimes were caused by the fact that alcohol had been prohibited. People decided to fight back against the law by making their own "home brew" or by illegally smuggling it into the United States from Canada. Miners in Picher and the surrounding area were no exception to this; many of them would choose to make their own "home brew" before they would go without their drink at the end of the day. Also, alcohol played an important role in the life of a miner when it came to sickness and dealing with the aches and pains that came with working in the mine for long hours.

¹ Gibson, A., "A Social History of The Tri-State District," pg. 183.

Life during this time period was not easy for miners. Most lived from paycheck to paycheck and tried to save what little money they could from it, although usually that was not possible. Without their job at the mine most mining families would have nothing to live off of, or if they were lucky at all would be able to get welfare from the government. The economy of the United States at this time was already starting to see a slight downturn before it finally collapsed in 1930. People would steal and do whatever it was they had to, to be able to get by in life and keep theirs and their families' heads above water. It was a difficult time for those of the lower middle class and in the lower more poverty stricken classes. Even though those on top made everything seem as if it was going well and that there was no downturn whatsoever in the economy.

The social life of miners was changed by the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. It used to be that after a long day of work in the mine that miners would go out on the town and relax from their long work day. Saloons were a gathering place for miners to catch up with friends and simply have a few drinks to forget about what happened at the mine that day. "Another diversion among miners was to group together, exchange experiences"² Alcohol was a major part of almost any social function in the mining communities. One historian argued that, "Seventy-five saloons were open both day and night and in most of them a full orchestra gave free concerts every night and in most a matinee Wednesday and Sunday afternoon."³ It was accepted as part of the normal day to day life of the community to see groups of miners together sharing a "wet" beverage and talking about the day. Picher and the surrounding area were no exception to this normalcy in social workings of the mining community.

² Gibson, A., "A Social History of the Tri-State District," pg. 184.

³ *Ibid*, pg. 183.

Even after the ban on alcohol miners would still continue to get together to talk, relax, and just have a good time amongst each other. However, usually illegal alcohol would be present at these functions. At some of them those who were intoxicated would lose their tempers and violence would then ensue. One such episode occurred in Picher, Oklahoma. Mack Haskins and Emmet Hedgecorth, both were miners, had been drinking together and Haskins took Hedgecorth to Mrs. May Cadwell's home to have him looked after. Hedgecorth began to argue with his friend Haskins and he ended up grabbing a gun and shooting Haskins. The shot ended up fatally wounding and eventually killing Haskins.⁴ The illegal alcohol that the two managed to obtain and consume helped to cause the shooting between the two. Another episode that occurred in Picher was when a man Mike Shaw, who had been a party a booze party, was stabbed in the side in an alleyway. The suspect was not apprehended by police officers.⁵ Alcohol is what allowed and helped to cause both of these incidents to occur. If Hedgecorth had not been intoxicated with illegal alcohol then there is the chance that he would not have lost his temper and shot his friend. Also, Shaw would have had his wits about him and would have possibly been able to stop the person that was going to attack and stab him in the side. Both of these crimes could have been avoided if only both men would have not consumed prohibited alcohol.

There were other incidents that occurred in Picher involving the consumption of illegal alcohol and violence.

"With the death of Bruce Hise Monday night at Mount Carmel Hospital... from knife wounds said to have been inflicted by Carl Moore... during an altercation in Mineral Heights, Picher... Hise was apparently intoxicated at the time of the stabbing and some evidence showed that Moore stabbed Hise in self-defense"⁶

⁴ *Picher King Jack*, July 22, 1929.

⁵ *Ibid*, January 14, 1929.

⁶ *Ibid*, August 8, 1929.

Violence caused by the intake of alcohol during this time period rose higher than it had been before Prohibition was put into effect. There were times that the violence, involving intoxicated individuals, came to blows exchanged between the participants with chains, axes, and even a shovel as seen in an incident that happened.

“The trouble is said to have started between the two men. The older man said that Roy Smith was under the influence of liquor. During the quarrel it is alleged that the younger man struck John Smith with an ax. Mrs. Smith then came to the assistance of her husband... and beat Roy Smith with a trace chain from a wagon. The fight ended when John Smith struck the younger man blow with a shovel.”⁷

Illegal alcohol played a major part in causing lots of fights to break out between residents who lived in or around Picher.

Other incidents would sometimes end with a person who was trying to stop fighting between one or two intoxicated people would become a victim of the violence. This occurred in the following incident that happened in Picher.

“A charge of murder against Frank Hintz in connection with the death of Lee Miller... officers said Hintz was drunk and quarreling with his wife. When Miller, a friend of the family, interfered and attempted to stop the quarrel, Hintz stabbed him six times with a knife and then pursued him about half a block and shot him twice.”⁸

Alcohol usually causes people to lose coherent thought and can cause them to become stupid mean. The incident above proves this point and all of these characteristics did nothing except to aide in the crime rates for Picher.

To a miner the loss of his job would spell out certain doom for himself and for his family. This was always somewhere on the minds of the miners in Picher and the surrounding area. The disease of silicosis or miners' consumption became such a problem for the area “that operators

⁷ *Picher King Jack*, August 29, 1929.

⁸ *Miami News-Record*, July 5, 1929.

combined to form the Southwestern Missouri Mine Safety and Sanitation Association. Weekly meetings were held to plan a program of education and treatment.”⁹ Alcohol was a normal “cure all” for many miners ailments, especially since most couldn’t afford the medicine that doctors at the company clinic offered. They would instead go for the cheaper route of buying something from a traveling medicine man, going to a saloon, or setting up a distillery on their own property and making their own alcohol. Even after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment those who had their own distillery would continue to use them for their own purposes.

Alcohol also played a part in the health concerns of miners. Many feared the threat of developing miners’ consumption which could spell impending doom and loss of their job.

“The intensity of miners’ consumption varies... the injured lung, together with the lowered vitality of the whole body, presents an ideal site for the development of tuberculosis. When this occurs, not only is the miner threatened with an early death or at least, a more helpless future”¹⁰

To the miners who lived here alcohol was their way of staving off the aches and pains acquired from having worked in the mine. “Some turned to alcohol and patent medicines to alleviate symptoms and keep working.”¹¹ Most didn’t have the money to afford to pay for “fancy” medicines or have enough to be able to move out West. Where they could get the “fresh air and dry climate” that their doctor would prescribe when it was discovered that the miner had silicosis. Miners were afraid of going to the company clinic, for fear of being fired for being found out to have consumption or silicosis. “the men distrust the clinic and mistrust the examining doctors paid by the companies, whose duty it is to weed out the silicotic and

⁹Gibson, Arrell M., *Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*, pg. 183.

¹⁰*Ibid*, pg.186.

¹¹ Derickson, “On The Dump Heap,” Pg. 15.

tuberculous, which to the miner spells unemployment and starvation.”¹² Alcohol allowed miners to keep on working in the mines and making the money that they needed.

Without alcohol many miners had to simply suffer through the pain that they felt, they could revert to buying contraband alcohol from bootleggers, or do as many before them and make their own “home brew.” Bootleggers would bring in alcohol from Canada to the United States in defiance of the Eighteenth Amendment.¹³ They would run the risk of being caught by border patrol or having federal prohibition officers catching and arresting them.¹⁴ Those who made “home brew” also ran the risk of blowing themselves up and bringing attention to their illegal actions. One man in Picher, Oklahoma found out the hard way what this entailed when he blew up his home with the distillery he had on his property.¹⁵ Officers and the area fire department arrived on the scene immediately and the owner of the property was arrested for his illegal activities. The home-owners entire house was lost to the fire, because of his bootlegging activities. Another incident occurred in Picher involving people partaking of home-made alcohol. “Beginning Saturday, the following arrests were made with the taking of alleged intoxicating liquors: Juanita Cook, Violet Watters, and Gladys Morris...in which 174 bottles of home brew were taken...the offenders were turned over to the federal commissioner”¹⁶ “Home brew” was the one way for the people of Picher and the surrounding area to try and get around the law that

¹²Gibson, Arrell M., *Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*, pg. 190.

¹³ “Angler Exposed As Federal Rum Scout”-Miami Daily News-Record. A man was sitting in boat “fishing” on a stretch of water between the borders of the United States and Canada. Other fisherman said something to officers about the man sitting in the boat and officers decided to look into the matter. They pulled up the man’s fishing line only to discover nothing at the end of it. It turned out that the man was a federal prohibition officer who was watching for any bootleggers attempting to sneak alcohol into the United States from Canada.

¹⁴ Gangsters such as the infamous, Al Capone, would play the part of bootleggers. They would bring in alcohol from Canada to the United States to the bigger cities like Chicago. Their bootlegging activities earned them lots of un-taxable dollars.

¹⁵ *The Picher King Jack*, March 8, 1928.

¹⁶*Ibid*, May 22, 1930.

banned alcohol. However, those who usually made “home brew” would get caught by prohibition officers or other officials and arrested for the possession of illegal substances.

Any and all people that were caught with alcohol were arrested and the alcohol was disposed of by police officers. “the beer and near beer and other intoxicants, to the amount of 880 bottles, was destroyed. The destruction of the stock was by pouring into the storm sewer...”¹⁷ Crime rates, instead of dropping like it would be believed to happen because of the ban on alcohol, actually rose because of the ban. Arrests for the possession of alcohol and vehicular accidents caused by the driver being intoxicated became the norm. Also, so did incidents with intoxicated individuals being out in public and causing disturbances. In Picher on the 4th of July police arrested up to ten people one of them being a woman.”¹⁸ Women would partake of illegal alcohol just as soon as men would; they had no problem with taking a nip or two of whiskey or “home brew.” Intoxicated miners would also at times create disturbances around Picher and cause the police to have to come and fetch them. “L.L. Brown, 25 years old, a zincville miner, was arrested... Brown, who was said to have been under the influence of liquor, carried a revolver.”¹⁹ There was also a raise in the amount of fatalities for the area, caused by altercations between citizens and between citizens and officers.

Altercations between officers and bootleggers or sometimes even regular citizens would sometimes occur in the area and in some instances would end with the suspect being wounded by the officer. One such altercation occurred between an officer and a bootlegger, although in this incident the driver managed to get away. “A booze car containing four gallons of whiskey was captured on Fourth Street about 3 o’clock, Sunday morning... The driver of the car ran and

¹⁷ *Picher King Jack*, September 12, 1929.

¹⁸ *Miami News-Record*, July 5, 1929. Even with the Prohibition on alcohol, people still partook of their “home brew” to celebrate the holidays.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, July 5, 1929.

escaped”²⁰ Officers and citizens who choose to partake of the illegal alcohol would also have run-ins with each other at times. Especially when the citizen or citizens would be intoxicated out in public, this would sometimes lead to the intoxicated citizen attempting to evade arrest. In the Picher area one such incident occurred when an intoxicated man was at a dance hall. At first he submitted to the officer that was trying to arrest him, but then decided to fight back. He broke away from the officer and ended up stealing a vehicle in which he fled with the officer shooting at the retreating vehicle. The officer ended up fatally wounding the suspect.²¹ The man, because he was intoxicated, had “liquid courage” and decided to try and fight the officer which led to his own demise.

Raids played a huge part in causing the crime rates to rise. Most raids that were carried out usually saw results. A gentleman in Picher had his home raided just as he was about to serve illegal alcohol to his friends. He claimed it was for “medicinal purposes” and for his “medicinal purposes” officers discovered three-hundred bottles of “home brew,” a fifteen gallon jug of “home brew” and a twenty gallon jug of “home brew.”²² In some cases though, the raid would end in violence between the officers carrying out the raid and those who were being raided. One such incident occurred in the area around Picher, when three officers began a raid on the home of a farmer. According to the officers the farmer came at the officers with a shotgun, threatening their lives. One of the officers ended up shooting the farmer, who threatened them with the shotgun, and killing him.²³

²⁰ *Picher King Jack*, August 8, 1929.

²¹ *Picher King Jack*, February 4, 1929.

²² *Ibid*, June 13, 1929.

²³ *Miami Daily News-Record*, July 5, 1929. The officer who shot the farmer was not recognized as a federal prohibition officer and was almost taken to trail by the city for murder. However, before this occurred federal officials stepped in and stopped the city officials from trying the supposed officer.

²² *Picher King Jack*, September 12, 1929.

Prohibition in Picher was strictly enforced by the officers who lived and worked there. The police chief of Picher, Joe Nolan, even went so far as to boldly state, "It will be our policy to make our raids so frequent and so thorough that no boot-legger will be able to make a living here in Picher and unless they go to work they had better move out."²⁴ Picher officers would work closely with Federal Prohibition officers in an attempt to make sure that the law was followed to the letter. They themselves would conduct raids on citizens' homes and business in an attempt to stop the making and consumption of illegal alcohol.

However, sometimes citizens would be informed of the planned raid by the officers. "Officers G.T. Leffler and U.S. Jennings...raided a home...The house raided is said to have been the home of Otto Huffman...Otto was not present to welcome the officers, and the officers have not since been able to locate Otto"²⁵ To avoid being arrested many would "slip out the back" to get away clean from the prohibition officers. Sometimes though "slipping out the back" would not work and would actually go so far as to run across state lines to get away from the authorities.

"Leonard Thompson...beat a hasty retreat across the state line...when Assistant Police Chief, G.T. Leffler, Patrolman Herman Brewer, and Deputy "Irish" Glen called at Thompson's home to conduct a raid for liquor. When one of the officers began waving a search warrant, Thompson ran...Twenty-Five gallons of home brew and a number of empty bottles were reported to have been seized by the officers."²⁶

Running from the officers usually did not work out so well for those who choose to do so. It normally resulted in their being captured and their alcohol being disposed of by federal prohibition officers down a sewage drain.

²⁵ *Picher King Jack*, January 14, 1929.

²⁶ *Ibid*, August 8, 1929.

These bootleggers would usually move to the bigger cities where it would be harder for officers to discover them and they could continue on with their lawless activities. It was sometimes a surprise to find out that certain individuals who held prestigious places within the community were bootlegging illegal alcohol into the area. One such incident occurred in Picher, where a man who worked in the mining clinic ended up having to place his resignation because of his illegal activities.

“Mr. Bishop returned and gave no explanation for his running away...It has been brought to my attention that he is under suspicion for transporting liquor from Kansas City to the field, and that recently prohibition officers made two attempts to catch him...I informed him this morning that I thought that he should submit his resignation”²⁷

Even those in good standing in the community would give in and become a part of the lawlessness that was seemingly lurking in the area of Picher and the surrounding areas. Those in high places were just as susceptible to falling into crime as were those in the lower classes.

The amount of crimes that occurred after Prohibition came into effect were not limited to just incidents occurring between two individuals fighting in person. Sometimes the crimes would involve vehicular “accidents” instances lead to both drivers getting into an argument and one or the other throwing a punch. Usually one or both of the drivers were intoxicated with illegal alcohol. In one instance an intoxicated motorist ended up harming both a mother and her child. “Mrs. Helen Parker and her two year old baby...were seriously slashed by a drunken man at ten o’clock Saturday night when occupants of two motor cars which had collided...engaged in an

²⁷ F.V. Merriwether, letter to Dr. R.R. Sayers, September 4, 1929.

The letter is about the resignation of Mr. C.K. Bishop. Mr. Bishop was on the run from federal Prohibition officers, since he had been turned in for bootlegging illegal alcohol into the country and selling it. He is believed to have fled to Kansas City, in order to evade capture by officials.

altercation over who was to blame for the accident.”²⁸ A little baby was harmed by a intoxicated man, this should not have happened during Prohibition.²⁹ Especially since any and all alcohol was supposed to have been banned and unavailable for anyone to consume. Yet still this crime was committed by an intoxicated man, when the vehicular accident occurred.

Besides drivers getting into altercations over whose fault it was for a vehicular accident there were also multiple hit and runs that happened in Picher and the surrounding area. Usually these happened because the driver was intoxicated and decided to go on a joy ride through the town or in surrounding area. Louis Quapaw and Douglas Keele were arrested at the Devil’s Promenade while intoxicated, “being a continuation of the state in which they were said to have been the night before”³⁰ They killed Fred Halfmoon, with their vehicle, as he was walking home along the side of the road. Instead of stopping and seeing if the person that they had hit with their vehicle was okay, they kept on driving. That is if they even noticed in their intoxicated state that they had actually stuck someone with their vehicle.

Others also did the same as the two mentioned in the incident above. A man was walking on the side of the road and was stuck down by a car.³¹ Many other reports of hit and runs were recorded and none of the drivers stepped forwards to take the blame for having stuck and injured or killed the victim. Prohibition changed the lives of many people across the United States. It caused changes in the social lives of the miners of Picher and of the surrounding areas. With the ban on alcohol people looked for alternate ways to get their hands on the banned alcohol.

²⁸ *Picher King Jack*, August 5, 1929.

²⁹ The baby and mother were taken to the hospital, where both were treated for the wounds inflicted upon them. Both returned home bandaged and bruised, but other than that alive and well. The drunken man was arrested by Police Chief Nolan, of Picher, and charges were pressed against him for assault with a deadly weapon.

³⁰ *Ibid*, February 25, 1929.

³¹ The man was taken to an area hospital where he was treated for his wounds and eventually recovered from his injuries.

Bootleggers would bring in alcohol from Canada and would sell it to those who wanted to lay hands upon it. Crime rates rose because of the ban on alcohol and violence became the norm for most people. Miners depended on alcohol to dull their pains and allow them to be able to face the day at work in the mine. Without it they had to simply suffer and deal with it.

Miners usually would gather together and would exchange stories about their work day at the mine. Usually while gathered together they would have some drinks and relax from their long day at work. At most social gatherings, before the implication of Prohibition, alcohol would be present and almost everyone would partake. However, once Prohibition was enacted social functions like what the miners were used to ended. As did their prescription of using alcohol to dull the aches and pains that they would obtain from working in the mine day in and day out.

The crime rates after the Eighteenth Amendment was passed rose tremendously, as more and more violence seemed to erupt throughout the country. Picher and the surrounding area were no exception to this. There were more vehicular accidents reported, because of drunken individuals who decided that they wanted to go out joy riding. Also, lots of hits and runs occurred in Picher and the driver was usually never apprehended. Usually the person that was struck by the vehicle would be fatally injured or would be severally harmed. With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment the crime rates across the country and Picher, Oklahoma and its surrounding area was no exception to this rule.

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