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Spring 5-1-2011

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**Prohibition and the Effects on Social History in the Tri-State Area**

**By**

**Grant LaForge**

Today we as citizens of this country believe that rights and liberties rule the air. On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1919 however, an amendment for prohibition was ratified, making alcohol consumption illegal. The whole country was affected by this amendment. In the East there were many organized crime related incidents related to prohibition. Other parts of the US that were affected by this amendment and bootlegging were prominent.

The Tri-State area in the middle of the U.S. is the states of Missouri, Oklahoma, and Kansas. These states geographical locations allowed for zinc and lead production. The mines that were built there housed many families and businesses. Picher, Oklahoma was a town in that was all mines, and everything that was built there "was because of the mines.

Prior to 1919 many things were the same in the Tri-State area. The mines were a good source of income and there were many people flocking to this area. It was similar to the gold rush of California in 1849. The mines were responsible for allowing many jobs to come to the area. With many jobs, many people came and supplemented the community with their presence. After work was over and the miners went home to their families they had a drink or two. Much had changed once prohibition was an amendment. However, before that time, good times were in store every night it seemed in the Picher area. Saloons were prominent and always served the hard working miner. Sure there were fights and anything alcohol related, but it was legal to drink. The legalization of alcohol was important to this area. After work activities a lot of the time was drinking and having a good time. That all changed in 1919 after an amendment abolishing the legalization of alcohol.

The times had changed all of the sudden after this amendment came into effect. Many miners would have lives outside of the mines. The activities that were present at the time included anything from family related activities or going to the saloon. In 1919 prohibition

prevented miners or others to consume or possess alcohol, so life altering activities had to ensue. The research will follow a correlation between prohibition, social experience, and crime rates in the Tri-State area. This research will help people find out how prohibition either did or did not have an effect on crime rates and social experiences. The research will help others understand why prohibition was good or bad in the Tri-State area in the 1920s. The historical context and evidence from research will provide a reason why either crime went up or went down during this time.

Social history in this area that was created by prohibition was prominent in the *Picher King Jack*, as reported earlier. Not only does the area have a police squad to worry about, the criminals also have to watch out for U.S. Marshalls as prohibition officers. Bootleggers were prominent in the area in 1926. The U.S. Marshalls involved with most of the cases were prohibition officers. These individuals monitored actions involving anything alcohol related. The Tri-State area was very active with individuals involving small alcohol amounts. The Kiltner Mine Distillery was the tip of the iceberg when trying to apprehend individuals with alcohol consumption or possession. The alcohol distribution was not that active however, the individuals that were caught with alcohol claim that the alcohol came from bigger cities. Joplin and other bigger cities were more prominent for the supply of alcohol to the smaller cities around the Tri-State area. Automobiles and trains were then responsible for getting the alcohol place to place. This put a bigger strain on the distribution portion of prohibition in the Picher area.

Picher mines had many accidents and other types of incidents that prevented miners to continue on working. Silicosis, tuberculosis, and mining accidents were the prominent reasons why miners would not be able to work the mine at any capacity.<sup>1</sup> These incidents affected the

<sup>1</sup> Gibson, A.M. "A Social History of the Tri-State District." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37, no. 2 (1959), 182-95.

social lives of the miners. The families of the miners that had these types of incident happen to them affected how they would survive. Other social events that were present in 1926 Picher were local dances. Family oriented activities usually were the other means to have fun. These activities included games, gardens, music, and other means of technology at that time. The mines started in 1840s and lasted all the way up the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The lead and zinc produced out of those mines was one of the largest producers in the nation. Although there were a lot of accidents, a life as a miner was relatively good to be. The reason that being a miner was good is because it was a nice income and it provided food for the miner's family. The injuries along with the hazards like hydrogen sulfide gas could put these miners out of work.<sup>3</sup> This is important because the miners needed work and if that work was not there sometimes crime would be the onset of some sort of an income. The affects of a miner who lost his job or was too sick to work was instrumental. The reasons behind this are if the individual did not have a family the more likely the miner would look toward crime.

The area did not have a lot of paved roads or railroads for people to get around on. The tracks to the railroad built early in the 1900s provided much needed transportation between mines.<sup>4</sup> The increased amount of automobiles and trains in the area allowed more production and faster shipment.<sup>5</sup> Automobiles along with trains had a lot to do with the mines, but they also played a huge part in prohibition. Not only did miners did not only have to worry about getting hurt in the mines, but they had to realize the new automobile had consequences, if you did not follow

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<sup>2</sup> A.M Gibson, 180.

<sup>3</sup> A.M Gibson, 181.

<sup>4</sup>A.M. Gibson. "Early Mining Camps in North. East Oklahoma." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34, no. 2(1956),193-202.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, 183.

the rules of the road. Automobiles like the model T were starting to be mass produced in the 1920s. In the *Picher King Jack* a subtitle reads as follows “Most Tragic Month.”<sup>6</sup> This article had the headline because the record of three fatality accidents in a span of one month.<sup>7</sup> This is important because there just were not car fatalities at this time. There might be one or so in a few months, but not three. The times were changing in Picher and car accidents had a lot to do with an increase of police on the road. This put a strain on bootleggers and the production of alcohol. As police presence went up, so did the production of alcohol. The reason behind this phenomenon was the automobiles and trains. The police presence went up because of the trains and automobiles, but the increase of transportation made it easier to produce and distribute alcohol.<sup>8</sup> Police did not document crimes as well during this time. It is different today because means of technology. Although there were many accidents and new types of transportation like trains and automobiles alcohol still seemed prominent.

In the East and Midwest gang wars over alcohol spread. Chicago was important because one of the major battles of distribution of alcohol ensued. Al Capone and his gang ran rampant through Chicago controlling almost all distribution of alcohol in that city. This is one case of the major problems that faced this country on alcohol and alcohol distribution/production. Crime was starting to spread a little more than the government was willing to let out. The alcohol and other types of technology like better automobiles, guns, and trains led to the increase of crime. Prohibition was prominent throughout the country, but still was not really treated as an

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<sup>6</sup>Most Tragic Month, *Picher King Jack*, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1926.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Automobiles rule the road, *Picher King Jack*, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1926.

amendment. The prohibition amendment was really just a law. A law that was unjust because of the movements that took place afterwards.

Social history in the tri-state area at this time was similar to those in the Trans-Mississippi, Colorado, and California regions.<sup>9</sup> The mines grew and when the new mines were built, miners would come and set up small shacks. After a few came the camps of the area became big and thus created mining camps.<sup>10</sup>

Business establishments, a neglect of the social grace, a disdain for learning, and contempt for religion, plus a riotous ribald pattern of living, making mining camps the epitome of bacchanalian activities, characterize the camps of the Tri-State just as they do for the Sacramento, Virginia City, and Cripple Creek regions. Of added significance for the Tri-State camps is the sharp contrast their quickened pulse and general turbulence supplies to the staid and conservative agrarian society found on their periphery.<sup>11</sup>

A.M. Gibson includes this excerpt talking about how people of the mining community did not really care about the social grace and how it compared to other mining communities around the U.S. The disdain for learning does not necessarily mean that there were not any people in the area that were not literate or educated. The disdain for learning comes back to the notion of social history and how people neglect to try to learn something new. Gibson talks about people in Picher and how the education was frowned.

The inertia in Tri-State intellectual life reflects the traditional mining camp contempt for refinement and amenities. The mining counties, when compared to their neighboring agrarian counties, have shown, if not an indifference, at least a retardedness in providing adequate educational facilities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gibson, A.M. "A Social History of the Tri-State District." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37, no. 2 (1959), 182-95.

<sup>10</sup> A.M. Gibson. "Early Mining Camps in North East Oklahoma." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34, no. 2 (1956), 193-202.

<sup>11</sup> A.M. Gibson. 182.

<sup>12</sup> A.M. Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State District." 188.

The people of the Tri-State area had their means to get by. Even though the great depression did not hit until 1929, the people of the Tri-State district suffered. There were more than just accidents in the mines. The grocery rations that were given to buy goods were not always present. Picher had a grocery store that was used by most of the miners. Other amenities like the Blacksmith shop; lumber yards were a few places people could buy materials. The reason was to get paid in rations, by the mine. The mine in this instance owned the grocery store along with a lot of the amenities that were around the town. The miners were at the mercy of the mines. The mines produced a lot of income, but the miners did not see a lot of that money. The social aspects of a small income and the extra-curricular activities that were a part of the mining community were family oriented and individualistic. The family oriented activities for example were gardening, farming, and caring for livestock. Others fished and hunted, this helped with the food issue.<sup>13</sup> You did not have to have a family to do these types of activities. Many miners were single. The single men who flocked to the Tri-State area for work participated in other activities. These activities included saloons, dances, sports and many others that may have included alcohol.<sup>14</sup> The sports section was heavily covered by the *Picher King Jack*.<sup>15</sup> The social experiences that included alcohol were almost a distant memory in everyone's mind during prohibition. In 1875 there were seventy five saloons that opened day and night.<sup>16</sup> By

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<sup>13</sup> A.M. Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State District," 183.

<sup>14</sup> A.M. Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State District," 183.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 183.



1919 Most of those saloons in the Tri-State area was either closed or only used for concerts and music.<sup>17</sup>

While the consumption of whiskey in the camps must have been considerable, moderation was encouraged, since, as the Missouri Labor Commissioner noted in 1887, ruiners who drank to excess found it difficult to secure backing for a grubstake if working on their own, or to gain employment if hiring out by the day.<sup>18</sup>

What Gibson is trying to say is that the miners were asked to drink in moderation. If that rule was not followed, then most likely the miner would not get a grubstake. A grubstake is supplies or funds advanced to a mining prospector or a person starting a business in return for a promised share of the profit.<sup>19</sup> This was important, but there were still a lot of mishaps with alcohol. There were other activities like strikes that the miners liked participating in. These strikes happened when a prospector found ore in a new location.<sup>20</sup> When these strikes took place many of the miners would include cigars and whiskey to the mix. These types of strikes and ultimatums led to more police. Police were enforced to cut down on crime in the mines. The mines did not see a lot of violent crimes, but those crimes were the most important. Violent crimes were cut down on, but many other problems arose. These problems arose because of extra-curricular activities the miners took place doing. Again alcohol, just like today had a lot to do with assaults, domestic disputes, and other types of disorder in the public. Picher had another way of handling its problems with crime. "Picher, Oklahoma was an exception. Modern Picher has municipal government but for most of its existence, it had, according to the Daily

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

<sup>18</sup> A.M. Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State District." 183.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

<sup>20</sup> A.M. Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State District." 184.

*Oklahoman* a feudal organization”<sup>21</sup> This allowed for less wiggle room for miners. The mines were governed well in Picher, according to Gibson.<sup>22</sup> Another way for people of Picher to be social was church. The religions that were the most prominent were Protestant and Baptist.<sup>23</sup> This was a big deal because of the conservative nature of the Protestant and Baptist. This means that a more conservative area like Picher would not have a lot of crime. This however, was not the case because the conservative nature of the Baptist in Picher and the Tri-State area was not conservative at all.

The Picher area in 1926 very heavily relied on mines and mine production to supply the area. Along with mines the automobile began mass production around this time and many people owned a car in the Picher area. Automobiles began a bigger police budget because of the traffic laws that were enforced at this time. The cars that were being driven gave way to more output and more of a police presence in the area. 1926 was very interesting because of the automobile and many a qualities that arose with it. Many crimes that were committed including bank robbery included a car as a getaway or storage. These correlations with articles in the *Picher King Jack* newspaper are supplemented by cars and crime. Every front page of the paper has something to do with a crime and/or a car incident. If the article included a car it may even appear to include both crime and car.<sup>24</sup> These incidents are documented throughout the entire newspaper from 1 January to 3 July 1926. Many other articles that are included that may affect

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<sup>21</sup> A.M. Gibson, “A Social History of the Tri-State District.” 183.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> A.M. Gibson, “A Social History of the Tri-State District.” 188.

<sup>24</sup> Automobiles rule the road. *The Picher King Jack*, January 1, 1926.

social history are the suicides that occur and Inine accidents.<sup>25</sup> Since those topics do not really relate this research to what is being researched, they 'will be briefly ntioned. Although there were lnany nline deaths. the research being cOlnpleted will define how social history was affected by prohibition.

A lot of the time, just like today alcohol was the ans\ver to a lot of problelns. This in conjunction with prohibition really put a strain on \whether or not it \vas a good idea to possess alcohol. The bootlegging that was done in this area at the time was not publicized. The reason for this was obvious as the individuals did llot want to attract attention and go to jail. The fines for these types of incidents where one individual ,vas caught on just possession, was five to ten donal'S a pint. Many of the times there were individuals that had twenty to thirty pints in a bust.

Prohibition ,vas enforced by a few individuals in the Picher area in 1926. Sheriff Sampson was a prominent figure in Picher. Alongside with Sheritf Sampson was Deputy Sheriff \V.L. Woolsey. Staffed under those two individuals was a different assortment of people like U.S. Jennings a comnandant. Several other conunalldants are filled out Salnpson's squad. Deputy Sheriff Woolsey was the arresting figure in many of ihe articles and in one of the biggest bust in the Tri-State area. The Keltner Mine \vas a very prolminent nline that undertook a huge renovation. The production the Keltner nline undertook in the two year prior to 1926 was almost zero. The individual that overtook and leased out the Keltner Mine was Fred Childress. Childress was a huge conunodity in the Tri-State area. Childress was a profitable lnan and an honest one people thought. On 17 January 1926 the Keltner Mine \vas then knO\V to be the Keltner Distillery. The distillery was known as the biggest in the -world. The networking and \vide spread news dO\vilgraded that notion, but 'was still a huge bust. Woolsey was the arresting figure. He arrested the Childress bros including Fred \who just bought out the lease to the Keltner

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Mine several days before. The distillery was worth thousands of dollars according to Woolsey. The other arresting individuals included prohibition officers who were I.T.S. Marshalls. J.H. Vickery and Ben Butler the two I.T.S. Marshalls involved with arrest eventually allowed the Childress Bros. to establish then made the arrest. The agents made some statements "It's the way the government deals with such stuff."<sup>26</sup> "We won't forget about this section of the country."<sup>27</sup> Along with those comments, the two Marshalls would admit that the Keltner Mine was the "World's greatest moonshine plant." These comments followed by "The Distiller was a pro."<sup>28</sup> This comment was referring to Fred Childress, who took the main blame. The losses were annotated to worth in the twenty five thousand dollar range, along with jail sentencing and fines.<sup>29</sup> This bust proved to be right, but had many other effects on the community. The prohibition agents were in Picher, but were undercover. This event opened the eyes of the community, but did not stop alcohol possession or consumption in the area. The losses to the mine also seem sufficient enough to stop that type of activity. Along with the twenty five thousand dollars in supplies lost. The Childress brothers were out of one hundred and fifty three thousand dollars that took to buy the mine. The fines that were handed out, along with the jail sentences, which ranged from a few years to ten years, seemed to be harsh enough to affect anyone thinking about creating a distillery. The police presence also increased as Sheriff Sampson hired two new constables to his squad.

The prohibition period was very prominent in the Tri-State area. There were many problems that arose when this amendment came into effect. Alcohol was the reason for many of

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<sup>26</sup> Keltner Mine Busted, *Picher King Jack*, January 7, 1926.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

- the crimes that were committed at that time. Whether it was theft, or a bigger crime, things did not happen without alcohol involved, a lot of the time. The prohibition period had some contributing factors on why crime rose. The automobile was used on a grander scale. The technology pushed East to West and by the mid 20s the automobile was used in the Tri-State more and more. Technology, social, and economic history played a big part on how crime and how much crime was committed in the mid 1920s, in the Tri-State area.

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