

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Theory and Practice: HIST430

History

Fall 12-13-2010

"Looking as Wise as a Tree Full of Owls": The Tri-State Mining District's Criminal Ring Disrupts Growth, Efficiency, and Stability of Society in 1918

Sylvia Rusk

Pittsburg State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/hist>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rusk, Sylvia, "'Looking as Wise as a Tree Full of Owls': The Tri-State Mining District's Criminal Ring Disrupts Growth, Efficiency, and Stability of Society in 1918" (2010). *Theory and Practice: HIST430*. 31. <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/hist/31>

This Undergraduate Research is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theory and Practice: HIST430 by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@pittstate.edu.

“Looking as Wise as a Tree Full of Owls”:
The Tri-State Mining District’s Criminal Ring Disrupts Growth, Efficiency, and
Stability of Society in 1918

Sylvia Rusk
HIST 430- Theory and Practice
December 13, 2010

During the year 1918, the criminal ring of the Tri-State mining district was at an all time high. Criminals like Dan Isley, Cedar Red, Harold Pickett, Jimmie Gardner, and the corrupt deputy Sheriff George Gibson terrorized the citizens of Picher, Oklahoma and the surrounding mining towns. These men were solely responsible for bringing and allowing a drug peddling circuit, prostitution, and bootlegging of illegal whiskey and liquor. During the criminal trusts height, the local newspapers of J.J. Shepherd displayed the truths of the illegal actions. These local publications gave the other side of the stories that the corrupt sheriff and local court judges tried to hide. The outlaws ran the local mining towns on fear, because of this fear the people never rallied against the criminals. Even with local publications exposing the truth of the criminals, the corruption went too deep in the law enforcement and local courts. The criminal ring prevented the growth of citizens to develop a stronger civil government. In the towns it was a classic cowboy rebellion type town. It was common for the citizens who worked, lived or shopped in the Tri-State district to witness murder, riots and obvious thievery.

The Criminal ringsters were swindlers, hustlers, and just downright dirty scoundrels that harassed the mining towns of Ottawa County, Oklahoma in the early 1918's. Classic mining towns of Ottawa County had a ring of crooks to shake down the local shop owners for reasons such as "protection" or "insurance." We can learn the patterns of destruction from Picher, Oklahoma that led the quick rise to the top as the world's largest Lead and Zinc producing town to the destruction in the 1930's by researching the local newspapers and personal narratives from people who witnessed the tragedy first hand. In order for Picher, Oklahoma to become the number one producer in the world of Lead and Zinc in the early 1900's, the Tri-State Mining District had to develop an uncorrupt government and officers of the law.¹ The removal of the

¹ Growing Up in the Tri-State Mining District: a Collection of Newspaper articles located at the Baxter Springs Heritage center and Museum

criminal ring and drug peddlers would be carried out by honest elections, morally defined character, and the placement of “loyal to the badge” officials into their governmental positions in the courts and within the officers of the law. The community would have to pull strength in numbers from leading individual voices within the mining areas in order to obtain a large movement that would essentially, clean out the corruption within the law and the governmental courts. The dark blight on the reputation of the mining towns was the criminal ringsters of 1918. Cleaning out the corrupt officials and criminals who exploit and shake down the people of the Tri-State areas would allow a steady, healthy growth of a community along with its ability to generate honest commerce. Citizens would need to join together and act as one in opposition to the criminal ringsters in order to force them out of the mining district.

Drugs such as cocaine, heroin, morphine, and dope were highly obtainable in the Tri-State mining district in 1918. In order for growth and stability to become the foundation of the mining towns, the citizens would have to kick their heavy drug habits. Cocaine and heroin were staggeringly accessible in Picher, Oklahoma brought up from Tulsa Ringsters.² For example, the option of the drug abuser to pre-order daily drugs allowed the criminals and drug peddlers to organize daily drug runs and better generate revenue.³ This was an intense time during 1918, when territory and who ran the lands were constantly being fought over. The local government and criminal ringsters would try and run the Tulsa drug dealers out by having them arrested then jailed. The corrupt Sheriff Freeman would then confiscate the drugs and have the local criminals steal the evidence then sell it on the streets. For example, anyone could walk into a dark alley and for two dollars purchase a shot of morphine or cocaine to get high. The ability for the local

² Shepherd, J.J. The Rounder. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

³ *ibid.*

criminal ringsters to run the territory, they were selling the majority of products on the streets for abuser consumption, no matter the poison of choice. The cocaine addicts of the Tri-State mining district consisted of just about everyone; parents- including pregnant mothers, fathers, and young children to young adults. The availability of the cocaine and heroin shots for two dollars in the mining towns would be the same today as the availability to purchase any common household goods. The undercover agents of J.J. Shepherd provided sworn testimonies on the process of obtaining the two dollar shot from the local darkened alley, tavern, or gambling den. The drug runners worked for the locally known big time criminal ringers such as Dan Isley, Harold Pickett, Jimmie Gardner, and the Deputy Sheriff George Gibson, also known as “the Beast”. These men were also responsible for automobile larcenies, cocaine peddling, burglaries, gambling, prostitution, illegal dance halls and nearly any other criminal activity considered unlawfully profitable. The corrupt officers of the law in the mining towns of the Tri-state district allowed the criminals to be shielded from most, if not all legal repercussions for the illegal actions.⁴ Having a town led by corrupt local government and court officials that allowed drug abuse largely hindered the development of a respectable town.

The local corrupt sheriff, deputy sheriff, and court judges protected the local known drug runners, gamblers, bootleggers, and prostitute houses. For Picher to have the reputation of a respectable, efficient, and commerce generating town, the criminal ring controlling the area would have to be eradicated. This is the only way for Picher to grow healthy, honest, hard-working businesses. The deputy Sheriff George Gibson, also referred to as “the Beast”, was widely known to be a protector and apparent violator of his power to enforce the law. George Gibson was exemplified by the possibly sensationalized, local newspaper criticizing his actions

⁴ Shepherd, J.J. The Truth. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

by hauling young prostitutes in the back of his truck, at ten to twelve a load, to the Tar River, Oklahoma dance hall⁵. Deputy Sheriff Gibson, in full violation of his authority had J.J. Shepherd arrested and held at an unreasonable bond amount. Resulting in a five day long jail vacation because of the high bail amount, Shepherd went to court for charges of “slandering” against the Deputy. ⁶George Gibson was also well known for unlawful actions such as extortion, drug running, rape, prostitution, gambling, bootlegging, and protection of local criminals with manipulation of his authority. Placing local innocent men in jail for the illegal actions of the protected criminals of the trust established the well known reputation for the Tri-State mining district as a precarious town. Deputy Sheriff George Gibson would need to be removed from his position within the law before the mining district fully got rid of the criminal ringsters.

Dan Isley and Cedar Red had numerous been identified with other criminals such as A.W. Turner, Jimmie Gardner, corrupt Sheriff Edd Freeman and Judges Barry and Preston Davis. Dan Isley was a widely known and feared man in the mining towns of Picher and Tar River, Oklahoma in 1918. He had a reputation of starting riots on the main shopping street, bootlegging whiskey to dance halls, as well as owner of a gambling pool hall and old country house gambling den. Exposed in the local newspaper once for breaking one of his bootleggers out of jail, Isley attacked the local jail. Isley and an unknown assailant beat and kicked the deputy sheriff that was holding the Isley employee in jail, for over half a block before forcing him to release the employee. Criminals of these times were likely to get away with beating and attacking the honest people of the mining towns of 1918. Dan Isley was one character in the mining towns that delayed the healthy growth to develop into a respectable, stable, and civil

⁵ Shepherd, J.J. The Truth. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918

⁶ Shepherd, J.J. The Affidavit. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

town. Dan Isley ran around with a well established criminals and high boss of the illicit ringsters trust was a man named Cedar Red.

Good Ol' Cedar Red was a town harasser protected by his friend, Dan Isley, who had influence over many people in the Tri-State area. Cedar Red would terrorize local shop owners by threatening the owner to comply with the monthly payoffs or the likelihood that something many happen to his shop, like large amounts of damage, would increase dramatically. Threats to the owner from the scandalous ringsters would ideally be for some type of loosely defined protection, prevention of a brick going through the front window; the owners had no other choice but to pay. Criminals like Cedar Red were big time bootleggers during prohibition and making money off the local people's weaknesses such as drug and alcohol abuse. The deputy sheriff was once questioned why he didn't arrest Cedar Red and his only reply was "what good would it do?"⁷ Cedar Red also had an establishment that allowed gambling, illegal drinking, and prostitution. Priding himself on the fact his status was one of a professional criminal. Contrary to status, he was also called a drunken ignoramus.⁸

Other known corrupt local court judges who manipulated their lawful positions were Judge Barry Davis and Judge Preston Davis. These judges were known for protecting the criminals within the cocaine peddling circuit, bootlegging distribution, prostitution houses, and facilitated unlawful acts of convictions of the innocent. These men were responsible for inadequately upholding the oath of law and justice, crippling societal development. Judge Preston Davis, identified as a rapist in the affidavit of Alice Morris, identified in the statement as the judge that drunkenly forced her into sexual intercourse, committed these acts multiple times

⁷ Shepherd, J.J. The Watchman. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918

⁸ Shepherd, J.J. The Affidavit. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

in a period of two days. The judge, notified with the news that Alice was with child, and had lost the baby at birth, sent her only twenty-five dollars for her troubles. This man was a morally confused man. He sentenced the innocent to jail, raped the young women and ruined society's ability to develop mores. During a time of instability, corruption and prohibition criminals were a lifestyle choice and it was not seen as wrong.

The local court judge Berry Davis manipulated his position often by protecting the criminals in the trust. In return for his legal protection the criminals would go electioneering for him by influencing voters for the judge's reelection for a definite win. Judge Berry and Sheriff Freeman would work well together both criminally and professionally. By having the sheriff arrest the innocent men that physically looked like the criminals, the judge could convict the captured, claiming justice served. The evident actions of the so called law enforcers and the officers of justice were enough to be known for blackmailing, extortion, and perjury⁷. If these men had been upstanding men of the law, criminal trust would not have been able to organize.

Sheriff Freeman was a whiskey ring protector and good at bootlegging during the prohibition for profit.⁹ His actions of enforcing the law of prohibition upon bootleggers who lived outside of the Tri-State mining district ring then brought it into the Tri-State district. By obtaining their bootlegged alcohol as evidence, he would then sell it locally to the ringsters for pure profit. This routine made the sheriff notorious for receiving kick backs in order to make a profit in your business. Sheriff Freeman was in support of the whiskey ring with George Gibson, known whiskey bootlegger. With a sheriff as pitiful as Freeman, the Tri-State Mining District was unable to develop any healthy, legitimate commerce. The allocation of criminals in the district was very unlikely to even be expertly dealt with labeling Picher as a feudal society. Men were married, but nightly found in the dance halls abiding prostitution and gambling addictions.

⁹ Shepherd, J.J. The Truth. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918

Morals were disappearing and chaos ruled the streets. Also, with virtually no law reinforcement from the proper authorities allowed the men to become honest enterprising business men instead to become sure-thing gamblers, professional pimps and morphine peddlers¹⁰. Sheriff Freeman was bought off with large amounts of money he obtained by kick backs from allowing illegal actions to occur. With corruption in the election system, the sheriff was able to maintain his position, thanks solely to his friends in the criminal trust.

A.W. Turner, also known as “High Diver” was part of the criminal trust and at the same time the Assistant County Attorney for Ottawa County, Oklahoma. This county attorney could have received two paychecks, one from the state and the other from kick backs from the larceny, extortion, bootlegging and gambling. Turner would be the county attorney in cases where innocent men sentenced in place for the criminal who belonged in the criminal trust. As a whiskey ring associate, gambling house, and pool hall owner as well as county attorney, High Diver Turner was able to be involved with many aspects of the criminal ring and manipulator of the law. Turner was able to make a reputation in the criminal ring by establishing friendships with known criminals like Dan Isley, Cedar Red, Jimmie Gardner, and Sheriff Freeman. A.W. Turner had threatened to murder J.J. Shepherd for his assassination of his character from the editor in 1918. Though his words were harsh, threatening, or bribing A.W. Turner never followed through on his treats on J.J. Shepherd. Criminals like A.W. Turner were a part of the mining towns that required a disbanding in order for local governments to grow into respected and honest government enforcers and change the image of gambling dens and like establishments.

¹⁰ Shepherd, J.J. The Watchman. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

Jimmie “the Nibbler” Gardner was a greedy criminal with no moral code. The court or sheriff before raids, would call Jimmie at home and Jimmie would then call and warn the crooks of the raid in order for everything to be clean when the officers showed up. ¹¹Gardner was in close with the bribe takers, making collections and beating up the debtor for when payments were not made on time, receiving the other nickname as the “paymaster.” ¹²Having such power over a person in debt, Jimmie “the nibbler” was easily able to be involved in election rigging by influencing voters in favor of Sheriff Freeman. As well car steeling, whiskey bootlegging, and gambling dens, Jimmie was able to have many other links in the criminal ring. Keeping company with dance hall beauties in prostitution and friends like High Diver Turner, the county attorney, deputy Sheriff George Gibson and Sheriff Freeman quickly named Jimmie as one of the big four criminals of the Tri-State mining district.

The certainty of gambling houses and dance halls to be the source of disease outbreaks with the towns was revolting to humanity. Within the walls of these establishments the young girls of the town would lower themselves to such humiliation in order to make a profit and a minuscule profit with each client. “Painted Hags” or women of uncertain ages because of bad looks were known to train younger ladies possibly girls as young as twelve to fifteen in the schooling of prostitution and men. Without these establishments sickness, death, and poor living conditions could have been avoided because money made by the community would not have to be spent on morally questionable establishments such as dance halls and gambling dens. If the community were shunned of the dirtiness of drug addictions, corruption of government, and enforceability of the outlawed gambling house and dance halls then growth of a strong moral community could be established in the Tri-State mining district.

¹¹ Shepherd, J.J. The Watchman. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

¹² Shepherd, J.J. The Rounder. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

With the honest and righteous but defiant publications distributed to a community from a rebellious source, the individuals usually cannot hold the source as creditable. But, the publications of J.J. Shepherd were published during a time of literal censoring; people knew he was speaking obvious truths. In order for world success the local Tri-State mining towns would have to come together against the criminals, to establish clean and legitimate law enforcers along with judges, juries, and attorneys.¹³ When it is customary for a person to be on a walk to work and see mutilated human body parts disregarded in chat piles and never investigated or spoken of again, that is cause for change. With outspoken protest to the way things were, J.J. Shepherd, also known as the Rounder, for his publications that brought to light the dishonest actions of the government and criminal trust of the Tri-State Mining District. With colorful names of his publications, he was able to attract more readers, and by result he was able to move the community to object to the criminal trust as well as become more literate. The political ring of known corrupt positions would develop criminal charges against the editor. Still, tenacious and on a crusade for justice, Shepherd continued to publish papers against the criminal ringsters. The Rounder was able to sell his papers at five cents a copy and establish his reputation as a good guy and protector of justice. Offered a position as the head of the crooks for propaganda, he blatantly refused on principle foremost. Though, his life was threatened weekly, (with each new publication) the Rounder was able to remain alive. Once, with the threat of a mob of fifty one people armed with rifles and shot guns, the J.J. Shepherd was escape the threat because the mobsters abandoned their mission on the account of being followed. The editor was known for defending the innocent, arresting the murders and drug peddlers, replacing corrupt officers of the law, also in ending the unlawful act of prostitution.

¹³ Shepherd, J.J. The Watchman. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

The Rounder, J.J. Shepherd was able to employ young boys to sell and distribute the papers throughout the Tri-State Mining District areas. Frequently, the boys would be harassed by the surrounding criminals. By taking and destroying the publications, robbing the young boys, and then roughing them up would be normal protocol for the bullies. Never actually killing the messengers, but scaring them enough to prevent encouraged selling. The young boys were helpless, young, and innocent of any crime, but the criminals would continually harass and beat them. Distribution of the publications could encourage rebellion against the corruption, but if they were destroyed, then only town talk was education on the corruption.

In conclusion, the facts that the criminal ringsters such as Dan Isley, Cedar Red, Sheriff Edd Freeman, deputy Sheriff Geroge Gibson and the corrupt local court judges Berry Davis and Preston Davis in the Tri-State district area were hindering the development of a civil society in 1918. The criminals that ran the town harassed the local shop owners and citizens of the mining towns in Ottawa County. Righteous soldiers such as J.J. Shepherd and his agents were dedicated to exposing the criminals for their illegal acts and making the publications that did so available to the citizens of the Tri-State District. The Tri-State Mining District heavily corrupted in the justice department resulting in the local criminal ring running out of control. In order for Picher, Oklahoma to become the number one producer in the world of Lead and Zinc in the early 1900's, the Tri-State Mining District had to develop an uncorrupted government and officers of the law. By electing honest and honorable people into the positions, they could have become developmentally stable. They needed people whom would be loyal to the oath sworn to uphold the law within the officers of the law and judicial positions. The community would pull strength in numbers from individual voices rising within the mining areas in order to require the large movement that would essentially, clean out the corruption with the law and in the governmental

courts. Cleaning out the corruption and criminals who exploit and shake down the people of the Tri-State areas would allow steady, healthy growth of a community along with its ability to generate commerce. Removing the criminal band and drug peddlers would allow the Tri-State District to grow into a powerful and proficient society. By rapidly increasing the public's awareness of criminal activity as well as what individuals were responsible, society could develop a moral conscience. Creating the illusion of the society that would be described as "looking as wise as a tree full of Owls."¹⁴

¹⁴ Shepherd, J.J. The Truth. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Baxter Springs Heritage Center and Museum. Growing Up in the Tri-State Mining District: A Collection of Newspaper Articles. Baxter Springs, Kansas.

Shepherd, J.J. The Affidavit. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Anti-Frame Up. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Anti-Hun. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Anti-Jobber. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Exposer. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918

--- The Gaff. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Jinx. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Ouster. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918

--- The Rounder. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Square Deal. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Truth. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

--- The Watchman. Tar River, Oklahoma. 1918.

Secondary Sources

Alan Derickson, "On the Dump Heap: Employee Medical Screening in the Tri-State Zinc-Lead Industry, 1924-1932." *The Business History Review* 62. No.4 (1988) 656-677.

[This text discusses the medical screening tests and clinic of Picher, Oklahoma.]

Gibson, Arrell Morgan Dr. "*Wilderness Bonanza: the Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*. Norman, OK. University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

[This article discusses the Tri-State district area as a Wilderness Bonanza. The Wild West mixed with city corruption.]

--- "A Social History of the Tri-State District." *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 2 (1956) 182-195

[This article discusses the social history of the miners in the Tri-State district.]

--- "Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma." *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34, no.2 (1956) 193-202

[This article discusses the life of miners and the early mining camps conditions in Northeastern Oklahoma.]

Markowitz, Gerald and Rosner, David. "The Street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950." *The Journal of American History* 77 no.2 (September 1990) 525-52.

[This article discusses the abundant spreading disease of Silicosis in the Tri-State Region, caused by the dust inhalation of the miners.]