

A Different Time

by Kevin Gordon

Sgt John Fulton serves as the administrative assistant to St. Clair County Sheriff Mearl Justus in Belleville, IL. In the fall of 2007, the Sgt. learned, almost by accident, that the agency had a 45 Thompson machine gun donated to the department in 1927. He learned the agency still possessed that weapon after 82 years! The weapon was located in the vault, was serviced and taken to the range, several times.

According to the 1927 newspaper account, the weapon was purchased by the Illinois Banker's Association to ensure officers were "adequately protected in the event of a bank robbery". It was presented to Sheriff Charles Ahrens along with 500 rounds of ammunition and 2 magazines, a 50 round and a 20 round. But it made me wonder, what was going on that the Sheriff's Department needed a Thompson, so I did some checking and looked at the articles just a couple days before and a couple days after the donation, to get a feel of the time.

Both Individuals and state governments were taking the country "down the path to anarchy" due to their disregard of the 18th amendment, according to William McAdoo, former Secretary of the Treasury and a candidate for the democratic nomination for President. He blamed the widespread lawlessness on just one thing, alcohol.

Another alcohol article referred to those for and against as the "wets" and the "drys". Although Prohibition was about 7 years old with 6 to go, Congress was already starting to sway. The Treasury Department, tasked with enforcement of the Volstead Act, declared under cover dry agents were necessary to effectively enforce the laws. Knowing that, Congress rejected appropriations for the under cover officers.

Gangs seemed to be everywhere; the Shelton Gang, the Birger Gang, Capone's gang. The "Chicago Gangsters" believed some E. St. Louis gunman robbed two Chicago gambling houses of \$20,000. During the Chicago robberies "the out of town gunmen were armed with a machine gun, sawed off shotguns and automatic pistols. They worked with clock like precision, securing all the money in the till and robbing frequenters of the establishments. Since the Chicago Gangsters were "unable to appeal to police" for help they decided to take care of it on their own and sent gunman to E. St. Louis to "privately settle the difficulty". It leaves the reader wondering what the outcome was.

The Shelton Brothers, Carl, Earl and Bernard, called the "gang leaders of Southern Illinois" a title the Birger Gang would have disputed, were on trial on charges involving a robbery of the Collinsville Post Office. Due to the gang friction the trial was moved to Quincy where "no person not actually connected in an official capacity with the trial will be admitted and the court room and building will swarm with deputy marshals ready to prevent any demonstrations, which, rumor has it, had been planned by the Birgers, rival of the Sheltons". A later report said there were twelve US Marshals, eight Postal Inspectors and Special Detectives from St. Louis assigned to trial security.

Much like today, the paper was filled with articles of crimes and violence. A "bandit" holdup man lost a "battle to death" with an officer in a street fight when the officer "downed him with one shot". Bodies found in unusual places, a woman forced to flee from a cruel mate, a man who threatened to kill his wife and neighbors with a razor and a hatchet, a "thug" killed when resisting arrest, a wife shot by her husband, a husband shot by his wife, unclaimed body parts located. One article sounded strangely like today with a headline "Bullets instead of ballots rule Mexico". But former Congressman Reilly, speaking at the Belleville Knights of Columbus, blamed the situation not on drugs as today, but the attempts to form a "Bolshevistic government".

One headline was eye catching, "Imported gunman, bombs aid

gangs in South Illinois". It continued that battles by New York and Chicago gangsters have caused the town of Herrin to be "known the world over for its violence and its astonishing record of sudden death". But apparently things were getting better as "only six persons were killed in the latest outbreak at Herrin". It continued, "A person unfamiliar with Southern Illinois might get the impression that this section of a rich and prosperous state is made up entirely of bootleggers and gangsters who spend their time sniping at each other. But this is not the case. The gunmen and the gangsters make up a might small percentage of the population. The farmers are all law abiding and so are the coal miners *except in time of strikes.*" You can't make this stuff up!

Not every article was about crime. "What is taken as an indication that corn grown in St. Clair County is in a good healthy condition was seen here Saturday when it was announced that corn entered in the exhibit at the Farmers' Week Conference by Jacob Baer of Summerfield had been awarded 7th place.

As a balance, that article was directly above one titled "Scarface Al is driven from old haunts in Cicero". The article claimed the "New Chief of Cook County highway police forced the gang leader to get out and stay out." Capone was described as the "supreme dictator over vice, booze and gambling in Cicero" and "one of the most feared gang leaders in the history of Chicago". Chief Hughes was quoted, "I have driven Capone out of Cicero and he'll stay out as long as I am in charge of the county police". Within a year, Hughes resigned and Capone's "empire" was considered worth sixty-two million and was bringing in over \$100,000 a week. You decide who won that one.



As in the more recent past, gambling machines were targeted by law enforcement. The owner of a soft drink shop was charged with operating an illegal slot machine. This one I have to quote in its entirety. "A slot machine which delivers varying amounts of candy-coated chewing gum balls when the player of the device inserts a one-cent coin was seized in the wholesale slot machine raids made by Deputy Sheriffs under the direction of Sheriff Ahrens (yes the same Sheriff who accepted the machine gun).

There was some doubt as to the illegality of the machine since it does not pay coins so the sheriff withheld the information of the seizure of the device until the matter was reviewed by State's Attorney Lindauer. He declared in his opinion that the machine is illegal *because the amount of gum balls vary with each play.*" Yes, they actually ruled a gumball machine was illegal. I'll never pass one again without thinking about that!

Just four days after the delivery of the machine gun there was a jail break from the county jail. Eight prisoners, in jail for charges from horse theft to payroll and bank robbery, escaped in 15 minutes with "uncanny silence, speed and stealth". They used a crude wire hook from a coat hanger to release the lock on the cells, used a hacksaw to saw a window bar, wedged through a small six inch space, slid down the wall on rope cut from a dumb waiter, scaled a wall and disappeared into the darkness. And all this in only 15 minutes!

As it was certainly a different era, the county officers notified the police in all the surrounding cities and towns within a radius of more than a hundred miles and asked them "to arrest all strangers in the city as suspects". During the man hunt, squads of 2 officers in cars were sent to the "various highways and railroads leading out of the city" in an attempt to recapture the escapees and "Every available weapon, including the new *Thompson machine gun* in the Sheriff's forces' artillery was pressed into service". Thanks Illinois Banker's Association!

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About the author: Kevin Gordon retired as Chief of Police after 25 years in LE. He is both a national and regional officer with the International Police Association.

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