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High Heeled Bootleggers:
The Role of Crawford and Cherokee County Women during Prohibition Kansas

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Kansas has a long history in fighting for what they want. In the 1850s, prohibition became the topic of concern. Although the federal prohibition mandate in the United States did not begin until 1919 when the 18th amendment was ratified in Congress and signed off by President Harry S. Truman, it began in Kansas in 1880. The count was narrow, but Kansas was passed as a dry state.¹ Because it was not a federal law, people habitually broke it or found ways around it. Up until the prohibition law was federally passed, saloons filled the towns, especially in Crawford and Cherokee County. Not everyone felt as though this law was needed and felt it was unnecessary. Some of those people were the immigrant coal miners that came to that area.

Without research, the topic of a woman's role in prohibition Kansas makes people tend to think that all women were like Carrie A. Nation. While there were women who participated in trying to put a stop to drinking, many more were not. Instead, they involved themselves in the illegal activities of making, holding and distributing of alcohol in prohibition Kansas. Their role was important because without it the bootlegging industry would not have thrived as it did during prohibition Kansas.

Immigration played an important role in the history of Southeast Kansas. This region has been called the "Little Balkans" due to its diverse population of immigrants from the Balkans region in Europe.² When the coal mines opened in the Tri-State area there was a need for miners, so the coal companies reached out overseas and brought in workers. When the workers arrived in Crawford or Cherokee County they would establish a residence and would then send

¹Patrick G. O'Brien and Kenneth J. Peak, *Kansas Bootleggers* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1991), 1-2.

²William E. Powell, "European Settlement in the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Summer, 1975): 157.

for their families. With the arrival of their family, their culture came as well.³ The women that came to Crawford or Cherokee County to begin their new lives could not prepare themselves for life they were going to end up living.

The life of a coal miner's wife is not one that could easily be glamorized. However, living in a mining camp community was the life that thousands of immigrant women lived.⁴ They did the cooking, cleaning, washing, child rearing, farming and so much more; all trying to make sure their families were taken care of. Thus, they developed their own "concept of femininity."⁵ Still, women heavily depended on their husbands to provide the money needed for them and their families they raised in Crawford and Cherokee County.

Immigrant women were no strangers to hardships. Powell points out that "The European-born left a harsh social environment on the continent and migrated to the coal field where the social environment was also one of frequent physical hardships and economic deprivation."⁶ There were many problems revolving around economics in the mining communities in Crawford and Cherokee County. The coal companies ran the communities. They owned the property in which the workers and their families lived on and controlled the miners by paying them in a way so that they could only spend money at the company stores.⁷ Miners were already paid a low

³Powell, "Sequent Occupance," 116-17.

⁴ Powell, *European Settlement*, 156. Powell points out "mining communities were drab and depressing agglomerations of houses, shacks, retail stores, company stores, saloons...."

⁵Ann Schofield, "An "Army of Amazons": The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-22," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (Winter, 1985): 687.

⁶Powell, "European Settlement," 159.

⁷*Ibid.*, 160-61.

wages and many times items at the company stores were overpriced.⁸ The coal mining families were falling into a deep debt and with the insecurity of the mining jobs.

Coal mining was a job that was full of unpredictability. For immigrants, unpredictability was a scary thing that they faced on a daily bases, but bootlegging was a form of security. There were many times that the mines had to shut down because of explosions, falling rocks, or strikes.⁹ Each time these happened miners found themselves out of work and unable to provide for their families. Bootlegging was an option that unemployed and under educated immigrant coal miners and their families saw as a safety net.

When families had established themselves in communities, some of the first buildings to pop up were saloons and dance halls. Polka dances were usually held every Saturday night at the local dance hall.¹⁰ Bringing together the immigrants for a dance, and in many cases, a drink helped them form bonds with one another so that they did not feel lonely in America. Of course, along with the buildings, came the opportunity to break the prohibition law and for bootlegger women, make some money.¹¹

Saloons continued to openly run their businesses in both Crawford and Cherokee County up until the federal law against prohibition.¹² Saloons were like a slap in the face to those working toward a dry Kansas. After 4 years of living under the prohibition laws, “313 out of 708

⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159. There was an extremely bad explosion in Frontenac in 1888. 47 miners were killed and many others were injured. In the 1920's there were large amounts of strikes, leading to the Army of Amazons march.

¹⁰ Powell, “European Settlement,” 162. The price of Deep Shaft varied from time to time. Some report it being as low as \$2 a gallon, but the average price was around \$5 to \$8 a gallon.

¹¹ Peak and O'Brien, 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

saloons” were still open throughout Kansas.¹³ Cherokee and Crawford County had a harder time in closing down saloons because of the coal miner’s camp communities in which they were located within.¹⁴

There is a town called Corona that is located in Cherokee County Kansas. Corona was one of the most well known places to buy Deep Shaft, along with Roseland and Frontenac. This town was known as the type of town that openly admitted to the production of liquor and did not try to hide the fact that anyone could buy it there.¹⁵ Because this town did not care if they were following the law, they had no problem also having a dance hall conveniently located near a storage center of Deep Shaft.

That dance hall was called Gay Parita. The Gay Parita was created for immigrants that came to Cherokee County that were maintaining the familiarity of home. This dance hall was right across the street from an old abandoned warehouse that was used to house liquor for bootleggers.¹⁶ The people who attended the dances simply had to make a pit stop along their way to the weekly dance to get their liquor.

Another place to dance and drink was called Rosie’s. Rosie’s, located in Pittsburg, was known as a nightspot that held dances and served liquor to its customers.¹⁷ Other places like Rosie also existed. These businesses had women servers who served their customers the alcoholic beverages, and if an undercover law enforcer caught those servers, they would be the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶ Peak and O’Brien, 82. In this warehouse, the bootleggers stored the infamous Deep Shaft whiskey that was notorious in both Crawford and Cherokee County.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114. The alcohol the owners served was usually made near the premises.

ones in jail.¹⁸ The *Pittsburg Daily Headlight* spoke about Bridget McLaughlin, who spent time in jail for serving “strong drink to the thirsty.”¹⁹ The corrupt police officials allowed places and people to continue to serve alcohol. It is because of the lack of law that women violated the prohibition law just as frequently as males did. Moreover, they did so whether it was by serving alcohol in dance halls, making it at their homes, or distributing it to others for a profit.

Along with building drinking spots, immigrant families also brought the tradition of making and drinking alcoholic beverages. Majority of the immigrants came from an area known as the Balkans.²⁰ They were used to having to grow their own food and make their own drinks. When they arrived in the mining communities many families immediately began planting gardens.²¹ Italians living in Crawford and Cherokee County were well known for the wine they produced. Along with making wine, vinegar and raisins were also made. Many Italian women had charges brought up against them for possessing vinegar and raisins.²² Some might find it odd that having possession of raisins was grounds on being arrest, but where there were raisins, there were grapes, and where there were grapes, there was most certainly wine.

Women during this time usually did all of the cooking and canning, so it can be assumed that they were also involved in the majority of making wine or running stills in their homes while their husbands were at work. Peak and O’Brien point out that usually did not run the stills unless

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 23. This woman ended up being convicted and put into jail after serving to an officer.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 22.

²⁰ Powell, “European Settlement,” 153-54. The Balkans refers to the lower eastern countries of Europe. Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia are a few of the countries that comprise the Balkans region.

²¹Powell, “Sequence Occupancy,” 117-18. Planting gardens in communities also helped the underpaid miners supplement their incomes and feed the hungry people of the area.

²²Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925. Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

they were in the house.²³ The gender lines were very well defined during this time. Some women bootleggers were known because they looked, acted, and sometimes even impersonated men.²⁴ However, for the majority of the women during this time they were not the ones that go off to work every day as their husbands did. That time at home is what gave them the opportunity to prepare the merchandise and to sell it.

Wine was not the only type of alcohol being produced to sell by women bootleggers. A type of whiskey for with southeast Kansas is famous for was brewed in abandoned deep shaft mines, giving it the name Deep Shaft Whiskey. Deep Shaft was known for being distributed throughout the country and even in Canada.²⁵ Deep Shaft, like all alcohol, was dangerous to make because it had to be done in a still. Stills are very unpredictable and could blow up at any time. Some people may wonder why bootleggers would risk their lives for alcohol, but it was really the alcohol that was allowing them to live a life that was a little less poverty stricken than what mining could provide.²⁶

The poor women of the mining communities in Crawford County had to worry about putting food on table, taking care of the children, or in some cases boarders that they had to bring in for extra money if their husbands died in the mines, or from mining conditions. Many of those women had immigrated to America and then to Crawford County in Kansas, following their husbands who were hired by coal companies. The men who came overseas to work in Kansas

²³ Peak and O'Brien, 56. The stills in which the alcohol was brewed in the old mines was very heavy equipment. Many times the machine had to be packed up and moved to other abandoned mine. There was also a danger that the still could combust, making keeping it in the home a liability and a threat to the well-being of the family.

²⁴“Dallas Woman Imposters Man,” Bootlegging Vertical Files, Kansas Collection. Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS

²⁵Peak and O'Brien, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

had worked in the mines over in Europe and were desperately needed when coal was discovered in the Tri-State area. Whenever the miners were on strike, it was up to the women to pick up the slack caused from the lack of working by their husbands, which in turn led to the “Army of Amazons” march.²⁷

Women of this time were not prone to stand up for themselves by striking and for many the march came as quite the shock. The women were tired of the “protracted strike and...dwindling family incomes” and decided to take a stand.²⁸ When the Army of Amazons march occurred, reports and pictures filled not only the local papers, but also front-page news in the *New York Times*.²⁹ Many people that read about the “army” did not understand that this was a non-violent expression of their rights. The newspaper journalists were more interested in selling papers by expanding the story to make it seem as though the immigrants were bad people.³⁰ The strike brought up a “red scare” in the United States because the majority of the women were immigrants, but many people did not take the time to see what the root of the problem was.³¹ That feeling of insecurity was creeping up into the lives of the miner’s wives thanks to a strike that had occurred the year before.³² They felt vulnerable at this time because

²⁷Schofield, 694.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 686.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 694. Schofield points out on page 686 that the “army” never attacked. 49 of the women were still charged with unlawful assembly, assault and disturbing the peace.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 694-95.

³¹*Ibid.*, 694.

³² *Ibid.*, 687-88. After WWI John L. Lewis, leader of the United Mine Workers of America and Alex Howat, the president of Kansas District 14 had multiple face-offs. In September 1921, Howat led Kansas miners on a strike, and after he defied an agreement made stating that the miners would not strike until a joint committee resolved the issue, Lewis struck back. Lewis gave Howat’s job to another man and told surrounding states with openings in their mines to not hire out of work Kansas miners. The women took it into their own hands to handle the matter.

new machines were phasing out their husbands and the need for miners was on the decline.³³ Their banning together was something that they would have done back home in their own countries to feel secure. This act was one that brought a sense of familiarity to the women and families, which during this time felt as though it was slipping away.

Women who were sent to jail during this time had a lot to lose. They were the ones that were to look after the children and taking care of the home while their husbands were at work or if they were killed. Looking through Crawford County court dockets, page after page is filled with names of women who were arrested for violation of prohibition law, or better known as VPL.³⁴ These women came from all different nationality backgrounds and were found with everything from wine, whiskey, mash, and choc.³⁵ Many of them pleaded guilty and faced their consequences, while some were let go due to insufficient evidence. One woman that appeared over and over again was a woman named Mary Constantino.³⁶

Mary Constantino was born in 1891 and had immigrated to America in 1910 on the ship Province.³⁷ Along with her with her husband, Frank, they settled in Frontenac Kansas. Her husband worked in the coal mines and Mary stayed at home to raise her daughter, Rose. To help her husband provide a home and even allow for her daughter to take voice lessons and travel

³³Powell, "Sequent Occupance," 115.

³⁴ Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925.

³⁵ Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925. Choc is also spelled Chalk. In the court dockets, however it is spelled Choc.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷ Crawford County (KS) Naturalization Records, Vol. 1, A-F. Franklin Miners Hall Museum, Franklin, KS.

back and forth to Europe she did what many women did and participated in the bootlegging industry.³⁸

Mary Constantino's life was one of interest because her name kept coming up time and time again in the Pittsburg criminal dockets. Research has shown that this woman was well known in the Frontenac community. The *Pittsburg Daily Headlight* said that she was "well known in the community as 'Pretty Mary.'"³⁹ She made the front page news by getting caught for her distribution, selling, and making of wine and other illegal alcoholic beverages.

Over 30 other women in 1925 alone were arrested for the violation of prohibition law. In the court dockets the name or names of the violators were listed, along with what they found during the search of their homes. There were times when the charges that were brought upon the woman were also put on her husband.⁴⁰ Many men and women, whether they were father and daughter, or husband and wife, were teams that worked together to make sure that they were able to stay out of trouble.

There was an article written about a 16 year old girl named Mary and her father being arrested for the possession and intent to sale of alcohol. Mary was in charge of dropping off a load of liquor to customers, after her father had collected the money and made sure no law enforcers were involved in the deal.⁴¹ Mary Constantino and her husband, Frank were also a

³⁸"Rose Constantino is Dead." *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*. Pittsburg, KS. 27 May 1937. Mary's daughter, Rose, a well-known member of the Frontenac community, died from a stomach illness in her early 20's. By reading the obituary, a person can assume that the bootlegging business helped support this family quite comfortably.

³⁹"Pretty Mary" is Under Arrest. *Pittsburg Daily Headlight*. Pittsburg, KS. 10 Jan 1921.

⁴⁰ Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925.

⁴¹"Mary's Little Wagon Wasn't Speedy Enough", Bootlegging Vertical Files, Kansas Collection. The sheriff caught Mary and her father. He noted her suspicious behavior, chased her down, and ended up finding a wagon full of liquor.

team along with Jack and Grace Dellabelta, Mr. and Mrs. Adolph Delonay, Amelio Aldrighetti and wife, and so many more.⁴² However, like so many women of this time, it was more important that her husband out of jail so he could work in the mines, so she took the blame and faced the consequences.

Not all women were found guilty. In many cases women were arrest and charged with violation of the prohibitory law, but when a search of their homes was conducted, many times nothing was found, making the state drop the charges.⁴³ Some women such as: Mary Hays, Daisy Bossetti, and Katie Resteva were accused of violating the law, but after warranted and searched, nothing was found.⁴⁴ It can be speculated that the women really were guilty, but the news of their arrest spread quickly through the small towns and other people entered the house before the police and were able to hide the evidence before it could be found.

If evidence was found after a search warrant had been issued, the sheriff would take it upon himself to confiscate and hold the evidence. In the documents that were filled out for all arrests and warrants, the sheriff said whether or not they found any evidence found at the homes of the accused.⁴⁵ If there were items that were against the law found, they were listed and said to be held at the home of the sheriff. Many law enforcers where known for being bribed by either money, or alcohol.⁴⁶ The reports made by the cops could have been inaccurate at the time; there

⁴²Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Crawford County (KS) District Court, Girard. Record of Information and Indictment: Under Prohibitory Law, Vol. D, April 1909-1926. Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS; Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925.

⁴⁶ Peak and O'Brien, 23. The convicted Frontenac woman was surfaced the corruption occurring. The *Girard Press* asked if the woman serving the beer was more of a criminal than the official that accepted a bribe.

is a chance that there was more alcohol than reported, but they kept some for their own enjoyment.

Women that were found guilty in the violation of the Federal Prohibitory Law appeared to have had a much more serious consequence than a man did. The men that were arrested for the violation of prohibition law were usually put into jail for the act, bonded out, and then had a court appearance where they paid their fine and went on with their lives. Women were also taken to jail, could be bonded out, and had a court appearance, but they did not just receive a fine. Women of this time received a fine, anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000 and then they were sent to the Kansas Industrial Farm for Women.⁴⁷

The Kansas Industrial Farm for Women is located in Lansing, Kansas. It was first opened to be a branch of the men's prison in 1916, but in 1917 was changed to house women who had committed petty crimes against the state.⁴⁸ The women that were sent here had sentencing's that could last anywhere from 6 months to a year.⁴⁹ Being away from their families and not being able to help support them was a real problem.⁵⁰

The woman's role in prohibition Kansas in the Crawford and Cherokee County area is one that many do not know about. Women were not only expected to take care of the home and the family, but they were also expected to help with a second form of income. For some women

⁴⁷Crawford County (KS) District Court, Girard. Record of Information and Indictment: Under Prohibitory Law, Vol. D, April 1909-1926. Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS; Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925.

⁴⁸ *Records of the Kansas State Industrial Farm for Women*. Kansas Historical Society, <http://www.kshs.org/archives/214395> (accessed November 14, 2012).

⁴⁹Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket, Vol. B & J, 1925.

⁵⁰ *LFC:History*, Kansas Department of Corrections, <http://www.dc.state.ks.us/facilities/lcf/history> (accessed November 14, 2012). Reports show that workers were treated inhumanly during their sentencing here. The women were not granted any luxury goods and worked under strict watch.

they only way to make money was to bootleg. The woman's role was critical to the bootlegging industry and without it, it would not have thrived in Crawford and Cherokee County. Women actively participated in the illegal activities of making, holding, selling, and distributing of alcoholic beverages after it became illegal in Kansas.⁵¹ Even after the federal prohibition mandate came into effect, they did not and would not stop. They would rather go to jail and pay a fee than to wash their hands of the evil alcohol had associated with it. Women themselves became law breakers so that they could hold on to their way of life; so that they could continue to bring in a second paycheck in case their husbands were not in work because of strikes, or their husbands met an untimely death. They knew that with bootlegging as a job they would be able to take care of themselves and their families.⁵²

Many of the immigrant women were involved with alcohol not to break the law, but because it was part of the culture that they had left behind when they moved from their homelands in Europe. The immigrant woman's role in the bootlegging industry was helped shape the communities in which they lived. Contrary to popular believe, women were not innocent bystanders. They were active in a business they saw was important to people, helped it grow and succeed, and never gave up the fight for alcohol, even if it was illegal.

⁵¹ Pittsburg (KS) City Court, Criminal Docket. Vol. B & J, 1925.

⁵²Peak and O'Brien, 57.

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Schofield, Ann. "An "Army of Amazon's": The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-22." *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (Winter, 1985): 686-701.

This article talks about the women's roles in the mining communities of Cherokee and Crawford County. It focuses on the strikes and strives women made.

Winters, Carolyn Loss, and Kaye Lynn Webb. *Raisin Pie in a Miner's Bucket: And Other Stories and Recipes from Conversations in Southeast Kansas*. Berkley California: Edition One Books, 2010.

This book contains recipes from immigrant families that came to Cherokee and Crawford County to work in the mines. The book also contains personal stories about life in the area.