

2018

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Recommended Citation

D'Ambrose, Tyler (2018) "Morality in an Era of Lawlessness: How the KKK and Organized Crime Attempted to Instill their Visions of America during the Prohibition Era," *Legacy*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

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Tyler D'Ambrose

Morality in an Era of Lawlessness: How the KKK and Organized Crime Attempted to Instill their Visions of America during the Prohibition Era

Introduction

“Today I am entirely disillusioned in regard to the alleged teaching of the great American organization,” said the anonymous biographer of a book heralding Sheriff S. Glenn Young for his service in several southern Illinois counties.¹ He continued, “I am fully persuaded that the principles espoused by the Klan are of the highest, and that conditions which have developed in our American life have demanded just such an organization of red blooded men to bring about those dramatic changes which must be effected.”² Sheriff Young was undoubtedly a controversial figure. While he was celebrated for his ability to quick-draw on vigilantes and lock away criminals, Young did so largely on behalf of the Klu Klux Klan. The conflicting views surrounding Sheriff Young are echoed in this paper, as it explores what it is that truly defines someone as a moral person.

For many Americans, the Progressive Era embodied a nationwide effort to move towards a moral society in the wake of the infamous Gilded Age. Morality, an ambiguous concept, is bound to offer different interpretations of its meaning. To many Progressive reformers, morality in American society meant the weeding out of corruption and the move towards wider civic engagement in the political process. But to the more ideologically-driven reformers like the KKK, morality in America meant the advancement of white Protestantism and the elimination of alcohol from the country. And to others such as the Shelton and Birger gangs that dominated

¹ Unknown, *Life and Exploits of S. Glenn Young* (Herrin, Illinois: 1927), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

bootlegging in Southern Illinois during Prohibition, the concept of morality was used to mask violent activities.

This paper examines how morality factored into the major events that transpired in Southern Illinois during the Prohibition Era. More specifically, it looks at how notions of morality guided these events. Through the use of local newspaper articles, biographies, and historical commentaries, this paper explores the multiple discourses of morality that were prevalent during this time, specifically in regards to the notion of honorable masculinity. It finds that despite the efforts of moral reformers, actions taken under the guise of morality during the Prohibition Era in Southern Illinois were in fact morally questionable. Rather, the non-hegemonic nature of morality was taken advantage of by organized crime, the KKK, and law enforcement so that each group could further their own ambitions. Additionally, this paper analyzes the personal dynamics and characteristics of the actors involved, and formulates alternative historical explanations of the events described in light of these complexities.

Literature Review: Organized Crime in the Progressive Era

The historiography of organized crime has its roots in the field of sociology.³ Before popular culture attempted to make sense of the world of organized crime through movies and literature, scholars devoted their efforts into understanding how criminal organizations functioned. In the 1920s, during the age of Prohibition, there was not a solid body of scholarly work in place that examined organized crime. During this time a great deal of lore surrounded the gangs and violent criminals who thrived in an illicit environment. Scholars responded to this

³ Frederic Milton Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press).

cultural intrigue by examining the structure, functioning, and organization of organized criminal organizations (OCOs).

Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* was not only one of the first works to examine the sociological aspects of the American gang, but also a landmark study in the historiography of organized crime.⁴ In his study he argues that gangs "develop in definite and predictable ways" predetermined by "characteristic internal processes and mechanisms."⁵ Thrasher reached the conclusion that gangs could be easily studied because they operated on identifiable natural processes. In his study, *Theft of the Nation: The Structure and Operations of Organized Crime in America*, Donald Ray Cressey outlines a more structured methodology to study organized crime. Cressey showed that since the early 1900s, organized criminal organizations often linked to powerful government interests reshaped the logic of their operations by functioning as closed enterprises.⁶ More recent scholars such as Alan Block have challenged much of what we know about organized crime, and how we study the subject. In his study, *History and the Study of Organized Crime*, Block notes two major fallacies in the study of organized criminal organizations. First, he argues that cultural misrepresentations of OCOs in popular culture have led to a historical naiveté on organized crime.⁷ Secondly, he insists that the tendency of scholars to rely on personal testimony as absolute truth has contributed to an inaccurate view of organized crime.⁸ Block noted that law enforcement officials and the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Donald R Cressey, *Theft of a Nation: The Structure and Operations of Organized Crime in America* (New York: Joanna Cotler Books, 1970), 3.

⁷ Alan Block, "History and the Study of Organized Crime," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* Vol. 6, No. 4 (January, 1978), 455.

⁸ Ibid., 457.

criminal justice system at large have contributed to this historical naiveté by taking the sworn testimony of criminals as absolute fact.

The most recent works on organized crime challenge the notion of the existence of OCOs. In Peter Reuter's work, *Disorganized Crime: The Economics of the Visible Hand*, the author argues that modern criminal organizations are inherently disorganized because of their lack of structure and failure to focus on a specific aim.⁹ This view on organized crime stands in contrast to Frederic Thrasher's landmark study, as it calls into question the idea that OCOs operate on predictable and natural processes. In all, the literature on organized crime reminds us of the importance of organizational structure in the context of studying criminal operations. But most importantly, the literature compels us to question the fixed notions that have been developed on the structure and functions of OCOs. Nonetheless, it is important to examine organized crime through the multiple lenses offered by the literature so as to develop a more complete view on the mechanisms of organized crime.

Historical Background: The Progressive Era and the KKK

The Progressive Era, which defined the political climate of the 1920s, came into fruition in the wake of the Gilded Age. From the 1870's to the early 20th century in the Gilded Age, American society experienced a rapid transformation as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Positive changes such as technological advancement and economic prosperity came alongside financial inequality and rampant political corruption. The corruption of the Gilded Age left many Americans ready for the reforms that would follow in the Progressive Era.

⁹ Peter Reuter, *Disorganized Crime: The Economics of the Visible Hand* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1983).

The political struggle of the Progressive Era pitted the will of the public for a “good” government against the corrupted “machine politicians” and “special interests.”¹⁰ The public worked towards a more “honest government” through changes in the political system that would change both the structure of government and the manner in which public officials were elected.¹¹ Reformers went about achieving this vision by enacting municipal government reform, which sought to restore morality and rationality in the political process. These reform efforts worked to combat the forces of political corruption and elitism in government, and by doing so would theoretically prevent the moral erosion of American society.

Reformers sought to take control of municipal politics in a variety of ways. Public regulatory activism was a means that reformers relied upon to instill their idea of a good government into their local communities. The modernization of public health and public education was a cause that many middle-class activists and professional reformers alike worked towards.¹² Through a combination of philanthropy and municipal reforms, programs in indigent health care and health education were successfully created in some progressive regions of the country.¹³

There is strong evidence to suggest that the progressive reforms of the early twentieth century achieved measurable success in both enacting effective reforms and reducing government corruption. Reports on instances of corruption “declined between 1870s and the

¹⁰Samuel P. Hays, "The politics of reform in municipal government in the progressive era" *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 55, No. 4 (1964): 157.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² William A. Link, "Privies, Progressivism, and Public Schools: Health Reform and Education in the Rural South, 1909-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 54, No. 4 (1988): 623.

¹³ Ibid., 625.

1920s.”¹⁴ Between 1908 and 1917, during a period of significant reform, instances of corruption notably declined.¹⁵ Actions that business interests and political factions took that were previously allowed became better enforced against, which was a major factor in the decline of corruption. Governments that had “rarely prosecuted themselves” responded to reform efforts, as they “more effectively patrolled each other.”¹⁶ The progressive sentiments of the era made their way into the established news entities and levels of government of the time, and thus reformers were able to weed corruption out of many facets of American society.

Progressivism was not relegated solely to reformers that fought for social reforms deemed moral by societal standards. By the early 1920s, the Klu Klux Klan had resurged to a membership of over 2 million in a “sentimental reverence” to the Klan of the 1860s.¹⁷ Like the progressive reformers who sought to vanquish political corruption and enact public regulatory activism, the KKK attempted to instill their own vision of a moral society in the Progressive Era. The Klan attributed the rampant government corruption of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to an American economy “taken over by strangers.”¹⁸ The KKK worked to combat the forces of corruption by operating as a “national political lobby,” one that sought to reform government in much the same way as the grassroots activists who enacted municipal government reforms.¹⁹ This movement fought for “purity reform measures” which kept with the Klan values

¹⁴Edward L. Glaeser and Claudia Goldin, “Corruption and Reform: An Introduction,” *National Bureau of Economic Research* (2004): 13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ David A. Horowitz, “The Klansman as Outsider: Ethnocultural Solidarity and Antielitism in the Oregon Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* Vol. 80, No. 1 (1989): 12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of “Americanism” and tradition by supporting immigration restriction laws that would restore the American economy in addition to lobbying for Prohibition in defense of Christian values.²⁰

The Klan practiced temperance towards alcohol long before the Progressive Era. During Reconstruction, the residents of Southern Illinois viewed drinking and criminality as synonymous.²¹ Additionally, an influx of immigrants into the region led residents to believe that they had lost their “cultural homogeneity.”²² Cultural change was not welcomed in “Egypt”--- to which southern Illinois was sometimes referred---as many residents were sympathetic to the discriminatory cause of the South during the war.²³ The combination of temperance attitudes and anti-immigrant sentiments led to the introduction of the postwar Klan into “most Egyptian counties of southern Illinois.”²⁴ Klansmen in the region used intimidation tactics and “reactionary violence” in an attempt to make community leaders “conform to the old values” of pre-Civil War times.²⁵ Klan activity in the area declined after the Progressive Era, but the ideals of this movement would go on to be replicated during the 1920s.

In the 1920s, KKK membership peaked in towns that held strict religious values. In the case of Belvidere, Illinois, the town’s mostly white and highly-Protestant population made the place a “perfect recipe” for Klan membership.²⁶ Belvidere was “overwhelmingly Protestant,” and sought to abide by its religious principles.²⁷ According to a local newspaper, the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Edgar F. Raines, Jr., “The Klu Klux Klan in Illinois, 1867-1875,” *Illinois Historical Journal*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (1985): 21.

²² Ibid., 22.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 44.

²⁶ Adam Furman, “The Klu Klux Klan in Small-Town America: Belvidere, Illinois in 1923-1925,” Southern Illinois University Honors Thesis: May, 2011, 18.

²⁷ Ibid., 17.

introduction of the Klan into the area came to be in an effort to combat the “immorality of the times.”²⁸ One instance of this effort came in the form of the KKK’s opposition to the showing of Sunday movies. In the view of this group, Sunday pictures were a “violation of God’s Day.”²⁹ The Klan also fought against immorality by enforcing Prohibition. Community leaders in Belvidere followed with the “law and order” mentality of the Klan by establishing committees to investigate local shops suspected of making alcohol.³⁰

The issue of the “moral erosion” of society drew many into the Klan, and it proved particularly effective at bolstering female membership.³¹ Prohibition was a clear moral topic for the KKK to focus on, as the group was dominated by deeply religious members who held strict views on temperance. For Klansmen and Klanswomen, the grand vision of the KKK constituted a “white, Protestant America” that had “perfected private family life.”³² To the KKK, the “serpent of alcohol” was a necessary political target, since the group believed that America’s overindulgence of the drink had eroded family life.³³ The Klu Klux Klan’s opposition towards alcohol would prove to be a serious issue of contention as organized crime and bootlegging began to flourish in the Prohibition years.

Prohibition and the Rise of Organized Crime

Many reformers’ efforts of the Progressive Era were made with good intentions. Reformers attempted to restore honesty and morality into a corrupted government. The Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution embodies this sentiment. Prohibition

²⁸ Ibid., 18.

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

³¹ Kathleen M. Blee, "Women in the 1920s' Ku Klux Klan Movement," *Feminist Studies* Vol. 17, No. 1 (1991): 58.

³² Ibid., 67.

³³ Ibid.

of alcohol in the United States---also referred to as the “noble experiment”—was implemented in 1920 with great ambition. Reformers hoped the law would reduce crime and corruption, improve the nation’s health, and solve a variety of social problems.³⁴ However, Prohibition was in fact a “failure on all accounts.”³⁵ Instead of improving the health of the country, the Eighteenth Amendment resulted in an “appallingly high” death rate from alcohol poisoning, with the national death toll rising by roughly 3,000 from 1920 to 1925.³⁶ Additionally, the government’s inability to control where drinking establishments were located led to a number of “speak easies” being created in previously dry regions.³⁷ These illicit drinking locations outnumbered the number of saloons in the country, and they were responsible for increasing the availability of alcohol during Prohibition.³⁸

The illicit drinking market spurred by Prohibition worked as an avenue for criminal activity to flourish. Bootlegging---or the selling of illegal alcohol---was used to serve the drug to thirsty Americans. The large number of speak easies in the country meant that bootlegging was bound to be a profitable enterprise. Bootlegging, being an unregulated, illicit, and profitable market, became a valuable area for organized criminal organizations to exploit. Competition between rival gangs would inevitably lead to violence. However, it was perhaps the reaction by those in favor of Prohibition to the OCOs that was the most significant source of conflict.

The Klan Anti-Klan War

³⁴ Mark Thornton, "Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 157: Alcohol Prohibition Was a Failure," *Cato Institute* (1991), 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The Klu Klux Klan employed violence in the organization's fight for temperance. Klansmen hoped to quell the public's thirst for alcohol and tendency to resort to bootlegging by conducting raids of suspected distilleries. Additionally, the KKK worked with law enforcement to achieve the mutual goal of suppressing illicit activity. Local sheriffs were paid by the Klan to operate as "raiders" that fought against the bootleggers. These raiders came to be regarded with great reverence in towns that opposed the illegal consumption of alcohol, as many wanted a "cleanup of vice" in the Prohibition era.³⁹

One of the most widely praised raiders from Southern Illinois, was Sheriff S. Glenn Young. As one resident commented, "There is hardly a nook or corner of the entire United States where the name of S. Glenn Young is not known."⁴⁰ Young came to Williamson County, Illinois in 1924 and quickly made a reputation for himself as a quick-draw master. There were hardly any activities of Young's that were not the "chief topic of conversation" among Williamson residents.⁴¹ Due to his tendency to dress in civilian clothes, the sheriff embodied a notion of morality that was easily within reach for many onlookers. To his most ardent admirers, Young was a "dauntless crusader" who fought sin wherever he found it.⁴² Thus in 1924, when Young was employed by the KKK to conduct raids in Williamson County, many of his supporters came to view the Klan as a force of virtue.

The violent raids perpetrated by the Klan were met with mixed reactions. Local periodicals quickly condemned the KKK for its "religious intolerance" and "race hatred."⁴³

³⁹ E. Bishop Hill, *Complete History of Southern Illinois' Gang War: The True Story of Southern Illinois Gang Warfare*, (Harrisburg, Ill: Hill Pub. Co., 1927), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴³ *Life and Exploits of S. Glenn Young*, 6.

However, many who lived in Southern Illinois did not harbor ill sentiments towards the Klu Klux Klan. Some residents believed that Williamson County became a “vastly different and better place to live” thanks to the actions of the KKK and Sherriff Young.⁴⁴ The KKK was viewed as “one of the very greatest organizations of patriotism” by those who believed that the organization was acting on behalf of morality and Americanism.⁴⁵

It is easier to regard the Klu Klux Klan, and the law enforcement officials on their side, as moral crusaders in comparison to the forces they were fighting against. In the 1920’s, the anti-Klan forces in Southern Illinois consisted of ruthless gangs that sought after illicit profit-making schemes and that used violence to control their enterprises. The Shelton and Birger gangs were the most prominent OCOs in the region. These groups fought side-by-side against the Klan forces due to their common interest of maintaining control of illicit bootlegging and gambling markets. The Birger gang was headed by Art Newman and Charles Birger, from whom the gang gets its name. The Shelton gang was founded by the brothers Carl, Earl, and Bernie Shelton, who rose to prominence with the advent of bootlegging during the Prohibition Era. While these gangs initially collaborated in opposition to the pro-KKK forces, they eventually turned on each other in an effort to win control of the bootlegging market in Southern Illinois.

From the perspective of the bootleggers in Southern Illinois, as well as several law enforcement officials, the actions of the KKK, and those who supported them, were far from moral. For some, in Williamson County, the infiltration by the Klu Klux Klan into the area was a breach of authority for those previously in charge. Some law enforcement officials such as

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7.

George Galligan of Williamson County lamented the fact that KKK members regularly broke into the homes of residents without proper search warrants.⁴⁶

While the Klu Klux Klan represented the religious and demographic values of many residents in the region, there remained a sizeable portion of the population that objected to their activities. When the Shelton and Birger gangs came together in opposition to the Klu Klux Klan, they were supported by many people who, while normally law abiding, “objected to the Klan on general principles.”⁴⁷ The support of the gangs by the citizens of Williamson County, in conjunction with the backing of a few law enforcement officials, gave the gangs a backing to wage war against the Klan.

On August 30, 1924, the KKK and the bootlegging gangs, each with their respective motives, came to a particularly bloody clash in a battle in Herrin, Illinois. On one side of the quarrel were the KKK supporters, backed by local hero Sheriff S. Glenn Young. In opposition to them were the Shelton and Birger gangs, backed by Sheriff George Galligan and those who believed the Klan had gone too far in their moral crusade. The battle was bloody, and at the end of the conflict seventeen combatants were dead.⁴⁸ The bootlegging gangs had shown no mercy, as evidenced by their particular modes of fighting. Shelton gang members used makeshift tanks, which were in essence armored cars fixed with guns, to wage gruesome warfare. Birger and Newman equipped their men with machine guns, which surely outgunned the simple revolvers famously employed by Sheriff Young. The end result of the fighting was devastating for the

⁴⁶ Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Special Collections Research Center Archives, Shelton Gang United Press articles collection, 1943-1957 [Carbondale, SIUC-SCRCA Shelton Gang], Box 1, Folder 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

pro-Klan forces; the hero S. Glenn Young perished amongst many others, and through the strength of the organized criminal forces the Klu Klux Klan was effectively shut out of the area.

While it is tempting to view the defeat of the Klu Klux Klan in Williamson County as an instance of justice, the details of the event prove otherwise. From the perspective of the Shelton and Birger gangs, the KKK were simply an obstacle to their bootlegging business. The fight against the Klan was merely an opportunity for vengeance. Sheriff S. Glenn Young personally conducted raids on several Shelton-Birger joints, and his pestering of the gang leaders even led to Charles Birger's arrest and sentencing to a year in jail.⁴⁹ Thus, the slaying of Sheriff Young in the Herrin battle can be seen as the fulfillment of a personal vendetta by Birger rather than an incidental casualty. It is important to note the personal dynamics and motives of the people involved in these gangs and conflicts, as it serves to shed light on the true nature of the historical events. When taken from a big-picture perspective, the Klan anti-Klan conflict appears like a battle between good and evil. Klan supporters in Southern Illinois viewed their side as good, as the Klan fought for "American" values in the 1920's. Those who opposed the group believed that their side was the truly just cause, as the Shelton and Birger gangs fought to eradicate the unwanted presence of the KKK from Williamson County. However, as the events of this time period unfold, it becomes clear that neither side was inherently honorable, but rather merely driven by personal motives.

The Shelton/Birger Feud

Once organized criminals eliminated the KKK, the Shelton and Birger gangs soon turned on each other. The most obvious reason for this split was that the Shelton brothers, Charles

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Birger, and Art Newman simply entered into a power struggle in order to win control of the bootlegging operations in the region. Like with the personal dynamics that acted upon the Klan Anti-Klan War---including the vendetta Birger had with Young and the feud between George Galligan and the KKK---it is worth examining the specific motives of the characters involved so as to not lead to a complicated big-picture rendering of the events.

Personal dynamics help to explain the Birger/Shelton split. In addition to the monetary conflict between the factions, there was also a personal conflict between the gang leaders. Carl Shelton and Charles Birger, either by coincidence or by circumstance, fell in love with the same woman. After receiving a lofty \$100,000 inheritance, Ms. Helen R. Holbrook promptly left her husband and set out to “enjoy life.”⁵⁰ Whether it was for the money or for the woman, both Birger and Shelton fell into a jealous hatred with each other as they pursued the attention of Ms. Holbrook.

While the personal dispute between Charles Birger and Carl Shelton may not have been solely responsible for the feud that followed, it is hard to ignore that it had a measurable effect on gang relations. Furthermore, it is worth noting the nature of this personal dispute as well as its relevance in explaining the personal characteristics of the men involved in these gangs. Both Charles Birger and Carl Shelton grew up in environments where violent and aggressive behaviors were seen as indicative of manliness. Charles Birger grew up as a Russian immigrant in a tough neighborhood.⁵¹ The gang leader had to learn to “be tough” to survive in St. Louis; this mindset clearly stayed with him as he entered the illicit bootlegging industry. The Shelton brothers experienced a similar upbringing in East St. Louis, and likewise came to cultivate a

⁵⁰ Carbondale, SIUC-SCRCA Shelton Gang, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

similar mindset. This information brings significant relevance to the personal dispute between Charles Birger and Carl Shelton. Their competition to win the attention of Ms. Holbrook created a dynamic where each man desired to prove his worth through his superior virility. For many men, “violence is, under certain conditions, the only perceived available technique of expressing and validating masculinity.”⁵² Thus, it is plausible that the threat to Birger’s and Shelton’s masculinity played a significant part in sparking the Shelton/Birger feud.

When applied in other contexts, masculinity can serve to explain other aspects of the Shelton/Birger feud. Upon separating into competing factions, the Shelton and Birger gangs went to great lengths to demonstrate the strength of their respective side. At each gang’s base of operations stood armed guards, mounted machine guns, barbed-wire fences, piles of ammunition, and fleets of armored “tanks.”⁵³ In anticipation of all-out gang warfare, both the Shelton and Birger gangs put on heavy recruiting campaigns to rally troops to their sides. Over the radio, gang leaders issued stark provocations and warnings to enemy fighters and citizens alike. To Southern Illinois residents, Charles Birger stated “you need have no fear for your lives. We know whom we are after.”⁵⁴ In response, Earl Shelton contended that citizens “needn’t fear any reprisals from the Shelton brothers because of the depredations committed by Charley Birger and his gang.”⁵⁵ Additionally, he quipped, “I want to say that Birger is full of hot air and crazy.”⁵⁶ Following their radio exchange, the Shelton brothers decided to flex their muscles. In a military parade of sorts, the Shelton gang drove their fleet of armored cars into downtown Marion and

⁵² Walter S. DeKeserdy and Martin D. Schwartz, "Masculinities and Interpersonal Violence," *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 362.

⁵³ Carbondale, SIUC-SCRCA Shelton Gang, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

circled the courthouse for all citizens to see.⁵⁷ Shortly after, the Birger gang paraded their own armored vehicles to the public. Despite the strength shown by each side, neither gang resorted to violence.

While it is not clear what this accomplished for either gang, there is no doubt that each gang attempted to express their masculinity through a show of strength. The Shelton and Birger gangs employed morality through the concept of honor, which involves being “good” at being a man.⁵⁸ In the context of this feud, manliness called for these men to stand up for themselves as “independent” and “proud” actors, and to hold their own when challenged.⁵⁹ This helps explain the excessive weapons build-up and extravagant show of strength by the Shelton and Birger gangs. Although neither side sought to impose their vision of morality on society, the organized criminals used the concept of honorable masculinity to justify their aggressive actions.

Despite the threat of violence, tensions between the Shelton and Birger gangs eventually subsided. Law enforcement eventually removed the Shelton brothers from the region after a twenty-five-year conviction sent them to prison in 1925. The Birger gang reached a demise in their own right. In 1928, gang leader Charles Birger was hanged for killing the mayor of West City.⁶⁰ While violence did not completely stop after the removal of the gang leaders, it never reached the same levels of aggression.

The behavior of the Shelton brothers after their retreat from control of the bootlegging industry speaks to the nature of the men involved in this criminal organization. Even after

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 43.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁰ Carbondale, SIUC-SCRCA Shelton Gang, Box 1, Folder 1.

discontinuing his involvement in the bootlegging industry, Carl Shelton found great difficulty in refraining from personal feuds. In 1948, an angry neighbor named Charles Harris murdered Carl Shelton. According to Earl Shelton, Harris's disdain for Carl came from a dispute they had about some stray Shelton cattle.⁶¹ Earl Shelton did no better in refraining from abhorrent activities. On two separate occasions, Earl Shelton faced charges for molesting young girls.⁶² A broader categorization of the organized criminal warfare in Southern Illinois can be made in light of the immoral behavior of the Shelton brothers.

No Honor Among Thieves

It is incredibly tempting to paint history in broad brush strokes and with satisfactory generalizations. But in doing so, the smaller dynamics that play into historical events are sometimes lost. Whether one was in support of the KKK or the Shelton and Birger gangs did not determine the facts of the events that transpired. For pro-Klan citizens, arguing that the KKK fought for American values and moral principles was only true within their specific ideological framework. In fact, a good percentage of Americans disagreed with the KKK's moral assessment, as evidenced by the popularity of bootlegging and speakeasies during the Prohibition Era. And for the supporters of the gangs in their fight against what they deemed to be the intrusive Klan, arguing on the basis of morality was rendered futile when the bloodshed and bad behavior perpetrated by the Shelton and Birger gangs was taken into consideration.

Perhaps one finds not an entire side, but only a singular figure who supposedly embodies the right qualities one would look for in a moral or heroic person. Sheriff S. Glenn Young was undoubtedly a hero to many Southern Illinois residents. By fighting sin and dauntlessly

⁶¹ Ibid., Box 1, Folder 2.

⁶² Ibid., Box 1, Folder 15.

crusading against criminals, Young embodied the courageous and righteous qualities that many wished to have for themselves. To the 1920's small-town man, this could very plausibly be the case. But to someone living in the present, the mere fact that Young fought on behalf of the KKK is enough to dismiss any heroic or redeeming qualities he may have possessed. Some residents of Southern Illinois must have also looked up to men like Carl Shelton and Charles Birger. By embracing the aggressive tendencies of honorable masculinity, the members of the Shelton and Birger gangs acted out the part of the risk-taking rebel that many men wished to become. To the ordinary American man, either side could have echoed the values or personal qualities that he admired. But to someone living in present times, it is difficult to justify the actions that the KKK, law enforcement officials, and the bootlegging gangs took using the rationale that their behavior abided by moral principles.

Conclusion

While the Klu Klux Klan and the organized criminal organizations that operated in Southern Illinois during the 1920's fought for specific values and purposes, any granting of outright righteousness to either side is unwarranted. The KKK attempted to uphold the American ideals they wished to see in the country, but nonetheless alienated the vast majority of the population while operating on a moral crusade. Although the Shelton and Birger gangs successfully fought off the Klan to the delight of many, their violent tendencies and less-than-redeemable personal characteristics were a far cry from moral superiority. Even though there were singular figures from each side that embodied the values that many residents admired, none fit within the modern interpretation of a truly moral person. While many who lived during the Progressive Era attempted to move America towards a more moral society, in the case of Southern Illinois morality remained remarkably absent.

