

Gangsters of Kenton

By: Steven D. Hiller

Every year Kenton celebrates Little Chicago Night, a remembrance of times when Kenton was a little less than lawful.

Little Chicago Night has been a thriving fund raiser for the non-profit organizations that have been involved in it. The program brings many local Kentonites down to the square to enjoy some fun and social entertainment. Lately, the Kenton Armory Restoration Foundation has been holding the event with growing success.

The basis of Little Chicago Night is founded in the seedy past of Kenton. A past when gangsters were not just a memory, but neighbors. Men like Dillinger and the Purple Gang as well as ladies of the night often called Kenton home. There are still places around the square where hidden rooms can be found. These rooms served as speakeasies, which was an established place to drink and socialize without being noticed. During this time, alcohol was banned in America and these rooms provided a place for people to break the law. People would be in a room that was out of sight of the general customers. The proprietor would signal the people inside of the secret room if police happened to show up in the front part of the business.

These were not the only establishments in Kenton that were not truly legal. Much of the true nature of the many businesses in town is still unknown, seeing these businesses were not recorded in the legal record. Much of what is known is known through the memories of those who were there.

One of the reasons gangsters chose Kenton might have been reasons that the convenience of these illegal facilities. Kenton also had an unofficial view of the mobsters in town. According to John Jester, as long as the gangsters didn't cause any problems, the city left them alone. A kind of live and let live theme was the way of life in Kenton.

The town was trying to exist in the middle of the depression. Families were attempting to make a living or just to feed their families. The gangsters brought money into the town. They paid for services and bought items from the local retailers just as if they were the same as



anybody else.

They came into town on the Erie Railroad from Chicago or New Jersey. Often they were looking for a place to lay low for a few days. Kenton filled that need.

There were others that came into the small town or lived there that didn't fair as well. Bootleggers were often caught smuggling their wares into town. One was caught near the Hardin-Marion County line with nearly 200 gallons of moonshine in his car.

Stills were seized in the country side. The religious groups even sought to have dancing outlawed in Kenton. The belief was that dancing brought people together and they would then drink alcohol.

Even as Kenton tries to claim the name of Little Chicago, many other towns have also boasted claims to this seedy past. Lima, Ohio has boasted that even Al Capone may have resided within the city's limits. Crown Point, Indiana has laid claim to the name through its association with John Dillinger's jail break. Arcadia, Louisiana was the sight of the death of Bonnie and Clyde.

The number of possible towns that may have housed or hidden mobsters may be any town along a rail connecting to the windy city. So, is Kenton the true Little Chicago?

It does not matter if Kenton is the true Little Chicago or not. The best part is the celebration that happens every year. That and the fact that many of our older citizens may know a little more than what has ever been put in any history book.