

# Washburn Community Affairs 1940-1948 — Crime and Saloons

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The major "crime" problem confronting authorities and parents was vandalism by young boys. A favorite activity of the boys was to break into vacant buildings, usually just for the challenge of doing so, but often doing malicious damage once inside.

With numerous buildings and many boys, it was impossible for the one policeman usually on duty to apprehend them. In connection with the case in July 1943 of three boys who were caught after they had started a fire in a vacant building, the Times noted that "Vandalism by boys has been increasing in the city and has gone uncorrected too long, in the opinion of most citizens." In October 1944 the police reported that "an exceptionally bad wave of juvenile vandalism has broken out in the city in the past week or two. . . . Fences are broken, privies tipped over, garbage cans upset, air let out of tires, horn buttons jammed. . . . It's almost impossible to catch them, as they scatter from the scenes of their vicious mischief and hide in the grass if you get close." But the vandalism continued with damage to trees, shrubs, and mail boxes, the firing of small caliber rifles in the city, plus other transgressions. Occasional efforts were made to solve the delinquency problem by providing recreational opportunities for children. Winter and summer sports and recreation programs were organized,



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a youth center called the "buzz bowl" was set up in the Du Pont School, and Halloween parties were sponsored, as well as many other activities. While these efforts were well-meaning and beneficial, they generally did not interest the boys who were responsible for much of the vandalism. Many older boys felt that it did not make any difference if they were caught, since they were going to be drafted anyway.

The state of crime prevention in Washburn at the time is perhaps illustrated by an amusing incident that occurred one night in February 1942. A businessman, who had forgotten to bring his store key from home, left his building for a few minutes to retrieve the key. While he was gone, the night watchman, discovering the unlocked door, went

inside to telephone the merchant. When the merchant returned, and seeing what he assumed to be a burglar inside, he locked the door. Failing to contact the night watchman, he and several other men surrounded the building with the intention of catching the culprit if he tried to escape. The watchman soon identified himself, however, and everyone had a good laugh.

Meanwhile, the old debate about saloon license fees resurfaced, although it was more a matter of extracting as much revenue as possible from the saloon owners, rather than controlling the number of saloons, as in earlier years. But the saloon owners had many supporters, including some council members, and in June 1939 they were able to convince the council to reduce the license fee from \$250 to \$150. The reduction was strongly criticized, however, and in June 1940 the council raised the license fee back to \$250. There the matter rested until April 1947, when the local Women's Christian Temperance Union was successful in having a no-license proposition on the ballot. The members of a newly organized businessmen's organization were unanimously opposed to the no-license option, one declaring that if approved it would affect "the volume of business of all local stores," another that it would be "a kick in the

face' to every local business," and a third that the vote would "decide whether the city lives or dies.'" They need not have worried for the voters rejected the no-license proposition by a vote of 768 to 136. Realizing that the principal reason people had voted against the no-license proposition was that they did not want the city to lose the revenue from the saloon licenses (thereby raising taxes to make up the difference), the council apparently decided that it was a propitious time to increase the license fee to raise even more revenue. Immediately after the election, the council voted to double the license fee from \$250 to \$500, increasing revenues from that source from \$1,950 to \$3,900. Not surprisingly, the saloon owners strongly objected before the council and after negotiations between the parties in June, the fee was set at \$350.

In 1940 and 1941 another one of those periodic drives against slot machines in saloons was launched. It was apparently successful, the district attorney declaring in February 1942 that in her opinion "no machine are operating in Bayfield County." Based on past experience, this confident announcement of the demise of the "one armed bandits" was probably premature for the "heat off," the machines would be quickly brought out of hiding.