

# BOOTLEGGERS!

## The story of the only Gleeson jail break-IN

Before 1915, the sale of alcohol in the state of Arizona was governed by a county-based "Local Option" law. Each county could choose for itself whether the sale of alcohol was prohibited. Maricopa county (8701 registered voters in 1914), was a "dry" county. Cochise County (8431 voters) was "wet". The third largest county, Pima (2378 voters), was also "dry".

Harry Wheeler, sheriff, and Constable Lafe Gibson, captured two bootleggers with several burros loaded with booze. They were Mexicans and were lodged in the Gleeson jail, as the officers hurried to Douglas on the trail of more bootleggers.

Thirsty people from dry counties often made day trips into the wet counties to slake their thirst or to surreptitiously stock up on alcohol to take back home. Second in size only to the "dry" Phoenix area, Cochise county was a popular stopping point for such trips. The higher elevation and cooler temperatures made it even more popular during the warmer months. Frequent and reliable train service between Cochise county and other parts of Arizona made day trips or weekend trips much easier. A trip from "dry" Tucson to "wet" Cochise and back could be done at a leisurely pace in a single day. A trip from Phoenix and back would make for a nice, relaxing, "wet" weekend.

In November of 1914, voters in the state of Arizona passed an amendment to the state constitution which prohibited the manufacture or introduction of alcohol into the entire state of Arizona. The law went into effect on January 1, 1915, making Arizona the 22nd state to become "dry". Since both Mexico (to the south) and the state of New Mexico (to the east) had no such prohibition, Cochise County was the primary conduit for bootleg liquor to enter southern Arizona. The period between 1915 and 1918, when New Mexico also became dry, was marked by a great deal of bootlegging between the two states. Bars also opened up in the Mexican border towns of Agua Prieta, Naco, and Nogales. You could walk

into the Concordia Coffee Shop in Naco, cross a painted line on the floor which marked the Mexican border, buy a drink in the Concordia Saloon in Mexico, then walk back out the U.S. door and be home without breaking the law.

Needless to say, much of the manpower of the county Sheriff's office spent their time tracking down bootleggers, who brought illegal booze into Cochise county and then transported it to eager waiting customers.

Such was the situation in February of 1917, when Sheriff Wheeler and the Gleeson constable, Lafe Gibson, captured a car load of whiskey being smuggled through the area just south of Gleeson. Under cover of darkness, the bootlegger tried speeding his Buick north towards Gleeson, but was confronted by Wheeler and Gibson. The unknown bootlegger jumped out of the car while it was still moving, and darted out into the darkness, leaving behind the whiskey as the Buick rolled into a ditch.



Wheeler and Gibson pulled the car out of the ditch and Gibson drove it back into Gleeson. For several days, both whiskey and Buick remained at the Gleeson jail while Gibson searched for the bootlegger. When it became obvious that the perpetrator was not to be found, Sheriff Wheeler drove the car back to Tombstone. The whiskey was poured out into the ground next to the jail.

This was not the first time that the ground near the jail was soaked with alcohol. One month previously, Constable Lafe Gibson captured four barrels of whiskey bound for sale in the dry state. The two-hundred gallon haul was loaded into the freight

lockup room of the Gleeson train station, just up the hill from the jail. It was not long before one of the thirstier citizens of the area tried to liberate the liquid by allowing gravity to have its way. Having spied the barrels in the freight room, an attempt was made to crawl under the floorboards of the station. The perpetrator dragged with him a hand drill and a bucket. Boring a hole up through the floor of the station, his intent was to drill right into one of the barrels and allow physics to play bartender. Apparently his thirst affected his judgment of distance, for he missed the intended barrel and left a hole in the floor. The station agent, Mrs. Katherine Moore, noticed the hole in the floorboard and, discerning the attempt at liquid liberation, called Constable Gibson. The lawman decided to transfer the four barrels to the Gleeson jail for safekeeping. Being constructed of reinforced concrete with steel doors, solid steel shutters, and a concrete floor, he judged it the safest place to keep the illegal substance. It appeared he underestimated the thirst of the local denizens, however, because during the night, the only known attempt to break IN to the Gleeson jail occurred. The solid construction of the building and its location in the center of town, however, doomed the break-in attempt with only minor damage, and the next day Constable Gibson and his assistants rolled the four barrels outside the jail, knocked in the stopper heads, and let the whiskey soak into the ground.

There was, no doubt, much groaning, gnashing of teeth, and licking of lips among the many onlookers. Arizona voters chose to repeal the statewide ban on liquor in 1933, and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, making liquor legal again nationally, was ratified in December of that same year.

