

Brookside Centennial

By Sue Cochran

During 2013, Brookside will celebrate 100 years as an incorporated town. If you have memories of your family's involvement in the Town, we would welcome writings about them, and also if you would share with us documents, pictures, or other memorabilia, we would appreciate that.

Movies, Moonshine and Hell's Half Acre

When Brookside was first laid out as a town early in 1888, there was already a "paper town" in existence just northeast of us. Homesteader Sylvester Davis had filed the plat for his town of Springfield in December of 1887. Measuring only two blocks by two blocks, it really was a tiny little town.

We don't really know what Sylvester had planned for his little town of Springfield, but we do know what really happened. When the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe-owned coal companies announced that no saloons would be allowed within their town of Brookside, some sharp thinker realized that Springfield had no such restrictions.

From the beginning, what had been laid out as Springfield was known far and wide as Hell's Half Acre. Past publications tell us that five taverns opened on the north side of today's Cedar Avenue, while two more located on the south side. At least one house of ill repute appeared around the curve toward Fawn Hollow – which had a wild reputation of its own in later years when that institution catered to hard-drinking soldiers from Camp Carson.

Miners from Brookside appreciated the taverns in "The Acre". It was worth the short walk across the field to get a nice cold drink after another long shift in the mine. Fine upstanding citizens from Canon City, who had voted to ban the sale of alcohol within their city as well, made the trip to The Acre hoping that they would be far enough from home that no one would report their whereabouts to the tee-totalers in downtown Canon City.

If Hell's Half Acre appeared in the newspapers, it was never good news. Coverage of a murder in 1896 referred to The Acre as "that portion of the coal camp given over to lewd women and depraved men". That's probably a little harsh, but we have to admit that it was not an unpopular opinion.

In 1898 the Klondike saloon was held up early one Sunday morning by two robbers who got away with a reported \$300 and two horses they stole from the Colorado Supply Store's barn in Brookside.

In 1900, two Hungarian miners who had been drinking in The Acre bought a pale of beer and started across the field toward home. When accosted by two masked men, the miners struggled to understand the English orders, and were shot before they could decide what they were supposed to do. One survived long enough to tell the tale to officials investigating the crime.

In 1902 a party of revelers from Portland enjoyed the music of an Italian brass band at one of the saloons, rewarding the musicians with several bottles of liquor. When the partiers left The Acre to continue their trip to Canon City, the woman who was driving the team was seen to be in an intoxicated condition, but she insisted on driving none-the-less. Before reaching Canon City, the rig upset, killing the driver and injuring other members of the party.

County Commissioners drew fire in 1910 when they voted to approve requests by Max Vezzetti and Toney Adamic for saloon licenses. Two Canon City newspapers blasted away at the reputations of the applicants as well as the Commissioners who voted to allow the businesses to remain open.

By 1914 things had gotten really interesting. Canon City had become the location of a couple of silent film companies. Most of the movies made here were westerns that ran from eight to fifteen minutes, called "shorts". Westerns at the time had good guys in white hats, bad guys in black hats, very simple plots, and morally-acceptable endings. On the way to those endings, however, many films included shoot-outs in a saloon, and Hell's Half Acre starred in a number of those. It was simpler than changing the sets in the studios downtown.

During the mining strike of 1914, the tragedy at Ludlow and the shooting at Chandler were still fresh in everyone's minds when the Colorado Motion Picture Company staged a live scene containing a lot of shooting at The Acre. The Fremont County Leader reported the incident like this: "It was a real Wild West stunt and many shots were fired with blank cartridges. Within a few minutes the hill between them and Brookside was bristling with guns containing sure enough bullets." The situation was soon defused and the participants adjourned to the saloons of The Acre, where they frequently gathered after the Director yelled "Cut" anyway.

The five cent beer with a free lunch at the Fremont Saloon had been a favorite of some of the movie crews, including leading man Tom Mix, who spent as much time at The Acre and the taverns of Prospect Heights as he could get away with. He and Woody Higgins, a local who provided horses to the film crews, were known to take turns shooting lemons off a glass at the end of the bar. Lights and windows got shot out from time to time, and bullet holes could be seen in the walls and ceilings for years, but the crazy stunts always drew a crowd, and that was good for business for the Vezzetti family, proprietors.

The 18th Amendment to the US Constitution banning the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic drinks was ratified in 1919. The Acre was officially closed. Unofficially, Prohibition could not stop hard-working men from craving a cold drink at the end of a hard day.

A Florence newspaper from 1927 tells us that "Two Cripples at Hell's Half Acre were Fined for 'Legging' ". Both men ran stores that carried candies, soft drinks and other confections. Lawmen seized 700 pints of homebrew, containing about 8% alcohol. Since both men claimed ignorance of violating the law, and in light of their struggles to make a living, they were given light sentences. Stories like this appeared regularly during the days of Prohibition.

The Italian residents of Brookside sorely missed a little glass of wine with their dinner. Many simply made their own. One local resident told of the night the dreaded "Revenuers" arrived to search his family's property. As the officers led his father away, his mother became hysterical and threw herself on the floor in a state of collapse. After their confiscated wine was loaded up and hauled away, and the officers were gone, she miraculously revived and rose to show the family the barrel of wine she had saved by covering it with her large skirts.

In 1933, the 18th Amendment was repealed. The vote in Brookside was 89 votes to repeal and only 9 votes to stay "Dry". The Brookside Council granted Edward Rocco the first license to open a saloon in Hell's Half Acre, now a part of Brookside, where he would sell the new 3.2 beer, a far cry from what they'd been drinking during the "Dry" years.

If you'd like to add your memories to this story, please call Renee at the Brookside Community Center or contact Sue Cochran at 276-0577.