

“Little Chicago”

By Steve Buono, Reprinted from *Old State of Franklin Magazine, Issue 25*

A brand new shiny black '34 Packard roars past the streetlight. In the darkness beyond, the echoes of laughter and song filter up from a basement door. Every so often, the door opens and a couple leaves the lights and music and fun of their favorite speak-easy and disappear into the night laughing and swaying.

Down the street a bit, the door of a '33 Ford Coupe opens. A man climbs in and slumps down behind the wheel. Obviously drunk, he struggles to close the door. After fumbling with the keys, he extends his foot down in the darkness and presses the accelerator.

An explosion immediately engulfs him, lighting up the entire street. The couple leaving the bar avert their eyes and hurry out of sight. Does this sound like a Chicago neighborhood in 1934, or maybe even a scene from a Capone biography?

According to local folklore, these events and many other similar events occurred in downtown Johnson City. While this seems almost unbelievable to those of us born after this time, those who lived through it say it is entirely appropriate that Johnson City became known as “Little Chicago.”

During the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Johnson City had more than its share of honkytonks and bars. Apparently alcohol flowed freely, bootleggers were everywhere, and a free easy reputation spread. Perhaps the origins of the Little Chicago nickname are rooted in this simple availability of alcohol during a time when Chicago was in the news daily for exactly the same thing – or perhaps not.

To be sure, Johnson City does have a long history of trouble with alcohol. In 1873, the *Jonesboro Herald and Tribune* reported that Johnson City had three saloons and was expecting more. It mentioned that the women of Johnson City were soliciting the help of the women of Greeneville in the noble cause of eradicating alcohol from their midst.

Their efforts were not successful. Bars remained so plentiful and problematic that by 1879, Johnson City voters decided to forfeit their nine-year-old town charter to activate what was known as “The Four Mile Law.” This law prohibited the presence of a bar within four miles of a school or iron works, except in a chartered area.

Despite this radical move, alcohol was not beaten. In 1885, a local newspaper, *the Comet*, reported that the women of Johnson City were tired of dragging their men home drunk and broke every other day. These weary wives eventually gained enough sympathy that a sunshine law was passed to force bars to close before dark.

Clearly, Johnson City's reputation for alcohol goes back to its very inception. It is not hard to see, in an area of "dry" municipalities, why this must have made Johnson City seem downright decadent to the neighboring communities. One could just imagine the gossip that circulated locally about the going-ons within the city.

But if alcohol were the only factor, one wonders why other nicknames did not spring up. Little Chicago is so specific. Could it be that Johnson City shared more than one trait with Chicago, Illinois?

During the 1930s and 1940s, Chicago was not only the center of a huge illegal alcohol trade, it was also known for its railroads, its nightlife and its opulent social scene. More than that, it was famous for its corruption and gangsters.

During the same time, Johnson City itself was a significant railroad hub, with booming shipping and warehousing businesses. Business was so good, in fact that Johnson Citians suffered significantly less than the rest of the nation during the Great Depression.

Though on a much smaller scale than Chicago, Johnson City had its own upscale cultural attractions. In the 1920s, the town had six theaters and four opera houses and numerous restaurants. These were no doubt frequented primarily by the folks profiting from the illegal alcohol trade.

With so much extra change in their pockets, these wealthy entrepreneurs needed fancier digs. So in 1922, Montrose Court was built to accommodate the growing upscale population. It was touted as the most luxurious apartment complex for miles around. It was also the first structure in town to get an elevator.

In the beginning, Montrose Court was the sight of many wild parties and swank soirees attended by an exclusive group of guests. In this region, Johnson City had become the place to be and the place to be seen. It was happening and hip and boogie-woogie wooed.

It was also corrupt. Or at least that's what some of the juicier stories suggest. Picture this on a sunny afternoon: A group of boys are chasing a dog nearby. A scattering of young mothers, old men, jawing about the weather and spitting tobacco, fill the square in front of the courthouse.

A black sedan pulls up. No one gets out. A certain top-ranking elected official walks out of his office and calmly strolls over to the car. A door opens. The man looks around and then gets into the car without saying a word. The door closes and the car drives away. The sedan laps the square once again in front of the politician's office. He gets out and swaggers back up the courthouse steps ignoring the raised eyebrows that follow him.

In another story, a helicopter is rumored to have landed periodically in Tanglewood Subdivision. Many believe it was a government aircraft transporting a Tennessee governor. Apparently he came to party with some of the most successful bootleggers around.

A few tales like these must have convinced folks that Johnson City was full of shady deals and notorious characters. Add this to the availability of alcohol, the railroad and the town's social life and you begin to see why this intriguing nickname, Little Chicago, may have taken hold.

About the only thing missing from the equation now is a gangster. And one doesn't have to look long to find him. Local legend suggests that Johnson City was not only host to a gangster or two, but may have been host to the most notorious gangster of them all: Al Capone himself.

Capone scholars will tell you that Al Capone split his time between Miami and Chicago. If he took the train, as he reportedly did, Capone would almost certainly have come through our depots. At its peak in the 1930s, we received 22 passenger trains daily.

These same scholars will also tell you that Capone often went to other towns to set up operations but that there is absolutely no evidence he ever did business in East Tennessee. Of course, Capone was an expert at covering his tracks. Perhaps only the valet that held the door for him at Montrose Court each day or the waiter who served him dinner each night, recognized who he was.

Some people say that Capone vacationed in Johnson City and did indeed stay at Montrose Court. Others say he was a guest at a house in Tanglewood with golden spigots in the guest bathroom and an indoor water fountain in the foyer. A few even think that he had an interest in a ski resort built along the crest of the mountains separating Tennessee and North Carolina.

Add these rumors of Capone to the illegal alcohol, corrupt local government, busy railroad center, secret gambling, and high society night life, stir in a jigger of gin with a dash of twelve-bar blues and a twist of lemon, and I suppose even a northern transplant like myself could get used to calling Johnson City "Little Chicago."