CHAPTER XII

Law and order on the Mesabi Range prior to 1910 was what you might have expected it to be in a new industrial country recently opened to development. In short we had a lot of law and no order. Public officials fast learned to close both eyes to what was going on. Largely you fought your own fights, took the law into your own hands when necessary and tried to keep alive. The range attracted every type of undesirable that there was; we had unscrupulous saloon keepers, gamblers, panderers and prostitutes. There were more cutthroats in Hibbing and Virginia at that time than in any other place in Minnesota. They were all cursed with the lust for gold that was being siphoned out of the Mesabi hills in ever increasing quantities. The code among these rakes, procurers, trollops, fornicators, and cheats was; dog eat dog and the devil take the hindmost. These unsavory classes became the leeches and blood suckers which thrived and waxed rich in some cases on the toil and sweat of the embryo mining industry and its workers.

Because most of the mines during the Great Lakes navigation season operated around the clock, the impresarios oof the saloons, bawdy houses and gambling places assumed the same prerogatives. Saloon keepers even boasted that they had no locks in their doors. It was an unwritten law that a barkeep never threw a customer out of a saloon as long as he had money. The same was true of the roisterers who frequented the bagnios. Every saloon maintained what came to be known as a "snake room", a kind of lounge where the prostitutes could "roll" a drunk of his wages after the imbiber had consumed too much whiskey or been fed knockout drops. When the victim came to it was considered quite magnanimous of the saloonkeeper to "give" the victim a couple more shots of whiskey before throwing him out in the street. There were a few miners and lumberjacks who frequented these places and got wise to the situtation. If it happened to be payday they would put the bulk of their money in safe keeping and draw on it as they needed it. There were a few decent saloonkeepers, however, who were honest.

Ted Finch was one of the more affluent saloon keepers at Virginia about 1910. In all Finch operated seven saloons.

One that I used to frequent was considered to be one of the ritzier places where the men customers used to sit or stand arcund the cigar counter at the front of the place and have their drinks served to them there. I seldom drank in his place principally because I didn't like the taste of the whiskey he sold. But I was a regular cigar smoker and enjoyed listening to the light banter that you could always hear in such places. One of Finch's regular customers was Sam Hoar who had the reputation of a braggart and an exaggerator when he could make himself the central figure in his fiction. Sam was laying it on thicker than usual one morning when I peered over the swinging door and said:

"Sam you're a liar."

Sam had a stein of beer in his hand at the time and he let it fly at me. I ducked and the stein sailed thru the plate glass window and then everybody started ducking or running. I began running myself and the last thing I remember hearing Ted Finch say was:

"Emmett I'll kill you if you ever come in here again. You never buy anything but cigars anyway."

There was a French panderer who kicked a prostitute to death one night after she had refused to turn over to him all that she had earned in one of the socalled middle priced sporting hous s in Virginia.

The event received scarcely any public notice. A few of Jessies patrons missed her and that was about all. The righteous element of the citizenry wouldn't be heard discussing the sordid event and the unrighteous were unconcerned. So a pimp killed a prostitute so what? The Mesabi Range had more where they came from but the authorities had to maintain the pretense that law and order prevailed on the range and the Frenchman was brought to trial. Witnesses disappeared or couldn't remember. The Frenchman denied even knowing the girl and a jury acquitted him. Some time later I met the foreman of the murder jury and asked him why the jury had freed the Frenchman.

"Well," he said, "It was like this: we counted all the pimps and prostitutes we could think of or remember and found that Virginia had an equal number of each including the Frenchmen. We thought it best to leave the situation as is."

One of the most notorious of the Mesabi Range brothels was the stockade on the road between Virginia and Gilbert. The fifty inmates of this place had attracted to their wares the hundredsof miners on the Mesabi Range and the four or five thousand men working for the lumber interests in the forests within a range of fifty miles.

Atthat time Virginia boasted the largest white pine saw mill in the world. The estimated number of prostitutes in the growing town of Virginia at that time ranged from a hundred to two hundred. These workers and their weges were considered fair game to whoever could part them from their money first. Besides the regularly established houses of prostitution most of the saloon keepers in Virginia, at least, maintained brothels in connection with their liquor business. On mining company pay days the prostitutes used to come to Virginia in special busses. They also followed the migrant railway workers who were extending the trackage of the sprawling railway system in northeast Minnesota in the same type conveyances. It was a living repetition of the stories we had heard about the gold rush days of California and Alaska in earlier years. The Mesabi Range was the frontier of the North. Among those of the immigrant population who were able to hold their own against all comers were the Finns. It was considered dangerous to even argue with them. There were repeated instances of men who didn't heed these warnings who tried to take advantage of the Finns and were badly slashed and cut up for their folly. The Finlanders were a law abiding people but it was woe to any man who tried to take advantage of them.

I can remember of no instance where a Finnlander killed another man but it wasn't healthy to tangle with them. They reached a high degree of skill in the use of the knife and had acquired the knack of slashing a man to the point of death without his injuries proving fatal, but those that did take on a Finnlander knew they had been in a fight .

A number of chapters of Mesabi Range history were written in blood. In our crew which was stripping the Dean ine at Buhl about 1913 or 1914 we had a large number of recent immigrants from Serbia. Near the mine and not far from a small building which served as the street car station but back in the woods several hundred feet was a "Chippie" shack in which lived several prostitutes. I had been down to the Dean Mine supervising the repair to some broken machinery at about nine o'clock one night and as I came up out of the mine I noticed three of Butler Brothers Serbian miners running from the brothel. When I got to the street car shelter the men came into full view and I could see that each was armed with a long knife. Two of the men seemed to be chasing the third and they were all streaked with blood. From my point of vantage in the shelter I could see the look of terror in the face of the intended victim as he sparred with his two adversaries with only the stump of a tree separating them.

After one violent thrust after another the two friends finally dispatched their man. He fell to the ground and bled to death within a few feet from where I was standing. The two killers walked away without seeing me. Good citizenship standardstoday would have required that a witness come forward and tell what he knew. But in those days on the range you kept your mouth shut. And justified it by keeping out of trouble, you thought. The two men were apprehended, brought tontrial, pleaded self defense and received a sentence of ten years. They were released a few years later.

There was always bad blood between the Italians and the Serbs. Another instance of lawlessness occurred between an Italian and a Serbian who shared a company bunkhouse with about a dozen other men of the two races near the Dean Mine. We had known that trouble was brewing in the camp for some time, but dared not interfere. The climax to the long smouldering feud happened late one night on a Hibbing-Virginia streetcar. The Italian had followed the Serb and when the latter stepped off the street car at Virginia the Italian shot him thru the back three times and killed him. In the background of most of these disputes was usually a women-or more correctly a prostitute. They were known in those days as either one dollar or two dollar girls.

What the difference was I never inquired.

I remember a big Irish policeman in Virginia who shot a man thru the head for no more reason than you might shoot a dog. The policeman's explanation in this wanton killing was that he had told the victim to stop and when he didn't stop he shot him. What he didn't explain was that his victim didn't even understand English. There was a saloon keeper who shot and killed a gambler because the man refused to pay for a drink. Brought to trial, the saloon keeper pleaded self defense and was acquitted.

This is not intended to infer that all of the Butler Brothers, each pretty stubborn, hardheaded and unequivocal in his own right escaped these cross currents of conflict unscathed. Of all the brothers Cooley had the most difficulty getting along with the men. Because of his uncontrollable temper and ugly disposition when he was working too hard, Cooley brought a lot of unnecessary trouble upon himself. He had a repetation across the Mesabi Range for not getting along with the men who worked for him. Patience was not one of his virtues. He would fight at less than a drop of the hat. I can recall instances where Cooley would walk up to an employee who might be new on the job and didn't know all the details of the work and hit him for no better reason than that. If a man quit his job Cooley considered it an occassion to fight him.

And there were few on the iron range who could best him.

Even Mild mannered, even tempered John had difficulty staying out of brawls with his workmen. Once during a stripping operation at the La Rue mine there was an accident in which the steam shovel was derailed. John lost his patience with John Larson the shovel runner and in a fit of temper called Karson a name. The shovel runner got down off of his machine and used brother John to wipe the floor of the mine. Then I saw John the next day dressed in new clothes his only explanation was that his old clothes had gotten soiled. Later when details of the story got around and we learned that Larson was still on the job we wondered. John explained that he had not discharged Larson because he was a good workman, " in fact he's a better man than I am."

One fellow whom John discharged took his dismissal pretty seriously and pulled a gun on John. While the man kept John covered John inched his way forward until he grabbed the man's gunhand and disharmed him. At pistol point John forced the man to walk to a nearby pond where he threw him in and held his head under water until he had nearly drowned.

I did the same thing myself one Fourth of July morning to a locomotive engineer who swung a wrench at me after I critized him for wrecking one of our locomotives.

During my own early years on the Mesabi range I had always considered that I possessed more common sense than to pick on a man that was bigger than me. It took a young redheaded Irish bricklayer from Duluth whom brother Bill had discharged to upset my apple cart. While I was making out his time checks for some reason or other I got a little bit over bearing with the man and when he protested I threatened to clip him on the chin. Bill McGovern was his name. No sooner had I uttered my threat than McGovern was on his feet swinging. I guess I never knew what hit me, because when I finally got my bearings I was sprawled out on the floor and wondering how I got there.

More than forty years later my wife and I were flying from Chicago to spend a few weeks at a Palm Beach, Florida hotel. We noticed a man who seemed to be taking more than a casual interest in us during the trip. Later at the Palm Beach Hotel while we were waiting for the hotel clerk to assign our room the man came over and said:

"Your name is Emmett Butler isn't it?"

"Thats always been my name," I said.

"Well, my name's Bill McGovern. I used to be a bricklayer?" he said.

He was the same McGovern that we had fired and that I had fought with nearly half a century earlier. Our fight McGovern told me laughingly, had been the turning point in his life. He had quit Minnesota, wandered out to the southwest and ammassed a fortune in oil. With his wife they were celebrating their golden wedding anniversary. During our Florida stay we got to be good friends.

In order that this report of life during the early years on the Mesabi Range be as rounded as possible I asked my daughter Mary Ellen Butler Hume, after whom I named a mine in 1923 to set down some of her impressions of life as she lived it as a girl. Here are some of the things she remembers:

"It was a lot of fun moving into our new house in 1908 which father had acquired from an old couple who had homesteaded the land for their share in the mining rights. The couple wanted to sell us their dog, a cocker spaniel, but father, farm bred, said that he had never bought a dog in his life but that he would give it a home. The men worked early and late. There were many difficulties those first years and it seemed that everything including the weather seemed to be against us.

It rained so much that first spring that the crews were using rowboats to keep the pits open and the pumps running. The locomotives and steam shovels could be very cranky but to us they were almost like personalities. I can still see father trudging along the railroad tracks in suspenders, his shirt sleeves rolled up and his head bent in concentration. The stoop of his shoulders always was an indication whether things were going well or badly.

The many times Uncle John came from Carson Lake to see how things were going under father's direction always were red letter days for the children. I used to listen to their conversations and their long silences, but eventually was rewarded by some anecdote about the men or how a problem was being solved. They had many gripes about the mining engineers, superintendants of the big companies and the inspectors for the various mining interests. To hear Father and Uncle John tell it, these men were the natural barriers to progress and success much like the overburden and the rainstorms, something to be despised and outwitted. Naturally I shared many of these prejudices, tho secretly I admired these men, particularly if they were young and handsome and picturesquely attired for their jobs. It took a long time before I was willing to concede that father or my uncles might be wrong in some of the controversies, but the mellowing process was going on in them too.

I learned early that the Butler men were hard and not soft.

"Uncle John as I remember him was a big,bluff man with wavy white hair. He was proud of this wave and he called it his Della Fox curl. To me he always seemed to radiate health and well being and hewas very particular about his appearence. The Butler men could speak softly or they could be hard, cutting and sarcastic. It was good to hear them laugh. Everything Uncle John owned or purchased was naturally the best, and this included his automobile, his driver, and Aunt Maggies cooking. He liked to call her bread Angel food. He had advice on anysubject. Altho he had no children of his own, Uncle John was certain that Mother was raising her own children badly. He never came to visit us but what he had a new fad or theory. He was a paradox of extravagance and penury. One of his pet economieswas to staple together used envelopes to be used later for scratch pads. In the same breath he could spend a hundred thousand dollars for new equipment needed at the mines.

"The Butler men were impatient of stupidity. I can remember the night a pit foreman telephoned Father to advise that the number twelve locomotive had blown its valve-cap and what should he do.

Father told him to sit on it, and banged down the receiver. A little reflection made father realize that his sarcasm would not help matters and after trying in vain to telephone the office had to dress and go down to the trouble anyway. He had a bad temper with the crews when the work wasn't going right, but he was never impatient with his children.

"We had more than twenty three nationalities in the Virginia school, and I can remember we passed nineteen saloons in five blocks to get there. Hogs, cows, and chickens roamed the streets. When a municipal pound was established for stray animals, it was not infrequent that Mother had to drive to the pound to rescue our cow. Even the chickens were smart in those days. They got to know that the blast whistle at the mine meant danger and they scurried under the house or into the coops until the rocks and dirt stopped falling.

"One day we exercised less intelligence than the chickens. With Father we had walked over to the edge of the pit when the rocks and dirt began to fly over our heads. In terror I ran and had my skirt torn off by a flying piece of ore. When we got back home we found that some of the rocks had gone thru the house and barn. Some of the baby chicks were prostrate on their backs from the shock. There seemed to be a tendency for men living so close to danger to be careless of these things.

"I can remember a powder man who opened a keg of black explosive powder with a pickaxe. Altho he was badly burned to every one's amazement he recovered.

"Among the first things Uncle Cooley did when he came to Nashwauk to take charge of operations there was to order a home built along the lines of a private railroad car, which could be elevated on to flatcars and moved from one mining location to another. The windows had regular pullman shades and I can remember that leather chairs faced each other in a tiny compartment. Uncle Cooley was original but his brothers considered him freakish. Later when Uncle Cooley built a full scale house from plans and materials he ordered thru a Sears Roebuck Mail catalog his pullman residence became the employees first clubhouse.

Everything Uncle Cooley did was different. He was the first man on the Mesabi Range to buy a Stanley Steamer automobile and he acquired a big Chesapeake dog called Jeff to go with it. He had a contempt for cigarette smokers. He had a habit of snatching cigarettes out of men's mouths and he would call them pimp sticks. Noone was ever allowed to smoke in his home.

"'Years later when Uncle Cooley visited me and my husband in New York he invited us to dine with him at the old Waldorf. Along about the salad course my husband looked at Uncle Cooley and said:

"'Do you mind if I smoke?'

"'No gentleman would,' Uncle Cooley said.

"Uncle Cooley had a fierce pride in his name. I can remember when he used to stand my youngest brother Cooley in front of him and say very solemnly:

"'Remember Cooley there are only two Cooley Butlers in the whole wide world'.

"Uncle Cooley wore a sheriff's deputy badge and carried a gun during some of the I.W.W. disorder on the Mesabi Range. It has been said that Uncle Cooley owned a dog and a gun because he was afraid, but I think that all the Butler men had plenty of courage. I know that Father had a wicked looking knife which snapped open and shut and once he let a disgruntled miner get a glimpse of it when the man became threatening.

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"The Butler Brothers were extremely fond of their employees, recognizing from the outset that the success of Butler Brothers depended upon the men hired to help them. There was one favorite employee, a little Italian man named Angelo. He used to call Father Mr. De Butt and he drove one of our first trucks and was as proud of it as tho he owned it. I can remember we took a picture of the truck and wanted to get the magic words Butler Brothers into the picture, but Angelo wanted to be in the picture too. The result of our camera effort was that Angelo was the biggest part of the picture, completely obliterating the name of Butler Brothers.

"As rapidly as we grew up, we spent our summers working for the company, the boys in the mines and me in the office at Nashwauk.

"None ever had a more exciting childhood than the Butler children".

End Chapter XII.