

CHIPSTER.NET

Irene Kite and Her Ax

By Ed Hertel (edhertel@hotmail.com)

First published:

Casino Chips and Token News

Winter 2019 edition

Number of pages: 5

Description: In 1937, the world news was transfixed on the actions of Irene Kite who decided to settle the score with local central Illinois bars by smashing their slot machines with her handy ax. Why she took the militant stance is surprising and the ending unexpected.



by Ed Hertel



February 1, 1938, seemed like any other typical Tuesday evening at the Blue Ribbon Tavern in Illinois' East Alton. A table of jurors on break from the neighboring courthouse were enjoying a drink and quick meal, while another table hosted a group of locals playing cards while sipping on a few beers. The two bartenders were attending the patrons at the counter and didn't notice when a short, middle aged housewife walked through the front door. She stood motionless for a few moments, scanning the room quietly.

One of the bartenders spotted the woman and asked, "Can I help you ma'am?"

The little lady, spotting the slot machines on the back wall, pointed and asked, "Is it all right to break 'em up?"

Confused, the bartender looked at the slot machines, then to the lady, then back to the machines. Shaking his head, he answered quietly, "You can't do it here."

By now, the other patrons were beginning to take notice of the odd exchange and all watched in silence. For some, the scene was reminiscent of something that had been in the newspapers recently.

"Oh, come on." She persisted. "Can't I break 'em up?"

Before the bartender could answer, the woman reached into her coat, withdrew a small hand ax and rushed to the back of the tavern. In a flash, she started hacking down on one of the slot machines, transforming the once serene setting into a symphony of breaking glass and metal.

After giving the first machine a good ten whacks, she turned toward the second, but was stopped when the bartender forcefully wrestled the ax from her grip. At this point, the tavern was a buzz with both excitement and fear.

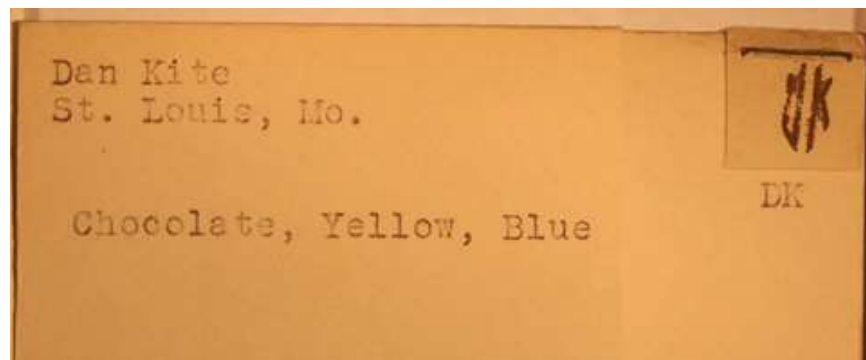
All who witnessed the attack were now in total agreement. This was no random act of violence against a slot machine. This was an attack in the war waged by the famous Irene Kite.

The story of Irene Kite is not well known today, but for a few months at the beginning of 1938, there was not a newspaper in North America that didn't run a story about the "Carrie Nation of Slot Machines".

Irene's story was not the typical run-of-the-mill crusader against vice type. She was not a victim of crime, or had any ill feelings towards it. She had been a gambler her entire life, even saying "My first husband almost divorced me for losing the grocery money so often." Her wild life did ultimately end her first marriage, as well as a second. On the third attempt, Irene found a kindred spirit in a local hustler named Dan Kite. With a reputation for bootlegging and gambling, and a wrap sheet to match, Dan and Irene seemed the perfect pair.

Dan was what they called an independent hustler – eschewing the local "syndicates" and choosing instead to be his own man. Although this meant he wasn't beholden to a boss, he was exposed to the dangers of being outside the syndicate's protection from both other criminals and law enforcement. One way Dan tried to mitigate these threats was by moving his operations out of his large and

dangerous hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, over the river to small town Alton, Illinois.



Undated, sparse Mason & Co. record for "DK" chips ordered for Dan Kite, presumably to be used in his Alton, Illinois, dice club.

It was in downtown Alton at 411 Belle Street that Dan opened his small dice game. At first it seemed the quiet life in Alton suited the Pike's just fine, but it didn't take long for the problems to start to mount. It started in mid-1937 with a visit from the local gambling syndicate who "suggested" that Dan should install a couple of their slot machines in his club. He politely declined.

Within days, police started tapping on the door of the Belle Street club, "suggesting" Dan should close up. Officially, the city was involved in a cleanup. Unofficially, clubs without the syndicate's seal of approval were the only ones being shut down. Dan had no choice but to close the club, and with it, the Kite's only source of income.

While Dan hit the town looking for other hustles, Irene Kite went to find some answers. Even the most surface search of open Alton clubs showed that many still harbored illegal gambling of all kinds, including craps games and slots machines. It was obvious to her that the city's cleanup had been targeted and prejudicial, and she wasn't going to be kept silent.

Her first stop was the county courthouse where she met with a county official to register a complaint. After explaining the situation and naming all the clubs that still had gambling, she was startled to find that not only would the county not act on her complaint, but if she kept it up her husband would be arrested for vagrancy.

But Irene Kite was not to be silenced so easily. If the officials wouldn't listen to her, she would need to

find a louder voice. What she did next would start a buzz that would reverberate louder than any official complaint. Irene was about to go full out fanatic-mode.

Nobody could have been prepared for what happened on December 20, 1937. Life in the small town of Alton went from quiet to all out bizarre when Irene Kite unleashed her fury on the local taverns and clubs. Equipped with determination, the element of surprise, and a hand ax, she set about destroying as many slot machines as she could.

The tavern employees were surprised, and perhaps a bit scared, of the little lady swinging her ax. Before they knew what had happened, she was out the door and on her way to the next tavern. Before long, she had visited seven establishments and laid to waste fourteen illegal slot machines.

By this time, the police had been alerted, although even they were a little confused as to what was happening. As Irene left the last tavern, she spotted a police car pulling up to the curb and walked over to it. She asked, "Are you looking for me?" Puzzled why indeed they were there, Irene held up her ax and said, "Well I got as many as I could!"

With that, Irene was arrested and locked up for the night. Her rampage was halted, at least for the moment.

As Irene sat in jail, refusing to accept bond, the rumor mill was working overtime. Stories of the ax-wielding, slot machine destroying woman were spreading all over town. Tavern owners who had been victim to Irene's wrath were asked for information, but all declined to talk. Yes, their machines had been destroyed, but they were illegal machines. If they talked or registered a complaint, they were admitting to harboring illegal equipment. Best to just let it go and hope this whole thing blows over.

But that wouldn't be the case. With no registered complaints, Irene Kite was released the next morning and drove straight to the newspaper offices where she told her story. That day, newspapers hailing Irene as the "Carrie Nation of Slot Machines" were all over town.

Carrie Nation's name registered more with people in the 1930s since Prohibition had been so prevalent in their lives. She had been a turn-of-the-century advocate of women's rights and alcohol temperance before the country went into Prohibition. Her claim to fame was ambushing taverns by swinging her trusty hatchet at booze bottles and furniture, all the while garnering publicity for her cause.

Now, Irene Kite was being compared to a modern day Carrie Nation, but not everyone was on-board with the comparison. For starters, Irene was completely forthcoming about her reasons for attacking the slot machines. Unlike Nation's stance against an immoral

impropriety, Irene Kite's motivations were strictly selfish. She was not against gambling, but acting out of anger because others were allowed to gamble and her husband wasn't.

The media however couldn't let a little thing like selfish motivations get in the way of a good story. A little woman going around town smashing slot machines with an ax was just too good a story not to exploit. Soon, newspapers across the world were telling the story of Irene Kite and her ax. She was a sensation!

The month of January might as well have been the month of Irene. Not a day went by that she wasn't giving an interview, or posing for pictures with her trusty ax. Through it all, her story never varied – she wanted to end gambling in southern Illinois simply because she couldn't be a part of it.

After a few week of relative quiet, Irene found a reason to wake up both her cause and her trusted ax. In an interview by East Alton's Mayor Van Preter, he was asked about Irene's accusations of rampant illegal gambling in his town. His words were direct, "It's a lotta baloney."

In asking for a response, Irene said it was time for another show of force.

This declaration to action however would be a major mistake. In her original raids, she had the



element of surprise, giving her a chance to attack the taverns before they even knew what hit them. Now, it had been a month of non-stop news coverage, complete with pictures and declarations of war. There would be no sneaking into taverns this time.

On the afternoon of February 2, 1938, Irene set off for her second run at justice. This time she was accompanied by a friend named Clarence Madrey, fellow anti-gambling enthusiast, to be her driver, giving her quick strike ability.

The two pulled up to the Blue Ribbon Tavern where Irene started her new campaign by politely asking if she could destroy the slot machines in the back. In front of

witnesses, including the table full of jurors, she wrecked one machine before the bartender stopped her from getting to the second.

Now cornered from doing any more damage, Irene bolted from the tavern and ran across the street to the Yoder's Tavern where she knew more machines were housed. As she approached the door, a quick thinking bartender lunged forward and just managed to snap the lock. Irene pounded on the glass, screaming, but stopped short of pulling out her ax. She knew that damaging more than the illegal gambling machines would get her in trouble.



Examples of area chips:

Top: Domino's (Alton), "JBI" Club Alamo (Alton)
 Bottom: "H.P.C." & "J.P.C." – Hyde Park Club (Venice);
 "VB" – Main St Cigar (Edwardsville)

Her latest deployment was not going so smoothly, and unfortunately for all involved, it was about to get much worse.

Knowing the entire town of Alton was now compromised, Irene flagged down Clarence and the two of them sped off towards neighboring Edwardsville. There was no lack of slot machines in southern Illinois, and Irene was not about to be stopped now.

As the car pulled into town, Irene jumped out in front of Louis Vanzo's Place and rushed in to find a bank of slot machines aligning the back wall. This time there would be no asking of permission, she just started hammering away. Within seconds she was swarmed by patrons and employees who disarmed her and threw her to the ground. Outside, Clarence Madrey witnessed the treatment and rushed in to help, only to find himself outnumbered and outmuscled. Irene was luckily enough to only be held back, but poor Clarence took a beating, leaving him bruised and injured.

Irene was led out the door, followed closely by Clarence being dragged to the curb. What had started as a publicity stunt had now gone completely wrong. Irene helped Clarence into the car and drove them back to Alton. The night had been a disaster.

In one day, the mood of the campaign had been decisively changed. What had started as a feel-good story about a little lady do-gooder was now a tale of violence and threats. Unfortunately for Irene, the people she was fighting had much more power than she did, and they wanted this war to end.

County officials went through the law books and "reinterpreted" the definition of private property. At first glance, it didn't seem like illegal slot machines would qualify, but what about when they weren't being used? Does the future potential for being illegal make them illegal now?

With this logic, county officials deemed slot machines private property, and Irene smashing

them could now be seen as a criminal offense. She was arrested and put in jail.

Irene refused all efforts to bail her out, instead opting to sit in jail to garner both sympathy and publicity. Outside, the public was clearly divided on how they felt. On the one hand, Irene's cause, although motivated by self-interest, was bringing to light a problem many citizens wanted cleaned up. On the other hand, not only is property being destroyed, but people are now getting hurt. A local dialog about the ends justifying the means was ongoing.

There is no better example of this moral conflict than when fifteen Protestant ministers took time out of their sermons to deliver resolutions from their pulpits which praised the feats of Alton's "lady with an ax." The next morning, an opinion piece in the local paper outlined what many in the town were thinking. The writer says, "On the surface the deeds of Mrs. Irene Kite might appear faintly admirable [...

but] Mrs. Kite goes around smashing slot machines because her gambler husband is not allowed to operate his own dice game. If Mr. Kite can't be in on the Alton gambling racket, then as long as she can swing an ax no one else shall be." Calling out the ministers... "Maybe the ministers justify their praise under the reasoning that any tool is righteous in a good cause" but concludes with, "It would be more understandable if they would influence their congregations to clean up Alton's vice situation for more admirable motives."

No doubt about it, the good citizens liked the action, but couldn't get behind the instrument. If Irene Kite was going to continue being the focus of this anti-gambling cause, it was time for a major makeover.

When Irene came out to her holding cell, she started a public relations transformation that she hoped would garner her more sympathy. For starters, she became a member, and soon spokesperson, for the local Better Law Enforcement League. Her job, officially, was to report on illegal



HITS A JACKPOT!

(Associated Press Wirephoto)
Mrs. Irene Kite, borrowing the hatchet-wielding methods of Carrie Nation, renews her one-woman war against slot machines in Alton, Ill. You can see her going into action against a "one-armed bandit."

gambling activity for the lobbying group. Unofficially, she was a name that would get them publicity.

It was also around this time that she seemed to have a change of heart about her motivations. In a matter of one day, she went from saying one thing, to something else entirely:

Feb 2, 1938 – “I’m an honest gambler who doesn’t like to be taken for a ride.” When the syndicate made her husband close shop, “That made me mad. Just because he was on the wrong side, they made him quit. Well, I said if Daniel can’t, nobody else can.”

Feb 3 (the next day) - Irene said, “her motives have been misinterpreted. She denied she was seeking revenge [... and] her purpose, she said, is to stamp out the crookedness and crime that is associated with gambling.”

It’s no coincidence that this about-face in motive coincided with a photo shoot at Irene’s home. Gone were the photos of her holding an ax. Now, the newspapers ran images of Irene in an apron; baking, dusting or coyly smiling while knitting. The days of a rough gambler’s wife were in the past. Irene Kite was now one of the masses, just another housewife



who wanted something better for her family. At least that was what she was attempting to portray.

But, as Irene was settling into her new life as a role-model for the morally righteous, she found herself embroiled in a scandal that would prove to be too much for her to return from. The papers called it a “crime against nature” and unfortunately for Irene, she would find herself in the middle of it.

It started with an elderly post office worker named William McNeil who was accused for having an affair

with another man. According to him, when the secret was revealed, Irene Kite, her husband Dan and the Kite’s associate William Williams all conspired to extort Mr. McNeil for \$300 in exchange for their silence. Instead, he went to the police, creating a media sensation unlike the small town had ever seen. News of the same-sex scandal trial was huge. The courtroom was packed and spectators were afraid to leave their seats for fear someone would take their spot. Media attention was constant, although somewhat lacking in detail – “The morning session had been marked by testimony that is unprintable, but the afternoon was to be worse.” When asked to describe the action between the two men “women in the courtroom gasped.”

It was a media sensation, and unfortunately for Irene, there is indeed such a thing as bad publicity. As she took the stand, her reputation was immediately under attack. They quizzed her about her rough childhood in correctional schools and her multiple failed marriages. Her history with gambling was on full display and eventually the image of the mousy housewife was all but washed away.

In the end, Irene was found not guilty of the extortion crime. What part she played couldn’t be proven one way or another, but the damage was definitely done. Finding supporters for a woman whose questionable morals were now laid out fully would be impossible. There would be no reinventing herself from this.

It had only been four short months between Irene smashing her first slot machine and her lost fame. Within days, news of Irene had stopped all together. Her fame was intense, but ultimately fleeting.

Irene’s story would pop up on occasion, usually in those “Remember when” pieces on big year anniversaries.

When her husband died in 1953, his obituary opened with, “Dan Kite, husband of Irene Kite smasher of slot machines in Alton taverns some years back...”.

I will assume Irene will go back into obscurity now until the year 2038 when the papers will memorialize the “100th anniversary of the Ax Wielding Lady of Alton”.

Until then, good night Irene.