

Hammers of Justice

IT MUST FEEL GOOD to demolish a slot machine with a sledgehammer: the swing of the heavy tool; the kinetic impact of a blunt instrument on an intricate mechanical device; the immensely satisfying explosion of glass, metal shards, and coins in every direction as you pound the machine over and over again until it lies, dismembered and inert, robbed of the power to accept anyone's nickels, dimes, and quarters.

Surely adding to the pleasure would be a belief that the destruction represented a blow against a civic evil. Witness Carrie Nation, who, in the early twentieth century, attacked saloons with a hatchet in her crusade for temperance. Her rampages inspired Prohibition, the era during which federal agents staged repeated assaults on barrels, stills, and bottles, sending an ocean of whiskey and beer down the drain.

For decades, cops and bluenosed politicians took up hammers, axes, and crowbars in the fight against illegal gambling in the Twin Cities. These acts were made-for-media events. Throughout most of the twentieth century, news photographers could not resist the spectacle; the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* contain dozens of images that show men obliterating pinball machines, roulette wheels, card tables, and other confiscated gambling paraphernalia.

I particularly like this image from 1928. Four law enforcement officers somewhere in the Twin Cities surround the spoils of a raid: about 10 slot machines whose wooden cases



Police take aim at doomed slot machines, 1928. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

resemble early radios. In an era when even hard physical labor was no excuse to dress down, the cop on the left has removed his suit coat for the occasion, but his vest and tie remain. Another one holds a hatchet, for more delicate work. The machines are arranged in a dingy basement, and you can be sure that none of them are getting out alive.

In those days, vice officers often called themselves the “morals squad” or the “purity squad”—ironic given the rampant corruption and payoffs that characterized early- to mid-twentieth-century policing in the Twin Cities. A mayor’s surprise that

people were playing the slots right under his nose was probably as genuine as Captain Renault’s shock over the gambling at Rick’s American Café in the 1940s movie *Casablanca*.

Even for the honest leaders, it would be hard to pass up the photo opportunity. A slot machine needs no judge and jury—just the hammer of justice to smash the gambling device to smithereens.

—James Eli Shiffer

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JAMES ELI SHIFFER is the author of *The King of Skid Row: John Bacich and the Twilight Years of Old Minneapolis* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). A professional journalist for more than 25 years, he works as an editor and staff writer at the *Star Tribune*.



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