

A GANGSTER'S LIFE AND TIMES



▲ Southern Illinois bootlegger Charlie Birger (center, sitting on car roof) and his gang at Shady Rest.
Photograph courtesy Gordon Pruett.

In the small coal-mining towns of Williamson County (Ill.) during Prohibition, rivals duked it out over criminal enterprises ranging from bootlegging to gambling. Charlie Birger, the most charismatic of these outlaws, ran several speakeasies and brothels in the 1920s. His gang and the Shelton gang teamed up to fight competition in their territory by the Ku Klux Klan. By 1926, however, he and the Sheltons had a falling-out that led to escalating violence, including the bombing of Birger's infamous roadhouse, Shady Rest, in 1927.

This stormy chapter of Southern Illinois history came to a close when Birger was convicted of murder and hanged in Benton in April 1928—the last man to die on the gallows in Illinois. Hundreds of people jammed the streets to see the spectacle. Eyewitness accounts say that Birger grinned and joked with officials. His last words? “It’s a beautiful world.”

David Kidd, who works for SIUC's Broadcasting Service, told the tale in a recently aired documentary, “The Legend of Charlie Birger.” This WSIU-TV production, which was funded in part by a \$10,000 Illinois Humanities Council grant, has received several honors, including a bronze Telly award, a Videographer Award of Excellence, and one of only two Certificates of Excellence in multimedia given by the Association of Illinois Museums and Historical Societies in 2004.

Kidd and his team interviewed eyewitnesses and historians and scoured the region for photographs and other artifacts. They also reenacted scenes from Birger's life, using local actors and musicians and filming in venues across Southern Illinois. Their work, the association said, “is an excellent example of how communities can come together to tell a common story.”