

How and Why do Historical Sources Disagree About the Life and Career of Bonnie Parker?



Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, snapshot taken in 1932 by a member of the Barrow Gang in Joplin, Missouri. Snapshot was found in their cabin in Joplin by the police and then sent to the newspapers.

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A. Abstract

This essay investigates the question “How and why do historical sources disagree about the life and career of Bonnie Parker?”

The investigation uses of a range of primary and secondary sources. “*The Bonnie and Clyde Scrapbook*” by B. Gelman and R. Lackmann¹. “*My Life With Bonnie and Clyde*” written by Blanche Caldwell Barrow², which consists of a personal Memoir written by “Buck” Barrow’s wife, (Clyde’s sister in law). Furthermore, usage is made of, “*The Family Story of Bonnie and Clyde*” by Marie Barrow Scoma in collaboration with Phillip W. Steele³, Clyde’s youngest sister. Additionally, the book, “*The Lives and Times of Bonnie and Clyde*” by E. R. Milner⁴ has been used along with the 1967 movie, “*Bonnie & Clyde*”, directed by Arthur Penn⁵ and a documentary from the BBC, “*The Real Bonnie & Clyde*.”⁶ Finally, all these sources contain extracts from, Bonnie’s personal diary, poems and letters and also several newspaper articles and police reports.

The Extended Essay is broken down into five main sections, the abstract, introduction, investigation, conclusion and bibliography (followed by the Appendices if necessary). The investigation is the main body of the essay. The investigation begins by briefly outlining its own structure to then present and evaluate the source material. Following this, the main debates are presented. Bonnie Parker’s life and career are given close consideration in order from three separate interpretations of her; the Orthodox Patriarchal interpretation, the Transitory Interpretation and finally the Feminist Interpretation. My personal opinion is then presented. Following this, I discuss why the sources present these different interpretations whilst referring to their reliability, origin and purpose.

The main conclusion reached in the investigation is that as one examines different periods of Bonnie Parker’s life, the sources will portray different girls, the Bonnie Parker of that period.

¹ *The Scrapbook consists of Bonnie Parker’s personal diary entries and poems, letters written by both Bonnie and Clyde to one another, newspapers articles and numerous photographs.* Gelman, B. & Lackmann, R. (1968), “The Bonnie and Clyde Scrapbook: The Letters, Poems and Diary of Bonnie Parker”, Personality Posters (ASIN: B0007FQ9B2).

² Barrow, Blanche Caldwell (2004), “My Life with Bonnie & Clyde”, University of Oklahoma Press (ISBN: 978-0-8061-3715-5)

³ Steele, Phillip W. & Barrow Scoma, Marie (2000), “The Family Story of Bonnie and Clyde”, Pelican Publishing Company (ISBN: 1-56554-756-X)

⁴ *Milner’s book is an account which draws on locally published accounts, previously untapped court records and archived but unpublished oral histories from sixty victims, neighbours, relatives and police.* Milner, E.R. (1996), “The lives and Times of Bonnie & Clyde”, Southern Illinois University Press (ISBN: 0-8093-2552-7)

⁵ Penn, Arthur (1967), “Bonnie and Clyde”, Warner Bros. Pictures.

⁶ Wilson, Chris (2009), “The Real Bonnie and Clyde”, BBC Timewatch.

Historical Relevance

The Bonnie and Clyde story encapsulated and reflected the tension in American society at the time of the Great Depression; their robberies gained such prominence on one level because they came to embody the raging argument about communism versus capitalism. For some, Bonnie and Clyde were romantic Robin Hood figures robbing the rich to feed the poor; whilst for others, they were unpatriotic Bolshevik thieves. At a time of this massive economic hardship and therefore political instability, they became mythologized and demonized in equal measure. The attempt to fix the Bonnie and Clyde story into the national mentality was a disguised attempt to promote a social system by different political groups.

Contemporary Relevance

The Bonnie Parker story in particular is a useful case study in the historiography of gender relations and social class in the historical record.

The orthodox, pre-feminist interpretation was that Bonnie Parker was a pitiable working class figure, manipulated and destroyed by an evil, stronger male; whereas the transitory interpretation was the idea that she was a strong but singular woman at least the equal of her lover in terms of determination and criminality; whilst the revisionist feminist interpretation she represents a new model of proletarian womanhood who refused to be withheld by the constraints either of society or of her menfolk. An interpretation that was far from being singular.

These conflicting interpretations highlight postmodernist concerns that all History – or "Her-story" in this case – is merely a linguistic construct reflecting more about the prejudices and preoccupations of the historians themselves rather than about the subject they feign to study.

Structure of Investigation

The investigation will examine how the various sources I have used seem to agree and disagree in their interpretations of Bonnie Parker. The sources overall seem to present three clear yet contrasting interpretations, an orthodox patriarchal interpretation, a transitory interpretation and finally a feminist interpretation. Then I will discuss reasons why the sources differ in their interpretations by evaluating them with regard to their origins and purposes to help reach the best conclusion in section D.

Source Material

The first primary source utilized in this investigation is a memoir, “*My Life with Bonnie & Clyde*”⁷, by Blanche Caldwell Barrow (edited by John Neal Philips). During the years 1933 to 1935, whilst in prison, Blanche “wrote a detailed account of her time with the Barrow Gang”⁸. Twelve years after Blanche’s death, good friend Esther L. Weiser stumbled upon the account and consulted, John Neal Philips⁹, to have a look at the account and help her publish it. This source manifests a particular value, it is the only eyewitness account that places historians inside cars and cabins with Bonnie and Clyde. Also, Blanche produced it only a couple of month after being captured, leaving her memory intact.

However, during Buck and Blanche’s final gunfight, Buck was gravely injured and later died in custody. She might have felt resentful towards Bonnie and Clyde and blamed them for her husband’s death and portrayed them in a bad light. Additionally, the scope of the source is inherently limited in that it presents only one viewpoint, one interpretation of what happened. Undoubtedly, “life writing has the potential to enrich our historical understanding in ways that cannot be replicated in other sources. But to understand [its] impact... we must complicate our thinking about the nature of historical understanding.”¹⁰

Other primary sources include “*the Letters, Poems and Diary of Bonnie Parker*”¹¹. The diary entries are succinct; the only entries recovered were from 1928. Bonnie and Clyde didn’t meet until 1930. However they remain extremely valuable sources when trying to establish Bonnie’s personal character, as are the letters she wrote to Clyde whilst he was in prison in 1930. Nonetheless, the scope of the source is again very limited. There are only seven diary entries, spread out over sixteen days. Bonnie would have changed

⁷ Barrow, Blanche Caldwell (2004), “*My Life with Bonnie & Clyde*”, University of Oklahoma Press (ISBN: 978-0-8061-3715-5). Blanche was married to Clyde’s older brother, Buck Barrows, both were accomplices of the Barrow’s Gang. They first met Bonnie and Clyde on the 29th of March 1933 and persisted in being members of the Gang until their capture on the 24th of July that same year.

⁸ Wilson, Chris (2009), “The Real Bonnie and Clyde”, BBC Timewatch.

⁹ John Neal Philips is “the most highly regarded Bonnie and Clyde historian in American”. Ibid

¹⁰ Wallach, Jennife Jensen (2006), “BUILDING A BRIDGE OF WORDS: THE LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL”, Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/bsps/additionalcontent/18/22445254/BUILDING-A-BRIDGE-OF-WORDS-THE-LITERARY-AUTOBIOGRAPHY-AS-HISTORICAL-SOURCE-MATERIAL> (10/12/2009)

¹¹ Gelman, B. & Lackmann, R. (1968), “The Bonnie and Clyde Scrapbook: The Letters, Poems and Diary of Bonnie Parker”, Personality Posters (ASIN: B0007FQ9B2)

drastically from when she was eighteen to when she was twenty-four, in 1934. The poems offer an emotional insight and her sentiments towards the circumstances she was living in. However, a poem's purpose is not written to provide a factual account. A certain degree of imagination and creativity must be used when writing a poem, making the source inevitably flavoured with bias.

The secondary sources include a very careful account of Bonnie and Clyde by E.R. Milner called "*The Lives and Times of Bonnie & Clyde*"¹². It relies "on primary sources – oral history, personal memoirs, newspaper articles, official records, diaries and letters."¹³ This immediately imposes limitations upon the source; since it can only ever be as reliable as the primary sources it has relied upon to produce this secondary source. Still it is able to offer an informed overview of the lives of Bonnie and Clyde, based on numerous sources. "Secondary sources are therefore essential for background information and to tell us what other historians know about the subject."¹⁴, able to offer a wider historical context than, for example a memoir, allowing us to evaluate that source more fairly.

Furthermore, Ted Hinton's book, "*Ambush: The Real Story of Bonnie and Clyde*"¹⁵ was also of use. Ted Hinton was a member of the posse that ambushed and killed Bonnie and Clyde. It is hard to ignore that this makes Hinton himself almost compelled to view Bonnie and Clyde negatively. The fact that the Barrow's gang ultimately killed at least nine police officers only encourages an unfavourable depiction of the couple by Hinton. I also examined the book "*The Family Story of Bonnie and Clyde*"¹⁶ by Phillip W. Steele, written with the aid of Marie Barrow Scoma, Clyde's youngest sister. The family association questions the source's value; almost systematically would it show favouritism towards Bonnie and especially Clyde. However, the couple rarely saw their families, making their contact with Marie and her knowledge of Bonnie and Clyde's life minimal. Also of interest is the film "Bonnie and Clyde" produced 1967, directed by Arthur Penn, with Faye Dunaway as Bonnie. And finally, I analysed a BBC documentary called "The Real Bonnie and Clyde" aired in 2009. The film and documentary are valuable as it shows some aspects of the culture the couple lived in and the way in which they dressed. Factually the film is a very flawed source, the timeline of events have been altered to allow a more logical narrative flow. Such sources need "to be treated with caution because they were created for the purposes of their producers, not necessarily with an eye to accuracy or truthfulness."¹⁷

¹² Milner, E.R. (1996), "The lives and Times of Bonnie & Clyde", Southern Illinois University Press (ISBN: 0-8093-2552-7)

¹³ Barnes & Nobles, "The Lives and Times of Bonnie & Clyde", <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/The-Lives-and-Times-of-Bonnie-and-Clyde/E-R-Milner/e/9780809325528> (10/12/09)

¹⁴ Sennet, Alan (07/01/2005), "Film as a Historical Source", open2.net, <http://www.open2.net/historyandthearts/history/primarysource.html> (11/12/09)

¹⁵ Hinton, Ted (1979), "Ambush: The Real Story of Bonnie and Clyde", Shoal Creek Publishers (ISBN-13: 978-0883190418),

¹⁶ Steele, Phillip W. & Barrow Scoma, Marie (2000), "The Family Story of Bonnie and Clyde", Pelican Publishing Company (ISBN: 1-56554-756-X)

¹⁷ Sennet, Alan (07/01/2005), "Film as a Historical Source", open2.net, <http://www.open2.net/historyandthearts/history/primarysource2.html> (11/12/09)

How the Sources Differ.

Amongst all the sources that I have evaluated and even within one single source, three distinct different Bonnies have emerged or instead three separate interpretations of Bonnie Parker.

Firstly, there is the Orthodox Patriarchal interpretation which portrays Bonnie as a weak and innocent young girl who “was afraid of the dark, as well as bugs and snakes”¹⁸, “enjoyed being the centre of attention”¹⁹ and “loved poetry and music”²⁰. During robberies, she merely stayed in the car as a look-out as she wrote her poetry.

Then the Transitory interpretation, Bonnie the alcoholic and drug addict, who was “drunk most of the time”²¹, so drunk that “she could hardly walk”²².

And finally there is the Feminist interpretation, where Bonnie is a strong and representative woman. The media nicknamed her a “gun-carrying, cigar-smoking gang thug”²³, always right there next to Clyde shooting at the lawmen and robbing banks.

1. The Orthodox Patriarchal Interpretation

The Orthodox Patriarchal interpretation presents the classic, pre-feminist view of women, those oppressed by their society and culture, those who by themselves are weak and insignificant, thus need a male figure to survive.

This is initially portrayed in Bonnie’s characteristics and actions. In her diary, just after her husband left, Bonnie numerously stated she felt “very blue” and “lonesome” for weeks in a row. It demonstrates the effect of losing a lover had on Bonnie, how fragile she becomes without a man in her life. Having already lost her first lover might have discouraged the idea of leaving Clyde despite her life getting increasingly more dangerous by the day, as she feared life without love, without a man.

Additionally, the movie presents Bonnie as a pretty, young woman who merely chose the gangster lifestyle because of her love for Clyde. “When it became apparent that she would have to make a choice between the two [Clyde or the Law], Clyde won.”²⁴ Running off with such facileness indicates her life had no real importance or significance, thus was abandoned without hesitation. Portraying Bonnie this way reinforces the romantic aspect of their life. In simplified terms, the storyline presents a beautiful, young and innocent woman who falls in love with the courageous, handsome thief. Such storylines are very popular and sell extremely well.

The interpretation of Bonnie being somewhat of an ‘underdog’ oppressed by society, is emphasized when examining the relationship Bonnie and Clyde shared. Blanche’s account, on occasion, suggests they had a somewhat physically violent relationship. They argued frequently, mostly over petty things, ‘they kept arguing until they both were mad enough to fight... Clyde wasn’t very easy with her. He knocked her across the bedroom a couple of times but she got up and went back for more.’²⁵ Even if Bonnie wished to fight back, she was powerless against Clyde, just as she was powerless

¹⁸ Barrow, op.cit., page 104

¹⁹ Milner, op.cit., page 25

²⁰ Ibid., page 63

²¹ Barrow, op.cit., page 25

²² Ibid.

²³ Hinton, op.cit., page 39

²⁴ Gelman & Lackmann, op.cit., page 18

²⁵ Ibid.

in her society to do anything other than follow Clyde. Another fight describes Bonnie about “to shoot [Clyde], but Buck grabbed the gun out of her hand... He always separated them... especially if one of them got too rough”²⁶ Again, a man restrained her. The use of a gun shows she knows she can only hurt him with a gun; all other weapons still make her weaker than Clyde. In terms of the source, Blanche is the only eyewitness, placing us in the room. When she wrote the account of her life with them, it was not in her immediate intent for it to later become a book, adding to the source’s reliability.

Not only physically violent, several sources suggest Clyde was also quite dominant over Bonnie. In the movie, Clyde says, “Change that, I don’t like it”²⁷, referring to her hairstyle. Instantly, she stops eating and re-styles it. Normally, something so minute would be overlooked, however other, more reliable sources have backed this up. Miller’s book describes an event that highlights Clyde’s dominance and might also justify some of her criminal activity. Clyde behind the wheel, whilst in pursuit, “laid [a] rifle across Bonnie’s lap, with the barrel stick out the window. He told Bonnie to hold it up and shoot. She did.”²⁸ It is as if her own thoughts are completely neglected as soon as Clyde asked her anything.

Bonnie’s criminal activity, when reading Steele’s book, “The Family Story of Bonnie and Clyde”, is practically non-existent. There is not a single mention of Bonnie ever firing a gun; killing someone or even entering the establishment the Gang was robbing. For most of the robberies Bonnie was either in Jail, at her mother’s house or lying in a rented cabin recovering from her burn injuries. When present, she would remain in the car, as the “look-out”²⁹. Milner’s account supports this.³⁰ When the actual robbery took place, Bonnie was posted “as a guard with orders to sound the horn in the event of trouble”³¹. Her criminal activity only involved planning, demonstrating the degree to which Bonnie and her capabilities are undervalued, all she had left to do was write poetry whilst she waited.

Finally, after Bonnie’s accident, Clyde takes extreme care of Bonnie due to her weakened physical state, he treated her wounds, “changed Bonnie’s dressings”³² and “carr[ied] Bonnie”³³ to the car when their hideout was being too hot and they were obliged to move rapidly.

²⁶ Ibid., Page 72

²⁷ Begin Scene of 4, Bonnie and Clyde are having lunch in a dinner. Penn, Arthur (1967), “Bonnie and Clyde”, Warner Bros. Pictures.

²⁸ Barrow, op.cit., page 66

²⁹ Steele, op.cit., page 78

³⁰ Milner, op.cit., page 51-2, “Though [Clyde] did not allows Bonnie to participate in actual robberies, Clyde permitted her to go to the bank to look over the floor plans and report back on the positions of guards and other strategic info.”

³¹ Ibid., page 52. Mostly she simply “sat in the black Ford coupe (or which ever car they had at that time) and watch the unfolding scene.”

³² Milner, op.cit., page 92

³³ Ibid., page 90

2. The Transitory Interpretation

This interpretation presents Bonnie as a strong but singular woman, suggesting that she was merely one isolated case. She should only be looked at as an exceptional event, not representative of other women during this time.

Solely Blanche's book, *My Life with Bonnie & Clyde*, seems to indicate that Bonnie was a heavily drinking and drug addict after her car accident in 1933. Other sources merely hit at the idea. She is described as very slothful, who "seldom got up before twelve noon or one o'clock"³⁴. Blanche seems to suggest that her room was always a mess, she could not cook and had a very short temper. Additionally, she describes "Clyde and Bonnie [to be] crazy drunk... Bonnie was nearly out cold"³⁵ Bonnie "often told [Blanche] she was happier when she had something to drink. So [Blanche] did not blame her for staying drunk most of the time, if it made her happier." Despite this not being the traditional portrait of a strong and powerful woman, one must remember the society conditions they lived in due to the Great Depression. The luxury of being able to get up at in the afternoon, drink all day and not have to cook was very rare during those times.

Furthermore, when Clyde began to sense the end was approaching, "Clyde asked Bonnie to write a letter to Dallas authorities in which she would surrender, but Bonnie refused and said they would die together."³⁶ This demonstrates that, despite the disagreement on the extent of her criminal activities, she was well aware that the criminal activity around her was having a great effect on her. However, as long as Clyde was alive, she would be right beside him. This was her problem to worry about and not his and something she decided independently, against Clyde's advise.

This interpretation of Bonnie, to me seems very accurate and can be best justified when looking at Bonnie on a broader scale, rather than isolated events. The whole existence of Bonnie and Clyde and the reason we still remember them today is because during those times, Bonnie's actions were unprecedented for a woman. Bonnie decided to demonstrate a complete disregard for her so-called "capitalist obligations" as a woman and broke free from them with Clyde's aid. Despite the numerous male criminals around during that time, 'Machine Gun' Kelly, Al Capine, John Dillinger, none of them actually had a female member in their gang. The thought of an independent female thug was even more far-fetched. Bonnie's actions required a great deal of strength and independence, and arguably that is the reason why they became so notorious.

³⁴ Barrow, op.cit., page 43

³⁵ Ibid, page 78

³⁶ Simmons, Lee (1957), "Assignment Huntsville: Memoirs of a Texas Prison Official", University of Texas Press (ASIN: B0007E6W56)

3. The Feminist Interpretation

The Feminist interpretation depicts Bonnie as a strong, yet representative woman. Bringing forth the idea that Bonnie's actions represented those of numerous women during her time.

The media was rather successful in depicting this interpretation; they named her the "gun-carrying, cigar-smoking gang thug". The media was extremely interested in Bonnie and often wrote about her and Clyde, yet they had very little information on her. Newspapers began to associate Bonnie with these "gang thug" characteristics after the police had ambushed a cabin the Barrow Gang had rented out in Joplin. There, they had left several personal items behind, "two rolls of photographic film... The pictures revealed that... the gang boastfully displayed officers' weapons they had stolen during kidnappings. One of the prints showed Bonnie with a cigar clenched between her teeth while she brandished two pistols. This photo was... a joke"³⁷. But the newspapers branded her as a "gun-carrying, cigar-smoking gang thug"³⁸. Bonnie did not even smoke cigars. Despite the 'nick-name' being incorrect, it did not stop people who read these newspapers to believe it. This depiction of Bonnie was great for the media; people were intrigued by this female, hence bought a newspaper.

In terms of her relationship with Clyde, there is no disagreement that they shared an enormous amount of love for each other and were prepared to do anything for one another, "Clyde fell in love with Bonnie almost instantly and never romantically considered another woman again". Blanche states that if something were to happen to Bonnie or Clyde "the survivor would have committed suicide... They loved one another too much to live without each other", emotionally establishing very equal levels for Bonnie and Clyde.

Furthermore, during Clyde's time in prison in 1930, Clyde "heard rumours of Bonnie becoming tired of waiting for him and dating others...[he thus] arranged for an injury...his inmate friend chopped off two of his toes"³⁹ causing him to be paroled, as Clyde had planned, and able to go back to Bonnie. This event demonstrated that Clyde was equally as much head-over-heels about Bonnie and fully prepared to make sacrifices for her. The traditional male-female roles appear slightly inversed. Bonnie shows authority and detachment from Clyde by moving on and dating other men, whilst Clyde demonstrates emotional weakness and dependence by chopping of his own toes to be able to see Bonnie.

Finally, when looking at Bonnie's criminal activity, the 1967 movie depicts Bonnie to be very criminally active. In scene 9 and beginning of 15, Bonnie holds a handgun during an armed robbery (without firing it), then again in scene 15 and 24 she shoots countless times to try to fight off surrounding lawmen. As the movie was made some thirty years after Bonnie and Clyde were killed, Bonnie's character appears somewhat more modern and contemporary than in other sources. This adaptation to her character suggests that during the 1920s the mere presence of Bonnie in the gang was enough to fascinate people, but thirty years later it took more action and drama to catch people's attention. Possibly because for women to desire independent, personal freedom had become more acceptable.

³⁷ Milner, op.cit., page 66. Photo shown in Appendix A.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Steele, op.cit., Page 47-48

Why the sources differ.

a. Complexity of the human subject matter

My personal opinion is that Bonnie was, to some degree, all of these interpretations at different stages of her life. Before she met Clyde, she was indeed an orthodox, pre-feminist girl who was hurt, lonely and slightly depressed due to her husband leaving. This experience made her stronger and possibly gave her the strength to run off with Clyde and live his criminal lifestyle. It is highly unlikely for Bonnie to not once have picked up and shot a gun during all those years on the run and all the time they were being pursued. Finally after her accident, she began to take several drugs to ease the pain. However, I do not think that she was an alcoholic or drug addict to the extent Blanche Burrow describes her to be, as it seems highly improbable for her to be able to continuously outrun the police in such states. The sources vary on whom actually Bonnie was, either because they focus on different periods of her life or because it is more beneficial to the source to portray her in a certain way, as mentioned above when referring to her depiction in the movie. What is important to consider, is that after her accident in June 1933, when Bonnie's body was pinned under the tipped-over car as her nylon stockings set on fire⁴⁰, she spent many month recuperating, which meant she was unable to execute any sort of physical exercise, let alone armed robbery. Consequently making it almost impossible to be this strong feminist. Her body was simply too weak to withstand such physical demands.

b. Limitations of the historical source material

As has become evident, there are some quite substantial disagreements between the sources. Together presenting three almost very different interpretations of Bonnie. There is disagreement on Bonnie's character, her relationship with Clyde, and criminal activity which all feed nicely into the three interpretations outlined above. Was she an alcoholic or a sweet, young girl who loved poetry? Was she right there next to Clyde, shouting at the police and robbing banks or was she merely the Gang's lookout?

Disagreements between the sources, when referring to Bonnie's character, are justifiable when considering that every source has a different origin and purpose, each shining a different light on Bonnie. For example, Blanche's memoir is the only source that is able to give insight on Bonnie's daily life as Blanche actually lived with Bonnie for three months. Her book was published in 2004. Arthur Penn's Film, "Bonnie and Clyde", produced in 1967 did not have this source to draw any information from and instead used other sources such as newspapers and police reports to get an idea of who Bonnie was. When there was no evidence available that described Bonnie in the gang's car or cabin, Penn simply had to use his imagination when shooting such scenes.

The film illustrates the classical representation of Bonnie that most people nowadays possess, Bonnie is the infamous female gangster from the 1920-30s romanticized couple "Bonnie and Clyde", who shared a socially equal relationship. It shows that Bonnie was just as criminally active as Clyde was, the fact that she was a woman did not make her less of a criminal. In contrast, Steele and Scoma's book, which

⁴⁰ "Much of the skin from Bonnie's hip to her ankle had been terribly buried and in some places had exposed the bone". Milner, op.cit., page 82.

is a much more factual account of their story, has not one single mention of Bonnie even holding a firearm, let alone firing one. On top of this, Milner's book states, "[Clyde] did not allow Bonnie to participate in actual robberies"⁴¹.

I think the sources disagree here due to the fact that my secondary sources, especially the movie and newspaper reports, are sources that were made to sell and make money. Thus making it more interesting to 'spice' the truth up a bit, appealing more to the general public, who are then more likely to go out and buy the newspapers and film.

⁴¹ Milner, op.cit., page 51. Yet, there are numerous mentions throughout the book stating her job was that of, "a guard with orders to sound the horn in the event of trouble." Page 52

D. Conclusion

This investigation had sought to answer the question “How and Why do Historical Sources Disagree About the Life and Career of Bonnie Parker’s?”

With regard to how the sources differ, the main disagreements lie within three central aspects of Bonnie Parker’s life. One, a great deal of variance is present when depicting Bonnie’s character and the kind of person she was. Two, the sources failed to agree on the extent of her criminal activities. And three, almost all source describe a different kind of relationship she shared with Clyde. These disagreements amongst the sources enabled me to draw three separate interpretations of Bonnie, portraying her as three very different women.

With regard to why the sources differ, two clear points emerge.

The first point relates to the subject matter itself. Bonnie was a complex character whose life drastically changed at least four times in the space of five years. She went from being somewhat depressed after her first husband left her, to almost over-joyful when first running with Clyde, then in April 1932 Bonnie spent three months in prison and finally in June 1933 she was severely injured due to the car accident, which rendered her physically inept for at least 3 months. My point here is that such life experiences often drastically change a person, thus depending on what period of Bonnie life a source is describing, different interpretations are presented.

Secondly, the origin and purpose of the sources themselves present various weaknesses. Blanche’s book could only ever cover a very short period of time of Bonnie and Clyde’s life as she only ran with them for three months. Additionally, this source’s main purpose is to recount Blanche’s life rather than Bonnie or Clyde’s life. Ultimately, we find out more about Blanche than Bonnie and Clyde put together. Steele’s book will undoubtedly not shed negative light upon the couple, as Clyde’s sister is its co-author. Newspaper reports are notoriously unreliable due to their commercial motives and political agendas. And finally, all of the sources produced by Bonnie herself only cover a period of three months tops, making the scope of the source very limited. Also, as Bonnie only began to catch the attentions of the public once she joined the Barrow gang, there is very little information on Bonnie before Clyde. This makes it difficult to judge to what extent Clyde’s influence affected Bonnie.

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Appendix A:



Snapshot of Bonnie Parker in 1930, Joplin. "The Bonnie and Clyde Scrapbook: The Letters, Poems and Diary of Bonnie Parker", Personality Posters (ASIN: B0007FQ9B2), page 31.