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TEMPERANCE - NOT AN AMERICAN VIRTUE

Saturday, May 14, 1932, was the day of the big parades. Throughout the country in cities and in small towns bands played, and thousands marched carrying signs and banners. These parades were not held to recognize heroes or to celebrate a holiday; they were held to honor Beer, which had been denied to Americans since Prohibition became law in 1919.

In Detroit 15,000 people marched. In New York City the parade, led by Mayor Jimmy Walker, lasted all day long and into the night. In Daytona Beach the marchers actually dispensed illegal beer to the spectators along the route.

By 1932 most Americans were thoroughly sick of national Prohibition. Most had decided that they had been misled - duped by a band of fanatics into the ill-advised "Noble Experiment" which had only caused lawlessness, more drunkenness, and undesired social changes. In 1919 a majority of Americans had favored Prohibition, a narrow and unstable majority perhaps, but a majority nevertheless. Many states were already Dry and in Wet states there were Dry cities and counties. During World War I a form of Prohibition had been imposed on servicemen with general approval. Newton D. Baker, the Secretary of War and a notable Dry, Proudly proclaimed that the government would guarantee every American mother that her son would never have a drop of liquor touch his lips. Baker was as good as his word, and

the Doughboy served in the driest war in American history.

Americans, in 1919, had been indoctrinated by persistent and effective propaganda against liquor, and this propaganda had been going on for over eighty years. Since the 1830's organized groups had campaigned against liquor with the same fervor and with more political sagacity than feminists and ERA supporters show today. Thus, when the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified there is no doubt that it had the approval of the majority.

What is remarkable is the way in which the work of eighty years was undone in a mere fourteen as a result of the experience of living under Prohibition. Prohibition taught the American people that moral values cannot be legislated unless they are, in fact, held by an overwhelming majority of people. Many people who had firmly believed in Prohibition came around to the viewpoint which Abraham Lincoln expressed in 1840: "Prohibition will work great injury to the cause of temperance. It is a species of intemperance within itself, for it goes beyond the bounds of reason in that it attempts to control man's appetite by legislation and makes a crime out of things that are not crimes. A prohibition law strikes at the very principles upon which our Government was founded."

Lincoln's measured statement was early evidence of the judgment and steadfastness which he brought to many impassioned issues during the Civil War. Lincoln, the most Ameri-

can of Presidents, well understood that temperance was not an American virtue. Nothing illustrates this truth more than the bitter animosities which Prohibition aroused. Friends and foes of alcohol were alike in their disdain of each other. Feelings ranged from condescending pity, at best, for their benighted ignorance, to fierce hatred, at worst, for their indefensible immorality.

To a disinterested observer today the ironic part is that, while the battle lines of prohibition have never changed, the members of the opposing armies have changed sides often. Supporters of alcohol one day became its bitter foes the next; and staunch Prohibitionists became Wets. Prohibition, once a most liberal social viewpoint, is now considered one of the most reactionary. These role reversals were caused by changing social, cultural, ethical, and regional values.

First of all, let us acknowledge that Americans in the early Nineteenth Century had a problem of sizable dimensions in the misuse of alcohol. The English visitor Captain Marryat declared: "Americans can fix nothing without a drink. If you meet, you drink. If you part, you drink. If you make an acquaintance, you drink; if you close a bargain, you drink. They quarrel in their drink, and they make it up with a drink. They drink because it is hot; they drink because it is cold. If successful in elections, they drink to rejoice; if not, they drink and swear. They begin to drink early in the morning, they leave off late at night;

they commence it early in life and they continue it until they soon drop into the grave."

In 1830 Maine had thirteen distilleries which turned out one million gallons of rum, much of it dispensed through five hundred taverns. With a population of only 450,000, Maine had two thousand places where intoxicating liquors were sold. In Portland, the largest city, it was the custom to toll the Town Hall bell at midmorning and midafternoon to announce a drinking break for all employees. Despite its reputation as the hardest drinking state in the Union, Maine in 1846 passed the first Prohibition Law.

The Prohibition movement, Abolition, Women's Suffrage, and Capital Punishment were four great reform movements which came to a head in the 1830's. The heart, soul, and voice of all these movements was in New England, and they generally shared the same followers.

It is hard to believe that the Puritan ancestors of these reformers only a few generations before had described liquor as "one of the good creatures of God, to be received with Thanksgiving." So highly did these Puritan colonists prize liquor that it was customary in some towns to seal a bottle of whiskey into the cornerstone of a new church or public building. Their taverns were not only licensed to sell liquor, they were required by law to keep sufficient supplies on hand at all times. Remember that the original wealth of New England was founded in part on the famous "triangular trade" in which New England vessels carried

rum to West Africa to swap for slaves which were then transported to the West Indies and sold for sugar and molasses which were brought back to New England for distilling into rum.

Indeed pious Puritans appreciated rum more than they did their fellow Christians. Here is an instructive letter written by Cotton Mather, the most famous Puritan preacher:

There is now at sea a ship called the Welcome, which has on board an hundred or more of the heretics and malignants called Quakers, with W. Penn, who is the chief scamp, at the head of them.

The general court has accordingly given secret orders to Master Malachi Muscott, of the brig Porpoise, to waylay the said Welcome, slyly, as near the Cape of Cod as may be, and make captive the said Penn and his ungodly crew, so that the Lord may be glorified, and not mocked on the soil of this new country with the heathen worship of these people. Much spoil can be made by selling the whole lot to Barbadoes, where slaves fetch good prices in rum and sugar, and we shall not only do the Lord great service by punishing the wicked, but we shall make great good for his ministers and people.

Master Muscott feels hopeful and I will set down the news when the ship comes back.

Yours in ye bowels of Christ,

COTTON MATHER

The Porpoise failed to intercept the Welcome and Penn sailed on to his colony, where as an adjunct to his own house he built a brewery.

The simple truth is that all the colonists - English, Dutch, French, Spanish, Puritan, Quaker, Anglican, or Catholic - came from societies which used beer, whiskey, and wine without notable social problems and with full religious and moral approval. Yet in the American setting the descendants of these settlers had great difficulty controlling their use of liquor. The conclusion is inescapable that there was something in American life which made the difference.

It is recognized that the proper use of alcohol must be learned in every society. Society sets the mores, the acceptable standards of behavior, and these are taught in the home and in religious and public ceremonies. Also implied is a system of shared values and social stability. All of these requirements were lacking in America. First, the Colonists themselves were hardly the most stable elements of the old society. They were political and religious dissenters, failed tradesmen, adventurers, and younger sons seeking their fortunes. They possessed drive, energy, and ambition but not temperance and stability. The temperate, stable, successful types stayed at home.

These pioneers entered a land where survival required exercise of the will. They had to contend with Indians, weather, and even the land itself. The family was crucial

for survival, but it was not socializing to the same extent as the European family. Boys left home at sixteen or even younger, and many girls were mothers at fifteen. The village was not a stable, comfortable haven but a way-station to the frontier.

Life was competitive to the extreme. In addition, society was fragmented by a constant stream of new arrivals of different nationality, political views, and religions. Finally, the American premise of liberty as an inalienable right was uplifting but it was also destabilizing.

For most people in the colonial and pioneer days liquor was the chief if not the only means of relaxation. There is little wonder that it was abused.

The 1830's are perhaps the most important decade of American history. Most of the important social and political issues and decisions which exist today, such as civil rights and women's rights, took form in this period. Sectional differences were cast in iron. The most divisive issue was Abolition, and because so many abolitionists were Dry, the temperance movement became connected with it. This meant, of course, that temperance was anathema in the South just as it was an article of faith in the Mid-West. Schools like Oberlin in Ohio were founded upon the joint principles of abolition and prohibition.

Kentucky was a divided state on Prohibition as well as Abolition. Kentucky produced a notable temperance lecturer,

Thomas Marshall, a former Whig congressman, but it also was the home of bourbon whiskey and the mint julep.

The churches, officially, as well as the members individually, in the South at this time took no position on liquor. As far as they were concerned it was still one of the "good creatures of God", especially since it was condemned by Yankee Abolitionists, who also condemned God's institution of slavery. Bourbon whiskey, in fact, was first produced in Kentucky by a Baptist preacher, the Rev. Elijah Craig, near Georgetown around 1780.

In the Deep South, society, except for the slaves, was Wet. Liquor was denied to the slaves except twice a year. The biggest celebration was at Christmas. They were given gifts, time off from work, and one or two days on which they were allowed to drink hot toddies, egg nog, rum, whiskey, or hard cider. The other celebration took place in late summer after the crops were made. Then the slaves were given a holiday and a ration of rum or whiskey. This summer celebration was the origin of "Nigger Day", which was observed every August 8th until quite recent times.

While temperance became a national issue in the 1830's, the first great temperance crusader appeared fifty years earlier. He was Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, who was Surgeon General of the Continental Armies. He was a free thinker in religious matters, and his views on alcohol were not acceptable to traditional churchmen. However Rush had considerable influence on Thomas Jefferson, who tried to get

Americans to give up whiskey and rum in favor of cider and wine. Jefferson's views on most issues were gospel to his followers but not in this case.

Rush gradually influenced a wide circle of opinion makers, particularly in New England. The old Puritan authoritarianism was declining and the more humanistic doctrines of Universalism and Unitarianism were gaining support. In 1810 the Prohibition movement made a notable convert. After attending a boozy gathering of clergymen at an ordination service in Plymouth, Massachusetts, Lyman Beecher, the ancestor of Harriet Beecher Stowe, first resolved to be a temperance activist. "They had a great deal of spirituality on the Sabbath," he said, "and not much when there was something good to drink.....Twas that that woke me up for the war." Beecher was instrumental in the founding of the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance, the first national organization of its kind. In the beginning the Society discreetly refrained from demanding abstinence from its members, urging temperance only. Members were asked to pledge themselves to varying degrees of temperance. The highest degree was total abstinence, and members who signed this pledge were marked in the rolls with a "T" for "Total" beside their names, whence the term "teetotaler."

There was a class conflict inherent in the Prohibition movement in addition to the sectional conflict. The Drys tended to be upper class, educated, and idealistic. The objects of their interest, the persons whom they intended

to save from "Demon Rum", were generally laborers, factory workers, or rural hired hands. The conflict took on an ethnic tone as the flood of Irish Catholic immigrants began in the 1840's. The Irish did not understand why they should be denied a drink, and they opposed the Prohibition laws which the Drys were constantly introducing in the state legislatures. They turned to the political bosses of Boston, Tammany Hall, and other large Eastern cities for help.

The Prohibitionists were always political activists. From the beginning they took their cue from the Abolitionists, who wanted laws against slavery. The Drys lobbied in the state legislatures to get Prohibition laws passed. In addition to Maine, Massachusetts and Michigan passed such laws only to repeal them. In other states they were passed and repealed more than once. The occasion for Lincoln's remarks was the debate upon a Prohibition Bill in the Illinois House of Representatives where he was a member.

The Prohibitionists were usually Whigs, but they did not get much help from their party. Most distillers, tavern owners, merchants, and businessmen were also Whigs, and they opposed Dry legislation.

The Democrats had no such problem. Then as now, they represented a coalition of interest groups which happened to share an opposition to Prohibition - big city laborers, ethnic groups, the frontier states, and the South. The identification of the Democrats with liquor became so great that

the Rev. Samuel Burchard was speaking the truth when he unwisely called them the party of "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" in remarks on behalf of James G. Blaine in the 1884 Presidential race. Incidentally Blaine lost by fewer than 25,000 popular votes, probably due to the loss of the Irish vote as a result of Burchard's unfortunate remarks.

After the Irish came the Germans in the 1840's and '50's, bringing a taste for beer and wine with them. Many German religious societies emigrated en masse to occupy new lands in Missouri and Iowa. Herman, Missouri, was founded by one such group in the '30's because the hills overlooking the Missouri River reminded them of the Rhine River Valley. They proceeded to plant grapes on the hillsides and built wineries, still in operation today. In Iowa the Mennonites founded the Amana Colonies, where they still produce and sell their own fruit wines and beer.

The flood of Wets did not daunt the Drys, however. They continued to push their program. They founded their own political party, the Prohibition Party, which was surprisingly effective in influencing the Democrat and Republican platforms even though it never came close to electing a President.

In the second half of the Nineteenth Century two important events were taking place - reconstruction of the South, and the rise of the Women's Christian Temperance Union under the leadership of Frances Willard. Reconstruction and the WCTU turned the South into a bastion of Prohibition. It must be remembered that the South was morally as well as

physically and economically shattered after the Civil War. Southerners sincerely believed that it was by Divine Will that they had held the Negroes in slavery. They had been so taught by all their preachers, and they had been willing to see their churches irreparably split from their Northern brethren rather than concede that slavery could be wrong. Defeat in the war meant, they felt, that God had rejected the South, but not because of slavery as the Abolitionists would have it. Instead they decided that the South had lost the war because of Southern intemperance, and Frances Willard was there to make sure that the message was understood and acted upon.

Willard was one of the most capable organizers and propagandists that the country has ever produced, and the WCTU was really her creation. She was tireless in her efforts to organize women. She politicked, spoke, wrote, raised funds; and she almost singlehandedly sold the Prohibition program to the women of the South. The women's missionary societies of the churches were the nuclei of the WCTU local chapters.

The WCTU Chapters in the South in the 1880's and '90's helped greatly to bring the South back into national life as Southern women attended conventions, corresponded with women in other parts of the country, and generally became involved in a national movement.

Coinciding with the guilt and disappointment over the war was the determination to deny liquor to the Blacks.

Many people remembered the semi-annual holidays of the slaves feared that if the free Negro had access to liquor his conduct would be uncontrollable.

Southern white men were overwhelmed by the WCTU tide. While the men still ran the churches and the political institutions and had no sympathy with women's suffrage, they could not withstand the unrelenting pressure at home. The missionary societies had become power centers in the churches. The women taught Sunday School classes and indoctrinated the children. They were also the public school teachers. They were everywhere.

In the Mid-West the situation was the same. There, in addition to the WCTU, the Anti-Saloon League flourished. Women organized civil disobedience groups to block sidewalks in front of saloons, to heckle customers, and to write down names of all who entered. They endured insults and allowed themselves to be carted off to jail. They became suffragettes and demanded the right to vote so that they could punish legislators friendly to the liquor interests.

So the Mid-West and the South were now partners in supporting Prohibition; old antagonisms were forgotten in the urgency of the cause. Democratic and Republican Parties were both forced to come to terms with Prohibition, which was now rather easy to do since so many people seemed to agree on the issue.

Among the churches, the Methodists were the quickest to come over to Prohibition. The fervent reform movement fitted

in with the church doctrine of sanctification, and Methodist bishops and preachers became active Prohibitionists. Baptists were not far behind despite their historical indifference to the issue; and once they adopted Prohibition they became its most ardent supporters. The Universalists, Unitarians, and Episcopalians, the original temperance leaders, began to lose some of their zeal and deplored the elements of coercion adopted by the Drys. Gradually they faded out of the movement and into passive opposition.

Thus the stage was set for the final act, so most people felt, which would be the passage of a national prohibition law. But Congress was unwilling. It thought such a law would be unconstitutional. A constitutional amendment would be necessary and such an amendment would never pass, or so thought the Wets. But the Drys were not to be put off, and we know the outcome. The Nineteenth Amendment received the requisite thirty-six votes, and Prohibition for fourteen years was the law of the land.

So Prohibition stands today as a monument to good intentions gone wrong, to the folly of making crimes, as Lincoln said, of things that were not crimes. The problem which the Prohibitionists wanted to solve is with us still. It is a problem of American life and American culture. Alcohol is neither the "good creature of God" that the Puritans praised nor the "Demon Rum" of the Prohibitionists. The Greek maxim "Nothing in Excess" could well be learned by both Wets and Drys, for temperance is still not an American virtue.

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