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TEMPERANCE IN PRE-CIVIL WAR ARKANSAS

by

JANIS PERCEFULL

DECEMBER 1974

TEMPERANCE IN PRE-CIVIL WAR ARKANSAS

Nobody can say for certain the one reason why there was reform in the Pre-Civil War period, or even if there was just one. There cannot even be one explanation for what motivated these reformers or how it was possible for them to operate.¹ However, it is quite certain that as far back as the birth of the nation there were movements in favor of temperance. During the three decades previous to the Civil War these movements were very active in Arkansas.

The need for reform however, did not just suddenly appear three decades before the civil War. By 1810 the United States, with a population of 7,200,000 people already had an estimated 14,191 distilleries, which produced over 25,666,000 gallons of liquor a year. And in territories such as Arkansas there were hundreds of family stills.² The encouragement of vice grew rampant; the barrooms were often "anterooms" of "gambling dens" and "houses of prostitution." And State legislation and municipal administration was also being corrupted by the liquor interests.

Because of these prevailing conditions and the energetic efforts of the temperance leaders a wave of prohibition sentiment swept the country.³ Thousands of protestant moralists had long described drunkenness--though not drinking--as a sin. Through both sermons and laws the territories

and states had sought to check the evil of liquor.⁴

The birth of the temperance movement was national. The idea of local reform was meaningless in an increasingly nationalistic age. The reformers were encouraged by their progress, and looked to the future with hope. With this confidence they "strove to convince the unred~~e~~ deemed that the nation was not what it should be." and they tried to get all Americans to back "their efforts to convert dream into reality."⁵

In the time period from 1820 to 1860 Arkansans, along with Americans in general spent much of their time and money on crusades to change aspects of their society. Many supporters were attracted to movements as ending slavery, prohibiting drinking, establishing women's rights, morally rehabilitating the poor, and converting Jews to Christianity. Although New Englanders were more responsive than others to these reform appeals, support came from people in all geographical sections and all classes. Reform became a national preoccupation.⁶ From the 1820's on, antiliquor reformers built their crusades on familiar ideas and prejudices.

Their notions were meaningful to Americans precisely because they were trite. Unlike the radical utopians, the leaders of the temperance crusades found sickness all about them, and their followers saw it just as clearly.⁷

Reform societies not only fanned their propaganda

throughout the country, but they also organized thousands of local societies, and tried to incorporate unaffiliated local groups into the national network. The nationalization of reform was both a result and a cause of the growing national spirit in the United States as a whole.⁸

By 1830 the officers of the American Society For The Promotion Of Temperance, wanted legislation to exert some power and influence to help rescue those who were, and those who would be drinkers. For the next twenty years, backers of temperance fought for laws to destroy saloons (which were called grog-or dram-shops). They forbid the sale of liquor in small quantities, and gave counties, cities, and villages, the local option to decide whether liquor could be sold within them. When all else failed, they turned to statewide prohibition of the manufacture and sale of liquors except for medical purposes.⁹

Of all the organizations, the American Temperance Society was the strongest, and because of its many branches it was most closely in contact with the rank and file workers in the cause. Many societies, however, were not associated with it, and its influence in some states like Arkansas was not felt very strongly. Many backers of the temperance movement wanted to unite the various groups, and put together their progress and objectives. The executive committee of the American Temperance Society

took it upon themselves to call a convention, to meet in Philadelphia in May 1833.¹⁰ The outstanding advocate of temperance in the upper South was General John Coker of Breno, Virginia, who was elected president of the American Temperance Union in 1836. He showed his loyalty and devotion to the cause by erecting a small stone building in the form of a Greek temple on his plantation with the inscription, "Dedicated to the Sons of Temperance." And in 1839 the state of Georgia was the dramatic scene of a prohibition movement led by a wealthy planter, named Josiah Flourney.¹¹

Between 1851 and 1855 a Maine Law movement for prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquors swept the North and entered the South, where support for the Maine Law grew steadily.¹² The temperance backers felt they were making a strong stand against liquor. By the time of the Civil War thirteen states had experimented with prohibition laws. This was the first of three waves of prohibition, the third of which took hold and engulfed the whole nation. It was not until this last wave of prohibition that the whole nation was ready for the wiping out of liquor.¹³

The South not only found a reason for temperance but found plenty of people to handle the job. The South

like most of America indulged in liquor quite often. Colleges had difficulty with excessive student drinking and more than one prominent public man was notorious for his occasional sprees. The clergy in the South seem to have been considerably less given to excesses than were their fellows to the North, but the situation was one to invite reform in an age much given to reforming.¹⁴

The temperance movement in the South gained a wide popularity, for it harmonized with the religious fundamentalism of many Southerners.¹⁵ From 1819 to 1836 Arkansas was a territory. Arkansas had a generally western point of view. There was no unity, for Arkansas had planters, cattlemen and mountain people. Arkansans were not always sure that they were an integral part of the "conscious South."¹⁶ During this territorial period, Jacksonian Democracy rose to power in Arkansas, as in many western states and territories. There was the emphasis upon individual liberty, boastful frontier patriotism and loose morals, on the other hand it emphasized the reforming and humanitarian spirit protesting against the evils of this too brazen democracy. Arkansas was caught up and tossed about by the many conflicting ideas of this new democracy. Immorality, vice and intemperance ran rampant. At the same time there was the beginnings of a moral and social reform which slowly but surely, checked these vices, and

transformed the state into a more peaceful and steady place to live. Arkansas was faced with a very real liquor problem.¹⁷

So in Arkansas, like all frontier sections of the country, the people were hard drinkers. Whisky was cheap, and advertisements in the Arkansas Gazette gave witness, quite often, to the amount and frequency of sales. There were often notices in the paper of interest to homebrewers.¹⁸ The Ozarks, of course, had many ideal hideouts and proved a popular place for moonshiners. Making good whisky was not easily done and the moonshiners took great care and pride in their liquor. They used pure grain, pure water, (usually from a good limestone spring) and pure sugar. "They looked after their fires and carefully timed their fermentation. And of course they aged it in a good heavy oakstaved barrel."¹⁹

To most of the people in Arkansas at this time, liquor was an evil, but a necessary one. Sometimes a farmer or a group of farmers would come to town, drink a lot of liquor, stir up a lot of trouble, and then defy the authorities to molest them.²⁰ It was quite usual that at Fourth of July celebrations the prepared programs should include fifteen to twenty designated toasts, and in their enthusiasm, the merry-makers would propose many voluntary, toasts in addition.²¹ Often the supporters of a candidate

for public office would give a dinner in honor of their leader; the same custom of toasting was followed. At a 1829 dinner to honor Governor John Pope, thirteen regular and seventeen volunteer toasts were drunk.²² At another dinner in 1829, for Mr. Ambrose Sevier, delegate to Congress, (who seemed to drink a lot himself), thirteen regular and forty-five volunteer toasts were drunk.²³

Even though these celebrations were frequent, there were other causes for the drunkenness which seemed to be so popular in Arkansas. The elections and campaigns turned into more opportunities to drink, as candidates treated their followers to whisky. Drinking was a method to get votes, and a victory celebration was an excuse for even more drinking. There was much abuse of drinking as a method to get votes in the election of 1827.²⁴ In an editorial, May 13, 1829, the Gazette called its readers' attention to an "anti-electioneering association for the abolition of such abused." Subscribers started writing in condemning the drink which often accompanied campaigning.²⁵

Often times high officials, not only drunk, but had a drinking habit. One judicial official, Judge James Bates, from Crawford County, was removed from office on the charge of intemperance. His supporters accused Sevier of causing Judge Bates removal for his own personal reasons. In the dispute that arose, charges of intoxication were made

against many officials. It was established that Sevier had nothing to do with the removal, but the whole incident showed the extent to which intoxication existed among the highest officials of the territory.²⁶ Not long after this, Ambrose Sevier was accused through columns in the Gazette, of outrageous conduct in a drunken street brawl. Mr. Sevier and his friends were described as getting drunk and using their firearms in resisting arrest. The charge was not denied.²⁷

So one historian noted, "the success of other reform movements depended to some extent upon the reduction of intemperance. Those who were working for the reformation of the criminal were struck by the correlation between drunkenness and crime." Even juvenile delinquency was traced directly to surroundings whose "sordidness" was due to drink.²⁸ Many serious crimes resulted from the widespread drunkenness and poor law enforcement.

Murders were so common in Arkansas at this time that newspapers would describe such occurrences under the captions, "another homicide," and "another murder." For example, "...one Josiah Lillard, having been in a state of intoxication for several days, made a war on his neighborhood, July 4, 1828, before he was finally killed."²⁹ The Gazette in describing the killing of a certain Leper Brown on May 16, 1832, sited an old feud as a partial

cause of the trouble, but adds that whisky, as usual, appears to have been the immediate cause of the conflict.³⁰ Quite frequently similar occurrences appeared, many of which can be traced to the influence of liquor. The situation became so alarming that Governor Pope, in his message to the legislative council, in 1832 stated his dislike of the situation. He blamed the courts, because they had "mitigated murder to manslaughter in cases of ordinary provocation or sudden heat and passion." Governor Pope also advised against carrying concealed weapons. Nothing was said about lessening the severity of the drinking habit, a fact which indicated the general attitude toward drink at that time.³¹

The soldiers within the borders of Arkansas brought with them even more liquor problems. Liquor was quite the popular thing with them. Condemned soldiers would be executed in a complete state of intoxication. And if it was not bad enough that the United States government allowed soldiers to drink in excess, the government also bought whisky for the soldiers in huge quantities.³² This situation ended with a United States Army regulation in November, 1832. No liquor from this time on was to be issued to troops as part of their rations, nor was money to be issued for liquor. In addition it stated that no liquor was to be brought into a fort, camp, or garrison, to be sold, and

that no permit was to be granted for the purchase of liquors.³³

The Indians in Arkansas brought on an even bigger liquor problem. The Indians loved whisky (fire-water, as they called it), and it seemed to have more of an effect on them than on white men. Much of the trouble with Indians started with whisky. They would raid the territory for whisky, and molest, scare and enrage the white settlers. The settlers would often express their feelings in the Gazette. After one raid the Gazette published its views by stating:

It [the Indian raid] ought also to have the effect of bringing to punishment those who, for a little paltry lucre, are in the constant habit of selling spirituous liquors to the Indians, and thereby jeopardizing their own and their neighbors' lives. They are the principal instigators of these disturbances; and our grand jurors, and all good citizens, ought to take every lawful means to cause the laws prohibiting illicit trade with the Indians to be rigidly enforced against them. A few examples would have a good effect in correcting this glaring and growing evil.³⁴

Toward the end of the year, a group of twenty-two merchants from Fort Smith, who had been selling liquor to Indians, signed an advertisement in the Gazette denying the charges of the Grand Jury. They stated that what they did, others did all over the territory.³⁵ The situation worsened until 1832, when six members of the United States Grand Jury, for the Territory of Arkansas, published in the Gazette a long article condemning merchants in Fort Smith for selling whisky illegally to the Indians.³⁶

Finally, in 1837, a law was passed to (hopefully), remedy the situation with the Indians. The law stated that:

"If any person shall sell, exchange, give, barter or dispose of any spirituous liquors, or wine to an Indian, on conviction there of, he shall be fined in any sum not less than or no more than five hundred dollars!"³⁷

Even though protests had been made by individuals since the beginning of Arkansas' territorial history, it was left up to the organizations and societies to get the temperance reform underway. The origins of the reform for temperance were connected with the spread of revivalism in religion and with the advance of humanitarian reform in general. Manhood suffrage and the growth of democratic ideas helped the movement for temperance.³⁸

One movement which was prominent at this time was called Millenarianism. The churches began to think they were going to live in the time when Christ would reign for a thousand years on the earth. This concept was of course taken from Revelations. The temperance crusade, among others, took Millenarianism to heart. This is well put by Lark Hopkins, the president of Williams College, to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1845:

Sooner or later, in one way or another, ... the time must come, when the evils which now provoke the vengeance of heaven and curse humanity shall come to an