

TEMPERANCE AND WEALTH

As the state's population increased during the peaceful years following the American Revolution, a stronger social order developed and certain social problems began to emerge. The religious segment of the society believed the problematic root was firmly nourished by the whiskey jug. Indeed, by the 1830's abuse of alcoholic beverages had reached alarming proportions in York County as well as all of South Carolina. Wherever the population gathered, you could be sure a jug was passed around.

During the nineteenth century, alcohol abuse in York County was widespread and knew no social boundary. Drunkenness was common at county sales days, court days, political campaigns, elections and militia musters. Not only on these occasions, but it would seem wheresoever two or three gathered, there was the jug also.

Believing that drinking and drunkenness had to be curbed, concerned citizens across the State began to organize temperance societies in the 1830's. These societies, known as Sons of Temperance, were somewhat similar in organization to the Masonic Order, having secret rituals, grips and symbols, with each member taking a pledge "to prohibit the manufacture, sale, and use of all alcoholic or intoxicating liquors, as a beverage. . ." Some groups went so far as to denounce "the manufacture, use, purchase or sale of the fermented juice of the apple, as a beverage, is a violation of the pledge." These societies grew so numerous that by the time they held their first convention in Columbia in November 1838, they were bursting with political power.

Just one year after their Columbia convention, one low country society flexed its political muscle and petitioned the South Carolina Legislature for a statewide prohibition. Though this prohibition would not take place for another 10 years it signaled a warning of what was to come. Unified in their desire to control intemperance, they were divided in how it should be done. Some favored abolition of all grog shops, and others believed limiting sales could control intemperance.

Some completely doubted the real worth of these societies: such as J. W. Neel, President of the Sulfur Spring Debating Society, of York County. On 1 August 1840 he rebutted: "May God protect us from any and every thing that favors aristocracy. May he guard us from any system that trammels the poor, and prohibits free trade in any article of commerce. . . That intemperance is an evil, no one pretends to deny and I have no doubt that every one would put a stop to it, but not by Temperance Societies, not by legislation, but by the mighty sweep of religion and public opinion. Nothing can effect the morals of a community but the spread of religion and the happy effects of the light of the Gospel."

Though some like Neel debated the value of temperance societies, the reform impulses of the 1840's gathered momentum, bringing about a temperance crusade in the 1850s In York County, as well as across the state, the general population turned to Temperance Leagues to cure the evils of excessive drinking. The leagues had a definite link with the local church as they most often met in local meetinghouses and its leadership was drawn from the clergy and local church leaders.

By 1856 the temperance societies were speaking with the voice of an evangelical preacher, charging whiskey as the corrupter of society, making it ripe for barbarism and tyranny. Some teetotalers bewailed the political system that had been undeniably corrupted by bribes of whiskey on election days. Reform fervor ran high and prohibitionists cried, "The reign of the whiskey barrel over the ballot box must cease," and candidates were judged on whether they supported a "wet" or "dry" ticket.

Enticement of the Temperance Movement reached the far corners of Western York County and two of the county's oldest churches. On 20 August 1857 Beersheba's Sons of Temperance was organized, and in 1858 Bullock's Creek's Son of Temperance was formed at the Bullock's Creek Presbyterian Church. Typically they adopted a constitution and by-laws, and agreed to keep an eye on its members and the community at large.

Like local church courts, should a member "violate his pledge" he could expect a visit from a couple of society brothers who would confront him with the charge and should the offence be true, they would expect him to appear before the body and seek forgiveness. With the proper, heart-felt plead, a member might expect restoration; but non-compliance or in case of a severe violation of the constitution, one might expect immediate expulsion. Even failure to attend the meetings would be interpreted, as an unwillingness to depart from the jug, could result in expulsion on "general bad behavior."

The few existing records of local Sons of Temperance provide us with proof that it was easier for local men to give their pledge to abstinence than to give up strong drink itself. Apart from human nature, the principle of the temperance leagues was in direct opposition to a long-standing social standard that had been practiced since frontier days. Too, most church doctrines opposed drunkenness rather than drink itself, stating that no thing was evil, but what was done with it.

The Temperance Movement was male oriented, and because of this a moratorium was brought about by advent of the Civil War that called men from home and community. However, after the war and the unsettling Reconstruction Era the movement became active again--this time greatly influenced by the presence of women. Following an 1892 referendum in which South Carolinians demanded prohibition, the House of Representatives passed a prohibitions bill. The Senate would have followed suit but Governor "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, who believed Prohibition was unrealistic and that the state should make money through sales, substituted the Dispensary System that was no more than a state monopoly on the sale of alcoholic beverages.

Tillman's system, which went into effect in July 1894, greatly bewildered prohibitionists and decimated the influence of the Sons of Temperance so that the organization gradually faded from the scene. The Dispensary System was armed teeth that allowed Dispensary officers to invade private homes of suspected bootleggers and promoted neighbors to spy on each other. For the most part, the people became suspicious of the government and relished violating its laws.

The Dispensary System accomplished little other than producing widespread corruption unseen in South Carolina since Reconstruction. It had no influence on consumption, nor did it curb violence as some had hoped. In fact, shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, Charleston

had more murders than Chicago and pistols were considered part of a man's attire whether black or white, rich or poor.

With the advent of a trunk line built from Blacksburg to York by the Chicago, Cincinnati, and Charleston Railroad in the late 1880s, several towns in Western York County sprang into existence. In 1889 Hickory Grove petitioned the General Assembly to allow its 1888 charter to be amended to allow the sale of liquor while the Sharon town fathers requested the legislation to allow its entrance as a "wet" municipality. Both towns were granted its petition. In Sharon, however, a successful prohibition campaign, led by one woman, Mrs. Eliza Kennedy, turned the tide through a petition to the General Assembly, and it entered in as a "dry" town.

The first "wet Saturday" in Hickory Grove was riotous. The newspaper reported that "a general congregation of all the rough elements" were gathered at a barroom when a quarrel broke out. The quarrel turned into a free for all in which one man was stabbed in the throat, two others were shot, as well as a policeman who tried to quell the brawl. Soon afterward the town officials petitioned the General Assembly to amend its charter again making it "dry."

The Dispensary System was finally discontinued by the General Assembly in 1907. By then life for the farmer had worsened. Land ownership had declined so sharply by 1900 that six of every ten farmers were either tenants or sharecroppers. In dire financial straits, many turned to a surer "cash crop"--moonshine. Over the years various prohibition groups were able to influence the passage of laws, leading the way for the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1917 that strictly forbid the production of alcoholic beverages.

By July 1919, thirty-one states were either "dry" or were in the process of passing prohibition laws. Riding the crest of the Eighteenth Amendment, law officers labored steadily to break up stills and end the making of illicit whiskey, but with little success. In 1919 a grassroots movement began one Sunday afternoon in Western York County when a group of local citizens met and formed the Broad River Township Community Improvement Association. Not long after, the Bullocks Creek Township formed a similar association with identical goals.

The organization's membership was reminiscent of the old Temperance Leagues in that it consisted of the churched, landowning upper class. Unlike the former leagues these saw their primary duty was to gather information on illicit liquor trafficking and pass it to law enforcement officers. Spying on one's neighbor, created by the Dispensary System, continued. The presence of ministers at these meetings was obvious as they took a vocal role in denouncing moonshining and encouraging the membership. The usual diatribe was similar to one local minister who warned that illicit liquor threatened "the life work of every man and woman," would cause farm values to fall, decrease the influences of the educational and religious institutions and would make the area become "a blight upon the escutcheon of York County."

When the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed in 1932, the hopes of prohibitionists of having a "dry" society were dashed. The following excerpts from a longer poem, written by Zarephath College President, Alma White, and printed in a 1936 publication, clearly expresses the feelings of prohibitionists and teetotalers:

The liquor curse, oh! Who can tell
The Souls that it sends down to Hell?
The dragon's mouth is open wide
In ev'ry place, on ev'ry side.

The U.S.A. has doffed her crown,
And on us is Jehovah's frown.
With government endorsement now,
The multitudes to booze must bow.

Old Alcohol, the King of Night,
Is ruling now with main and might;
The ballot in the people's hand
Brought back the curse upon our land.

In spite of Temperance Leagues, prohibition, a corrupt distillery system, an amendment to the Constitution and various grassroots movements that spanned more than 100 years, it was a cultural change that ended the manufacturing of illicit whiskey and widespread abuse. A natural decline was seen when Western York County moved from its sole dependence upon agriculture and its people gained steady paychecks through manufacturing and service jobs. Too, the United States was changing its drinking habits, favoring beer as its national drink. While alcohol abuse will always be with us to some degree, drinking habits changed with a better distribution of wealth and when citizens were given more opportunities to improve their lives. This is a lesson both the state and county governments need to keep in mind; it has been tried and proved by 150 years of history.