

Dispensary Bottles Now Collectible

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Dispensary bottles, with their palmetto tree design, are now collector's items.

South Carolina's venture into state socialism, sometimes called the "Swedish experiment," was the brainchild of Benjamin Ryan Tillman, one of the most dynamic and controversial governors S.C. has ever had.

The experiment resulted in nothing less than the state of South Carolina manufacturing its own whisky in order to drive taverns out of business and rotgut whiskey out of the state. In 1893, S.C. legislated the first state alcohol monopoly in the country.

It was a temperance move that stopped short of prohibition (which undoubtedly would not have worked in S.C. any better than the later 18th Amendment worked nationally). Besides, prohibition would only have cost the state tremendous sums in attempting to enforce it.

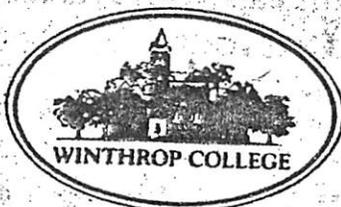
Populist Gov. Tillman had a better idea than prohibition. Why not sell it cheaply in state-regulated shops, but with enough profit to turn a healthy net revenue over to the towns, counties and the schools?

It was a temptingly neat package: get rid of the grogshop nuisance, better educate the children (assuming that more money really does do that), and lower the taxes. The last was a strong Tillman campaign promise.

Tillman, who characteristically got personally involved in matters he cared about, even determined the kind of whiskey South Carolinians would have available. There were to be three kinds: whiskey aged one, two, or three years, each mixed half-and-half and ethyl alcohol. The barrels, he said, should be marked X, XX and XXX.

The Dispensary Act of 1893 established a central bottling plant

South Carolina's Story The making of a state



and warehouse in Columbia, and the 1895 State Constitution embodied the provisions of the law: liquor could be sold only between sunrise and sunset, and no drinking would be allowed on the premises.

The Dispensary Act, like the U.S. Congress' Volstead Act which enforced the 18th Amendment, was not easily enforced. It satisfied neither the "wets" nor those who wanted prohibition. Jurors would not convict violators. "Social Clubs" imported whiskey for private members by using interstate commerce protections.

Most troublesome were the "blind tigers," a term later replaced by "bootleggers," that referred both to "moonshine" and to the person illegally selling it.

The Rock Hill Record, in 1905, reported that a York County "blind tiger," who was arrested for making illegal whiskey, had this recipe on his person: two pounds of cheap tobacco, one ounce of opium, two quarts alcohol, three grains of strychnine, one ounce rosemary, and five gallons of water. When brought to a boiling point, the liquor was ready for use and was "said to be difficult to distinguish from genuine whiskey."

In 1894, when Tillman appointed 20 constables to go to Darlington County to enforce the Dispensary Act, there was such an outrage that

prominent Darlington citizens armed themselves and met the constables at the railway station.

When the confrontation, sometimes called the "Darlington War," or the "Second Whiskey Rebellion," was over, two Darlington citizens were dead. One state constable was dead and one was wounded. The remaining constables fled for their lives and all survived.

When Gov. Tillman got the news, he immediately ordered out the state militia. Units in Columbia, Charleston and Newberry, all centers of anti-Tillman sentiment, refused to go. Other state militia units, composed of Tillmanites, or "wool hat boys," went to Darlington where they found only quiet.

The whole history of the dispensary system, which lasted 14 years, was a series of ups and downs. As long as Tillman was governor, he kept the system under control and the state did not collect much more tax money than it had under the saloon system. After Tillman was elected U.S. senator in 1894, he turned his interests to Washington and corruption seeped into the dispensary system.

In 1907, the people voted out Tillman's "experiment in socialism" and replaced it with local option for the counties.