

S.C.'S 14 Year Socialism

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South Carolina's Story



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In 1893 the South Carolina legislature passed the Dispensary Act, one of the most controversial laws in the State's history. The brainchild of Gov. Benjamin Ryan Tillman, the Act was an attempt to regulate the sale of liquor in the State but had ramifications far beyond most regulatory acts.

Suddenly the State was in the business of manufacturing, bottling, distributing, book-keeping, and policing all the alcohol legally sold in the State. And Tillman intended that the State make a profit on the operation.

Among many interesting outcomes of the 14-year experiment in State socialism were the construction of a glass works, a bottling plant, and a distillery.

The Carolina Glass Company was capitalized at \$60,000 by 12 prominent Columbia businessmen. The company was never big enough to meet the needs of the distillery but did

turn out a number of 1.5 pint and quart-size bottles. The plant boasted of being cooled by electric fans - a novelty in the 1890's.

Skilled glass blowers were brought in from Ohio and Kentucky. The blowers were paid union wages. Union wages were probably more of a novelty in South Carolina than electric fans. In a few years, though, the glass blowers, who required many years to perfect their skills, were replaced by a remarkable glass blowing machine. The Owings machine not only displaced craftsmen, but it also was able to fill the rising demand for beer and soda pop bottles.

The Carolina Glass Company bought liquor bottles, flasks, corks, demijohns, and kegs of all descriptions from factories in Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Tennessee. At first the State emblem, the palmetto tree, was embossed on each bottle. After Tillman was out of the governor's office, the State contracted to have "S.C.D." (South Carolina Dispensary) on each bottle.

In an investigation into the handling of State contract in 1906, it was stated that an average of 85,000 cases of glassware came into Columbia by rail each year. Up to 1,300 cases could be carried in one furniture car.

The bottles were

bought by the Richland Distilling Company to be used in their large plant on the banks of the Congaree River, southwest of Columbia. In the beginning, the plant's capacity was about 100 bushels of grain daily, but this soon increased to 900 bushels.

The distillery consisted of a number of buildings: a fermenting room, grain bins, boiler room, dry house, cistern room, bottling house, a cooperage, and an office building. There was also a five-story bonded warehouse that would hold 10,000 barrels of whiskey. There were 12 fermenters, each holding 15,000 gallons.

Seventy-five men were employed for nine months of the year. The plant closed down in the summer months; unlike the glass works, there were no electric fans.

Federal inspectors - two gaugers and three storekeepers - saw to it that the federal government collected an average of \$5,000 revenue tax daily.

Three brand names were used by the distillery. The barrel goods carried the name "Coon Corn." The bottles were either labeled "Peaceful Valley" or "Poplar Log." No coloring and no flavorings were added.

A side business developed when the Richland Distillery had to dispose of the rain cake which remained after the

alcohol was extracted. The cake made excellent cattle feed.

The distillery bought up steers from all over the South, had them shipped by rail, and then fed them by way of pipes which sent the "swill" into troughs in the adjacent stockyard. It usually took about 90 days for the steers to reach their maximum weight of 900 to 1,000 pounds. About 500 steers were constantly being readied for the market. At that time, beef on the hoof ranged between 3 and 4 cents a pound.

The State monopoly of liquor sales, thus, had an unusual effect. The grade of beef for sale in the marketplaces was the highest that the State had ever known.