

NEW OUTLOOK

DECEMBER, 1932: p. 22

The End of an Era

By
Forrest Davis

The Volsteadian era stands as one of the classic examples of mass resistance against unwanted legislation. Forrest Davis, who reviews this Dry Time, is a New York newspaper man and the author of "What Price Wall Street?"

IT IS, BY NOW, apparent to even the dullest citizen that the pious interment of John Barleycorn in the year 1920 occurred prematurely. The American people, in decisively electing a wet President and Congress on a wet plank that stands as a model for candor, resurrected Mr. Barleycorn. They did not set out consciously, we may believe, to restore an engaging symbol. The aim of the majority, expressed according to predilection, locality and self-interest, undoubtedly was, variously, for a nickel glass of honest beer, relief from Federal taxes and an end to a recklessly criminal period. But whatever the prevailing motive, whether related to thirst, good business or sound morals, the American voter of November 8 gave us as an end product Barleycorn redivivus and the beginnings of another era—the third, speaking approximately—in our experience with rum in a modern society.



No sensible man doubts, granted reasonably good faith on the part of the Democratic majorities, that last month's election marks the abandonment of prohibition as a national policy. The mass conversion of the American people to a drastically opposed attitude respecting liquor regulation—perhaps the swiftest and most spectacular shift in a population's viewpoint since the nationalization of Christianity under Constantine or that later King of Russia who bade all his subjects repair promptly to the icy streams for baptism according to the Greek rite—seems effectively complete. What remains is merely for the triumphant majority, duplicating the fervor and methods of the dries in 1917, '18 and '19, to carry their will into effect in Congress and State conventions. Or, so, it appears. The Anti-Saloon League and allied groups of agitation procured the ratification of the thirty-sixth State for the Eighteenth Amendment in one year and twenty-nine days. The

dry forces were militant, plentifully endowed; the opponents of national prohibition bewildered and unorganized. Now the situation is the reverse.

Whether, as certain gay patriots fondly hope, we have licit "beer by Christmas," it seems safe to assume that we have passed out of a fabulous, twelve-year Volsteadian interregnum and have turned at least one corner.



The End of an Era

A new era in liquor regulation. But is it new? We note the resurrection of John Barleycorn, genial figure of the contentious old past when the brewer's big horses couldn't run over little girls in blue organdy with white bows pinned to their bosoms; when the Demon Rum lurked in the bottom of the stripling's first glass; county option, the Raines law, Sunday closing, county church bells tolling throughout election days, revivalistic onslaughts on the "liquor interests" and the "corner saloon." We are entering a new day, but will it not remind us of our frenetic past before the Eighteenth Amendment settled "once and for all" the citizen's approach to the drink problem?



Manifestly, with the return of liquor control to the States, we are reverting to the pre-Volstead era of local trial and error—making it possible, as the late Dwight W. Morrow suggested, to experiment in "forty-eight laboratories instead of one." In ridding ourselves of the Eighteenth Amendment we may be certain we are not eliminating liquor from politics. The tradition of temperance reform by legislation is too time-honored thus to be laid. It has survived too many changes up to and including the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment, a recourse which the late President Harding, at that time a Senator, believed would forever relieve Congress of pressure from wets and dries.

We need only reflect upon the waves of organized prohibition sentiment which spread through the land in the 1840's and '50's; again in the 1880's, and, latterly, in the pre-War years, to apprehend what is in store on that head. Singularly, the prohibition movement in this country has paralleled the rise of evangelistic fevers. In the fore part of the last century, the so-called "great religious awakening" spread outward through England and Wales to this country; Moody and Sankey aroused the Evangelical hosts to seek obvious social reform in the '80's; the Rev. William F. (Billy) Sunday, the Rev. J. Wilbur Chapman and hosts of imitative exhorters stirred the godly in the West and South into a tempest of reform, centering on the abolition of rum, in the first decade of this century.

Dissent, as we know, feeds on active revolt against authority, whether expressed in institutions, custom or law. It seems plain that the newest era will bring its crop of pulpit prophets, bestirring, with their own special sort of self-interest, the waters of liquor legislation; so we may expect inspired propagandists on the other side to exert their arts of persuasion.

In this new era, citizens should have cool heads, should attempt the scientific approach to a knotty problem as old as the first man who discovered the decadent alchemy of fermentation. But it seems unlikely that we will be left alone to work it out detachedly. We plunged into bone-dry national prohibition a short fourteen years ago; we now abruptly repudiate that policy. Unlike European countries, whose leaders sought through the painful processes of reason to find a solution to the drink evil, we Americans are addicted to quick, emotional decisions. Unless our racial nature changes overnight, we shall be subjected to the mindless urgency of "pressure groups."

The Ontario system the Bratt plan no saloons, the continental cafe Government sale through State liquor stores Dr. Butler's formula, John Jones's scheme. We are, undoubtedly, in for ample bedevilment by advocates of patterns for handling the essentially simple question of where and how the desirous citizen may purchase, or make, a drink of consoling or exhilarating beverage for himself.

It really is too bad. But it is a penalty we pay, as an excessively moral people, for over-emphasizing the social and ethical significance of one among many practices with which man is familiar.

The End of an Era



In leaving one period—the irrational interval between January 16, 1920, when the National Prohibition Act became effective, and November 8, 1932, on which date the people definitely forsook “an experiment noble in motive”—for the next, we necessarily consult the experience we so painfully have gathered for insight into our new estate. What evils, what boons do we carry over?

On the debit side, we find at once a dismaying factor. The illicit liquor interests, built up within the last twelve years, infinitely shrewder, more venal and anti-social than the brewery interest that invoked Miss Willard's virginal aversions, remain to be dealt with. That is likely to be an ugly problem.

Immediately after the election, we are reliably informed, the leaders in the bootlegging racket met in New York to map their strategy. They determined, it was said, not to surrender the profitable job of manufacturing, importing and distributing intoxicants without a trial of strength. During hours when the beer-conscious elements in the nation were rejoicing; when Mayor Cermak of Chicago invited the brewers to renew their vats with potent lager, with Mayor Hoan gravely prophesying that Milwaukee presently would regain its position as the “Munich of America,” with barley futures restored to the Chicago Board of Trade after nine years of exile, the beer barons in New York disappointedly meditated the purchase of additional brewery plants and an intensification of vicious competitive methods. The Rupperts, the Busches, the Pabsts might plaster the billboards with assurances that they retained their pre-Prohibition cunning in lagering a suitable tippie; but the underworld mobs, intrenched under the robes of the law, do not intend to retire peaceably. New times, new men, they argue. They talk of applying gangster methods to the job of forcing restaurants, grocers, whatever outlets are legitimized, to purvey the beer of the present masters of the trade. Sluggings, “pineapples,” taking rivals “for a ride. . . .”

The importers of hard liquor from the Bahamas and Bimini, the important “alky” cookers, the owners of chains of cordial shops; they, too, look now to their commercial laurels.

Shall we see the sale of spirits, wine and malt beverages being legalized, a further challenge to the government from the established bootleg interests? Such a conflict should be short and decisive. The racketeer flourished during the life of the Eighteenth Amendment largely because of the benevolent indifference of the citizen. Rum-smugglers, beer-runners, speakeasy-owners enjoyed an informal franchise which is likely to be withdrawn once the disgruntled citizen again is in accord with his government on a certain private matter. The American, engaged in one of the most astonishing passive rebellions in history, indulged the Al Capones, the Owney Maddens and their understrappers, in naïve terrorism because they were operating an obnoxious, but essential, utility.



But the American is not, by nature, a timid, tolerant soul. The idea of gang wars, of crime overlords arising upon the profit of liquor law violations, never sat quite easily on his conscience. Without running much risk in setting up as a prophet, it might generally be said that once the citizen finds he may obtain his beverages—at not too great a disparity in cost, mind you, for

The End of an Era

our citizen is no self-denying idealist—legally and upon his own political terms, he will not extend sympathy to the Capones and the Maddens.

However, we would be justified in regarding the rivalry of the bootleg liquor interests with whatever system the State governments may establish, as the foremost predicament of our new era. Mr. Volstead's regime has empowered a band of bold, able and, wholly unscrupulous business men for a continuation of their own special war on authority.



On the credit side, certain factors appear encouraging to those who wish a wise solution. The pervasive, chain-store power of the brewer appears likely to remain broken. Few social critics have attributed to the trustifying of the brewery business its full share of blame for prohibition. The Wickersham Commission, in a passage of its report seldom quoted, put a telling finger on that abuse. "Much of the failure of the systems of liquor control devised in 19th Century America was due," said the report, "to their presupposing an economic situation which was ceasing to exist. For example, the high license system sought to insure responsible local sellers of good character and standing who might reasonably be expected to conform to the regulations imposed by local opinion and expressed in local laws. But the days of the old independent local tavern keeper were gone. The business of brewing and distilling came to be organized. The local brewer and local distiller, supplying a limited local trade, gave way to great corporations. . . . More and more the local seller ceased to be independent and became a mere creature of some producer."

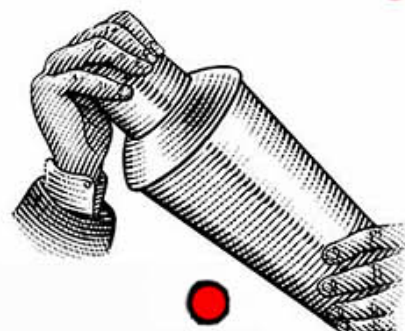
The "liquor interests" of our fathers actually were unresponsive, unlocalized interests. Piled upon the accumulated mistrust of liquor was the wide social distrust of big business.

The Wets have reason to rejoice also in that twelve years of nationwide prohibition have increased the proportion of women who drink, socially and casually. Women, the grim enemies of man's conviviality in John Barleycorn's earlier sway, may be found draped over bars from New York to Santa Barbara. A foremost cause of national prohibition lay in the fact that pioneer man, a thoroughly pestered soul if we credit the record, restrained "good" women, save itinerant Carry Nations, from entering his grogshops. It would have been better had he invited the girls in; and post-prohibition man, fending a wary way between long cigarette holders to an elbow place in his nearest ark of solace, understands that. Ironically, the devoted women who considered the sanctity of their sex to be bound up with prohibition have lived to see women assert equal rights at the bar as elsewhere. The women folk, without doubt, have learned to drink within the last twelve years. Sharing man's foolish pleasures, they no longer have, as they did in the early years of this century, a rawly envious pleasure in despoiling them.

Social drinking, as one observes it in New York and other cities, is on the mend. It no longer is necessary, as in the early years of the Volsteadian rebellion, for a wet patriot to get drunk at every opportunity to establish his loyalty. The drinking classes have come to realize that they have not plumbed the ultimate in the way of a beverage whenever a bottle is opened.

Although drunkenness enjoyed a revived tenure of respectability during the twelve years, one might be wholly accurate in asserting that the American people have come upon more wholesome drinking habits than before. We are more likely now to demand decent drinking places, to approximate, with the help of women's fastidiousness, the civilized accompaniments of drinking which exist abroad. The café, in such communities as choose public drinking places, is almost certain to replace that harshly maligned institution, the saloon.

The End of an Era



Other benefits may be chalked up by social historians as a result of the era of legal deprivation. What an era! What more is to be said about a twelve years which, no doubt, will pass quickly into the lore of the land; fitting as an amazing chapter into the pattern of our ruddy annals?

What is to be said of an era which produced "speak-easy frocks," and "bargain day" in the Federal courts; battalions of snoopers abroad in the land, legal homicides by dry agents, sopping wet public dinners throughout the Republic and "the man in the green hat" filling the lockers of dry statesmen in the House and Senate office buildings?

One circumstance, which may strike the young and the forgetful as novel, deals with the amazingly supine fashion in which civilized America accepted the Eighteenth Amendment and its subsidiary works, without protest, without resentment and without hope. Not the least credible portion of this story is that fact that in January, 1920, great metropolitan wet newspapers, such as the "New York Times" and the "New York World," "played down" the inauguration of a dry era. No western European nation of consequence ever had decreed that its citizens or subjects get along without alcoholic stimulation. Here was news! A great western power, exerting its sovereignty, forbade the meanest citizen to wet his lips over a shell of lager.



The dreary day came. It happened to be a night; a snowy January night.

New York, the entire country as well, accepted the new departure with few complaints. The opposition indeed was stunned. With isolated exceptions, all citizens believed that the Volstead act successfully would outlaw, if it did not indeed abolish social drinking. Hearty drinking men joined with Wayne B. Wheeler in applauding the new day. Gentlemen with prodigious thirsts contented themselves with lugging home a few paltry parcels of spirits. The assertions of the dries—incredible as it seems at this date—that drinking would become a lost custom, that a generation would grow up wholly alienated from alcohol, were accepted at par value. A student of prohibition phenomena must find the passive, non-resistant attitude of the wets in 1920 enlightening. The "New York Times" of January 17, 1920, reported:

"At the rails of the ordinary saloons stood a few old-timers, glad for what they could get, but for the most part the already dilapidated interiors appeared as cheerless as the snow-covered streets. Instead of passing from us in violent paroxysms, the Demon Rum lay down to a painless, peaceful, though lamented, by some, death."

A "New York World" reporter, obviously not gifted with second sight, dwelt in his chronicle of the dismal leave-taking to John Barleycorn, on the disturbing presence of a "good-looking, well-dressed girl" in a notable bar room of the period.

"The girl," he said, disapprovingly, "was an unusual sight, leaning up against a bar. Such a thing was never seen in that bar before."

The newspapers, in advertising as well as news and editorial columns, reflected the general resignation. A chewing gum manufacturer took large space to bid farewell to the cocktail. "Good-bye for keeps," the advertisement read, "It looks that way." Presently, candy makers would be urging the American father to carry home a box of sweets of a Saturday night in place of the weekend flask of rye.

The End of an Era

But how emphatically were the prophets confounded! Taking form slowly and without benefit of organized effort, a vast block in the population undertook to nullify the law. Here stands, for students of government, one of the classic examples of mass resistance, peaceable and roundly effective, to unwanted legislation. Gandhi himself cannot point to a



fuller expression of non-forcible will. The American colonies did not more effectually flout the distant George III. The people simply, as we review it now, would not accept bone-dry national prohibition.

Thus the change came about. Hardy souls sacrificing purse and health to whiskey "just off the boat," experimenting at the kitchen sink, booing enforcement agents; willing to lay down the last liver and light for the cause. They, in the last analysis, brought about the reversal. Their mass protest furnished a background of sentiment for the early leaders: Alfred E. Smith and Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler in New York, Governor Ritchie in Maryland. Increased largely in number, they voted last month wholeheartedly for a change.

What political, sociological and emotional changes the silently resisting mass wrought. We passed from the period when only prohibitionists were regarded by the general public as respectable. We came finally to the time, within twelve years, when the reverse was true; the wets, augmented by Mrs. Charles H. Sabin and her new-style band of hope, captured the moral advantage. Racketeering, the imputed but unproved debauchery of the "younger generation" weighted the ethical argument. The economic change of front was no less remarkable. In the war years, business, large and small, unburdened by taxation, eyed prohibition favorably as a probable source of profits. The industrialist hoped that a rigid dry system would prevent his hands assuaging their miseries in drink. No more "blue Mondays" in the factory yard. The merchant observed the enormous cash intake of the retail rumsellers with envy. He was led to believe that money now spent for booze and beer would go, under the new dispensation, into shoes, furniture, groceries, etc.

The depression, as we are acutely aware, shifted the business man's self-interest. We may be certain that the business man's longing for an estimated half a billion dollars in Federal tax relief played a decisive part in the dethronement of Rollin Kirby's doleful effigy and the resurrection of Mr. Barleycorn.

The changes in drinking habits, as we may observe them in perspective now, present a fascinating vista. At first bewildered, the persevering tipplers discovered early in the reign of Volstead that drink had not been eradicated. Good citizens in New York and elsewhere were made acquainted with the chemistry of bathtub gin. Grog shops tentatively were opened in back rooms and cellars. Italian table d'hotes offered homemade wines—"You know, Tony serves a fair white wine at a dollar"—German restaurants provided indifferent beer, often needled.

Rum Row flourished and was scattered. The Bowery firms in New York dealing in bars and fixtures entered into an unexpected prosperity. We passed rapidly from the time when a citizen bearing home a gift bottle of rum kept a self-conscious eye out for the police to the brazen period wherein brewery truck drivers rolled in their contraband barrels in broad daylight. Enforcement, never prosecuted with all vigor, broke down progressively.

The recital of the alterations in viewpoint and habit between 1920 and 1932—between the damp, badly light-

The End of an Era

ed back room speakeasy and costly, secure bar rooms in New York's Fifties, elegant in chromium and geometrical modernistic trimmings—would be endless.

That is past. We are plump into a new era, which, in due time, will develop its own special problems and perplexities as did our recent brief experience with pseudo-finality. Both wets and drys were deluded in 1920. Events did not turn out as we all expected. In the light of that recent example, it would take a courageous prophet to hazard a dogmatic guarantee of the future.

The best we can say is that the question of liquor regulation—a thorn intermittently in the side of our politics since the 1840's—seems certain to be returned to the States. Which is at once an advance over the current arrangement and a harking back to the troublesome pre-prohibition days when John Barleycorn was a symbol of contention throughout the Republic.

One fact seems certain: We haven't yet settled the issue of how and when, if at all, man shall enjoy the traditional pleasures of the glass.



NEW

OUTLOOK

ALFRED E. SMITH

Editor-in-Chief

OldMagazineArticles.com