

THE SERPENT ON THE SIDEBOARD

Prohibition and Temperance in Vermont

I wish it were possible to pass legislation which would prohibit boys and girls under the age of twenty-one from drinking.

These words might easily have been **uttered** during Vermont's 1986 legislative session when the debate to raise the state's drinking age from eighteen to twenty-one was so hotly argued. Instead, the above quote is almost fifty years old. It was the opening line in a 1937 letter from the Vermont Hotel Association to the Vermont Senate's Temperance Committee. Attitudes like this, however, were not new in the 1930s just as they are not new today. Concern over the consumption of alcoholic beverages by both young and old has spanned Vermont's entire history.

When colonists first arrived in this country, they brought with them the habits and tastes they learned in their old home lands. One of these was drinking. The tradition continued to travel as colonists moved and settled in new parts of the country, including Vermont.

Since settlers were not always able to buy the types of alcohol they once had in the "Old Country," they began to produce their own **spirits**. Vermonters made all manner of brandies and wines from local fruits, berries and plant materials. Hard cider or applejack was a staple consumed by most families, adults and children alike. "Methglin," was another local specialty that was rumored to be quite **potent**. It was said that after drinking only one glass of the dark alcohol made from honey, yeast and water, our Vermont ancestors could hear the bees buzz. References to these and other liquors the early settlers consumed are everywhere in



Woman posing with bottle of Old Crow whiskey, late 1800s.

the diaries and account books they left behind.

Alcohol was drunk at barn raisings and husking bees, weddings and funerals. It was even present at religious functions. According to New England folk tradition, it took one gallon of hard cider to build a **rod's** length of stone wall.

As Vermont became more settled, inns and stage stops opened at regular intervals along the early "highways." Most of these establishments sold rum, brandy and **grog** to travelers as well as to townspeople who had the spare pennies to buy. By the 1800s, much of the alcohol they sold was imported, although even small Vermont towns could boast as many as a half dozen or more breweries and distilleries.

Alcohol played a major role in the lives of persons who had to clear land for a home in the harsh Vermont climate and for whom hard work and isolation were a way of life. Because disease was a constant threat to settlers, the supposed medicinal properties of liquor won it both popularity and heavy use.

Gradually, in the 1800s, public opinion towards the consumption of alcohol shifted. The **temperance** movement had begun. Drinking "spiritous liquor" was equated with sin and evil. Temperance songs, poems and plays were written and performed to sway public opinion away from alcohol. Children's books contained many references to the "serpent on the sideboard" as liquor was sometimes called. Temperance almanacs warned readers of the **potential** if not **inevitable** hazards of drinking. The follow-

ing advise to young women appeared in an 1836 volume:

Many an unsuspecting female has been led to her ruin by such drinks, and many a lovely woman has dragged out a miserable existence, with a drunken husband. Touch not the **fatal** cup yourself - give not your affections to any one, until you have every reasonable certainty that total **abstinence** from intoxicating drinks is his motto.



Religious groups rallied to the cause. They took up the campaign to extinguish the intemperate use of alcohol with **zeal**. Sermons stressed the downfall of anyone who lifted a cup of liquor to his or her lips. There seemed no doubt that this evil was the root of Vermont's crime and poverty problem, and the religious community worked to bring about reform.

Petitions, like this one from a group of concerned Barnet residents, attempted to sway the opinion of the Vermont General Assembly towards temperance:

...we believe the **vending** of **ardent** spirits is demonstrated to be the cause of more crime, vice, **pauperism** and misery in our community, than are produced from any other source whatever . . . We appeal to you for aid in counteracting this great evil. . . The happiness and welfare of our country . . . is placed in your hands.

The reform movement continued to grow. Groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Sons of Temperance, and the Anti-Saloon League sprang up in Vermont and other parts of New England. Finally, in 1852, the Vermont legislature passed a bill prohibiting the sale and manufacture of intoxicating beverages. The bill to go "**dry**" was supported primarily by Vermont's large towns. Sparcely populated com-

munities, for the most part, were not in favor of the bill.

Feelings changed, however, and in 1903 Vermonters voted again. This time it was the small towns that favored the 1852 ruling to prohibit liquor and the major population areas who supported **repeal**. The result, local option, permitted each town to decide whether to allow the sale of alcoholic beverages within its borders.

Other states followed New England's lead and on January 16, 1919, National Prohibition was adopted with the **ratification** of the eighteenth amendment to the United States Constitution. The law went into effect one year from that date.

For almost fourteen years, from January, 1920, to December, 1933, when Prohibition was repealed by the ratification of the twenty-first amendment, United States citizens were not to make, buy or sell alcoholic beverages. Many, however, still did.



Prohibition ushered in more than a **decade** of **bootlegging** to the state of Vermont. Bordered by Canada to the north and the 135 mile stretch of Lake Champlain to the west, Vermont was a prime stomping ground for the smuggler. Settlement on the border was relatively sparse and the roads entering Canada were largely unpatrolled. Bootleggers and **rumrunners** took advantage of the situation. They transported liquor from Canada back across the border to sell to customers in their own country. During Prohibition, the United States was Canada's biggest customer of alcoholic goods.

Public opinion about liquor consumption did not change overnight when Prohibition was repealed in 1933. Local Option still existed in Vermont and many towns remained “dry.”

From Vermont’s early days when settlers first cleared land for farms in the Vermont wilderness, to the present, sentiment towards alcohol has roller coastered from one extreme to another. The historic 1986 passing of House Bill 6, Act 99, which raised the Vermont drinking age, is but another example of these swings.



VOCABULARY

utter - speak

spirits - used in this way means “alcohol”

potent - strong

rod - a unit of measure equal to 16½ feet

grog - liquor

temperance - moderation

potential - possible

inevitable - unavoidable

fatal - deadly

abstinence - going without

zeal - eagerness

vend - sell

ardent - strong

pauperism - poverty

dry - used in this way means “without alcohol”

repeal - to withdraw officially

ratification - approval or confirmation

decade - ten years

bootlegging - smuggling alcohol; originally referring to someone who hid liquor in the leg of his boot

rumrunner - another word for someone who bootlegs or smuggles

