

Temperance in Towanda

The Temperance Movement surfaced in rural American by the mid-1800s, spurred by religion and driven by rising concern for the harm caused by drink. The concern was to a great extent legitimate. Per capita consumption of alcohol had reached epidemic proportions by the 1830s. Illinois's Abraham Lincoln had, in fact, declared that in his youth alcohol had swept across the prairie "like the Egyptian angel of death, commissioned to slay, if not the first, the fairest born in land." However real the problems, the strategy and tactics adopted by the movement's adherents posed their own set of concerns.

Initially, temperance called—as its name implied—merely for moderation in drink but as it developed into a broader social and political movement many of its supporters came to link alcohol not only with gambling and prostitution but with domestic violence, crime and poverty. For many, temperance offered a remedy for the ills of a rapidly changing society. For some, if moderation would reduce the ills of society, its elimination would eliminate those ills. Gradually, the movement shifted its focus from temperance to outright prohibition. In 1851, Maine banned the manufacture and sale of alcohol and by 1855 thirteen of the nation's thirty-one states had adopted prohibition. Though no few supporters continued to believe that the church, not the state, should be the movement's moral steward, temperance gained increasing momentum and by 1916 twenty-one states had banned saloons. The adoption of the 18th Amendment and the passage of the Volstead Act in 1920 only recognized at the national level what had already become law across much of the nation.

We have since come to equate Prohibition with the Roaring Twenties and the public's disdain of that law. In doing so, however, we may be underestimating the temperance movement's very real success. To be sure, Al Capone may have had Chicago in his pocket during the 1920s and undoubtedly organized crime thrived there and in many of the nation's other cities during those years, but just the same, the consumption of alcohol had steadily dropped in the years following the Civil War, clearly suggesting the movement's effectiveness. Prohibition itself failed but temperance had to a great extent succeeded, thanks to the efforts of the movement's supporters and their tactics.

Rum running, speakeasies but also gunmen and the rackets mark our memories of Prohibition. The era was, perhaps, wild and adventuresome but it was also violent and criminal. We view these years with ambiguity, with both romanticism and disapproval, as did its contemporaries. No little hypocrisy surrounded the American public that could simultaneously condemn the activities that surrounded alcohol while still demanding drink. But, then, the Temperance Movement itself hardly stood unblemished.

Carry Nation and her hatchet has long since become a fixture of American consciousness, representing for many both intolerance and, perhaps, the silliness of the women involved in the fight against drink. Those women were far from being silly, however. Judging by the movement's eventual success, these women not only succeeded in curtailing drinking but they had also given women the opportunity to play an increasingly active role in

American politics. It was perhaps no coincidence that women gained suffrage at the same time Prohibition became national law. Their tactics, however, marred their success. With the urging of Frances Willard, president of the Women's Temperance Christian Union, women disrupted state legislatures and took to the streets, taking direct action against saloons, at least occasionally violently so. Carry Nation, as it turns out, was not the only woman to adopt violence as a tactic, nor was she the first woman to do so.

In the late 1860s, several years before Carry Nation gained her fame, several women met by prior secret arrangement at a hardware store in Towanda, Illinois, secured hatchets and marched to the *Buena Vista*, one of this small rural community's three saloons. They entered, the four men playing cards fled, and as the bartender watched in stunned silence the women proceeded to wreck the place. Furniture was destroyed, bottles broken and barrels and kegs stoved in. One woman's boots were so soaked in the whiskey that flowed across the saloon's floor that she could not wear them again. Sometime later, the women were tried in nearby Bloomington, fined a dollar and afterwards lunched in a local hotel.

The women's fervor can be easily appreciated, given the harm caused by drink in their own homes and within their communities. That a community the size of Towanda with but a few hundred souls could support three saloons is testimony to how widespread drink was. Soon, however, the temperance movement shifted its energy from the long-standing evils represented by rural America's taverns and saloons toward the nation's cities. Arguably, the temperance movement became a means by which rural America—predominantly Old Stock rural America—could control those beer-drinking Germans, whisky-swilling Irish and wine-guzzling Italians who so grievously threatened American society. The cities were viewed as being foreign, poor, desperate and also violent. It is with no little irony that it can be pointed out these women who did not hesitate to step outside the law and to use violence within their own communities could so readily condemn immigrants within the nation's cities.

The cultural war that these women undertook offers an intriguing insight into what we too readily tend to dismiss today as a near-farcical movement dominated by overwrought, hatchet-wielding females. We should perhaps take care not to underestimate the political significance of that movement, much less the critical role that women played within it. Those women vigilantes in Towanda, spurred by what liquor did to their families, did not hesitate to take the law into their own hands. It is good to remember that just a few years later, the good women of rural America directed their energies towards immigrants in American cities who were somehow threatening the public's peace in their saloons and Bier Gartens.