

The Literary Club's Great Drought

[History of the Literary Club during years of Prohibition. World War II Rationing.]

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Literary Club 'Budget Night' November 26, 2018
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1.

“Be sure you are right and then go ahead.”

John Uri Lloyd, Club member dating to the year 1900, renowned botanist, pharmacologist, scientist, donor of his great clock now in our Club Library, more than hinted at the possible emergence of what would become the 18th Amendment, known as Prohibition, adopted by Congress on January 16, 1920. His paper “A Peculiar Mission,” read March 30, 1907 stated what would directly impact millions of Americans--along with the members of our esteemed Club. Lloyd wrote, spoke that night on his views of ‘The National Pure Food and Drug Act’ of June 30, 1906. One provision in the act stated, “Alcoholic preparations of food and culinary use be contained.” He continued, “The people were (theoretically) to be cared for, and the individual’s stomach became at last a ward of the nation. The term ‘liberty’ be restricted.” Congressional lobbying, he noted, dropped ‘alcohol’ from the wording employed in “Food and culinary preparation” when the act was signed. It was noted that one southern state already subscribing to a form of prohibition “Consumed enough alcohol extracts in flavoring to flavor all the cakes and puddings in the United States.”

Likewise, Charles Greve, Club member since 1885, thundered against the 18th Amendment in his 1921 paper ‘Prohibition and Lawlessness’ did concede to social ills to society but railed, “The right to enact carries the right to repeal and point out the argument in its favor.” Greve quoted Elihi Root to the Howard Law School Association, “The enforcement upon the people of a law which has its origin only in the mind of a lawmaker has the essence of tyranny and its imposition is the mandate of a conqueror...the people through their taxes, in harmful and un-American activities (employ) whole armies of individuals who should be engaged in productive activity.” Meanwhile, those on Main Street U.S.A, with limited knowledge of law and niceties of the English language, growled, “Nobody gonna’ tell me how to live my life.” What reactions to Greve’s paper here in our Club was by evidence never recorded. Two years in researching this Budget Paper found limited references, financial figures, quotes and ‘rumors’ to what happened within our Club walls from 1920 through repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and again during World War II rationing. As a private club, we were not a ‘speakeasy’ with the ‘green door’ at our former Club house in any sense of the term but, perhaps, closer than we think.

The late Yeatman Anderson III, in his classic paper ‘Cin’ In Cincinnati,’ stated Cincinnati entered Prohibition “with, perhaps, the largest supply of legal whiskey in the United States” due to the machinations of famed bootlegger George Remus who had cornered the market on ‘legal’ spirits sold in pharmacies. This reinforced in the fine paper by Steve Strauss on the life and times of Remus and the infamous murder of his wife at the gate of Eden Park and ensuing landmark trial. Yeatman Anderson also stated, “Cincinnati moved out of Prohibition in 1933 with 50% of all legal whiskey in the country.” But when and how did this legislation come to reality with our Club?

2.

Figures in Secretary and Board of Management records tell all and more. Club grocery list September, 1916 accounts for just wine and liquors and beer—minus cigars and mineral water--\$140.25 or \$3,244 with current inflation. September 30, 1919 records show whopping \$360.00 for wines, liquors at the current inflation rate of \$5,246. Minutes state, “The supply of liquor may not last us that long (through the coming year) but at any rate it will be the last expenditure for this item.” The December 27th Holiday Observance with “Christmas carols, history, songs, recitations in the Club tradition. Twenty-two members and visitors shared the enjoyment of the ‘eggnog,’ perhaps the last. Who knows?”

So confident were the proponents of the Amendment that Senator Morris Shepard joked, “There is as much chance of repealing the 18th Amendment as there is of a humming-bird to fly to the planet Mars with the Washington Monument tied to its tail.” Edward, Prince of Wales, later Duke of Windsor, returned to the United Kingdom after an extensive tour of the Dominions and Canada. Discussing his tour with father, sailor king George V, Edward related a ditty he picked up in very ‘wet’ Canada.

“Four and twenty Yankees, feeling very dry,

Went across the border to get a drink of rye.

When the rye was opened, the Yanks began to sing,

“God bless America but God save the King!”

Prince Edward referenced the famous ‘Windsor Waterfall’ which was one major entry point of illegal liquor from Canada and the United Kingdom to the states via Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Toledo and other points. Private automobiles, trucks, boats carried booze into Cincinnati direct skirting Ohio River bridges as much as possible. One infamous import point then was off Kentucky Route 8 along the Ohio River below CONEY ISLAND across the river at night near mouth of the Little Miami River at present Lunken Airport on Kellogg Avenue.

Mobster, racketeer, and the one people both loved and loved to hate, Al Capone, offered a number of quotes on the ‘Windsor Waterfall’ and booze in general.

“I don’t even know what street Canada is on”

“When I sell liquor, it’s called bootlegging; when my patrons serve it on Lake Shore Drive, it’s called hospitality.”

“Capitalism is the legitimate racket of the ruling class.”

During the following years mention made that the Club steward then “volunteered to make bathtub gin for the Club” related by John Diehl, late Club historian, as whispered to him in conversations. No doubt the more timid members, and those in the law with political reputations, politely declined the steward’s offer either on Club premises or in his own home. One droll Clubbie dared to joke in private wondering “What if anything do the Tafts possibly drink down at Lytle Park?” Other cryptic notes in minutes mention a “Truly wonderful ‘date nut bread’ brought from home for some weeks to the enjoyment of all!” It appears member and photographer Paul Briol, no stranger to his martini glass, was a part of the ‘date nut bread’ scheme along with others. Little to nothing so far uncovered in our Club records as to the following years.

With the repeal of Prohibition by the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution December 5, 1933, Club records carry on the narrative with the Annual statement recording on September 24, 1934 “Drinks - \$301.00.” The Annual Dinner, October 29, 1934 states, “Excellent dinner accompanied by well-chosen beverages which added greatly to the occasion.” The event in 1935 mentions, “High powered beer and other drinks.” The Club’s Annual Statement, September 1935 for liquors \$4,790 in today’s value adjusted for inflation. September, 1938 at \$724.00 to an unfathomable rate of inflation to \$12,947 today. And the good times did roll at our club for a number of years. The octogenarian wife of a now long deceased member responded to my ‘research’ with a droll quip. “Oh, that Literary Club. I called it the old men’s drinking society.” OUCH!

Entry of the United States into World War II, December 7, 1941 brought in time a ‘new’ system of Prohibition not only for liquors but food supplies in general. The Annual Report for 1941 – 1942 states, “Although rationing was set in motion, food and drink were at their usual level of adequacy, the absence of Scotch whiskey must be remarked.” Our 1942 Report records “Liquor \$181, Beer \$36, wine \$260.” Steward Roy Carpenter commended for preparing a fine annual dinner as best he could using the ‘Blue & Red’ rationing points. Year 1943 tersely recorded, “Scarcity and increase in price of hard liquor.” Brief entries in minutes mention complaints, growling from some with continued serving of “inferior wines” in spite of rationing, men and women in uniform, war and dreadful starvation abroad.

Board of Management, March, 1943. “...Owing to the rising cost of whiskey and the growing scarcity of butter, meat and other foodstuff, it would be necessary to curtail the refreshments served at the Club” Minutes of 1943 Finances. “Decline in the red of \$34.34 due to “liquid assets,” price of hard liquor and (a) leak in the roof.”

4.

The Secretary's September 20, 1943 report recorded the increasing argument over liquors or lack thereof. "The chronic debate between the adherents of Scotch and Bourbon came to an abrupt halt, owing to the disappearance of both liquors. Debate of Sherry with the rural merits of California, New York and Ohio in an ignorant dispute. Meeting adjourned with increasing lamentable dispatch. Such arguments 'Carry them back to their coltish days,'" referencing the argumentative members.

Two now long departed—and here unnamed—Club members entwined in a rather juvenile debate on this very floor over merits of liquors, wines and sherry in spite of the raging war, deep rationing, starvation abroad. The stinging retort came with resounding pronouncements in this room. "I find it interesting to hear our fellow member disclaim on such a topic in light of his silence on all other issues during his long years as a member of this Club!" one sage member bellowed in resounding tones.

End of World War II and 'normalcy' at 500 E. 4th Street sees a brief financial note dated September, 1946. "Beverages above all, \$724.00" or \$9,400 at the present rate of inflation."

Each week our talented, dedicated Steward, Nico Ranieri, keeps our bar stocked with the best he obtains from "Party Source" in Newport, Kentucky. This same emporium our late George Rieveschl heralded as the "...best source of nearly every fine wine you could want," he gurgled rubbing his hands together with a sly smile. And George should have known as a connoisseur terming the vinting of wine, "Nothing more than basic organic chemistry." Times have changed with repeal of Prohibition, open transport of wines, liquors from Kentucky to Cincinnati without fear of arrest or confiscation of vehicles at either end of the bridges as some here may recall—perhaps all too vividly. Again we return to the dark persona of Al Capone to end this paper.

"Prohibition has made nothing but trouble."

"I'm like any other man. All I do is supply a demand."

"Rackateer! Why, the real rackateers are the banks!"

Gentlemen, let us consider those years of Prohibition and later World War II with rationing leaving our men very frustrated and dry. This is hard work up here and right now I'm feeling parched. As William Sinclair said, "The only time I ever said no to a drink was when I misunderstood the question." Thank you and good night.

END

