

TEMPERS AND TEMPERANCE | WILD WEST MEETS BIBLE BELT

Oklahoma's long history with alcohol was anything but dry

By **CLIFTON ADCOCK**
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Will Rogers, Oklahoma native and political humorist, once said "Oklahomans will vote dry as long as they can stagger to the polls."

Oklahoma has a long and sometimes schizophrenic history of temperance, with laws against the consumption of alcohol even before statehood while being a hotbed of illicit alcoholic activity during Prohibition, a clash of Bible Belt and Wild West mentalities.

In 1834, Congress passed a law forbidding the introduction of liquor into areas set aside for displaced American Indian tribes, namely what would later be Oklahoma. In 1907, Oklahoma was one of the first states to enact a prohibition law, which passed by a popular vote along with the state's constitution. It also was one of the last to repeal Prohibition, which came in 1959.

"Oklahoma was born sober and Oklahoma expects to remain sober," was a slogan of the Anti-Saloon League, an organization that advocated Prohibition, Walter W. Liggett wrote in his 1930 essay, "Whoopie in Oklahoma," for the magazine Plain Talk.

Liggett, an unabashed critic of the temperance movement, wrote in his essay about "dry" efforts to stop the sale of alcohol, while showing the state was actually quite "wet."

In 1926, an oil boom brought people by the thousands to Pottawatomie County, along with spirits to keep them happy, he wrote.

The boom ended with 102 residents of the county being indicted by the federal government, including the ex-mayor and the ex-sheriff, after agents discovered a large liquor ring, Liggett wrote.

The ring was brought to the attention of federal authorities by a feisty hotel owner in Earlsboro, Ethel Renner. Members of the ring tried to put Renner out of



Tulsa World publisher Eugene Lorton (left) receives the first legal case of beer in Tulsa on July 12, 1933. With him is Anheuser-Busch distributor O.F. Bryan. The World had editorialized vigorously for legal 3.2 beer.

Courtesy of Joanne Kirlin

business after she refused to provide a place for prostitutes and sell liquor, according to Liggett.

Renner eventually began carrying a revolver and kept a sawed-off shotgun handy, twice backing armed men out of the lobby and using her pistol to club a drunk deputy sheriff to his knees after he drew his gun, Liggett wrote.

When the state erected watch towers in forested areas of the Ozark and Kiamichi hills to allow rangers to look for fires, "hillbillies" threatened to dynamite the towers until assured by rangers they would not report smoke from stills or allow federal authorities to use them, according to Liggett.

Drinking was not confined to rural areas, however, Liggett wrote. Oklahoma City and Tulsa both were quite wet.

"Oklahoma City is a pretty

good drinking town — especially when the legislature is in session — but it is tame compared with Tulsa," he wrote. "Tulsa is the wettest spot in Oklahoma. Competition is so keen that bootleggers actually solicit trade from strangers. At least I had that experience."

Liggett reported that at least 200 beer joints were within a five-minute walk of the business district, and, in 1926, one highway patrol officer in Tulsa County testified he had seen several colleagues drunk, and all confiscated liquor was given to politicians rather than being destroyed.

In 1933, after a vicious fight in the Legislature, Oklahomans approved the sale of 3.2 percent alcohol by weight (4 percent alcohol by volume) beer, defined as "non-intoxicating" by the Legislature. Normal beer contains an

average of 5 percent alcohol by volume (4 percent by weight), according to the National Consumer's League.

The night the measure won approval, the state attorney general said the bill was effective the moment it was approved by the people, in defiance of then Gov. William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray who said results were not final until he officially issued the results, according to the book "Born Sober," by Jimmie Lewis Franklin.

Franklin wrote that thousands of rail cars full of 3.2 beer awaited the go-ahead to move into the state, and Murray declared martial law, calling out the National Guard in Oklahoma City to patrol all railway yards to prevent premature actions. The next day the action was lifted and Oklahomans had beer.

Despite four votes taken in

1910, 1936, 1940 and 1949, respectively, aimed at repealing the state's Prohibition laws, intoxicating beverages were not legal in Oklahoma until 1959 and even after repeal there were many restrictions on alcohol, some that last to this day.

Perhaps Rogers, in another jab at Prohibition, best summed up the effects of trying to ban alcohol. "Instead of giving money to fund colleges to promote learning, why don't they pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting anybody from learning anything?" he said. "If it works as good as the Prohibition one did, why, in five years we would have the smartest race of people on earth."

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