



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Priming the Pump

The mention of Prohibition at the weekly gathering of the Pump House Gang in Homestead gave way to a lively discussion as if the event had occurred yesterday rather than 98 years ago. That's how conversations go with historians.

"The most violated law in the country," Joel Sabadasz, retired professor of United States history, declared, for openers. Others in the group offered up their opinions, laid out the background, and declared who benefited and who lost out during Prohibition. Charlie McCollester, retired labor historian, set the scene:

The movement toward Prohibition coincided with the mass migration of labor to this area and the Eastern Europeans, who came to work in the mills, brought their own alcohol traditions, plum brandy for one. My German grandparents made beer in the bathtub, during Prohibition, and in the house I bought, there was a wine press in the cellar. People made their own wine.

Talk of "drink" brought forth recollections by members of the group who lived in the Steel Valley neighborhoods surrounding the mills.

John Rudiak, who grew up on the South Side, said that, in some cases, women waited at the mill gates to collect their husbands' paychecks, so the money did not find its way to the local taverns. "While Catholics

generally greeted the end of Prohibition with enthusiasm," McCollester said, "there had also been a strong Catholic anti-drink movement. The church recognized alcoholism as a threat to the family." And so did others outside the working class. "Women's rights groups were supporters of prohibition because they saw drink as the catalyst to ruining families," Sabadasz said.

Beginning in 1907, more than a decade before Prohibition became law, Margaret Byington, a young social worker, compiled a survey of the living conditions of 90 families and single men whose lives were prescribed by working in the mill and living in the community of Homestead. She described, with a warm tone of empathy, their crowded living conditions, limited recreational opportunities, and unbearable working conditions with long hours:

I have already noted that in this community of 25,000 there are over 50 saloons and other drinking places, ranging from "speakeasies" to the

conventional bar-rooms with plate glass and bright lights. It was no part of my study to investigate the ownership or police surveillance of these establishments, the profits gathered in on pay nights, or the intoxication which, as we have seen, the courts prove so ineffectual in controlling. As places of relaxation, they fill a need not otherwise supplied. The Carnegie Library has a gymnasium and clubs, but, except for the saloons and the club rooms of one or two fraternal orders, there are no free and easy lounging places for refreshment and friendly intercourse. The Slavs bring much of the liquor they buy home and drink it sociably there, many of them being heavy drinkers.

The time she spent engaged in conversation with 90 families, most often in their kitchens, gave her extraordinary insight:

With hot work to whet thirst, and with the natural rebellion of human nature against the tension of long hours, the liquor interests have exploited the needs of the adults for recreation and refreshment. It is true that they have not



Homestead postcard.
HHC Detre L&A, GPC020.F018.I01.

really met that need, and have exploited the opportunities they offer; but it is equally true that the need is met in no other way.

Our breakfast group, who resolve world problems every Wednesday morning, formed to keep the history of labor alive in the area. They view history through the lens of the working class, and Margaret Byington would have been at home with them.

“While the working class made home brew, the upper class could drink their Scotch and French wines at home and in selective private venues above the reach of the law,” said McColester, who then referred to the writing of Lincoln Steffens. “He wrote eloquently about the ‘Pittsburgh Plan of misgovernment’ whereby the political system was operated by real corporate power behind the scene. The

powers that be sat back and let the ward heelers control the government at the grassroots level. Those were the guys who ran the brothels, the gambling, and the speakeasies.”


We’ll never know the thoughts of Andrew Mellon and his friend Henry Clay Frick on this topic, but historians tell us how it played out: “Mellon was decidedly lukewarm about enforcing Prohibition,” said McColester.

Mellon had one third ownership in Overholt, Frick’s distillery that made rye whiskey. In 1907, they removed their names from the legal documents, realizing that being in the “rum business” was not wise when talk of prohibition was in the air. They still maintained ownership, and when Frick died in 1919, Mellon became the sole owner.

In 1921, the year after Prohibition became law, Mellon became Secretary of the Treasury.

Alcohol was, of course, under Mellon’s jurisdiction, a rather awkward situation for one who owned a distillery. Records show that Mellon turned over two million gallons of Overholt whiskey to the management of Union Trust Company, while he held office. Overholt had worked overtime before the law was passed, to stock up and send whiskey abroad. There is speculation that the whiskey found its way back to the United States.

Mellon had secured one of the few permits issued to sell the existing stock at the distillery as “medicinal” whiskey during Prohibition, legally with a prescription. When the William Penn Hotel uncovered the speakeasy on their lower level, they found three bottles of Overholt, dated before Prohibition. Frick built and owned the hotel, and no doubt supplied the whiskey.

It’s no wonder then that our historians speak so easily of the past. It’s all around us. 

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer and a longtime contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.



A crate for Overholt Whiskey.
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