

Gail Gardner on the Evils of Prohibition

By Gail I. Gardner

The late Gail Gardner was a founding member and early Sheriff of the Prescott Corral of Westerners International. He is fondly remembered for his amusing, but often pointed comments on public affairs of the times. The following is extracted from a talk he gave to the Prescott Corral in 1968. Russ Sherwin prepared the transcript from an audiotape of the event.

Now one thing that a lot of people don't realize today is that Arizona went dry before the National prohibition with an Initiative Petition, which of course amended our State Constitution. An Initiative Petition was voted in 1914 . . . which made Arizona go dry.

Well now that early Constitutional Amendment for Arizona had a loophole in it: While it was illegal to ship any whiskey commercially or any liquor of any kind commercially into the state, you could ship in liquor for what they called "personal use." So I'll tell you, that didn't last very long because the dear people got together and they initiated another petition . . . [T]hat made it illegal to own liquor of any kind.

Then came the National Prohibition. That was the Eighteenth Amendment. The famous Eighteenth Amendment. It was referred to the states in 1917, and was ratified by the 36 states in January 16, 1919, and was effective January 16, 1920. And then the Volstead Act, that was the act of congress that was to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment, was passed in October 1919. But President Woodrow Wilson vetoed it and they passed it over his veto.

This Volstead was a congressman from Minnesota. Quite an old timer. He was born in 1860 and died in 1947. He didn't die near soon enough. The Volstead Act was written by a Mr. Wheeler who was president of the Anti-Saloon League. The Volstead Act dried up all the states.

I think, commenting briefly on that, there were a lot of states that [already] had prohibition fairly effective [but not too stringent]. There was Kansas, and Oklahoma, certain

counties in Texas, New Jersey and San Francisco, California. How foolish it seemed to me, to have passed a National Prohibition Act for states like New York and some of those. What we had was working pretty well. Of course, there'd be bootlegging into Kansas and there'd be bootlegging into Oklahoma. But it was a local problem and could be handled. When they clamped down on the whole nation, you had an unpopular law which was absolutely unenforceable.

The social significance and other significance is that this was the first time—up till then our country was fairly law abiding. We kept the laws; we observed the laws pretty close. But here was this unpopular law that everybody commenced to break. Well now, that morally is a bad, bad thing. Because you bring in disrespect for the law. Of course, that was before these modern punks were born, but the effect may have come along through their fathers and mothers that permissive disrespect for law which is a bad, bad thing. And I lay a lot of that on the prohibition.

Now here's another social part of this prohibition business: When I was quite young, college days and so on, why young ladies did not drink. They simply did not drink. At a wedding or somewhere they might take a glass of Champagne, but at a party, why you'd never see a lady belt down a highball. She might have a glass of wine at dinner, but she didn't do any heavy or serious drinking at all. But

when Prohibition came along and they opened up the speakeasies why women were freely admitted. Incidentally, right here in Prescott, women were run out of the saloons way back in the early 1900s. Women weren't allowed in the saloons.

So the speakeasies started, and the gangsters and the hijackers. One thing that started there with the speakeasies were barstools. Now in the early days in the bars in Prescott they didn't have any barstools. You could sit down at a card table if you were playin' a little poker and they'd bring you a drink there, but you did your drinking standing up. And if you couldn't, you fell down, there was an obliging little booster who'd put you out in the gutter and you could finish your siesta out there.

But I think barstools and women in the bars and in the saloons—now they call them “Cocktail Lounges.” I regret the passing of that good old resounding word, “Saloon.” I think that just sounds fine. And I love to get into a nice cool, dark saloon on a hot afternoon. That was the beginning of the barstools and the beginning of the ladies in the bar. It began with prohibition. See, I lay everything on prohibition.

After the California personal use commenced to dry up, why we commenced to have local bootleggers makin' moonshine. Well that first moonshine they made was simply awful! You couldn't imagine anything worse. Well now there was a local sheet metal worker here. He cashed in on this deal by making some “preserving kettles” out of copper. (Laughter)

Well, these “preserving kettles” had a tight lid that fastened with real tight lugs, and on the top it had a threaded ell and arrangement to let the steam out when you were “preserving” something. Well, all you had to do is go up to Sam Hill's and buy a few copper fittings and a few feet of copper tube and screw the things together and you were in business with a still.

Now these country moonshiners—'course liquor is made of grain and sugar—well, any rancher could buy a lot of grain and sugar if that was part of his business. And some of the ranchers would make liquor out of honey. I never fancied the honey whiskey very much. It was not too good. But there was one moonshiner that made his whiskey out of honey. He had an airtight scheme. He'd finish up a few gallon jugs of moonshine, he'd set each one down in the middle of a beehive. Well, that kept the Pro-his (pronounced pro-highs) away because they didn't go around his place looking for moonshine in any beehive.

Another was a well-known moonshiner, and the road into his place crossed a sand wash. Well, where did he bury his moonshine? He dug a hole right in the middle of the road, right in the middle of that sand wash and buried his whiskey right in the road where everybody came in. And they never did catch him at it!

There were other businesses that came into view. Oh, it was not altogether bad. There were some businessmen really improved and made good money out of prohibition selling the sugar and the grain and what not. I know the man that I worked for for a time brought in a carload of charred kegs. White oak kegs, charred inside. Five, ten and fifteen gallon. A full carload of 'em, and we sold 'em out in a month. (Laughter) See, you bought your moonshine whiskey, that white mule—it was pure white—and you put it in the charred keg for a few weeks and that was supposed to color it and supposed to age it. It depended on how long you left it for it got aged! Anyway, it was in the keg.

Now there are various ways—whether it's a myth or not, but I know in distilleries they turn the barrels every so often, and some of the best whiskey was supposed to be shipped around the horn in sailing vessels, so the constant motion would bring the whiskey into contact with the charred inside of the keg. So

some of the people I knew had some interesting ideas. One of my neighbors hung a little keg up in the top of a big juniper tree so the wind would blow and that would keep that keg in motion all the time. Another one had a sheep outfit. When he'd come on a sheep drive from the valley coming up to the mountains why he'd pack a couple kegs on a burro. That'd rattle 'em up alright! Burro goin' over this mountain country with a charred keg would sure keep that whiskey stirred up. And those that were real brave, or real reckless, I don't know which, would put a keg of that stuff in the back of the car. Well that wasn't very smart because if they ever caught you with it they'd confiscate car and all and that'd be the end of it. I did know a few that did that but not too many.

Then there was another thing. Oh, a bad thing that came out in prohibition. You could buy these cans of malt syrup. Budweiser put 'em out. Other brewing people too. And that malt syrup said on it it was for baking because malt and hops are for baking. It was for making home brew beer. And that home brew beer, all you needed was a great big five gallon crock and you put this malt syrup and water and sugar in that and I don't know what all, but anyway you let that ferment a while and finally you bottled it and put more sugar in the bottles.

Well that stuff tasted like the bottom of a birdcage. It was just simply awful! (Laughter) everybody thought that the more alcohol you had in this—'course everybody was lookin' for kicks out of the alcohol. I'm thankful that today our drinking is much more civilized.

When you went to bottle that stuff, a little too much sugar in it and you'd open a bottle, well you'd better open it in the kitchen in a dishpan and turn it spout down, because if you opened it up why your beer would be on the kitchen ceiling. Oh, how the wives did love that! Homebrew beer all over the kitchen ceil-

ing. So you could turn it in the dishpan and open it, and catch the whole thing in the dishpan, and then pour it out of the dishpan into a glass, and if you were brave enough, you could drink it!

Now, this early whiskey, as I said, was terrible. Oh, it just tasted awful. Friend of mine gave some of it to a yardman and he asked the yard man the next day, "How was that whiskey?"

"Oh, it was just right. Just right!"

"Well, what do you mean, just right?"

"Well, I'll tell you, boss. If it was any better you wouldn't have give it to me, and if it was any worse I couldn't have drank it!" (Laughter)

And that was so bad that in the early '20s that we gave advice to our sons and our young men to beware of bad liquor. That was the only warning we ever gave 'em. Times change. Times change so much. Now we give advice to our daughters, hopefully, that the only effective oral contraceptive is "NO!"

Now, as I said, in my early youth, women just plain did not drink. And at mixed parties—I might have a party maybe at my house—well up in my bedroom I might have a little bottle of liquor for the boys to come up and have a snort if they wished. But the ladies DID. NOT. DRINK. Prohibition and those speak-easies and this smart idea of breaking the law or doing something that was a little off-color, why it began the mixed parties about the women and men drinking together. Well, that wasn't so good. And also we got so the young men—the roaring '20s were really the roaring '20s, there was no doubt about that. You would take a young lady on a date and to quote that offbeat poet, Ogden Nash—when you have a date and you want to break the ice, someone that you didn't know very well—Ogden Nash says, "Candy is dandy but liquor is quicker."

Well that was very true, because maybe you'd get a pint bottle, stick it on your hip, and take the young lady for a drive out in the pines or wherever, and a few belts out of that white mule bottle chased by a sniff or two of ginger ale, and her knees and her morals became slightly relaxed. (Laughter) It is sad to relate that many of these parties in the roaring '20s—incidentally, that ginger ale—I can't look a bottle of ginger ale in the face today!

Well, some of those early parties, I regret to say, that these parties would be started and all the host or hostess did was get a gallon of moonshine and a case of ginger ale and let nature take its course. In fact, some of the parties, all they did was choose up sides and get drunk.

I went to a Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention—in fact, it was 1926 when the Smokis went back to Philadelphia, and the only thing you heard—you see, the veterans of World War I, when they came home, prohibition had been foisted upon them while most of them were in France, and hey didn't like it one bit. In France they had all the beautiful vino and the cognac they could drink, and when they got home to find the country dry except for this poisonous moonshine, they resented it very, very much. And this convention in Philadelphia, all you heard was these veterans going up and down the street, flourishing bottles of moonshine and yelling to get the Eighteenth Amendment repealed.

At this point Gail told of his one venture into back-country distilling.

[We] made some whiskey but we didn't make it to sell, we made it to drink.

I don't condone our actions a bit! Not a whit! We broke the law, we knew we were breaking the law, and it was wrong. It was very wrong and we shouldn't have done it. But there was that feeling all over the country, universally. You'd be surprised how universal it was. No, you wouldn't be surprised. Lots of you re-

member how universal it was, that it was a law that you didn't regard and you didn't respect. Once again I say that Prohibition was the first thing that brought disrespect for our laws of this nation.

Now then, finally, the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed. And it was the only time in our history that any Constitutional Amendment has been repealed, but it was repealed. And that really is a tribute to the wonderful work, the wonderful document of our constitution. If we put something in it, amend it, and it doesn't work out, we can amend it again and take it out. That's what happened in Prohibition.

But now this repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, that was duck soup for the Internal Revenue Service. What did they do? Alright, they slapped a tax of ten dollars and a half on every gallon of whiskey. Now, ten dollars and a half, you figure that down to a quart, oh, I think it's about two-sixty-two and a half cents, something like that, so when I go up here and buy us a quart of whiskey, two dollars and sixty-two and a half cents go to the Internal Revenue Service. Which is all right. If you're going to drink whiskey you'd just as well pay a tax on it. Don't make any difference. We'd like whiskey without payin' tax on it, but now we're perfectly willing to pay the tax on it.

Now then, let's see. We might review the lessons of the evening. (Laughter) I acknowledge the evils of liquor. Nobody denies that. If a person uses liquor with intemperance, why he's in trouble and it's a bad, bad thing and a bad influence. None of us deny that. But our prohibition era was far, far worse. There's no doubt about it in my mind that it was far worse. And the poorest liquor that you can buy today in any bar is better than the best moonshine that anybody of us ever made.

