

Prohibition and the Farmer

[By William Jennings Bryan, in The Country Gentleman.]

The effect of intoxicating liquor is the same on all, whether they live in the country or in the city. However men differ in race, color or occupation, they are alike in the effect of alcohol upon the system. They may vary in self-respect, in self-control, in moral strength and in good impulses, but alcohol is to all a poison.

There are three propositions that are of universal application:

1. God never made a human being who, in his normal state, needed alcohol to stimulate his mind to action. If any such need exists it is evident that the person is defective either by nature or the voluntary cultivation of a habit.

2. Among the countless millions who have worn the image of their maker, not one was strong enough to be sure of his ability to resist the appetite for alcohol when once formed; every drunkard who has fallen into a disgraced grave has passed through the period of confidence when he boasted that "he could drink when he wanted to and leave it alone when he wanted to."

The line that separates moderate drinking from excess recedes like the horizon, as one advances, until it is lost in the black night of drunkenness.

3. There is no time in one's life, between the cradle and the grave, when one can with safety contract the habit. Even age gives no immunity.

All efforts to prevent or restrain the use of alcohol, whether by persuasion or by legislation, rest upon one fundamental proposition—that alcohol, when taken into the body, impairs the physical strength, weakens the energies of the mind, and menaces the morals. The proposition is certainly either true or false.

If it is false every law built upon it is without excuse, whether that law simply throws restrictions around the sale or use of intoxicating liquors or goes to the extent of complete prohibition. If it is true the growth of the opposition to the saloon is natural and logical.

That it is true is not at this day open to dispute. The law forbidding the sale of liquors to minors is built upon the theory that the individual, not having reached an age at which the reason is presumed to be mature, should be protected from injuries which he himself is not yet competent to ward off.

Laws prohibiting the sale of liquor to Indians rest upon the same ground—namely, presumed lack of ability to protect themselves.

Laws prohibiting the sale of liquor to drunkards recognize that the habit may become so overmastering that the victim is, like a child, helpless and in need of a guardian.

GREATER MORAL STRENGTH IN THE COUNTRY

Laws forbidding the sale of liquor to a husband over the protest of a wife are a recognition of the harmfulness of alcohol during the intermediate period between the minor and the drunkard.

The rule prohibiting the use of alcohol by the students of Annapolis and other government institutions, even though they have reached their majority, is a recognition of the injurious effect of alcohol, as is also the new law prohibiting the sale of intoxicating liquors to soldiers in our army regardless of age.

These illustrations are employed, not because the question is a debatable one, but to show the growing tide of sentiment against the sale of intoxicants.

The farmer is the foe of the liquor traffic. The general average of morality is higher in the country than it is in the city, moral standards being more universally respected. Evidence of the truth of this is abundant. Penitentiary statistics will show it, as will also poverty statistics.

Evidence can also be found in Who's Who and in the directories which show how large a percentage of the successful business men are born and reared in the country. Among the reasons for this greater moral strength three may be mentioned as of special importance.

1. The man in the country is in daily contact with nature and witnesses the miracle

which every plant as well as every animal exhibits.

He knows how to invoke the great laws that govern the world about us, but he bows in reverence before the mysteries on every hand.

It is not at all difficult for him to believe in God, for he constantly beholds the evidences of the intelligence, the omnipotence and the love of the Creator. He can hardly be irreligious; and morality, according to Tolstoy, is but the outward manifestation of religion. It would be strange if the farmer did not breathe in with the free air of his domain a sense of responsibility to God, as well as a sense of dependence upon him.

2. The fact that the farmer draws his wealth from the breast of Mother Earth, rather than from his fellow men, tends to strengthen his moral principles.

NEITHER PARASITE NOR PILFERER

The farmer adds to the wealth of the nation without subtracting from the wealth of any individual. He is neither a parasite nor a pilferer.

When the Creator gave us the earth with its fertile soil, the sunshine with its warmth, and the rains with their moisture, his voice proclaimed as clearly as if it had issued from the clouds: "Go, work, and in proportion to your intelligence and industry, so shall be your reward." This is the divine law of rewards and its must prevail, except where force suspends it or cunning evades it. The farmer not only learns this law but he has no reason to rebel against it. His conscience is not seared by constant effort to justify illegitimate accumulations.

3. In addition to an environment that encourages spiritual growth, and an occupation that confirms his faith in the justness of God's laws, he has a third advantage in the absence of many of the temptations that throng about the city. His hours of labor and his need of rest combine to shield him from the dissipations that find cover in urban darkness; he is out of the reach of those who, profiting by sin and vice, lay snares and set traps for the young men of the cities.

Another reason why the agricultural community is more inclined to prohibition than the city is to be found in the fact that in the country there is no mercenary group that reaps a profit from the sale of intoxicating liquor.

The brewery, the distillery and the saloon are the backbone of the opposition to prohibition; they furnish the money to subsidize so much of the press as is purchasable, and for the corruption of officials in so far as they are corruptable.

These interests are able to control a percentage of the vote by the appeals to the appetite, and a still larger number by the intimidation which they practice on business communities.

Until very recently the liquor interests had their representatives at every capitol and at every convention. The party politicians and the party organizations have alike been terrorized; though it would have not been possible to terrorize them but for their ability to intimidate the business men of the town.

The fear, studiously cultivated, that prohibition would "drive away trade" and "hurt business" has scared many cities into tolerating the saloon. Even when the farmers surrounding the town have petitioned the voters to abolish the saloon, the liquor interests have often been able to frighten the business element into submission to their demands. This very intimidation has, however, operated powerfully to arouse the agricultural vote against the saloon.

In 1914 the liquor interests in Ohio went before the state with a plea of "home rule," and succeeded in repealing county option. They did it by using the majorities in the wet counties to override the prohibition vote of all the agricultural counties. Although the business men of the cities draw their wealth largely from the agricultural districts, they practically disfranchised the farmers of the state at the demand of the representatives of the liquor interests.

Under the pretense of securing for the cities the right to govern themselves they really gave the cities the right to sell, not only to the people who licensed them but also in the agricultural communities, where the protest was overwhelming.

The slaughterhouse is a nuisance because the

odor that comes from it can not be confined to the land on which it is situated; it is as impossible to confine the evil influence of the saloon to the city that licenses it.

Everyone injured by the saloon has a moral right to protest and should have the legal right to do so.

The effect of prohibition has been the same in the country that it has been in the cities where it has been tried. The individual is better for not using intoxicants; life and property in his neighborhood are safer; political life is cleaner, and legitimate business improves.

Virtue is contagious; it is rapidly spreading. In the prohibition states young people grow up without any knowledge of the saloon and seldom see a person under the influence of liquor. Prisons stand idle, poorhouses are uninhabited, and the drunken chaffeur no longer terrorizes the traveler on country roads.

Young men learn by experience that intoxicants are not necessary; that, as Fred Emerson Brooks has expressed it, "Pleasures are false that bring repentant pain."

Business men find by consulting their ledgers that prohibition turns wages and salaries from the till of the saloon into the safes of merchants and the vaults of the savings banks; and public men discover that the elimination of a sordid, mercenary group, interested in nothing but the safeguarding of the liquor interests, enables the parties to vie with each other for social betterment and improvement in government.

What a hideous delusion it has been, that a city or agricultural community could really be benefited by the lowering of vitality, the impairment of productive power, the sapping of intellectual vigor, the wrecking of character, the impoverishment of families, the disrupting of homes, the diseasing of unborn infants, the debasing of society, the debauching of politics, and the paralysis of patriotism.

And yet the saloon had its defenders until they were overwhelmed by the sheer force of numbers.

Prohibition began in the country and extended to the cities, larger and larger in size, until finally it dominated the so-called agricultural states. It is now working its majestic march from the west and south to the northeast, closing, as it moves forward, not only the saloons but the houses of vice that cluster about the saloons. More than half the people of the United States now live in dry territory.

Congress, reflecting the sentiment of the voters, enacted the Webb-Kenyon law, and the supreme court, not unconscious of the change that has taken place in public sentiment, has declared it constitutional. Congress has taken the federal government out of partnership with the bootlegger and the liquor press and made it the ally of the state in its efforts to exterminate the saloon and to silence the papers subsidized by the liquor business.

And now, the capital of the nation takes its seat upon the water-wagon. After the first of November of this year, 1917, the white flag of prohibition will float over Washington, just beneath the Stars and Stripes.

The war is giving us, as a by-product, two new and convincing arguments against the saloon.

First, we can not spare the food grains that are now converted into alcohol; second, we can not in the present crisis permit anything so unpatriotic as the impairment of the strength either of those now in the army or of those who, at present engaged in other occupations, may at any time be needed at the battle's front.

Prohibition is coming. When it comes, to whom will the credit be due? To the farmer more than anyone else. Again he has demonstrated his morality, his intelligence, his courage and his patriotism. He began the fight against alcohol and he has kept it up until victory is in sight.

Hail to the farmer! May his influence never grow less.

Big business has convicted itself of being a slacker. The nation conscripted the manhood of the country for the purpose of fighting its battles in Europe. When it sought to conscript war profits for the same purpose, big business resisted to the limit, refusing even to be satisfied with being allowed to retain 20 or 30 percent of those profits, made possible by war. Patriotism finds the folds of the pocketbook an inhospitable abode.