

Early Vancouver

Volume Two

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Supplemental to volume one collected in 1931.

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THE OLD TIME SALOON

A fairly good description of the saloon.
There were dozens of them in Vancouver.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20, 1932

The Odd Angle

The Old-time Bar

By P. W. LUCE.

PROHIBITIONISTS in Washington have opened an old-time saloon as a help to temperance education. It is fitted with swinging doors, big mirrors, bright lights, mahogany bar, bungstarter, brass foot rail, 'n' everything.

It is supposed to be a horrible example of the depravity of the days that are no more, and a warning that we should not forget the benefits of prohibition. The "Drys" are quite satisfied with their old-time bar, but the "Old Soaks" have yet to be heard from.

There are bottles on the shelves, bottles bearing familiar labels of well-liked brands, but the bottles are empty. They are a sham and a mockery. The substance of the old-time saloon is there, but not the spirit.

SPEAKING as one who had a nodding acquaintance with the old-time bar, I want to say that it was not wholly a place of sin by a long shot. It had its redeeming features. Mellowed by the passing of years, memories of convivial parties on licensed premises bring back many a pleasant glow.

I am not competent to compare the old-time saloon with the modern speakeasy. I have never been in a speakeasy, and I have never tasted synthetic gin, but from what I hear, the modern youth who sucks at a hip flask and sneaks into stuffy blind pigs has never learned to drink his liquor like a gentleman. He makes a shoddy business of what should be a social pleasure.

THE trouble with this synthetic saloon is that it has been built by men who never had any sympathy for the genuine article. It may be correct as to scale and perfect as regards furnishings, but all the little intimate touches must be lacking. There are definite limits to the abilities of the "Drys," if not to their ambitions.

A gentleman in a white apron impersonates a bartender in the Washington reconstruction. Presumably he is a ro-tund and jovial personage, but, being a teetotaler, what a sorry bartender he is bound to make!

What a travesty on the florid Mike of long ago, Mike with his oiled and curly hair, his purple moustache, his eternal cigar, his golden smile that rivalled Jack Johnson's, his green tie, his white waistcoat, his heavy gold chain, his check socks, and his bright yellow shoes. Ah, there was truly a bartender!

The professional prohibitionist does not look a bit like that. No amount of make-up will make his disguise effective, and no studious practice can ever teach him to swing a wet towel along the bar in the traditional manner. It's a gift denied to men who don't drink.

WHILE it may be true that the old-time bartender invariably gave the change to the wrong customer so that somebody would buy another drink as a result of the argument bound to follow, and sometimes mistook his own pocket for the house cash register, nobody minded these foibles. He was a good spender, a genial soul, and he had the gift of the patient ear.

No matter how many times he had heard a customer's sad tale of woe, the bartender was always willing to listen and to say "Sure!" or "Tough luck!" at the right time.

Unlike prohibitionists, he never committed the fatal error of giving a man good advice. The most he would do would be to urge the fellow to have another drink, and he seldom had to repeat the invitation.

"HAVE one on the house!" was one of the sweetest suggestions of two decades ago. It saved countless parties from breaking up too soon, for etiquette demanded that the "one on the house" should be followed by one on each of the customers, so long as they had the cash or their credit was good.

I do not know the prohibitionists' equivalent for "one on the house," but I doubt much if it can be as popular. When you're not getting any drinks at all, not getting another drink may easily pass unnoticed.

THE formalities of an introduction were not insisted upon in the old-time saloon. A willingness to drown a thirst fulfilled all social requirements, and a general invitation to "belly up to the bar and name your 'pizen'" raised a man ace-high for the time being. There were places where a refusal to drink would have been construed as an invitation to fight, but on the whole, fights were frowned upon. There was always the danger that the big mirror might get smashed.

ONE of the glories of the old-time bar was the free lunch, though the Americans always excelled us in that respect. Our hotel proprietors were somewhat timid both as regards quantity and variety, and kept a calculating eye on the eatables.

Even in the better places, the free lunch was not always adequate to allay the appetite, but it could always be depended on to generate a thirst. The base might be smoked salmon or pretzels or cheese sandwiches or bologna, but the chief seasoning was always salt.

If the hotel men could have devised a salt-lick to take the place of the free lunch, they would have been happy.

WASHINGTON'S imitation saloon includes a brass rail, and the noble Bishop Cannon has had his photograph taken with his foot resting heavily on it, as if the thing were an emergency brake.

The good bishop means well, but he has failed utterly to grasp the function of the brass rail. The experienced drinker did not use it as a foot scraper or a stirrup. Rather, he used it as a barometer of his condition. So long as he could stand with one foot on the floor and the other resting lightly on the brass rail, he knew it was safe for him to "hoist another."

The "old soak" treated the brass rail with reverence. He stroked it gently with his foot, and he did it unconsciously, much as one strokes a pet cat, and got much the same pleasure out of it.

No prohibitionist will ever be able to understand that.