

Temperance and Morality in Rural Society

The Champlain Valley in the middle of the 1800s was more acutely affected by infrastructural and technological advances (canals, industrialization, and trade) than other parts of the rural North Country. Lake Champlain had long been the primary transportation route north and south, which made it also the center for industrialization in the region. The economic, demographic, and environmental changes this encouraged lead to more immediate social upheaval (the 1850s were the peak years for immigration into urban areas and out of the state by rural Vermonters, as well as peak environmental degradation). “In America in 1830s, only cultural power of religion could have assembled repertoire of protest. Aggressive expansion of capitalist markets uprooted individuals and groups and undermined traditional forms and purposes of collective actions....” Fast-moving social and economic changes are sometimes shown to have manifested in moral entrenchment, of which the temperance movement is a part.¹⁹ The contrast between rural and urban life is important in examining temperance and prohibition in the Champlain Valley.

Alcohol was seen as an urban problem even in widely rural Vermont prior to that state’s prohibition in 1853. A handbill from 1844 reads “While other countries are only chargeable with the amount actually consumed within their borders, it is a notorious fact that yearly inundates at least one-fourth part of the state with alcohol, producing drunkenness and pauperism. Washington, Lamoille, Caledonia, Franklin and Orleans Counties look here for the means of sustaining the traffic; and the flood-gates once shut down, by the voice of the freemen of this country, they would abolish the trade almost from necessity.”²⁰ When Vermont does pass its prohibitory liquor law, it was the farming communities in the Champlain Valley along the lake (as opposed to their larger industrial neighbors like Burlington and Rutland) that voted the law in.²¹ While small mountainous towns first felt prohibitions to infringe on their freedoms, temperance sentiments fomented downhill in the Champlain Valley; in those communities within close proximity to the social changes brought on by immigration and industrialization.²²

The beginnings of mass media fueled the early temperance movement, especially in its urban-rural distinctions. The political landscape in 19th century America was much more convoluted than we think of today. A web of different interests crossed political lines, unlike the more binary politics of today. In general, though, the Democratic Party was seen as the opponent of temperance and prohibitory measures due to its support from newly arrived immigrant groups, usually in urban areas, that held drink to be culturally important.²³ A large state like New York, where distant cities remained “wet”

¹⁹ Young, Michael P., “Confessional Protest: The Religious Birth of U.S. National Social Movements,” *American Sociological Review* (American Sociological Association, Oct. 2002), p.664

²⁰ “To the Freemen of Chittenden County,” 1844, Broadside, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, in Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, p.154

²¹ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, p.85

²² Searls, Paul M. *Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity, 1865-1910*. (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006), p.13

²³ Porter, Eugene O., “An Outline of the Temperance Movement” *The Historian* (Wiley, Autumn 1944), Vol.7, No.1, p.61

strongholds, complicated the political picture on the New York side of the lake. Vermont, with its smaller, widely rural, and more homogeneous state population, could more easily make legislative change statewide, although the results were still often very close. An early group, the Vermont Society for the Promotion of Temperance, was a 1820s men's movement.²⁴ Many other temperance organizations arose on both side of the valley, as well as in Canada. Alongside them, the American Tract Society took charge of spread the temperance ideas across the country through intensive pamphleteering campaigns. Famous publishers like Horace Greeley arose from this movement. Greeley began his press career in western VT, where he was famously ridiculed for his strong temperance position.²⁵

In particularly rural spaces like the Adirondack Mountains, nature itself came to represent purity, cleanliness, and temperance in the 1800s. Verplank Colvin, who surveyed the Adirondacks in the 1870s, credited his success partly to temperance policies on his expeditions – The pure waters of the mountains were all his men needed for moral and scientific success. “Not a particle of alcoholic or fermented liquor of any kind... was used, carried or permitted to be used... The result has been subordination, steady work, health and success.”²⁶

The landscape of small towns and farms was portrayed as more patriotically American than the quickly changing urban spaces. The Grange, a nation-wide organization to support farmers, had a strong foothold in Vermont and New York and also advocated for temperance in rural society – “The majority of our farmers come from the older pioneer stock that have been many generations removed from a foreign flag. This great difference is often overlooked in analyzing the difference between the city and county on the matter of temperance” reports a Grange publication from Ohio.²⁷

In the Champlain Valley during the era of state prohibition there was a focus on crime and corruption (especially around the sale of alcohol) within urban immigrant communities in places like St. Albans, Burlington, and Plattsburgh. Groups of working-class immigrants that were part of the new economic system, like Irish immigrants who had famously featured in the building of the Champlain and Erie Canals, and Italian immigrants who worked Barre's granite mines were prominent targets in the Champlain Valley.²⁸ As early as 1834 an upstate New York reverend wrote of Irish immigrants in the valley that “They will soon have five to one against us, -- Scotch and Englishmen... They are very noisy people when they drink... there is no stability in their loyalty to our government.”²⁹ The Irish immigrants working on the canals were known to be paid in whiskey and were often single, young men who worked hard and drank heartily. While certainly many canal workers were hard-drinking, the anti-Irish sentiment stemmed from Irish caricatures and anti-Catholicism of the era. A spectacular case of Catherine Dillon, an Irish immigrant in St. Albans who was a “notorious offender” -- arrested and indicted

²⁴ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, p.68

²⁵ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, p.67

²⁶ Colvin, Verplank, *Report of the Topographical Survey of Adirondack Wilderness of New York, for the Year 1873* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1874), p.43

²⁷ Taber, L. J., Master, the National Granger, “Why the Farmer Advocates Temperance” *Official Journal of the Religion Education Association* (Columbus, Ohio: 1932) Vol. 27, p.74

²⁸ Feeney, Vincent Edward. “Pre-Famine Irish in Vermont, 1815-1844,” *Vermont History* (Summer/Fall 2006) Vol.74, pp.101–126

²⁹ O'Callaghan, Rev. Jeremiah, *Usury, Funds, and Banks*, (Burlington VT, 1834), p.20.

countless times but apparently never punished harshly enough to deter her, was a newspaper sensation in the 1850s and 60s. Dillon consistently made enough money to pay all fines; an interesting clue to the state of prohibition enforcement at the time. “Catherine had well-developed relationships with those responsible for enforcing the laws and benefited from their assistance.” The Burlington Free Press writes in 1871.³⁰ The lack of effective enforcement was a consistent theme in the Champlain valley. Corruption by urban officials would become more and more of a theme.

Another difficulty with Vermont’s 1852 liquor law was that it did not prevent the creation of wine for religious purposes, the personal creation of cider, or other fermented liquor as long as it was not sold or given to a “habitual drunkard” or led to anyone’s intoxication. A ten dollar fine would be paid if broken.³¹ Alcohol was easily transported across the state line by mail-order from Whitehall, New York to Rutland, where the notorious *Jug Case* saw the Whitehall merchant fined again and again in the 1880s.³²

Confusion also existed about what was considered a “spirituous” beverage. The introduction of German lager beer into Vermont prompted the wonderfully named court case *The State of Vermont v. One Keg of Lager Beer*, which ultimately found (through highly questionable witness and expert testimony) the keg of beer exonerated; it was not found intoxicating. In a number of following cases this decision was reversed. Nonetheless, the loophole Vermont’s the 1852 liquor law allowing production for personal consumption created stark regional differences between rural communities (who passed these laws to begin with and probably saw little change in lifestyle) and urban spaces where alcohol could no longer be bought and could not as easily be made for oneself.

Anti-Italian sentiment toward alcohol was also apparent in the press. In Caledonia, the attorney for a man named Bardelli (who ultimately paid \$600 fine) testified “It is the custom of the Italians to keep wine and beer and sometimes stronger liquors for family use, and to use it upon their tables with their meals.” The attorney also called attention to a witness who “testified under a feeling of ill will and prejudice... toward the Italians in Hardwick.”³³

As the Twentieth century approached, another immigrant group began to dominate in the valley’s urban centers, as French Canadian families immigrated south from a depressed economic situation in Quebec.³⁴ French Democratic political organizations arose between Burlington and Plattsburgh that were certainly opposed to temperance sentiments, coming from a culture across the border that often celebrated drinking. Although much of “Anglo” Canada followed similar temperance patterns as their neighbors in the U.S., Quebec maintained separate customs of social drinking and cultural life, and would be celebrated for that later in Canadian History.³⁵

³⁰ Krakowski, Adam, *Vermont Prohibition: Teetotalers, Bootleggers & Corruption*, (Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2016), pp.45-48

³¹ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, p.41

³² Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, p.51

³³ Krakowski, *Vermont Prohibition*, p.65

³⁴ Robinson, Rowland E., *Vermont: A Study of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), pp.328-332 in Graffagnino, et al., *Vermont Voices*, p.227

³⁵ In 19th century Canada, music and entertainment were closely tied to drinking. Joe Beef’s Tavern, which was notorious in late-1800s Montreal, combined lower-class entertainments with drinking and working immigrant populations, and became so closely associated with social ills that reformers targeted the two