

Bootleggers, Prohibitionists and Police: The Temperance Movement in Miami, 1896-1920

By Paul S. George*

The literature on Miami during national prohibition (1920-1933) is plentiful, since the “Noble Experiment” failed so spectacularly in the area. Miami’s proximity to the liquor-supplying Bahama Islands, a lengthy coastline whose numerous coves and inlets delighted liquor smugglers, a large tourist population which demanded, – and received – alcoholic beverages, and public opposition to prohibition made the city a haven for bootleg liquor and produced a rich folklore that included ingenious methods of liquor smuggling, battles on the high seas between “rum runners” and United States Coast Guard patrols, and saloons operating with impunity near police headquarters.¹

But Miami had experienced difficulty in enforcing its temperance laws long before this era. Prior to Miami’s incorporation in 1896, Julia Tuttle and the Brickell family, the fledgling city’s most prominent pioneers, envisioned a community free of “malt, vinous, or intoxicating liquors.”² Therefore, in appropriating to Henry M. Flagler, the community’s developer, land that comprised its original boundaries, Mrs. Tuttle and the Brickells stipulated that anti-liquor clauses must appear in the deeds to each lot sold. These clauses prohibited landowners from “buying, selling, or manufacturing” alcoholic drink at the risk of having their land revert to the original owners.³

The anti-liquor clauses prompted several entrepreneurs to erect saloons less than twenty feet north of the city limits in North Miami. Other attempts were made in 1896 to open saloons within the city limits, but each was unsuccessful due to the efforts of City Marshal Young F. Gray and Sheriff R. J. Chillingworth, who also arrested many persons for drunkenness as well as for selling liquor within the city limits.⁴

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Following the death of Julia Tuttle, Miami became “wet,” because her son, Harry, the executor of her estate, sold a lot to a prospective saloon keeper in 1900 without the anti-liquor clause in its deed. Within months of the transaction a saloon opened on the property; after this action went uncontested, Harry Tuttle sold other lots without liquor clauses, some of which became the site of additional saloons.⁵ By the end of 1910, Miami contained eight saloons which, according to one pioneer, engaged in “a thriving business.”⁶

Although the saloon business was brisk, a strong temperance element began to surface. At its vanguard were local chapters of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Anti-Saloon League, numerous clergymen, and the *Miami Metropolis*, the city’s leading newspaper. As the prohibitionist forces grew, they prevailed upon the city council for more stringent liquor laws. Accordingly, the council, enacted a series of laws prohibiting saloons in residential sections, placed a \$500.00 fee on liquor licenses, limited the hours a bar could operate, and urged vigorous enforcement of a state law banning the sale of alcohol to Indians.⁷

Many saloons ignored these strictures due to the inability of the area’s understaffed police to enforce them. Meanwhile, incidents of bootlegging and drunkenness rose sharply, resulting, according to the *Miami Metropolis*, in “many men reeling about Miami streets.”⁸ On other occasions this journal complained of the rowdiness of Miami’s saloons and the practice by many politicians of distributing free alcohol to voters on election day in return for their support.⁹ Joining the *Metropolis* was the Anti-Saloon League which, in a resolution to the state legislature in 1907, complained of the ineffectiveness of the police in upholding the city’s liquor laws and requested assistance in battling the evil.¹⁰

Shortly thereafter, the Anti-Saloon League and the WCTU decided to place the issue of a wet or dry county before voters in a special local-option election. Held in October, 1907, the contest resulted in a narrow defeat for the dries.¹¹ The strong showing of the temperance forces, however, only stiffened their resolve for a dry county.

Accordingly, a second referendum followed two years of intense campaigning by the prohibitionists. The heart of their strategy centered on the recruitment of new members. To achieve this goal, temperance elements, led by the WCTU, launched a series of recruiting drives highlighted by impassioned orators who spoke before large audiences. The high-point of the campaign occurred in 1908 with the appearance of Carrie Nation, one of the country’s most influential temperance advocates. In talks before large and enthusiastic audiences, the doughty prohibitionist

charged the police and other officials with accepting bribes from liquor dealers in exchange for their tacit approval of illegal Sunday liquor sales.¹²

Carrie Nation reserved her heaviest artillery for County Solicitor H. Pierre Branning. During one meeting, Branning demanded that the temperance zealot prove her assertion that local authorities were cooperating with liquor interests. She responded by promptly pulling two bottles of whiskey from “the mysterious folds of her non-descript dress,” waving them above her head and crying, “Here is the proof. . . these bottles were purchased from North Miami on Sunday.”¹³ Despite the efforts of Carrie Nation and others, prohibition forces lost another local-option election in 1909.¹⁴ But pressure from temperance supporters on the council and the police led to new legislation and more effective enforcement of the drinking laws.

The council passed ordinances which further reduced the operating hours of saloons, placed additional restrictions on the size of the saloon district, banned women and children from bar premises, forbade the sale of alcohol to a drunkard or a person already intoxicated, and called for the removal of “any screen, or frosted glass or obstruction of any kind which will prevent persons passing along the street (from) seeing into the (saloon).¹⁵ Furthermore, the council and other municipal officials brought renewed pressure upon the police for more effective enforcement of these laws. Later, the lawmakers instructed Police Chief Frank Hardee to inspect periodically each of Miami’s saloons to insure their compliance with ordinances governing their operation. Chief Hardee and his small force handled this chore diligently by conducting numerous raids on establishments selling liquor illegally or on Sundays, after operating hours, or without a valid license. The Miami Police Department (MPD) also continued to make numerous arrests for drunkenness.¹⁶

The sheriff’s department compiled an even more impressive record during this period. Upon assuming office in 1908, Sheriff Dan Hardie vowed to “run down every blind tiger in the county,” and in his eight years as sheriff, Hardie closed numerous blind tigers, while arresting bootleggers, Indians with alcohol and saloon owners operating in violation of the liquor laws.¹⁷ On several occasions the sheriff closed saloons for repeated violations of these ordinances. In 1912, the MPD and sheriff’s department engaged in joint campaigns to halt the sale of bootleg liquor. Numerous arrests followed.¹⁸

Meanwhile, temperance continued to attract new supporters. Finally, in the fall of 1913, prohibitionists narrowly triumphed in a local-option

election. Beginning in November, 1913, the sale of intoxicating beverages was prohibited by law in Dade County.¹⁹

Instead of producing an era of sobriety and virtue, as its proponents had hoped, prohibition produced a flourishing clandestine liquor traffic, unleashed new forces, notably smuggling and organized crime, and exacerbated the older evils of bootlegging and moonshining. Consequently, prohibition enforcement became increasingly difficult for the police.

With all avenues for the legal sale of alcohol closed in the county, bootleggers received vast supplies of liquor from moonshine stills throughout south Dade and the Everglades, and from other "wet" areas of Florida. By 1919, liquor also began flowing into Miami from the Bahamas.

A few bootleggers dominated the local traffic in alcohol. Some established elaborate organizations that included "runners," agents who solicited and delivered orders for liquor from restaurants, soda fountains, bordelloes, fraternal lodges, and hotels.²⁰ By 1918, the police became convinced that a one-man monopoly controlled bootleg operations in Miami. Efforts to penetrate such an organization were largely unsuccessful.²¹

Regardless of who controlled the traffic in bootleg liquor, its quantity and price rose inexorably. In 1919, a quart of liquor sold for as high as \$10.00, one hundred percent above its price in 1914.²² Records of police raids provide some idea of the amount of liquor in Miami at the time. In one raid in 1919, Sheriff D. W. Moran and two deputies seized 380 quarts of liquor valued at \$4,800.²³ In addition, the number of liquor-related arrests rose tremendously over the pre-prohibition period. Hijackings of liquor shipments and killings among rival bootleggers were not uncommon.²⁴

The Miami Police Department, the sheriff's office, a district constable, several prohibition groups, and, by 1918, federal agents, worked diligently to counter the flagrant disregard of prohibition in South Florida. There was some cooperation among the various agencies in the effort, especially between the MPD and the sheriff's department. Both departments assigned several men exclusively to a liquor detail. Some served in an undercover capacity at the Florida East Coast railroad depot, package express office, post office, and the city docks searching for persons or vehicles carrying liquor. Patrolmen in Colored Town, downtown, and other parts of Miami were assigned to liquor surveillance as part of their

general duties. Some policemen, particularly in the black community, employed “spotters,” persons who bought liquor from bootleggers and subsequently identified them to the legal authorities. Raids on moonshine stills and speakeasies or clandestine saloons provided a conspicuous display of police activity.²⁵

Aside from several incidents involving drunken policemen, the MPD and sheriff's department performed competently. Numerous raids, arrests, and the confiscation of prodigious quantities of liquor drew praise from the press and grand juries.²⁶ However, the extent of the assignment, limited resources, and a reluctant population handicapped police efforts. Accordingly, the traffic in liquor increased significantly. The *Miami Herald* noted, in 1917, that despite hundreds of arrests, the police “have barely scratched the surface” of the traffic in bootleg liquor.²⁷ The paper observed that “the clandestine traffic in illicit liquor has grown to such proportions in the city and county in the last two years that it reveals a revolting state of affairs.”²⁸

Legal technicalities complicated the task of prohibition enforcement. Several enterprising saloon keepers noted the failure of the prohibition statute to define the quantity of alcohol necessary to constitute an “intoxicating beverage,” and opened “emporiums” offering “near beer,” a light malt liquor which tasted similar to beer but contained less than two percent alcohol. Miami Police Chief William Whitman, Sheriff Hardie and their successors tried at length to close the city's near beer saloons.²⁹ These officials believed that by serving alcoholic beverages, near beer saloons represented a direct violation of prohibition, and that they afforded a logical outlet for bootleg liquor. Under strong pressure from Whitman and others, the council, between 1915 and 1917, attempted to legislate near beer saloons out of existence by charging an exorbitant price for an operating license.³⁰ But the city's Municipal Court declared the ordinance unconstitutional, maintaining that it imposed a “prohibitive” cost on a business whose major product had not been proven to the court's satisfaction to be intoxicating and thus in violation of the dry law.³¹ Finally, in 1917, with strong pressure from Dade and other dry counties, the state legislature outlawed the sale of all beverages containing over one-half of one percent of alcohol, thereby eliminating the problem of near beer.³²

To a lesser degree the widespread use of Jamaica Ginger, a nostrum for colds with a high alcoholic content, also presented the police with serious problems during the early years of prohibition. Since Jamaica Ginger could be obtained easily — and cheaply — at drug stores, its

popularity grew. In 1916, Police Chief Whitman and the city attorney discovered an old ordinance outlawing the sale of Jamaica Ginger without a physician's prescription. Stringent police enforcement of the ordinance thereafter eliminated the medicine's availability as an intoxicant.³³

The presence of thousands of servicemen in the area in 1917 and 1918 further complicated prohibition enforcement. Bootleggers brazenly sold liquor near the entrance to the naval air station and other military facilities. Drunkenness among servicemen became so prevalent that one naval officer warned city officials that all base leaves would be curtailed if the police did not halt the sale of liquor to his men. Evacuation of the military camps at the close of the war ended the problem.³⁴

New problems arose, however, as the Bahamian trade soon began in earnest, pouring millions of gallons of liquor into Miami and South Florida in the 1920s, and turning the area into one of the chief purveyors of drink for a thirsty nation. If Miami can be said to have disregarded prohibition in its local phase, then it can only be characterized as having flouted it during the era of the "Noble Experiment." But the precedent had been established in the earlier period. Moreover, many of the methods employed by bootleggers during local prohibition carried over into the 1920s.

Prohibition contributed to Miami's emergence as a center for organized crime. The gangster element which was drawn to the city by the prospect of great fortunes through the illicit traffic in liquor remained after the repeal of prohibition, shifting to gambling and prostitution and to legitimate enterprises such as real estate and the hotel industry. Not surprisingly, Miami acquired a reputation as a "wide open" city, an image far removed from the visions of its founders.

NOTES

1. Patricia Buchanan, "Miami's Bootleg Boom," *Tequesta*, Volume 30 (1970); James Carter, "Florida and Rumrunning during National Prohibition," unpublished Master's thesis, Florida State University, 1965, pp. 4-8; 14-15; 29; 52; Walton Green, "Loose Islands and Lax Courts," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 2, 1926, p. 110; Henry Reno and Stephen Trumbull, "Rum Made Many a Miami Fortune," *Miami Herald*, April 26, 1960; Frederic Van de Water, "Pirates: Bootlegging in the Bahamas," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 8, 1924, pp. 8-9; 159-162.

2. Ruby Carson, "Miami: 1896-1900," *Tequesta* 16 (1956): 16; Isador Cohen, *Historical Sketches and Sidelights of Miami* (Miami, 1925), p. 57; John Kofoed, *The Florida Story* (New York, 1960), p. 30; John Kofoed, *Moon Over Miami* (New York, 1955), p. 200; *Miami Metropolis*, May 15, 1896, p. 1; June 12, 1896, p. 4; July 10, 1896, p. 1; Helen Muir, *Miami U.S.A.* (New York, 1953), pp. 68, 177.

3. Muir, *Miami*, p. 68. The lone exception to this stricture was Henry Flagler, who received permission from Tuttle and the Brickells to operate a saloon in the Royal Palm Hotel during the tourist season.

4. Muir, *Miami*, pp. 80-81; John Sewell, *Memoirs and History of Miami, Florida* (Miami, 1933), p. 141; *Miami Metropolis*, July 10, 1896, p. 4; September 4, 1896, p. 5. One person even opened a saloon on a houseboat on the Miami River at the foot of Avenue D, the original thoroughfare.

5. Muir, *Miami*, pp. 80-81, 83; Sewell, *Memoirs*, pp. 141-142. On another occasion, Tuttle leased his deceased mother's home to a gambler. Shortly thereafter, it became a thriving gambling club!

6. Cohen, *Historical Sketches*, p. 27; *Daily Miami Metropolis*, July 24, 1908, p. 2.

7. *Minutes of the City Council*. (Hereafter cited as *MCC*), Volume One, August 6, 1903, p. 321; Volume Two, November 16, 1905, p. 209; November 1, 1906, p. 368; Volume Three, September 19, 1907, pp. 41-42; *Miami Metropolis*, August 7, 1903, p. 5. During the Progressive Era, which occurred in the early years of the twentieth century, many areas of the country elected to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol. The prohibition crusade was one of the most prominent reform movements during this period.

8. *Miami Metropolis*, May 30, 1902, p. 9

9. *Ibid.*, January 3 1908, p. 2; May 14, 1908, p. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, April 12, 1907, p. 1.

11. Cohen, *Historical Sketches*, p. 57; *Miami Herald*, August 20, 1916, p. 2; *Daily Miami Metropolis*, September 8, 1908, p. 2; *Minutes of the County Commission*, October 19, 1907, p. 321.

12. Cohen, *Historical Sketches*, p. 59; *Miami Herald*, August 20, 1916, p. 2; *Daily Miami Metropolis*, March 7, 1908, p. 1; March 8, 1908, p. 1; March 10, 1908, p. 1. A state law prohibited the sale of any alcoholic beverages on Sunday.

13. Cohen, *Historical Sketches*, pp. 59-60; Hanna, *Golden Sands*, p. 280; *Daily Miami Metropolis*, March 10, 1908, p. 1.

14. Cohen, *Historical Sketches*, p. 57; *Daily Miami Metropolis*, November 6, 1909, p. 1; November 8, 1909, p. 5.

15. *Daily Miami Metropolis*, April 3, 1908, p. 1; April 17, 1908, p. 1; June 20, 1908, p. 1; *MCC*, Volume Three, April 2, 1908, pp. 208, 215-216.

16. *Daily Miami Metropolis*, July 24, 1908, p. 2.

17. *Daily Miami Metropolis*, July 12, 1909, p. 1; November 2, 1909, p. 1; July 18, 1910, p. 1; July 26, 1911, p. 4; *Miami Herald*, June 9, 1911, December 21, 1914, p. 6; May 27, 1916, p. 5.

“Blind Tiger” was a term used for a place which sold liquor illegally. Sometimes the term was also used to describe bootleggers.

18. *Daily Miami Metropolis*, December 20, 1911, p. 1; *Miami Herald*, January 16, 1912, p. 9.

19. *Miami Herald*, November 5, 1913, p. 1; *Miami Daily Metropolis*, October 30, 1913, p. 1; October 31, 1913, p. 1.

20. *Miami Herald*, April 26, 1914, p. 4; December 17, 1918, p. 4; January 1, 1919, p. 1; September 27, 1919, p. 2.

21. *Ibid.*, January 1, 1919, p. 1.

22. *Ibid.*, March 13, 1919, p. 4.

23. *Miami Herald*, September 27, 1919, p. 2; *Miami Daily Metropolis*, September 26, 1919, p. 1.

24. *Miami Herald*, December 31, 1914, p. 4; January 1, 1919, p. 1; *Miami News*, May 14, 1971, p. 30.

25. *Miami Herald*, January 4, 1914, p. 1; June 10, 1914, p. 8; November 12, 1914, p. 8; December 6, 1915, p. 8; December 29, 1915, p. 5; June 18, 1916, p. 8; October 29, 1916, p. 2; December 21, 1916, p. 4; March 20, 1917, p. 8; November 23, 1918, p. 1; December 16, 1918, p. 1; July 19, 1919, p. 1.

26. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1916, pp. 4 & 8; June 18, 1916, p. 8; December 21, 1916, p. 4; December 17, 1918, p. 4.

27. *Ibid.*, April 21, 1917, p. 1.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, December 21, 1914, p. 6; October 1, 1915, p. 3; January 25, 1916, p. 5.

30. *Miami Herald*, October 2, 1914, p. 6; January 21, 1916, p. 1; January 29, 1916, p. 1.

31. *Ibid.*, January 28, 1916, p. 8.

32. *Miami Herald*, April 28, 1917, p. 8; *Miami Daily Metropolis*, July 17, 1917, p. 3.

33. *Miami Herald*, April 12, 1916, p. 7; April 13, 1916, p. 8; November 10, 1916, p. 7.

34. *Ibid.*, June 9, 1918, p. 9; November 27, 1918, p. 1; November 28, 1918, p. 1.