

# Hell Joints & Murder Shops

How Saloons Prevailed  
in the War for Temperance

by James Hill



She arrived in Des Moines, Iowa, on a February day in 1901, her train pulling up to the station where an excited crowd of hundreds had gathered to meet her. Carrie Nation was a national celebrity by then and she had come to Iowa to give her temperance speech. Many in the crowd hoped for more. Her reputation as a hell-fire crusader and saloon smasher in the cities of Kansas had preceded her and accounted for the news reporters from major papers who mixed in with the many curious onlookers. No doubt they hoped for some smashing in Des Moines. As it turned out, Carrie Nation walked through the downtown area in the company of policemen, visited four saloons, berated the saloon keepers for operating "hell joints" and "murder shops," then left without further disturbance. The next day she boarded the train for Muscatine, made whistle stops in Iowa City and West Liberty, and arrived in the river town for more saloon inspections—not a bottle was broken—and a temperance lecture. After that it was on to Chicago.

Wherever she went, Carrie Nation struck a blow for the cause of temperance, often taking the law into her own hands as she saw fit. She might have differed from most temperance crusaders on methods—most preferred hot words to hurled brickbats—but she was at one with them on the common enemy: the saloon. Cast as a den of iniquity by organizations from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union to the Anti-Saloon League, the town saloon was something of a battleground in the years between Iowa's statehood in 1846 and the enactment of national prohibition in 1920. In that time, warring between "drys" (who supported the prohibition of the manufacture, sale, and use of alcohol) and "wets" (who opposed prohibition) went back and forth before the last legal drink was poured and all the remaining saloons finally closed their doors.

Given the long and spirited campaigns to put saloons out of business in Iowa, one wonders how they proved so resilient—how they stood as long as they did in the face of a stream of petitions and state laws

intended to banish or severely restrict access to alcohol. Before 1920, Iowans had twice come within a hair's breadth of amending the state constitution to prohibit beverage alcohol and twice had put saloons on notice by passing strong prohibition laws, only to buckle under pressure in later years and relax the laws, allowing saloons a foothold. Even after legislation had made Iowa a strong prohibition state, saloons carried on in one way or another, owing largely to the state's cultural diversity, legislation that proved unenforceable, and the ingenuity and adaptability of the dealers in beverage alcohol.

Why Carrie Nation found such fertile ground for her extremist message in Iowa can be explained by a temperance war that had been going on in the state for decades. From the 1830s, when Iowa was yet a territory, temperance-minded Iowans had called for restrictions on alcohol, and after Iowa was admitted to the Union they wasted little time in getting a temperance statute enacted. In 1847, after the first legislature passed a local-option law to grant

counties a referendum on the liquor question, all but one county voted dry. When the dry laws were routinely violated, however, another law, two years later, handed the power to license liquor dealers to county boards of supervisors.

In what was to become the pattern of debate for the next 70 years, legislators argued one way or the other on the liquor question. The temperance-minded argued for absolute prohibition—the banning of all beverage alcohol (beer, wine, and spirits). The moderates pushed for a modicum of regulation, usually licensing fees for

saloons and local option (by which the liquor question was left to the voters of a county or community to decide).

In the early years of statehood, one thing most Iowans could agree on was the problem of public drunkenness. Much of the blame for it could be attributed to



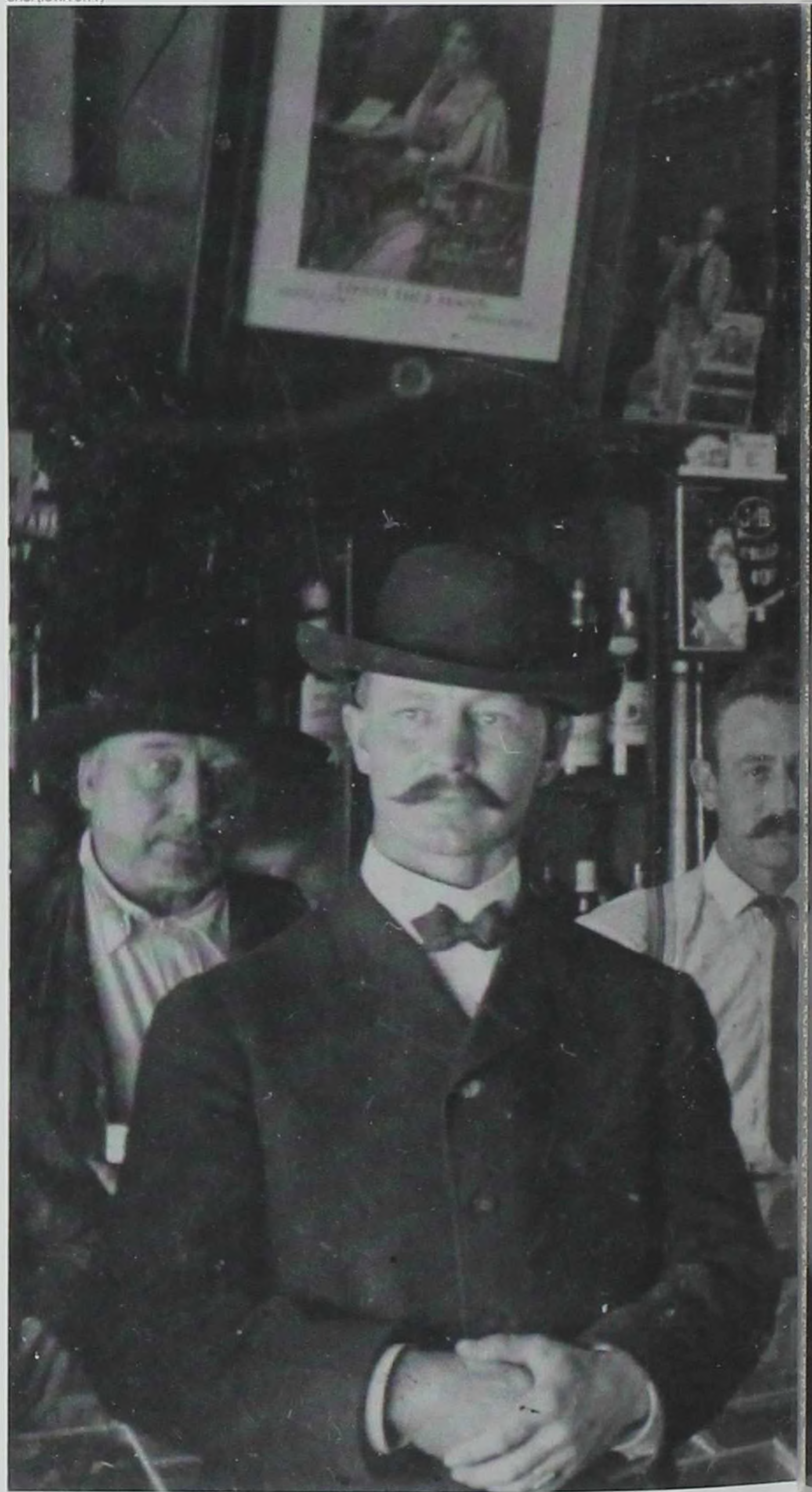
Beverage alcohol was ubiquitous and popular in much of 19th-century America. This 1871 advertisement for a Philadelphia establishment makes its point in German as well as English. Left: Background image is a hand-colored lithograph of "The Drunkard's Progress," circa 1846.

the plentiful and easily accessible supply of beverage alcohol, particularly whiskey, and a high rate of consumption—much greater than it is in modern times. Multiplied by a growing population within the state and the spread of saloons, drunkenness became a public nuisance, opening the door to a range of social ills. For many a drinker, access to liquor—hard liquor more than beer and wine—was a slippery slide that began in the saloon and spread to the workplace and the home, bringing ruin to the drunkard and his family. For concerned citizens the problem called for intervention—for a muscular activism rather than more homilies on the sin of drunkenness.

Thus there emerged in towns and cities of Iowa offshoots of national temperance societies, among them the Sons of Temperance, the Order of Grand Templars, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Largely church-based in their membership, they cast the drunkard as a weak-willed sinner in moral peril and in need of rescue from the devil's snare of the saloon. Rescue work began at the saloon door. There temperance crusaders sang hymns, prayed, and pushed tracts into the hands of patrons as they came

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and went. Their appeal was for more than temperate drinking, of course, more than what we call "responsible" drinking today. In their minds liquor was a poison to be avoided entirely; they demanded abstinence, usually following a pledge to get sober and stay that way.

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tavern, taproom, barroom, ale house, public house, grog shop—the saloon was seen as a “hell joint,” even if the image of the 19th-century saloon that has come down to us is much less sinister: a high-ceilinged room with a long polished bar, tiers of bright bottles set against a wide mirror, and rough, sunburned cowboys leaning forward on the bar top, one foot on the brass rail, tossing down shots of whiskey.

Saloons in 19th-century America were often spirit-

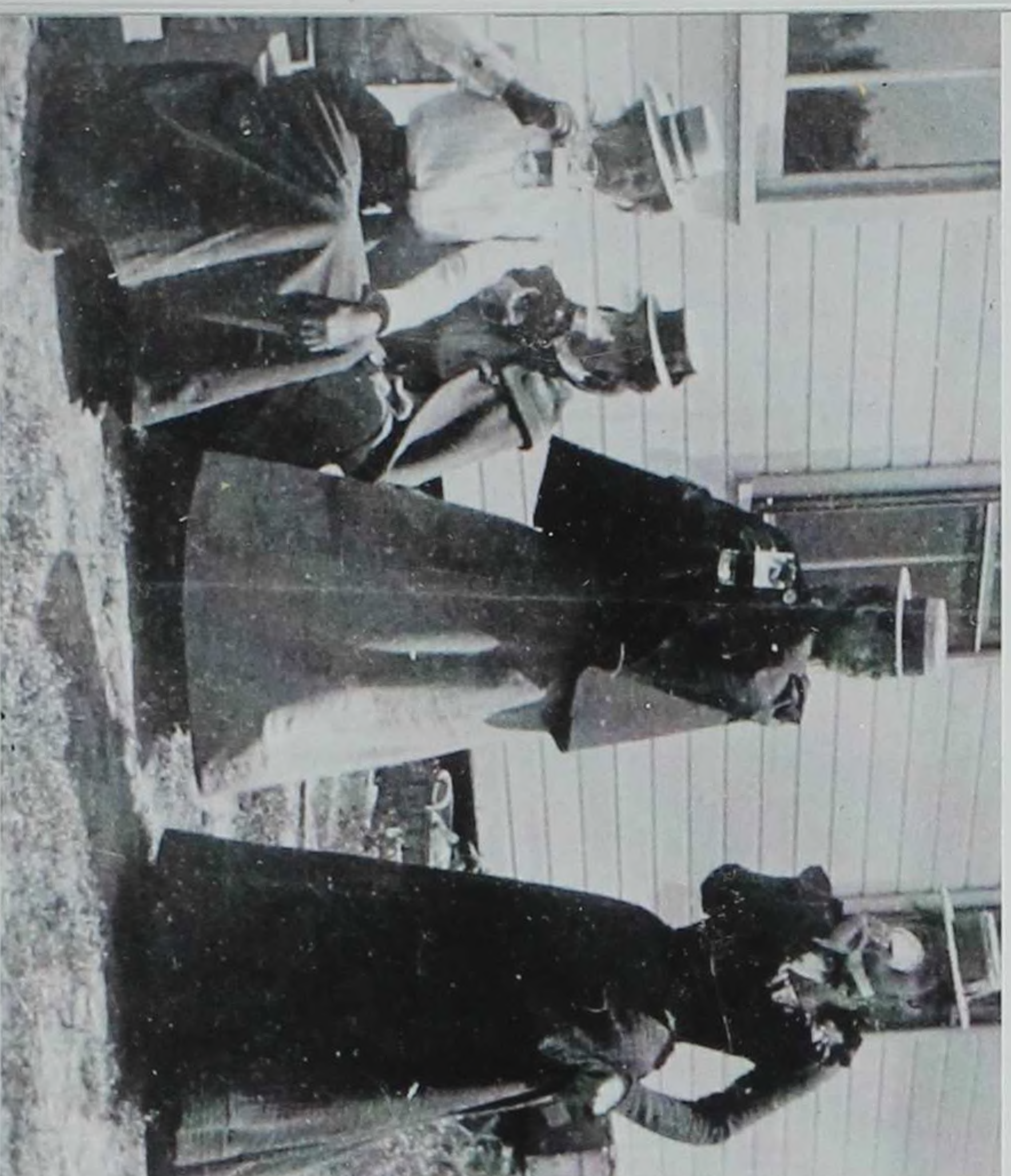
ed and rowdy, but overall they were an important part of the town culture. As the workingmen’s clubs, they were a place to relax and socialize. As historian Elaine Parsons notes, the saloon was “the place to go to get the local news, to find temporary work or workers, to make business deals, to get out of bad weather, to grab a bite to eat, and, of course, to have a few—or more than a few—drinks.”

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Many German American families clung fiercely to the custom of socializing in beer gardens, sometimes in outdoor settings, as this 1878 illustration shows. Germans were the largest ethnic group in Iowa, and many breweries operated in cities with large German populations.

cluded gambling and prostitution as well as strong drink, which preyed on drunkenness. Such vices, taken together, made a picture of hellish dissolution in the minds of temperance workers and, in a fashion that became typical for them, they demonized saloons. As the president of the Iowa State Temperance Alliance stated at a rally in Iowa City in 1885, the saloon is "where bad people gather to drink the poisonous intoxicating liquor, tell coarse and vulgar stories, learn to swear profanely, fight, gamble, and sometimes commit murder. It is a public menace—a menace to every home within the radius of its influence. . . . It is the most prolific source of crime, sorrow, grief, misery, and shame that we have about us. It leads to the poor house, insane asylum, jail, gallows." Such was the standard temperance brief on saloons.

In the public mind, saloon keepers themselves were often seen as the responsible party when that "radius of influence" included injury to others or destruction of property. So pronounced and widely shared was this feeling that in 1862 Iowa legislators passed a law that allowed the victims of drunken behavior to sue the saloon that provided the beverage alcohol. Smith's Civil Damage Liquor Law was one of the first of its kind in the nation, allowing an individual to sue the saloon keeper for the injurious consequences of drink.

Naturally the saloon keeper saw the matter differently: It was the free-willed individual who chose

to drink and then behave in ill-considered ways. Still, such was the stigma of sinister temptation and corruption attached to the saloon that the state held the saloon keeper responsible.

Temperance crusaders wasted little time after 1846 in seeking to pressure legislators to regulate the manufacture and sale of liquor within the state by force of statute. By 1855, Iowa had a strong prohibition law on its books; within three years, however, amendments tempered the law, making allowances for native wine and beer. They were among the first of dozens of liquor laws that described the advance and retreat of the temperance battle lines in Iowa for the next 60 years.

Among those Iowans troubled by the 1858 exemption law was Judith Ellen Foster of Clinton, Iowa. Long interested in the temperance cause, Foster began her local work by joining the Ladies Temperance Aid Society of Clinton. With others, she visited the city saloons to talk temperance with saloon keepers and patrons. But saving one soul at a time, as important as it was, did not suit the impatient Foster, who had a larger vision of temperance: She would remove the temptation by closing the saloons. As an attorney, Foster knew the law. If she found a violation of the liquor laws—say, "selling liquor, keeping for sale, or keeping a nuisance"—she

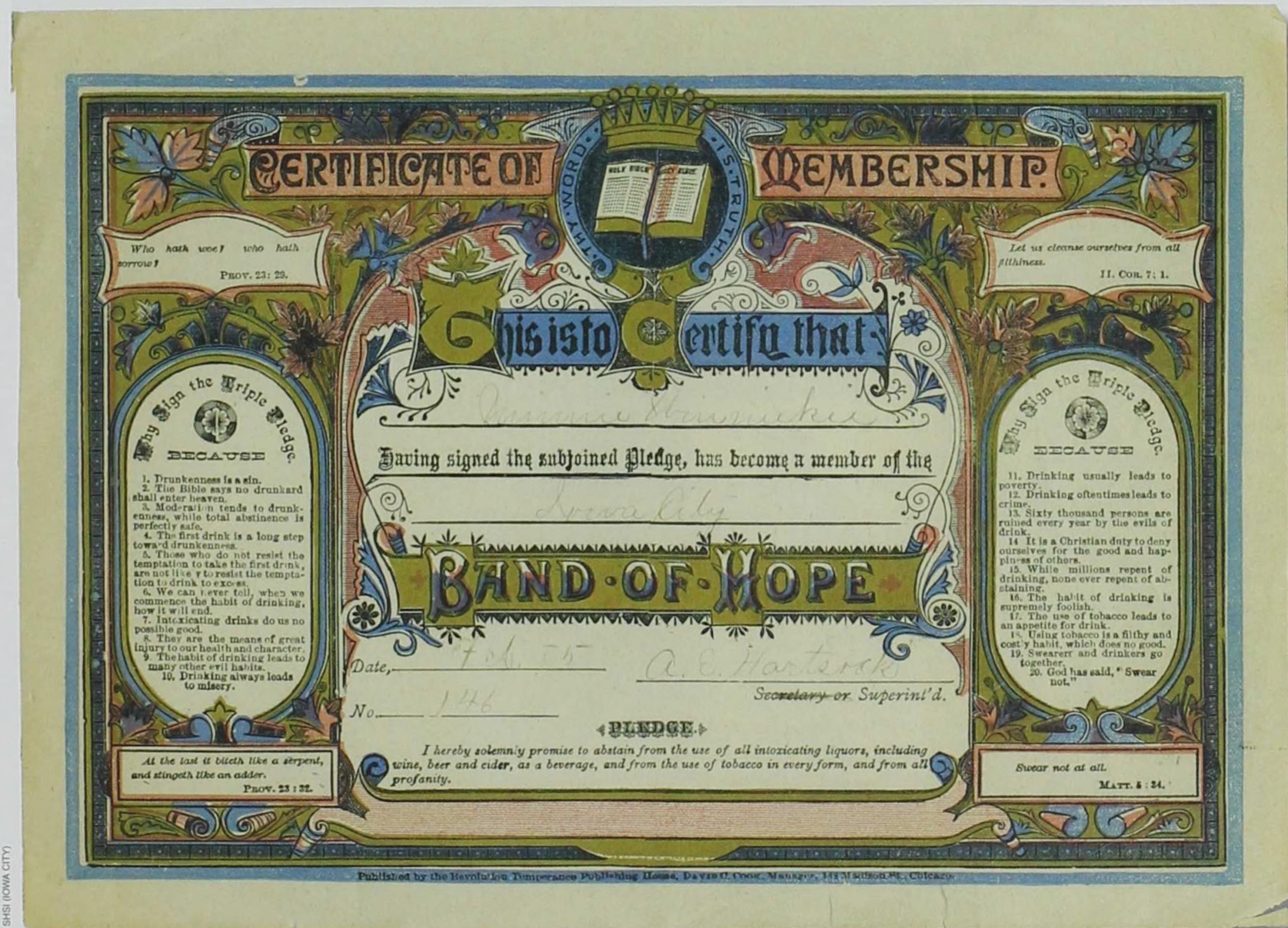
knew full well that it could lead to suspension of the saloon license.

Closing one saloon at a time was progress, but Foster had still grander plans. In 1874 she joined the newly organized Iowa branch of the WCTU and soon became an officer in that organization. Through the WCTU she began to promote absolute prohibition—the “bone-dry” version, which permitted no exception by local option and licensing fee or type of beverage alcohol. Meeting with WCTU members in Burlington in 1878, Foster proposed an amendment to the state constitution that would ban the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages within Iowa.

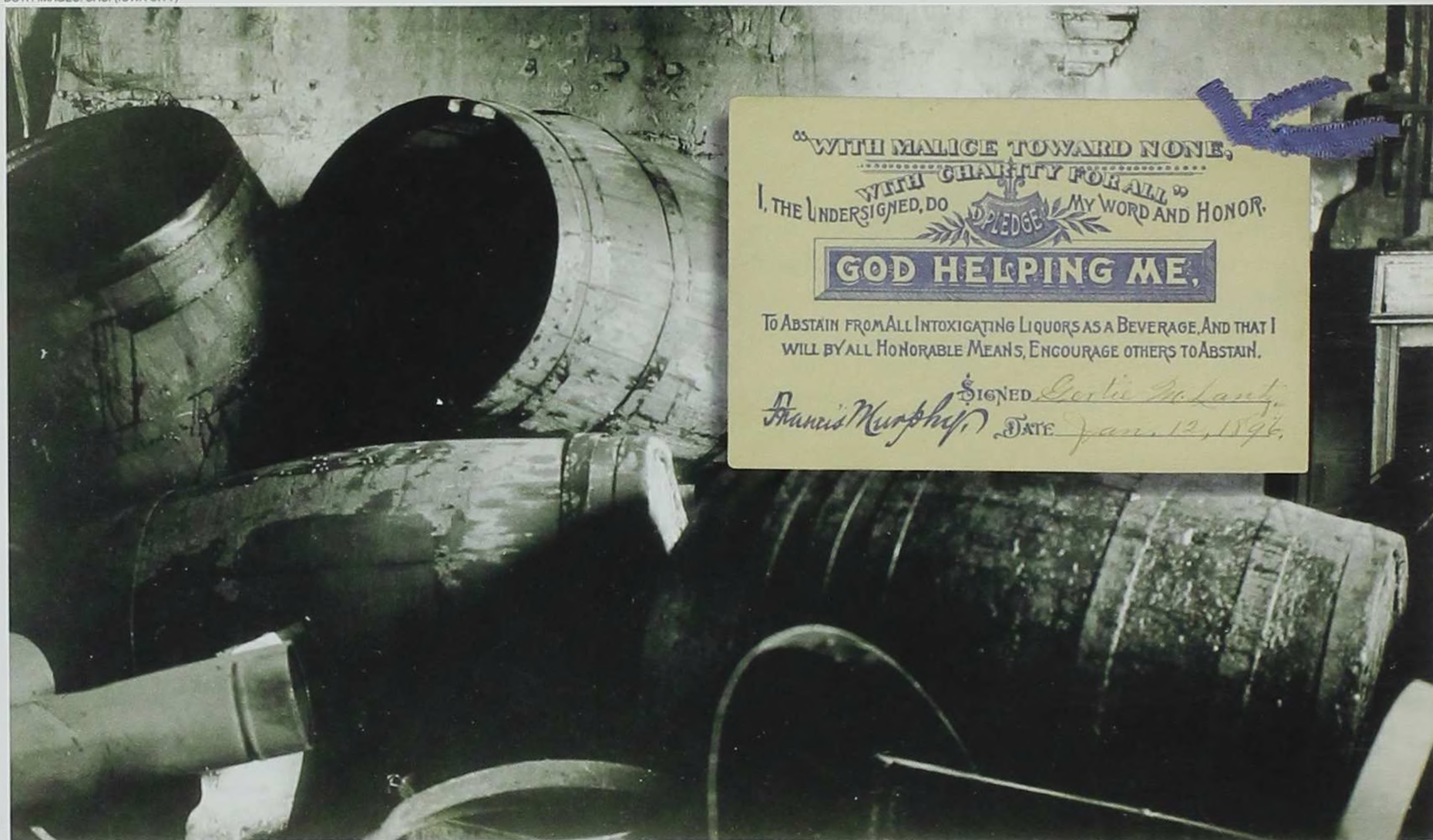
Facing Foster and her fellow temperance crusaders on the other side of the saloon issue were the distillers, brewers, and saloon keepers who saw nothing wrong

in having a drink—indeed, who saw it as an important personal liberty. On the whole they accepted some regulation of their business, licensing fees and even fines for violations, provided they could continue to operate, and they pushed back against the forces of prohibition that would close them down entirely.

A prohibition amendment to Iowa’s constitution was adopted in 1882, only to be overturned by the Iowa Supreme Court on a technicality one year later. Not to be denied their goal of a bone-dry Iowa, backers of the amendment succeeded in having the Iowa General Assembly pass a strong prohibition statute for the state in 1884, outlawing the manufacture and sale of liquor, wine, and beer within the state. Thus they achieved by statute what an amendment to the state constitution was intended to do. Following the enactment of



Teetotalers—those committed to abstain from all alcohol—joined temperance organizations and signed pledges, believing that “we can never tell, when we commence the habit of drinking, how it will end,” as this certificate warns. Others concerned about the use of alcohol took a more moderate approach, renouncing distilled spirits but allowing beer and wine.



Brewers, distillers, and distributors fought anti-liquor bills for economic reasons. Temperance workers framed prohibition as a moral necessity for protecting society. Prohibition became “the most emotional, politically significant, and tenacious” issue in 19th- and 20th-century Iowa, writes historian Dorothy Schwieder.

the law, an advocate was able to claim that prohibition was “the settled policy of the state.” Iowa had joined Kansas and Maine in having the strictest temperance laws in the nation.

A law does not enforce itself, and a strict state prohibition law did not stop people from drinking. After all, Carrie Nation’s Kansas had passed a constitutional amendment for statewide prohibition in 1880, but saloons still operated openly, with local enforcement of the state anti-liquor laws often lax or nonexistent.

Thus when Iowa’s prohibition law went into effect on July 4, 1884, compliance was mixed. In small communities with strong temperance feeling, many saloons did close their doors, but in several cities, especially the large river towns of Dubuque, Davenport, and Sioux City, many saloons stood brazenly open for business. In saloon-friendly Dubuque, little to no effort was made to enforce the law. In Burlington, the front doors of some saloons were closed and locked but the back doors were open. In general, in communities with strong anti-prohibition sentiment, any attempt to close saloons was met with stiff public resistance, often mob violence. Near Iowa City, a mob of anti-prohibition cit-

izens attacked an attorney who was prosecuting violators of the new liquor law and tarred and feathered the man.

One year after the 1884 law was enacted, a survey of towns in Iowa found spotty results. Prohibition had closed saloons in some towns but had produced no effect in others. In some places it was shrugged off with indifference, and the number of saloons had actually increased. Still, the State Temperance Alliance put a positive spin on it, finding overall a significant drop-off in the number of saloons in the state—3,000 fewer than before the enactment of the law.

In those counties where prohibition had succeeded in closing saloons, people who wanted a drink could usually find one. With the market for beverage alcohol yet alive and well, many saloons simply went underground, taking on new guises and surreptitious means for providing drink. Iowa’s prohibition law had exempted certain classes of alcohol—those used for “medicinal, mechanical, culinary, and sacramental” purposes. As one might expect, pharmacies soon picked up much of the saloon business under the cover of dispensing a medicinal product. As historian Dan



Clark notes in his description of this adaptation, "It is undoubtedly true that many of the deposed saloon-keepers entered the drug business and hired registered pharmacists for no other reason than that they might continue the liquor traffic. The partition in the rear of the store served as a screen to hide an improvised bar to which the uninitiated were freely admitted." At Des Moines's premier hotel, a dining room customer could mark a drink order on a card titled "Pharmacy" rather than "Wine List."

In communities with closed saloons, drinking moved into homes. The traveling salesman with a stock of liquor in his bag became a familiar figure. In town, suppliers of liquor would keep the product out of sight, then haul it up from the cellar or fetch it from a hiding place. Or the customer could travel to a pickup point—say, a home in the country—for bottles of whiskey or beer by the keg. Liquor flowed into the state to supply a market that had no love for prohibition.

In sum, violation of the Iowa liquor law was so

common many judged it a complete failure. Assessing the situation in 1892, one state senator commented, "There is not a city in Iowa of five thousand population where prohibition is a success. [In] Des Moines, the seat of all the leading prohibition forces of the state, where the State Temperance Alliance meets, and from which all prohibition works proceed, where there is a Republican mayor and police force, prohibition is simply a farce. There are not less than one hundred open saloons in this city where men can walk up to the bar and order their drinks, all the way up from a glass of beer to a cocktail, without answering questions."

Why the failure? The reason so many saloons operated openly can be explained in part by the pluralism of Iowa and the various traditions and attitudes toward beverage alcohol—beer and wine as well as liquor. In such diversity a single strict puritan standard toward drink could not be enforced with bone-dry effectiveness. Among ethnic communities, for example, Scandinavians, English, and Scots were more likely to be

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Individual beliefs and actions regarding beverage alcohol are seldom evident except in an occasional letter, diary, or photo like this one. Public stances are easier to track in newspapers, legal documents, petitions, and political ephemera.

dry, while German and Irish immigrants tended to be wet. Among religious communities, Protestants tended to be dry and Catholics wet. Politically, Republicans were dry and Democrats wet. And regionally, small in-

land towns were more likely to accept dry laws, and the river cities looked more favorably on wet behavior. After ten years of witnessing such defiance of the prohibition law, Iowa legislators passed a local-option "mulct law" (from the term for levying a tax or fine). Although "prohibition remained in force," historian Sharon Wood explains, "in cities with a population over five thousand, when a majority of voters signed a statement of consent, liquor sellers could be assessed a tax of six hundred dollars. . . . In other words, while the sale of liquor was illegal, saloon keepers in some urban places could operate openly" as long as they paid the

## Meredith "Wet" or "Dry" as Occasion Demands; Liquor Friends His Chief Boosters

Record Shows "Booze" Aides Have Never Found Meredith Wanting When It Came to "Framing" on "Drys"

Every political campaign presents Meredith "has been sending many hundreds of form letters to Democrats all over Iowa asking them what they

Left: Attitudes about alcohol frequently dominated state politics, especially in 1916 when E. T. Meredith ran for governor against William Harding. Below: A photo postcard post-marked Dubuque 1910 shows a wagonload of William Penn whiskey.



BOTH ITEMS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

tax. One newspaper called the 1894 mulct law "political acrobatism . . . without parallel in history." Saloons again proliferated in the cities and towns of Iowa, and so too did the activism of temperance workers. Leading the renewed charge was a new formidable player in the struggle, the Anti-Saloon League.

What Carrie Nation lacked in persuasive reach and the WCTU in organizational clout, the Anti-Saloon League (ASL) made up for in spades. Founded in 1893, with its membership drawn from temperance societies and Protestant churches, the league was an extremely powerful single-issue pressure group. In its state-by-state campaigns to close saloons, prosecute liquor-law violators, and advance prohibition in the early 20th century, it proved to be a formidably effective organization. It was so in Iowa, where the ASL policed violations of the state liquor laws, petitioned for local options to put saloons out of business, and promoted legislation to strengthen the existing laws.

Anti-Saloon League agents became active in Iowa early on, spreading their temperance message in towns and cities, by speech and pamphlet on the one hand and lobbying for liquor laws on the other. Under one of many anti-liquor laws they assisted in getting passed, a five-year limit was placed on the local option, after which a vote of the county residents on the liquor law was required. League agents became expert at winning votes and turning a wet county dry.

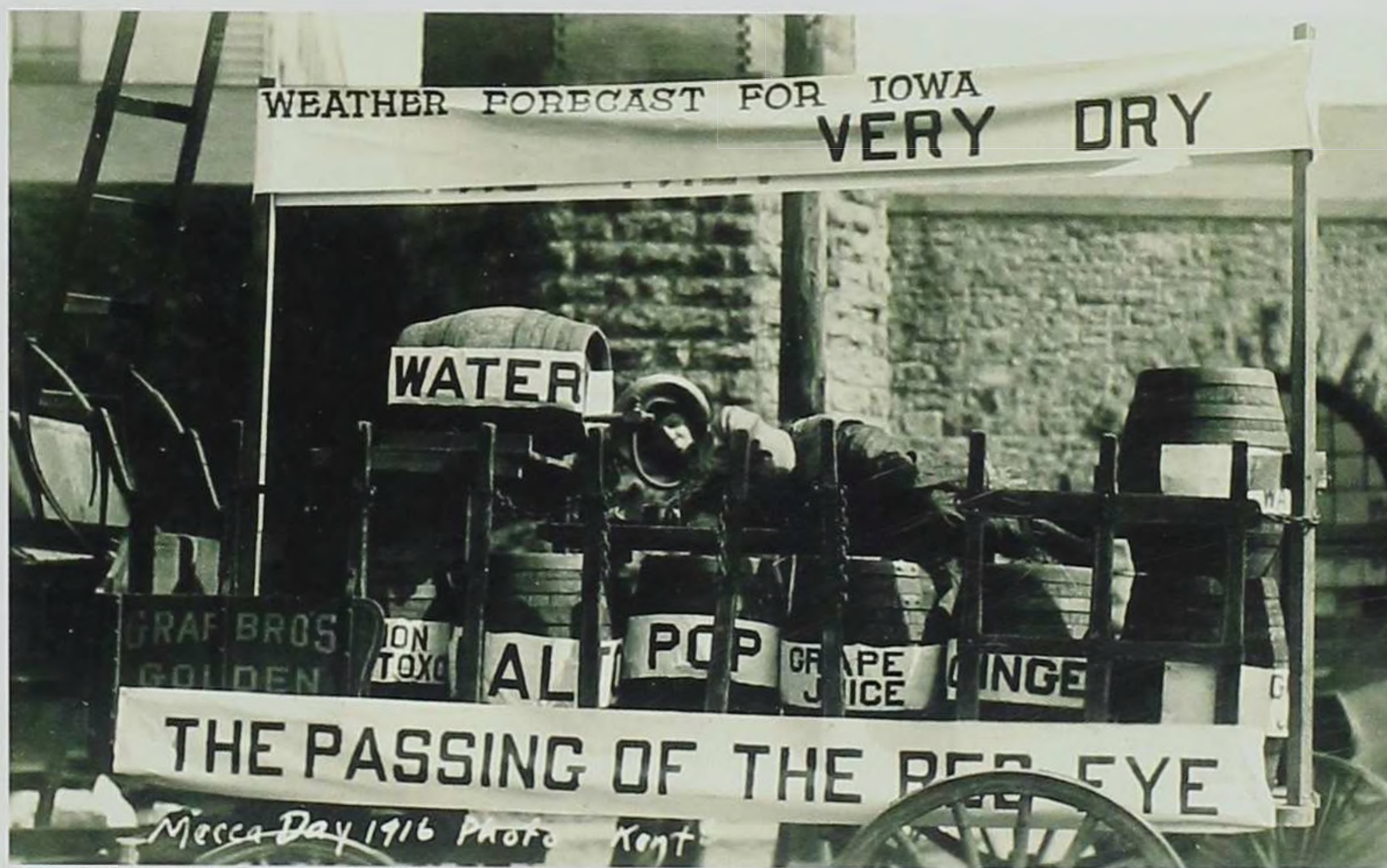
The ASL's annual reports trace a juggernaut across Iowa: By 1909, the league could note with satisfaction that 60 of Iowa's 99 counties were entirely dry. By 1911 the number of Iowa saloons had dropped by 20 percent (from 1,748 in 1909). ASL next set its sights on two goals for Iowa: "The fight is on for repeal of the Mulct Law and the securing of constitutional prohibition."

Not surprisingly, given the tenacity of the league, the mulct law was repealed in 1915, restoring the full force of the strong 1884 prohibition law. With the ASL pressing for enforcement, the state's remaining saloons began to fold. As the 1917 report noted, the "last of the



Top: Equipment and whiskey jugs from a destroyed still (probably in Iowa) are proudly displayed, early in the 1920s. Below: A float in a University of Iowa parade in 1916 predicts a dry Iowa, with pop and grape juice replacing red eye.

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594 saloons listed on January 1, 1915, went out of business on January 1, 1916."

Even in wet counties the ASL was effective in shutting down saloons, largely because it found the right people to carry out enforcement. One such ASL agent was Claud McMillan. A Methodist pastor who served as the ASL superintendent for Woodbury County between 1914 and 1922, McMillan became known in Sioux City for his forceful crusading. Respected and feared by some and despised by others, McMillan zealously joined in raids on hole-in-the-wall saloons and liquor-law violators, even though he knew that local

police and courts had little stomach for enforcement.

McMillan also had a vision of being part of a greater effort. When the prohibition amendment to the state constitution fell short of passage in 1917, he joined with other temperance crusaders in the cause of national prohibition. McMillan was a delegate to the national Anti-Saloon League convention in Washington, D.C., that year and attended part of the congressional debate on prohibition. He wrote home that "we shall have a bone dry nation in a very few years now."

McMillan proved prophetic. A strong wind of progressive change on the liquor question had been building in all quarters of the nation since the turn of the century. Public opinion in favor of prohibition was growing—by 1913 half the country lived under some form of prohibition—thanks in no small part to the relentless campaigning of the ASL. On January 15, 1919, Iowa became the 32nd state to ratify the 18th Amend-

ment to the U.S. Constitution. National prohibition was enacted on January 1, 1920.

Carrie Nation's cross-Iowa journey in 1901 had begun at Council Bluffs and rolled on to Atlantic, Adair, and Stuart before pausing in Des Moines. At the station in Adair she gave a short speech from the train. Seeing children in the crowd of people who pressed forward, she said, "God bless you, my boys. Look at that sweet baby. You are little saloon smashers, ain't you. Now I want every one of you to fill your pockets with rocks and go out and smash saloons and joints. Good bye." And with that, she waved as the train pulled away from the station and was soon out of sight.

Had Carrie Nation lived another 20 years and then retraced her cross-Iowa trip, she might have thought it



Shorty Julis (in the center) poses in front of his tavern about 1935 in Oakville, Iowa, circa 1935. Signs advertise Potosi Beer as well as lunch, ice cream, and cigars.

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a victory tour. By then she had won her war against the saloons: Iowa was dry, along with the rest of the country. As history has shown, however, Iowa's experiment in legislated sobriety, like national prohibition, was less than a smashing success. Beverage alcohol prevailed in the long war for temperance. Many saloons in Iowa simply defied the law after 1884, just as the nation's saloons went underground after 1920, and just as they celebrated their re-emergence in 1933. ❖

**Customers in the Davenport Turner Hall happily face the camera as the bar reopens just after Prohibition ends. Davenport had a large German American population.**

*Author James Hill became interested in the history of temperance movements in Iowa while reading Fran Grace's fine biography of the remarkable Carrie Nation. One thing led to another and eventually to the beginning of this article. Hill works at NCS Pearson, Inc. in Iowa City and lives in Coralville.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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