

Comment by the Editor

HISTORY UNAPPLIED

Everybody has a tendency to think his own experience is typical. Circumstances are judged according to personal knowledge, for that is the main avenue of opinion. The blind see best by their own sense of touch, not by the vision of others. One who has never felt an earthquake is compelled to imagine the sensation in terms of the tremors caused by heavy trucks. If intoxication were a universal practice, there would be less disagreement about the liquor business.

As individuals must learn for themselves, so each generation determines the character of its own education. Past events are viewed in the light of present experience, and immediate needs constitute the motive for future action. To the extent that public policy reflects the composite attitude of a heterogeneous community, it is likely to be as vacillating as the diversity of local experience. Thus the cycle of reform appears to be a natural process. Such a perennial problem as liquor regulation runs the full gamut from anarchy to prohibition approximately three times in a century. Every generation seems to be obliged to learn the lessons of temperance directly.

There is no necessity for such an ordeal. If people were willing to accept the social and political contributions of their ancestors as readily as the achievements of scientific progress, they would not need to perform the experiment in person. History provides an inexhaustible reservoir of human experience which, truthfully recorded and widely disseminated, may be utilized as a valuable guide for future conduct. But the historian who would guide the thought and conduct of a community must present the facts in terms that people will believe, and reconcile the objects of public policy with the popular opinion of general welfare.

The whirligig of liquor regulation in Iowa demonstrates the difficulty of basing social control upon opinion that is founded on prejudice and limited observation. Such support is seldom firm and never enduring. Constant, aggressive, and honest instruction relating to conditions under various forms of liquor control might crystallize legislation in a more permanent form.

The facts are simple. Inebriety is individually and socially undesirable. To prevent the intemperate use of alcohol is to protect both the addict and the community. But such protection inevitably restricts the manufacture, sale, and distribution of liquor. Since some people make money

from the liquor traffic, they resist the curtailment of their business. Thus the problem is resolved into the familiar conflict between private profits and social welfare. The liquor interests, including bootleggers and racketeers, constitute the only faction that perpetually resists control, resorting to sophistry, deceit, and even violence in the fanaticism of their opposition. It is significant that regulation has been applied only to the traffic and not to the consumption of liquor. No form of regulation can satisfy all elements of the liquor interests, and anarchy is intolerable to society. If social welfare is to be the aim of liquor control, then the history of social endeavor is a better guide than the tentative judgment of the present generation.

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