

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN C. PARISH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

VOL. III

ISSUED IN JULY 1922

NO. 7

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Liquor and the Indians

Nearly three hundred years ago a Jesuit priest of Canada — Father Le Jeune — wrote to his superior about the sale of liquor to the Indians. His comments, which follow, appeared in the *Jesuit Relations* for 1637 in a discussion of the increasing death rate of the red men:

It is attributed to the beverages of brandy and wine, which they love with an utterly unrestrained passion, not for the relish they experience in drinking them, but for the pleasure they find in becoming drunk. They imagine in their drunkenness that they are listened to with attention, that they are great orators, that they are valiant and formidable, that they are looked up to as Chiefs, hence this folly suits them; there is scarcely a Savage, small or great, even among the girls and women, who does not enjoy this intoxication, and who does not take these beverages when they can be had, purely and simply for the sake of being drunk. Now as they drink without eating, and in great excess, I can easily believe that the maladies which are daily tending to exterminate them, may in part arise from that.

During that century the question of prohibition was often discussed. Not, however, as far as the white men were concerned — that would be preposterous. They merely twisted the Biblical injunction to read: "Look not upon the wine when you are red." The priests, who lived and worked intimately with the Indian tribes were the ones who most vehemently called attention to the evils of the traffic. The merchants were of a different mind, hence the movement toward prohibition made little headway. But in one case at least the liquor traffic was made a question of state and discussed in a council called by order of King Louis the Fourteenth.

In 1678 there met in the Chateau St. Louis at Quebec a group of the most prominent men of New France — called together by order of the king who had asked Governor Frontenac to get the opinion of the principal men of the colony on the question of selling liquor to the Indians. The delegates included La Salle — well known already although his exploration of the Mississippi Valley was still a matter of future history — and Louis Jolliet, intrepid companion of Father Marquette in the famous trip down the Great River five years before. Twenty men in all faced the question as to whether the sale of wine, brandy, and other intoxicating liquors to the Indians should be allowed in the towns and in the Indian country, or prohibited under heavy penalties.

Each man separately gave his opinion and a

procès verbal was drawn up embodying these statements. Perhaps the bald statement of Du Gué sounded the real key note of those who favored continuing the trade. "The trade in brandy is absolutely necessary," he wrote, "in order to draw the Indians into the French Colonies and prevent them from taking their furs to other nations." The nations whose competition the French feared were Holland and England, for the fur traders from the English colonies and from the Dutch settlements on the Hudson River had pushed their operations far into the Indian's country.

Business no doubt stood in the way of the suppression of the liquor traffic, but many other arguments were paraded as justification by the Canadian merchants. Some contended manfully that it was in the interests of the Indian's soul that he be given liquor, since if the French did not so supply him he would turn to the Dutch and English for liquid consolation and through contact with them would either remain in his own idolatry or take up with the evil and heretical beliefs of those two nations. And others contended that only by allowing the Indian the same liberties as the whites could they draw him into Christianity.

One man gave as his reason for advocating the continuance of the trade the fact that the French brandy was far superior to the Dutch variety to which they would otherwise turn; and they did not forget to use the time-honored argument that prohi-

bition would bring forth the bootlegger. If the trade were banned by order of the king, the *coureurs de bois* and vagabonds would carry on illegal and very harmful operations in the distant Indian camps, selling poor liquor and demanding high prices.

La Salle was among those who believed in the continuation of the trade, urging that it was necessary not only for commercial reasons but also for the preservation of peace in New France. He invoked the aid of statistics to further his argument. The normal beaver trade of Canada during a year was from sixty to eighty thousand beavers and the Indians who bought liquor numbered about twenty thousand. Since a beaver skin was ordinarily worth a pint of brandy, a fourth or a third of the entire trade might be carried on in liquor without making it possible for the Indians to get drunk more than once a year. La Salle, however, with vigorous ideas of discipline, believed in punishing severely any disorders arising from intoxication.

Jolliet was of a different opinion. With regard to the transportation of liquor into the woods — and no one knew the Indian country in those days better than he — it seemed to him necessary to prohibit it upon pain of death; but he would allow the sale to Indians by the habitants in their own houses and stores in the settlements, provided it could be carried on with moderation and with every effort to avoid making the Indians drunk. And Jacques La Ber — merchant of Montreal — agreed with him.

Three other men declared against the sale of liquor to the red men either in town or country. But out of the score of men who gave their opinion, full fifteen were in favor of continuing the trade without let or hindrance.

So the traffic continued. It is not surprising that the large majority of the leaders of New France should favor it. Aside from their thorough belief that their business interests were inseparably bound up with this trade, the use of liquor was a matter of course in their own lives. It appealed to them not as a moral question but as a question of expediency.

As the Frenchmen came down into the Mississippi Valley they brought brandy and wines with them. They were staple articles of trade and they facilitated conferences. The Indians had taught the whites the art of smoking a pipe and with this friendly rite they opened all peace negotiations. The whites taught the red men the use of their more potent peace-maker, but they could not limit its influence to the happy calling of pacification.

And when Iberville in 1699 came into the other end of the Valley at the mouth of the river, he brought liquor to the southern tribes. Inviting a group of Indians on board his ship one day he fired off the ship's cannon for them and gave them a drink of *eau de vie* or brandy; and he tells of the amazement of the Indians at the roar of the engines of warfare and at the liquor which burned after they had drunk it.

For a hundred years more the sale or barter of liquor to the Indians went on in the Valley and met with little protest. Then the United States Government, as it extended its power across the Mississippi River into the Louisiana Purchase, began to take steps to prevent the traffic. Laws were passed by the general government and by the local governments to prevent the introduction of liquor into the Indian country. That these laws looked toward the protection and welfare of the Indian as well as the protection of the whites against the results of the red man's intoxication is shown by the fact that they often carried clauses providing that money received or goods purchased of the Indians in exchange for liquor must be returned to them. But the traders on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, carrying on their operations individually or on behalf of the various fur companies, were frequent violators of the law.

Whiskey running was hard to prevent but the Indian agents worked persistently. Frequent were the complaints turned in to the Indian Office with regard to Jean Joseph Rolette of Prairie du Chien, one of the most prominent of the traders on the Upper Mississippi. King Rolette he was called by the whites, while the Indians spoke of him as Zica or the Pheasant because of the speed with which he travelled. He was a French Canadian and his operations were paralleled by many others of his compatriots who enlivened the history of the Mississippi

River during the first third of the nineteenth century. He married the daughter of Antoine Dubois, a friend of Julien Dubuque, by whom it is reported the young girl was raised after her father had been killed by the Indians.

On the west side of the Mississippi, not far from Prairie du Chien, were the mines of Julien Dubuque, first permanent settler of the Iowa country. It is difficult to say how much of Dubuque's influence with the Sauk and Foxes was due to the insinuating services of the whiskey barrel. The evidence at hand, however, indicates that Dubuque held his unusual power over the Indians by reason of faculties which were uncommon even among the versatile French Canadians, rather than by use of the readily available expedient of intoxicating liquors. His companions were not able to hold favor with the red men and were driven out of the region upon Dubuque's death, nor could his rivals succeed to his post of profit.

Ten years later, in 1820, Henry Schoolcraft travelling through the Upper Mississippi Valley found great difficulty in getting permission to visit the mines, but at last succeeded by directing one of his voyageurs "to bring in a present of whiskey and tobacco". And in 1823 Beltrami, the Italian, coming up the river in the first steamboat to ascend to St. Paul, wrote:

The Indians still keep exclusive possession of these mines,

and with such jealousy, that I was obliged to have recourse to the all-powerful whiskey to obtain permission to see them.

Over on the Missouri a similar traffic was going on. The American Fur Company began the operation of a distillery at Fort Union but the Indian agent reported the fact to the authorities and the company was compelled to cease its activities. The most famous of the Missouri River traders was the Spaniard, Manuel Lisa, of the Missouri Fur Company. He was a man of great energy and wide interests and had many enemies. In 1817 he found it necessary to defend himself against the charge of selling whiskey to the Indians. In a letter written to William Clark, Governor of the Territory of Missouri, he said:

If this charge is true it is capable of being proved. There are in this town, at present, many persons who have been in my employment, characters of the first respectability; also five nations with whom I have traded; among them can be found witnesses to attest the fact, if it be true. On the contrary, I appeal to the whole of them, and pronounce it a vile falsehood. At the same time, it is an act of hospitality indispensable in his intercourse with the Indians, for the trader to treat his hunters with small presents of liquor. They look for it, and are dissatisfied if they do not receive it. The permanent trader makes such presents with discretion. I have made them, and urged the necessity of them to your Excellency.

In May, 1838, Father De Smet was sent out to

establish a mission among the Potawatomi Indians. His post was near the site of the present city of Council Bluffs. In his diary are frequent comments upon the evils of the liquor traffic among the Indians. Once he wrote as follows:

Arrival of the steamer *Wilmington* with provisions. A war of extermination appears preparing around the poor Potawatomies. Fifty large cannons have been landed, ready charged with the most murderous grape shot, each containing thirty gallons of whiskey, brandy, rum or alcohol. The boat was not yet out of sight when the skirmishes commenced. After the fourth, fifth and sixth discharges, the confusion became great and appalling. In all directions, men, women and children were seen tottering and falling; the war-whoop, the merry Indians' songs, cries, savage roarings, formed a chorus. Quarrel succeeded quarrel. Blows followed blows. The club, the tomahawk, spears, butcher knives, brandished together in the air. Strange! Astonishing! only one man, in this dreadful affray, was drowned in the Missouri, another severely stabbed, and several noses lost. . . . A squaw offered her little boy four years old, to the crew of the boat for a few bottles of whiskey. I know from good authority, that upwards of eighty barrels of whiskey are on the line ready to be brought in at the payment.

May 31. Drinking all day. Drunkards by the dozen. Indians are selling horses, blankets, guns, their all, to have a lick at the cannon. Four dollars a bottle! Plenty at that price!! Detestable traffic.

De Smet's service at this post was short, but in

1842 Fort Croghan was established with Captain Burgwin in charge and this proved a new obstacle in the way of liquor selling by the traders, for the captain had orders to inspect boats going up the river and seize the liquor. Chittenden, however, tells of one case in which a cargo of liquor was smuggled up stream to the Indian country in spite of the inspection of Captain Burgwin.

The ship *Omega*, an American Fur Company boat commanded by Captain Sire and bound for the Upper Missouri in 1843, was halted opposite Fort Croghan by rifle shots across the bow and the message that it must wait inspection by Captain Burgwin. It so happened that the naturalist John James Audubon and his party were passengers upon the boat and they had a government permit to carry a limited amount of liquor. This was exempt, but not so the large quantities of liquor which the boat carried in its hold. Audubon, however, was disposed to help out his companion, the boat captain, in eluding the seizure. He sent word to Captain Burgwin that he would like to visit his post, and so flattered and pleased the army officer by the honor of his visit that he delayed the tour of inspection for two hours. Meanwhile the boat crew had not been idle. The hold was divided into two narrow compartments with a partition between. For the moving of goods there was a sort of tramway with little cars which ran the length of one compartment, rounded a curve in the bow of the boat and returned on the other side

of the partition. The crew loaded the barrels of liquor on these cars and ran them into a dark corner of the hold.

Upon the arrival of the inspector, he was regaled with the choice wines of the Audubon supply until he was in such a mellow mood that he was willing to forego the inspection. But Captain Sire insisted upon it, only urging that he be as rigorous with all other traders. So the inspection began in the corner of the dark hold away from the liquor-laden cars; and if the captain had been suspicious and watchful as he finished one compartment and passed through an opening in the partition to the other side he might have seen, smoothly rounding the curve at the far end of the boat, a string of cars bound for the localities he had just inspected. The liquor was safe and Chittenden ends his story with this remark: "But woe to the luckless craft of some rival trader which should happen along with no Audubon in the cabin and no tramway in the hold."

In the period of the Territory of Iowa the Governor was ex-officio Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Robert Lucas and John Chambers were both men of strong convictions on the matter of selling liquor to the Indians. Lucas vigorously attacked the trade in his first message to the legislature and as a result a law was passed imposing a fine of not more than one hundred or less than twenty-five dollars for each offence. This penalty, however, was so light in comparison to the profits to be made that

traders incurred the risk without hesitation and the traffic flourished.

Chambers also attacked the trade in his first message. Depicting the degradation and destruction of the tribes from this practice, he said:

Humanity shudders and religion weeps over the cruel and unrelenting destruction of a people so interesting, by means so dastardly and brutal, that the use of the rifle and the sword, even in time of profound peace with them, would be comparatively merciful.

He urged the amendment of the existing law to make efficient its enforcement. But no action was taken. A year later he advised the addition of a term of imprisonment to the pecuniary penalty; but the legislature would go no further than to raise the amount of fine to a minimum of \$100 and a maximum of \$500. This was a move in the right direction but it did not greatly check the operations of the whiskey runners.

The last payment of annuities to the Sac and Fox Indians before their migration west of the Missouri took place at Fort Des Moines in 1845. An account of this distribution by a witness shows that liquor was much in evidence — that it was given to the Indians by soldiers under the eyes of the officers, that Captain Allen presented the chief Pow-e-shiek with a bottle of liquor with his compliments, and that the aftermath of the occasion was a general debauch.

Within a year these tribes had moved out of Iowa,

and the other tribes remained little longer. It seemed, indeed, that the only way in which Iowa was able to solve the problem of the sale of liquor to the Indians, was to send the Indians beyond its jurisdiction.

JOHN C. PARISH