

Offbeat Oregon: Portland's 'Temperance War of 1874'

By Finn J.D. John
for The Sentinel

The temperance movement, when it came to Portland in the early 1870s, really shouldn't have taken anybody by surprise.

What was surprising, though, was the form it took when it got there. Portland's temperance drama reached a climax in April 1874 with a genuine knock-down-drag-out riot on the streets of downtown Portland, as angry citizens exchanged punches and clobbered each other with chairs — while, the whole time, serene as if they were singing in a forest glade, a cluster of upper-class ladies in their Sunday best sang hymns and prayed for their souls.

And then, almost as soon as it appeared, the temperance movement was gone again from the public eye, apparently destroyed from within after some of the preachers who fancied themselves its leaders overplayed their hand.

It's going to take several articles to tell this entire story. And it's a bit of a slow starter: we don't get to the really interesting part until next week. But here's how it came about:

Early in the spring of '74, word started reaching Portland of the great temperance movements in Ohio.

There were, of course, plenty of other temperance movements across the country, and there had been for some time. But what was new about the Ohio movement was its spirit of assertiveness and evangelism. Participants — most of them women, who were largely excluded from "saloon culture" but not from its effects on their husbands and sons — were no longer contenting themselves with praying in churches and "setting a good personal example in the home."

They had started going out into the community to spread the word, and actually went to saloons to urge temperance upon their owners and customers. And they'd had some success at this — most notably in persuading saloonkeepers to leave the business.

In Portland, the mainstream newspapers — there were three of them at the time: the Morning Oregonian, the Portland Bulletin and the Evening Telegram — mentioned these events only briefly and occasionally. Likely they thought nothing of them; in 1874, three decades before Carrie Nation picked up her hatchet, the concept of aggressive temperance workers was new.

But Abigail Scott Duniway, editor and publisher of The New Northwest, was paying close attention. Readers of her weekly paper, mostly women, were kept very much up to date on the temperance movement.

Duniway was a legend even in her own time, and her profile has grown since. The great passion of her life was a quest

for legal equality of the sexes and voting rights for women. She saw temperance as an issue that would have been quickly resolved if 50 percent of the population were not forbidden to vote — in other words, as a symptom of the great social evil that she had devoted her life to overturning.

She was the sister of leg-

going out two by two, as Jesus sent forth his disciples, to hold their temperance-church services in the saloons themselves.

A few of the more conservative ladies thought that was too much, and when the decision was made to do this, they dropped out. But there remained a total of 13 game sis-

ter sisters (the next week's column about next week). But as Kelly mentioned, saloons were noisy places. A pair of frightened ladies standing close together in a corner singing hymns was easily ignored. In the pubs where they were not ignored, they were treated as objects of curiosity, as if a circus act was visiting the saloon.

Back in the church, the ladies prayed for strength and then went home for the night.

The next day, things were a little different. That's because rather than fanning out across the city two by two, the ladies decided to go in a group. All 13 of them would pay a call on a single saloon.

The ladies fortified themselves with a lengthy prayer service, then poured once again out of the church.

Today they descended upon the Mount Hood Saloon, owned by a chap named Thomas Shartle; he graciously let them in and gave them the run of the place. Shartle did not, however, turn off the taps, and was probably glad he did not. If two Victorian ladies in a saloon was a little like a circus act, thirteen of them was more like the whole circus. People poured into the Mount Hood.

On the surface, it looked like a repeat of the previous day's disaster, only on a bigger scale. Mr. Shartle did a brisk trade. The ladies got the same faux-hearty "best of luck to you, God bless you, here's to ya" response from the same saloon bums, and fielded the same fake signatures on the temperance pledge.

But this time, the "clink of glasses" was powerless to drown out their voices as they sang. There were, after all, a baker's dozen of them. They were too large a presence to ignore.

The ladies moved on, going downmarket a bit and visiting a rum house called the Evening Call. Again, they brought the proprietor plenty of business and left with very few legitimate pledges.

Back at the church, the ladies learned that word had gotten around the saloons that their presence represented a large business boom. One saloon owner actually sent them an invitation to come to his place, which — to his delight — they did the next day.

But the sense of demoralization was now utterly gone. The ladies knew they were onto something. If some people were laughing at them, at least they were now being heard; their seed might have been falling on stony ground, but at least it was being sown. They started going out every day, each day to a different saloon. And slowly, things started to change.

We'll talk about that change — and about the one saloon owner whose bellicose resis-

tance to the ladies' missionary efforts caused riots on the city streets — in next week's column.

(Sources: *The Women's War with Whisky; or, Crusading in Portland*, a book by Frances Fuller Victor, published in 1874 by Himes; "The War on the Webfoot Saloon," an article by Malcolm Clark Jr. published in the March 1957 issue of *Oregon Historical Quarterly*; Edward Chambeau: *His Autobiography*, a Ph.D. dissertation by

Timothy Wehrkamp, published in 1976 by the University of Oregon; OHS archives (MSS 1535 and 550); archives of *The New Northwest and Portland Daily Bulletin*, March–July 1874.)

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"Can you imagine what it would be to go into a saloon to pray? Then you can imagine how we felt..."

— Laura Francis Kelly
April 1874

endary longtime Morning Oregonian editor Harvey Scott — who, due to some political machinations going on at that time involving railroad-and-stagecoach baron Ben Holladay, was then working as editor of the Bulletin.

The New Northwest devoted considerable coverage to the temperance movement's successes back east. And that's probably the primary reason the whole thing came to Portland in the first place. It's certainly why the fervor of the movement was so startling and unexpected to Portland men.

They were nearly all caught off guard, because they were reading the wrong newspapers.

Nonetheless, those among them who happened to be preachers in temperance churches rose to the occasion with alacrity. Soon their churches were crammed with women yearning to do something about this terrible social evil.

They assembled in churches. Stirring sermons were preached. Invitations went out to men all over Portland to come and be inspired, and a pledge of abstinence from alcohol was circulated at each service. Hundreds of people signed.

Yet mere hundreds wouldn't change the course of history. Plus, those hundreds were most often already teetotalers. Then as now, the pub-crawling set wasn't seen much in church, or at least not in the kind of churches that would preach temperance and abstinence.

Inspired once again by The New Northwest's dispatches of events in Ohio, the ladies of several Portland churches decided they needed to be more assertive. They and their pastors organized themselves into an interdenominational coalition — the Women's Temperance Prayer League — and made their headquarters at the Methodist Church on Taylor Street.

There they decided, as the Portland Daily Bulletin's reporter put it, to "go forth and beard the lion in his den" — by

ters who were ready to go out there and change the world.

And so it was that on March 23, 1874, a team of fired-up ladies streamed out of the church and, in groups of two and three, fanned out across Portland.

The ladies' battle plan was simple. They would present themselves at each saloon and ask the proprietor if they might enter and lead a prayer service. Most of the time, the answer was yes — although that would change later. Then they'd pray, sing a hymn or two, circulate a pledge for the drunks to sign promising to abstain from alcohol, sing and pray some more, and leave.

For a Victorian-era lady, this was nowhere near as easy as it sounds to the modern ear. Laura Francis Kelly, one of the temperance crusaders, wrote a hand-written account of how it went:

"Can you imagine what it would be to go into a saloon to pray? Then you can imagine how we felt. I cannot tell you.

"The saloon keeper received us cordially, ushering us into the card-room. As the song rose from trembling hearts: 'Holy Spirit, faithful guide, Ever near the Christian's side,' etc., the bar-room quickly filled with young men to whom the barkeeper freely dispensed his liquors.

"As we knelt in prayer, the clink of glasses well nigh drowned the petitions that rose from trembling lips. When the short service was over, the bar keeper invited us very pleasantly to 'come again.' Oh! how we hastened back to church and kindred spirits! But the pastor, George W. Izer, met us with, 'Back so soon? Did you visit only one saloon?' Then we saw what was before us."

At the end of the day, they were exhausted and demoralized.

True, the ladies were treated courteously everywhere (with, the Bulletin sniffed, the notable exception of "the proprietress of a low doggery on Second Street" — and one other place, which we'll talk

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Native Oaks Ridge land acquisition to protect Oregon fish and wildlife habitat

The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) intends to fund the purchase of a conservation easement on approximately 326 acres of oak dominated habitats located close to Cottage Grove in Lane County, Oregon. When the purchase is complete, the McKenzie River Trust will manage the property for wildlife conservation purposes. The United States will hold third party rights of enforcement to ensure that the habitat values on the property are always protected.

The funding will be provided as part of BPA's ongoing efforts to protect, restore and enhance prairie and oak woodland habitat in the Willamette Valley. Funding this conservation easement partially fulfills commitments made by BPA in the 2010 "Willamette River Basin Memorandum of Agreement Regarding Wildlife Habitat Protection and Enhancement between the State of Oregon and Bonneville Power Administration" as part of ongoing efforts to mitigate for the impacts to fish and wildlife from the construction and operation of federal flood control and hydroelectric facilities. The protection of this property will provide long-lasting fish and wildlife benefits and will become part of a growing network of conservation lands in Lane County.

The McKenzie River Trust has developed a management plan to guide the protection and enhancement of habitat on the property. BPA reviewed the plan for consistency with the conservation purposes of the acquisition. A letter describing the proposed purchase, a map and information describing environmental review requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act are available at <https://www.bpa.gov/efw/Analysis/CategoricalExclusions/Pages/2019.aspx>.

For more information, contact BPA project manager Sandra Fife at 503-230-3678 or safife@bpa.gov. You can also call 800-622-4519 toll free. Please refer to the Native Oaks Ridge conservation easement.



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