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Offbeat Oregon: Stubborn saloonkeeper refused to play nice

By Finn J.D. John
 for The Sentinel

This column is Part Two in a four-part series on the Portland temperance riots of 1874.

As March of 1874 drew to a close, there was a certain uneasiness among the businessmen of the liquor industry in Portland. A large squadron of the ladies of the city — including the wives of some of their customers — were daily making the rounds of saloons, appearing there unannounced and in force and launching into prayer services unabashedly aimed at convincing their customers to quit them.

At first, they'd been pleased; most of their customers had seemed to look on the prayer-and-hymn services as something like having live music in the pub. But within a week the money-making magic was fading fast. The crowd of idle, thirsty spectators that had once followed the ladies around from tavern to tavern dwindled away until it included only the idlest and thirstiest. After a week or so, the crusaders' arrival at a saloon stopped being an attractant. At the same time, the number of ladies participating in the "raids" swelled. Soon their arrival meant not a lucrative afternoon of pouring drinks and collecting coin, but the effective shutting-down of the bar for as long as the ladies chose to stay.

More and more saloonkeepers began refusing to let the ladies come in. At first, when this happened, they'd move on, but soon — inspired by the actions of Walter Moffett (about whom more in a bit), they changed their tactics. When refused admission to a saloon, they'd stand in front of it on the sidewalk and hold a prayer-and-song service right there.

This was actually worse than letting them in, because it was like a picket line that customers would have to cross publicly if they wanted to enter the saloon. It also made a public spectacle of the barkeeper's lack of hospitality.

Tensions were on the rise as the month of April wore on. On April 14, at a saloon in the North End, a proprietress slammed the door in the crusaders' faces, and when the wind blew it back open again, "she rushed to the door and poured a volley of abuse upon us," according to the hand-written account of one anonymous temperance worker.

But there were some successes too. That same hand-written account goes on: "Evening Call saloon closed — proprietor signed the Pledge." You'll remember the Evening Call as the rum shop visited on the first day of the crusade.

By the middle of April, the warring parties had settled down into an uneasy sort of relationship in which the saloon keepers tried to keep as low a profile as possible — trying, if you'll pardon the anachronism of using a metaphor 100 years before its time, to stay off the ladies' radar.

Well, most of them did. There was ... one exception. And it's time to talk about him now.

Walter Moffett was one of Portland's most respected men, and by most accounts a decent guy. A Brit by birth, he went to sea as a young man and did well for himself; by the time he arrived in Portland, he was a ship captain. He settled down in Portland and married well — his wife was a daughter of the Terwilliger family. By the time he'd settled down with her, he was a man of property, owning several shipping interests as well as two saloons: the Tom Thumb and the Webfoot. It was the Webfoot Saloon that was to be Ground Zero in Portland's temperance riots.

The Webfoot was located on the northwest corner of First and Morrison — just off the waterfront at its more "respectable" southern end.

How the hostilities between Moffett and the temperance crusaders got started is unclear; there are two very different accounts of the action — one from the *Portland Bulletin*, and one from author and journalist Frances Fuller Victor's little book, *Crusading in Portland*, published later that same year.

Both accounts agree that Moffett first met two of the temperance workers on that first day in mid-March when they were fanning out across the city two by two. But that's all they agree on. The *Bulletin's* story the next morning says Mr. Moffett greeted them courteously but declined to let them enter his bar. Fuller Victor, however, describes the action somewhat differently:

"The two ladies, trembling, but full of holy zeal, paused at the entrance on Morrison Street, and stepped into the saloon whose proprietor was as unknown to them as the proprietors of other saloons. As they entered, Mr. Moffett, on the alert, ... entered

by the Front Street door, which brought him face to face with his visitors. Without giving them time to announce their errand, he seized each rudely by an arm, and thrust them out into the street, exclaiming, "Get out of this! I keep a respectable house and don't want any damn whores here."

She goes on to describe the ladies' shocked reaction to this reception, and the horror with which one of them recognizes him as a family friend:

"Walter Moffett!" she exclaimed. "Can this be Walter Moffett? Why, Walter Moffett, I used to know you; and I prayed with your wife for your safety when you were at sea years ago!"

"I don't want any of your damn prayers; I want you to get out of this and stay out; that's all I want of you. I don't keep a whorehouse!"

Well then. These are words that even today would earn a man a lusty punch on the mazzard from pretty much anyone in a position to deliver one, male or female. The fact that Moffett didn't get one on the spot can probably be chalked up to the utter improbability of his behavior, which was so far out of line with Victorian-era norms of how respectable women were supposed to be treated that the ladies were too flabbergasted to do anything but make their way back to the Taylor Street church and tell their comrades-in-arms what had happened.

Their story galvanized the congregation there. Outraged and furious, they immediately moved his name to the top of their target list.

For the next week-and-a-half, they tried to wear down his defenses by putting in daily appearances at his saloon — requesting entry, being denied and moving on.

Finally, on the last day of March, they changed tactics. After being denied entry as usual, they lined up on the sidewalk and launched their prayer service right there, outside the door.

Moffett's response was almost as tone-deaf as his previous one had been: He emerged from his saloon wearing spectacles and holding himself with prim dignity, a copy of the Holy Bible in one hand. From this he proceeded to read a selection of passages which, taken out of context, sounded wildly offensive. (The only one of these specifically mentioned by the crusaders is Deuteronomy 23:1, which reads, "He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.")

The ladies sang louder to drown him out. Moffett increased his own volume until he was actually shouting. This went on for some time, attracting — as you can imagine — a healthy crowd of spectators.

Finally, the ladies moved on. But before they left, one of them

tearfully asked Moffett why he was behaving like this. His bell-cose response was that he minded his own business and expected others to mind theirs, and he called the crusaders hypocrites.

That evening, the ladies discussed Moffett at great length. Was he simply incorrigible, a waste of their time? Should they simply leave him on his road to hell and focus their attention on more salvageable souls? Or — or was his bizarre, erratic and offensive behavior a subtle call for help?

Strange as it sounds, the "call for help" theory is the one that prevailed. Some of the ladies argued that his strange behavior must stem from an uneasy conscience, and that meant he was not beyond the reach of salvation. What Brother Moffett needed right now was not to be abandoned to his depravities and the blandishments of Satan, but rather to feel the tough, brave love of his true friends, who would be there to support his struggle for righteousness no matter how viciously he tried in his self-destructive, demonic madness to drive them away.

Looked at that way, leaving Walter Moffett alone would be a seriously sinful and selfish act, and one the ladies figured they'd be called to account for on Judgment Day. No, poor Brother Moffett would continue to receive his special treatment, along with earnest and loving prayers for his salvation, whether he wanted them or not.

In other words, Moffett's behavior had not only failed to persuade the ladies to leave him alone, it had put the full force of divine authority behind a mandate to continue pestering him. And the poor dolt clearly had no idea.

We'll talk about what this continuing attention would lead to 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 Printer of Portland; "The War on the Webfoot Saloon," an article by Malcolm Clark Jr. published in the March 1957 issue of *Oregon Historical Quarterly*; *Edward Chamberau: His Autobiography*, a Ph.D. dissertation by Timothy Wehrkamp, published in 1976 by the University of Oregon; OHS Archive document folders MSS 1535 and 550; archives of *The New Northwest and Portland Daily Bulletin*, March–July 1874.)

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