

Offbeat Oregon: When Portland's 'Temperance Crusade' collapsed

By Finn J.D. John
for *The Sentinel*

(Note: This column is the fourth and final part of a four-part series on the Portland temperance riots of 1874.)

As detailed in last week's article, Portland's legal authorities responded to the riot and street fight at the Webfoot Saloon on April 16, 1874, by arresting not the rioting brawlers, but the singing, praying church ladies they'd been fighting over. The idea was, although the ladies hadn't been personally disorderly, they had shown up and prayed on a sidewalk knowing full well that doing so might inspire others to engage in disorderly conduct by, for example, rioting and trashing the Webfoot Saloon.

It took a couple of days for the trial to finish up and for the jury to come to a decision. But one of the jury members was a saloon owner, and the other five were business owners of other types; their natural sympathy lay with the guy trying to sell beer, not the citizens outside interfering with commerce and trade by singing and praying in public. To no one's surprise, the verdict was "guilty."

The ladies were sentenced to spend a night in jail or pay \$5. Offers to pay their fines poured in immediately, but like Socrates refusing to go into exile, they insisted on doing the time instead.

And so, the six crusaders were carted off to the hoosegow, accompanied by a huge crowd of well-wishers.

All throughout that afternoon and into the evening, the Portland city joint was jumping. Hordes of visitors trooped in and out of the jail, to visit and to participate in impromptu prayer services; and the joint rang with the sound of six determined voices belting out hymn after hymn. Finally, visiting hours ended, and the ladies settled down for the night.

It couldn't have been more than half an hour later that Chief Lappeus stormed into the jail and ordered them to get the hell out.

The ladies, assuming this was another attempt to cut them a break, hurried to reassure him that they were quite ready to stay the night like the judge had said. The chief didn't even let them finish.

"I'm the BOSS here," he roared. "You leave!"

Some of the ladies had already dressed for bed. Lappeus roared at them until they scurried out of the jailhouse, half put together and feeling scandalously immodest. For a Victorian-age man, it was a remarkably ungentlemanly thing to do; people in the 1870s were challenged to duels for lesser "offenses against Womanhood" than this.

"From first to last it was a farce, although a very serious one," wrote Fuller Victor. "The women had violated no laws or ordinances. They were arrested on a charge which only really applied to the man who had them arrested, and only to him.

"In this first trial," she continued, "as in those that followed [against Moffett], the Crusaders,

whether defenders or complainants, were treated as if they had been in every other sense what they are legally — infants or idiots."

After this episode, the temperance workers virtually owned Portland. Moffett was bedeviled on almost a daily basis, and his behavior continued to be odd and erratic. For the most part, knowing he was fighting a losing battle, he contented himself with "following his tormentors around, muttering imprecations and offering unsolicited advice," according to historian Malcolm Clark Jr.

However, on occasion he would do something actually aggressive. On May 1, he made history in what surely was the first use of tear gas in state history. On that day, he emerged from his saloon with a wet handkerchief around his nose and some sort of vile-smelling smoke pouring from the pockets of the old overcoat he was wearing. In them, he apparently had a mixture of tobacco and pepper, and the smell was almost suffocating; Moffett, free to move about, could leave the cloud of stinging smoke behind him, whereas the singing and praying ladies more or less had to stay in one spot and endure it as best they could. Moffett was hauled into court for this bit of chemical warfare, but on May 21 he was acquitted — "the jury were all liquor men," an anonymous crusader wrote.

On May 27, the same crusader reported, "Mr. Moffett of the 'Webb-Foot' still a tool for Satan, executing the designs of the dev-

il with astonishing intrepidity." And as late as June, Moffett was still occasionally throwing firecrackers. But his tactics seemed to have shifted from pitched battle to isolated harassment.

Sadly, the chronicles are silent on the question of what impact his behavior had on his business. Did the drinkers of Portland rally around him, supporting him in his little war? Or did they start avoiding the Webfoot, uncomfortably with the ungentlemanly behavior for which it was fast becoming famous? We don't know.

As Election Day approached, a new newspaper, the *Temperance Star*, was launched — Abigail Scott Duniway's *The New Northwest* having been deemed not ideologically pure enough. And this was essentially true. Success had gone to the heads of the temperance-church preachers and other male leaders of the crusade, and they were starting to display a species of merciless, self-righteous swagger that Duniway immediately saw was public-relations poison. Foreseeing the brutal comeuppance that was about to come their way, she was at some pains to distance herself and her favored cause — women's suffrage — from their movement. They noticed, and, with the Manichean reflexes that all fanatics share, switched her designation from "friend" to "enemy."

A full slate of Temperance candidates was drafted and put forward for the upcoming election. Most Portlanders looked upon them with some favor, thanks to the copious goodwill generated by the crusading ladies.

Then, on the day of the election in early July, a little publication was distributed all over Portland, titled "The Voters' Book of Remembrance" — although it was not actually a book, but rather a half-sheet flyer. This innocuously titled circular was unsigned, but everyone assumed the League had published it, and it almost certainly had. But if the saloon-keepers had put it out as a dirty campaign trick, they would have been very pleased with the result.

The "Voters' Book of Remembrance" put the entire city into a cold fury. Its language doesn't sound too bad to the modern ear, but in 1874 it was outrageously unsubtle — and, what was worse, insulting.

"Voters of Portland, the Book of Remembrance is this day opened, and you are called upon to choose 'whom ye will serve,'" it starts out. "On one hand are found prostitutes, gamblers, rumsellers, whiskey toppers, beer guzzlers, wine bibbers, rum suckers, hoodlums, loafers and ungodly men. On the other hand are found Christian wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the good people of Portland. You cannot serve two masters. You must be numbered with one or the other. Whom will ye choose?"

In other words, as historian Clark puts it, "any citizen low enough to vote against the Temperance candidates was a supporter of Sin, an un-American scoundrel, and an arch-foe of Home and Mother."

Remember, this was a pre-Suffrage election, so it was to be decided by men. Most men, in 1874, had at one time or another participated in saloon culture — some of them on a daily basis, others very occasionally. And although it was a particularly hard-drinking age, not every Portland man was a souse. Responsible drinkers have always been with us, and in 1874, as in most times, they represented a great majority of the male population. Now here came these Temperance scolds to tell Joe Sixpack-A-Week that he must either dry out completely and join the "crusade" or be numbered with hookers, swindlers, loafers, thugs, day-drinkers, and "ungodly men."

No sale, Reverend.

The temperance candidates, who 24 hours before the election had looked like shoo-ins, were trounced. The Women's Temperance Prayer League vanished, its constituents slinking away from the public-relations fiasco that someone had signed their name to. It was replaced by the

Women's Christian Temperance Union, which lasted for years but never had the same kind of influence.

Ironically, probably the biggest loser in the whole fiasco was the woman whose newspaper had catalyzed the whole movement. Abigail Scott Duniway now got to watch her worst fears become reality: The women's suffrage movement became irrevocably tied to the temperance movement in most Portlanders' minds, and the temperance movement was now painted in the popular imagination as preachy, self-righteous, meddlesome and generally insufferable. It would take decades for this association to dissipate.

Speaking of dissipation, let's turn back to Walter Moffett for a moment. He started wasting away just a few months after the election. Then he sold his saloons and sailed off to the South Seas — a relatively unremarkable thing to do today, but a fairly odd action for a middle-aged married man of property to take in 1875; in that era of small, vulnerable sailing ships, sketchy navigation and nonexistent weather forecasting, people didn't go to sea unless they had to.

In any case, Moffett died en route. His cause of death was officially something else, but it's at least possible that he was suffering through the final stages of syphilis, which in that era caused many a middle-aged man to become mentally unhinged and then die early. Certainly, that would explain why a man who had clearly once had enough good judgment to build several successful businesses suddenly thought it would be OK to throw firecrackers at praying ladies on the street and call them "damned whores."

But, of course, we can't ever really know.

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. For details, see www.finnjohn.com.



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