

SOCIAL HISTORY OF ALCOHOL USE AND ABUSE

BEFORE 6000 BC

Early legends described the origins of wine as a god-given gift or affliction. The power of the gods to give joy and inflict pain seemed synonymous with the power of wine to create a cycle of ecstasy, sorrow and silent sleep. Since alcohol's power over the mind and body came magically from the fermentation of fruits and grains, it was a mysterious force to pre-historic peoples.

6000 B.C. - 3000 BC

In Mesopotamia, the Sumerians worshipped Gestin, a goddess, protector of the vine.

3000 B.C. - 500 BC

The Egyptian god, Osiris, was worshipped as god of wine and lord of the dead.

The Chinese Emperor Yu discovered rice wine, and subsequently prohibited its use.

The Persian King Dshemshid was convinced wine was poison. A suicidal woman at court took wine to die, but instead was cured of her chronic headaches; wine became "Royal Medicine".

In Greece, Dionysus was worshipped as god of wine; he was honored each year with a four-day feast -- by the preparation and distribution of wine, intoxication and revelry, sobering up and atonement, -- then celebration of Dionysus' return. This pattern of celebration continues in the Judeo-Christian traditions of Yom Kippur (atonement), Rosh Hashanah (the New Year celebration), and Easter (resurrection).

1000 B.C. - 300 AD

Roman god Bacchus (*bacca* is the Latin word for grape) was both a saint and a satyr. Bacchanalian feasts, orgies of intoxication, were celebrated at the grape harvest. As Judeo-Christian theology became dominant, the ancient festival became identified with the sins of intoxication.

Exceptional groups included the Moslems, who abstained in obedience to the Koran; the Brahmin in India, and the followers of Buddha. In each of these, intoxication was abhorred as a sin against Spirit and Self.

WHAT THEY DRANK

From pre-history through the Sixteenth Century alcoholic beverages were derived from fermentation. They were wines and beers containing, at most, 14% alcohol. Their use was common both in ceremony and as replacements for other beverages which might be unsafe to drink, such as water from public wells.

15TH - 16TH CENTURY

Alcohol began to be used as a pain killer and anesthetic during and after surgery. Distillation processes were developed in Europe and beverages containing 50%, or more, alcohol were drunk.

During the period 1710 - 1750, England experienced the "gin epidemic." Low cereal prices and an unfavorable balance of trade prompted a surge in the production of cheap gin. By the 1740's, when the cumulative effects of this overindulgence were acutely felt in declining birth rates and enormous incidence of malformed and retarded children, there was a social protest. Parliament was prevailed upon, in 1751, to increase taxes on distilled spirits and to limit the numbers of places it could be sold.

17TH CENTURY - COLONIAL TIMES:

The Governor of Massachusetts in 1629, was advised by English superior: "... if any shall exceed in that inordinate kind of drinking as to become drunk, wee hope you will take care his punishment be made exemplary for all others."

In Plymouth Colony, 1633, John Holmes was censured for drunkenness: his penalty - to "sitt in the stocks, and was amerced forty shillings."

First time offenders were put in the stocks. Repeat offenders were sentenced to hard labor or corporal punishment.

Cider, beer, and wine were the drinks of choice. The Puritans believed alcohol was God's gift to man, and a test of his soul. "The wine is from God, but the drunkard is from the Devil". (Puritan aphorism)

Tithingmen, tax-collectors who oversaw ten-families each, monitored excessive drunkenness and reported it to the minister, who reported it to the Governor's representative. Ministers could punish first time offenders, but repeat offenders were sent to the governor's representative for punishment.

18TH CENTURY

The rum trade with Barbados was opened, and domestic rum distilling became common by 1750. Rum was the drink of choice. As America became an urban society, public drunkenness became more commonplace and less controlled by local moral-prohibitions.

During the decade before the American Revolution, the average annual alcohol intake per person was 3.7 gallons of alcohol, mostly high-alcohol content rum.

The language to describe drunks was recorded by Benjamin Franklin in his *Drinkers Dictionary*.

Description of drunkard:

He's drunk as a Wheelbarrow, As drunk as a Beggar, Got Corns in his Head, Loaded his Cart, Cock Ey'd, God'd, Frozen, Been at an Indian Feast, As Dizzy as a Goose, Got the Glanders, Juicy, Merry, Mooney's, mellow, Oil'e, Got the Night Mare, Like a Rat in Trouble, In the Sudds, As stiff as a Ring-bolt, Soak'd, He carried too much sail, Topsy Turvey, Tipsey, He's wet."

DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR:

The USS CONSTITUTION set sail from Boston, on 23 August, 1779. She left with 475 officers and men, 48,600 gallons of fresh water, 7,400 cannon shot, 11,600 pounds of black powder, and 79,400 gallons of rum on board. Her mission was to destroy and harass English shipping.

Making Jamaica on 6 October, she took on 826 pounds of flour and 68,300 gallons of rum. Then she headed for the Azores, arriving there on 12 November, She provisioned with 550 pounds of beef and 64,300 gallons of Portuguese wine. On the 18th of November she set sail for England.

In the ensuing day, she defeated five British Men-of-War and captured and scuttled twelve English Merchant-Men, salvaging only their rum. By 27 January, her powder and shot were exhausted. Unarmed, she made a raid up the Firth of Clyde. Her landing party captured a whiskey distillery and transferred 40,000 gallons to board by dawn. Then she headed home.

The Constitution arrived in Boston harbor on 20 February, 1780, with no cannon shot, no powder, no food, no rum, no whiskey, but with 48,000 gallons of stagnant water.

[excerpted from U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings]

By 1790, the estimated alcohol consumption of each adult was six gallons of absolute alcohol per year (2.5 oz. alcohol/adult/day) - twice the estimated level of alcohol consumption in America in 1985.

19TH CENTURY

The American Temperance Movement began with a pamphlet by Benjamin Rush, first Surgeon-General of the U.S., which labeled intemperance as a disease and listed the symptoms of tolerance and alcohol withdrawal that form the basis of syndrome of alcohol dependence.

The first temperance movement opposed hard liquor, but condoned beer and wine. People found that: "houses could be built, barns could be raised, grain could be harvested, christenings could be enjoyed and the dead could be mourned without the constant accompaniment of distilled spirits."

The temperance movement waned in the 1820's. A rebirth followed Lyman Beecher's message proposing: "the banishment of ardent spirits from the list of lawful articles of commerce, by correct and efficient public sentiment, such as has turned slavery out of half our land; the dissemination of information on intemperance; the formation of an organization to carry on this work; the support of churches and of physicians; renunciation of spirits as a medicinal drug."

Temperance workers sought to control the sale and use of alcohol but tended to ignore the problem of drunkenness and consider it hopeless.

Serving alcohol to workers on the job was abolished during the 1870's but that did not end the problems of drinking on the job.

In Philadelphia and Boston, the category of "insanity caused by intemperance" accounted for over 50% of hospital psychiatric admissions. Drunkenness was prevalent among leaders of the community.

As the medical profession joined the temperance movement, the disease concept of drunkenness was further defined. Samuel Woodward, a physician, characterized alcoholism by tolerance, psychological dependence ("a tormenting thirst, and insatiable craving"), and physical withdrawal symptoms ("a sense of vacuity, faintness, and depression, which calls imperiously for a repetition of the stimulant upon which it depends.")

Immoderate drinking became a crime and drunkenness became a disease. Woodward and others called for prohibition of all intoxicating beverages, arguing that the legal system supports and encourages excessive alcohol consumption.

The temperance movement waned during the Civil War as its proponents turned their energies to abolition of slavery.

The post-Civil-War Era brought new problems with alcohol abuse. and opiate addiction. Federal taxes were imposed on alcohol. Organized opposition to Temperance began. The Prohibition Party was founded.

What Americans drank changed with the immigration of Germans and other Middle European people. Between 1850 and 1970, beer consumption increased from 1.6 to 3.8 gallons per person per year. However, increasing numbers of lower-alcohol-content beers were brewed.

OPIUM became a major substance of abuse after the Civil War.

There were no restrictions on importation or use of opium until the 1920's. Most opiate addicts were women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five including domestics, teachers, prostitutes, nurses, and society ladies.

It was easy to become addicted to opium and cocaine: until 1903, cocaine was an active ingredient in Coca-Cola, was an additive to teas, tonics, wines, cordials, cheroots, cigarettes and inhalants.

COCAINE was recommended for gastric indigestion, asthma, as an aphrodisiac, a local anesthetic, a stimulant and to combat the effects of alcohol and morphine. Cocaine was advocated in the treatment of opium addiction and vice-versa. Opiates were a "therapy for alcoholism" and heroin was a "cure for morphinism." Most "female complaints" were treated with opiates. Opiates and cocaine were a socially acceptable substitute for alcohol; several "pillars" of the anti-alcohol movement were addicted.

WHY THE WEST WAS WILD

As the Western United States opened up after the Civil War, the saloon became a primary meeting place. Newspaper accounts suggest that one or both parties were drinking heavily in at least half the fourteen murder incidents in Leadville, Colorado, between March and October, 1880.

Elsewhere, 60% of the misdemeanor arrests were for public intoxication. Frontier physicians noted alcohol-related deaths compounded by pneumonia and exposure. As farmers with families moved west, the temperance movement came with them.

The American Indians' quick addiction to alcohol led to a shame of America's past. With no history of exposure to alcohol, Indians easily became dependent, sickened and died. In spite of attempts to legislate against the sale of liquor to these naive people, many took advantage of their addiction to steal land, food, livestock, and furs.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY

The industrial revolution brought workers into factories. Drinking became a way to be accepted by peers at work. "Drink fines" were collected on becoming an apprentice, at the time of marriage, on the birth of a child, one "treated the gang." Hard drinking was an important way to achieve status at work, since frequent drinking was part of loyalty to the shop.

The temperance movement returned. Middle and upper class Protestants saw total abstinence as a symbol of respectability.

Temperance was identified with the Women's Suffrage Movement. Women would meet at the church, march to the saloon, protest by prayer and song, and demand that the saloon keeper give up his business and that drinkers stop drinking. This protest became the background for women to organize against sex-inequality in the work place and the voting booth.

Some saloon keepers protested against the protestors. In Portland, Oregon, women were hosed with cold water by one saloon proprietor. Then the women were arrested.

In Portland, about 1910, Simon Benson gave the city a gift of twenty, ornate bronze drinking-fountains; his intent was to end workingmen's consumption of beer-by-the-bucket to quench their thirst. The bubbling fountains did cut tavern business.

The tactic designed by the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was to dry up the country piecemeal through local option laws and statewide prohibition.

Georgia and Oklahoma adopted prohibition in 1907. In 1913, the Anti-Saloon League declared itself in favor of national prohibition by amendment to the federal constitution. It was opposed by the U.S. Brewers Association, and the National Wholesale Liquor Dealers.

On January 16, 1919, the 18th amendment became law.

The sale, manufacture, transportation, importation, and exportation of intoxicating liquors for beverage purposes in the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof are forever prohibited...

The Volstead Act was passed to enforce the Amendment. 170,000 saloons were destroyed. The Volstead Act had loopholes which were quickly filled as illegal smuggling, home brewers and commercial distillers established themselves.

Repeal of the 18th Amendment was accomplished by the work of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment; supported by several wealthy investors who were convinced that repeal would reduce their tax burden and hasten economic recovery from the Great Depression.

The 21st Amendment repealed the 18th Amendment and delegated authority to the states for regulation. Thirty states decided to allow legal availability of alcohol while eighteen states continued prohibition. In 1933, 38% of the population still lived in areas where alcohol was illegal.

Alcoholics Anonymous began in the 1930's. The role of this alcoholics-helping-alcoholics organization has been enormously powerful in beginning to overcome old stereotypes. Alcohol misuse and abuse profoundly affect the lives of many who do not have the full biological syndrome of alcoholism. Directly and indirectly, alcohol abuse leads to tens of thousands of deaths each year. By providing a safe place to reveal alcohol concerns and share the problems of the disease, AA continues to help, and to reduce the social stigma of alcoholism and alcohol misuse.

SINCE WORLD WAR II

In 1966, the last state went wet. Presently, thirty-four states regulate alcohol sales by license systems; the state grants the privilege of conducting business. Sixteen states have control systems where ownership and operation of wholesale and retail alcohol sales operations are directly managed by the state.

The role of alcohol abuse in highway accidents and fatalities, as a contributing factor to crimes, to violent family disputes, to illness, brain damage and death is recognized. In the interest of public safety, states and the federal government continue pass laws that lower tolerance for alcohol use by those who operate vehicles or provide public services. Alcohol and substance-abuse education and treatment have become part of the "punishment" for many crimes. The US has the strictest youth drinking laws in the Western world, including the highest minimum drinking age in the entire world.

Heavy alcohol use among people in the US 17 years of age or younger actually dropped by two-thirds (65.9 percent) between 1985 and 1997.

Americans continue to struggle with the misconception that drunkenness and alcoholism are the same thing. Many non-alcoholics on occasion become intoxicated or drunk. However, if they are not addicted to alcohol, they are not alcoholic. Of course, intoxication is never completely safe or risk-free and should be avoided. It is better either to abstain or to drink in moderation. As a governmental alcohol agency has explained, "Alcohol no more causes alcoholism than sugar causes diabetes."

In 1973, the fetal alcohol syndrome was first documented by extensive and careful research. Fetal alcohol effects, which include dozens of pre-natal injuries, damage thousands of infants each year. The danger to the unborn is still not well enough understood by women. In the US no public warnings were issued until 1977. Women were then warned against consuming more than six drinks a day. At the same time, moves to display compulsory public health warnings about the dangers of alcohol to the unborn child were rejected. In 1980 a national workshop was held and the following year the American Surgeon General issued a warning to pregnant women against consuming alcohol, even in food. In spite of protests, this warning was widely publicized and increased research funding for nationally coordinated projects on the topic provided. Since 1989, every container of alcoholic beverage sold in the US has had to carry a label which gives a warning that women should not drink alcohol during pregnancy because of the risks of birth defects. Extensive medical research fails to find scientific evidence that light drinking by an expectant mother can cause fetal alcohol syndrome. Of course, the safest choice is to abstain during pregnancy.