

Sabine N. Meyer,

*We Are What We Drink:
The Temperance Battle in Minnesota**

Reviewed by
Thomas L. Olson

We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota is an important book. National, broad-based histories of the temperance movement, and there are several,¹ offer a view at the top but don't tell us how the long battle was fought locally. Place, as Sabine N. Meyer points out, matters. Her history is about Minnesota, to be sure, but it is especially about St. Paul, where ethnicity, religion, gender, and, as I add, class, clashed and cooperated in a 70-year struggle for alcohol prohibition.²

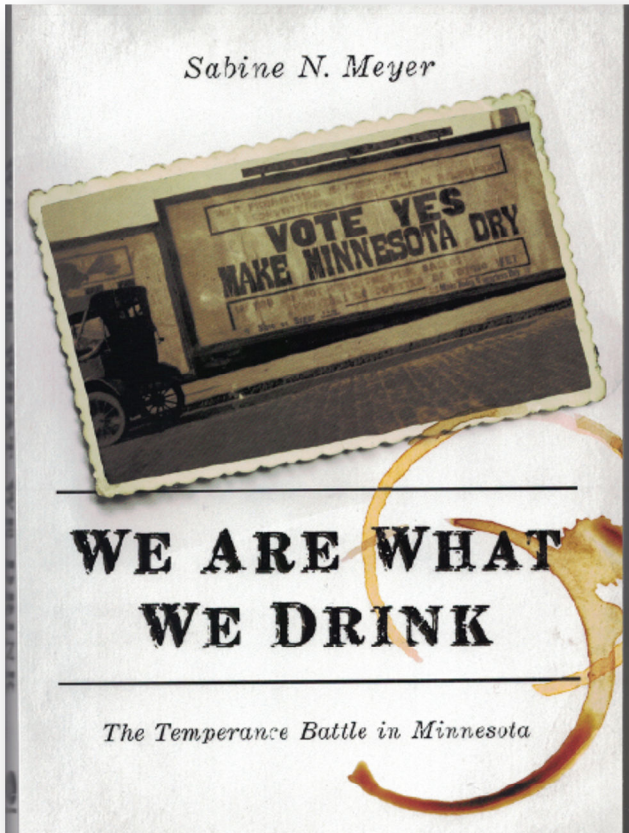
* University of Illinois Press, Urbana (2015, 1st Paperback ed. 2018) 204pp. (paperback) + notes, bibliography and index.

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¹ See, for example, Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York, N.Y., Scribner, 2010).

² As Meyer says, the word *temperance* can mean "moderation or self-restraint." But, from its earliest days, American temperance reform was rarely about moderation. Abstinence was the goal. Many temperance reformers did, to be sure, take a personal, voluntary pledge of abstinence and encouraged or coerced (with considerable backsliding) a pledge from others. But serious reformers knew this would never be enough. For them the coercive power of the state to ban the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol was from the earliest days seen as necessary.

Although Meyer focuses on Saint Paul, on ethnic group differences, and especially on the role of women, the temperance movement, as Meyer describes well, was brought to Minnesota by pietistic New England protestant men. Typically, they were Methodist, Baptist, or



Congregationalist, often the second sons of descendants of those prim 17th century protestant arrivals who now moved westward seeking fortune by any means. Their template was the temperance law that had been passed in Maine in 1851 (The Maine Law) and subsequently was adopted by 13 other states and territories.

But there was more to it. As Mark Twain pointed out in *Life on the Mississippi*, liquor, whether brandy

(French), rum (English), or corn whiskey (American) had been a “van leader” of civilization that was sold to and traded with Native Americans and subsequently also to soldiers at Ft. Snelling from the days when “white” men first arrived. From that time on, what was first Pig’s Eye Landing and then St. Paul became notorious as a liquor trading and consuming hub. Reacting to this trade, many pietistic early New England arrivals to St. Paul and elsewhere in Minnesota Territory moved to end the liquor trade and impose alcohol abstinence. The rationale was fourfold. One was a paternalistic attitude toward Native American “children.” A second was a belief that sober Native Americans were less

threatening to settlers. Following closely in the footsteps of this rationale came class consciousness—the desire to keep laborers, those who would actually build Minnesota, productive through sobriety. All of that was subsumed under pietistic Protestantism.

This rationale predominated and in 1852 the Territorial Legislature passed a Maine Law prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages.³ But the legislators apparently lacked confidence in their decision and made final enactment dependent on a public referendum. Led by clergymen and against the opposition of liquor dealers, lumbermen and fur traders, that referendum passed by a vote of 853 to 662. Unfortunately for the bill's proponents, Henry Z. Hayner, Chief Justice of the Territorial Supreme Court, struck down the law because only the territorial legislature was empowered to pass legislation.⁴ There was no legal provision for a citizen ballot. By that time Minnesota's population, and opposition to prohibition, had grown. The Maine Law in Minnesota died.

With that defeat, the legal battle shifted, over the next half century, to control rather than ban the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcoholic drink with the focus on sales. In particular, the 1853 and 1854 Territorial Legislatures enacted a modest license fee for saloons and a ban on Sunday liquor sales as well as prohibiting gambling in saloons and sales to minors and Native Americans. Those laws, over the next several decades were in some places enforced and in others, especially St. Paul,

³ An exception was made for the manufacture and sale of small quantities for "medicinal" purposes.

⁴ Chief Justice Hayner declared the law unconstitutional on November 21, 1852. In the next legislative session, a new liquor law was introduced and, in an exercise of caution, the Territorial Legislative Council asked Hayner for an advisory opinion on its legality. On February 18, 1853, he declared the proposed law unconstitutional on numerous grounds. It was not revised or reintroduced. See generally, Douglas A. Hedin "Advisory Opinions of the Territorial Supreme Court, 1852-1854," 15-21, 38-40 (MLHP, 2019-2011),

ignored. Twenty-five years later temperance advocates began to agitate for passage of an "Ohio" law that would have given those harmed by the actions of a drunkard the right to sue the saloon owner who sold the liquor. The burden of responsibility was thus shifted from the consumer to the seller—a burden particularly on the owners of small working-class saloons who could not afford to defend let alone lose such suits. The Minnesota version of this bill, introduced in 1872, went even further by providing also for an option for municipalities to become dry (local option), strengthen Sunday closing, and require saloon owners to post high surety bonds. The later was an attempt as Meyer says, by "the better classes of people" to restrict working-class saloons. The obvious class nature of this bill ignited strong opposition, especially from now robust German and Irish-American communities, to kill this type of legislation. But while opposition to an Ohio bill roused anti-temperance forces it also hardened the resolve of temperance advocates.

Subsequent to defeat of the Ohio bill temperance forces in the 1880's began to push for enactment of another "half-way" measure, a "high-license" bill which would substantially raise the cost of a saloon license and, married to that provision, for a local-option giving local jurisdictions the right to become "dry." That issue, and temperance generally, was politicized in the 1870's and 80's as the Republican Party increasingly adopted pro-temperance planks. When the Republicans took control of the legislature and governorship the result, in 1887, was passage of a high license bill (containing also a local option proviso) that raised saloon license fees to \$500 for small towns and cities and to \$1000 in cities with populations over 10,000.

Although hard line prohibitionists continued to push for a complete ban on alcohol production, sales, and consumption, the new law seemed to please more moderate temperance advocates and also the Anti-Saloon League, whose policy was "strategic gradualism." In some ways

the law was effective. Although the local option law had applied only to towns and villages, by 1910 160 of the state's municipalities had voted dry as had 1200 of 1800 townships. In 1913 the legislature expanded the local option law to include all cities of fewer than 10,000 residents. Post-enactment the high license fee did reduce the number of saloons but with a mixed result. Although the number declined, those that remained were or became larger.⁵ And the high fee opened a door for increased control by brewers and liquor distributors who bought licenses and then leased them to saloon operators who otherwise couldn't have afforded one. Those shortcomings, plus the failure of some localities to enforce existing liquor laws, led to a new initiative by temperance advocates for a county option law whose rationale was that the combined votes of rural and presumably more temperance-inclined citizens could overcome the votes of a county's larger city, whose urban and worker residents were presumably more inclined to vote "wet."⁶

Gender.

Minnesota's earliest prohibition advocates were in the main white Anglo-Saxon males. Protestant England stock moved west. Women, wives mainly, whose role was overwhelmingly defined as "in the home," despite their enthusiasm, played a lesser role — preparing banners for an all male march for example. Moreover, in territorial Minnesota those early women temperance advocates were of the wealthier class. And, although working class women were later drawn into the movement, that

⁵ In St. Paul at the time of the High License Law there were 11 breweries and 800 saloons. A look at the 1880 U.S. Census for St. Paul tells us that the population was 83,000 and that the male drinking age population was 37,000 (some of whom did not drink and/or didn't frequent saloons. A simple average then is that there was a saloon for every 50 or so men—drinkers and non-drinkers alike. Meyer says only that the number of saloons declined somewhat but provides no statistics.

⁶ County option remained a high priority for temperance advocates but was not enacted until 1915.

wasn't the case in the 1860's, 70's and 80's. This begs a question. Was the early motivation of those temperance women religious, altruistic, innate to gender, or a matter of class, an effort to uplift the poorer among them through moral improvement rather than through better wages?

Later, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), still dominated by wealthier Protestant women, grew rapidly in Minnesota. With it, women were more and more drawn into the public (vs. private or family) sphere. The WCTU, founded by Frances Willard in Ohio in 1879, was actually a broad based reform movement. Willard herself was a reformer on a broad front—primarily as a suffragist as well as temperance leader. In Minnesota, as Sabine Meyer tells the story, the WCTU accepted members as they were. If they were content with a personal temperance pledge which they might cautiously broach to others—fine. But as their involvement in the movement grew they were encouraged to enter the public sphere through demonstrations, lobbying and other public activity. In many instances this brought women into the suffrage movement as they began to understand that alcohol prohibition could not be realized unless women could vote. In that way, what Meyer helps us to understand is that in a critical way temperance often preceded suffrage and was responsible in key ways in bringing about the ultimate success of the 19th Amendment. If one reads Meyer for no other reason but to help in understanding this interrelationship her book is a must.

Ethnicity.

In Meyer's work, three ethnicities matter— Irish, Germans, and Swedes.

Irish emigrants arrived in St. Paul after the Civil War and just in time to provide a lot of labor—for the railroads and for building the city. As for alcohol, social changes in rural Ireland seemed to have contributed to

the rise of alcohol use so that by the early 19th century whiskey consumption had increased substantially and became a significant part of everyday Irish life, a dietary staple, as well as an important part of events such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, and business transactions. Saloons achieved high social and economic importance in Ireland and helped Irish men develop a male identity. In America that alcohol culture intensified because there were many single male emigrants, because they found themselves in a sometimes hostile urban environment, and because the saloon offered respite from what was often grueling physical labor. By the time the Irish began to arrive in St. Paul, alcohol consumption was a strong part of Irish identity and the “drunken Paddy” image was well-established. Still, there was a movement for temperance within the Irish community, including in St. Paul. And, although the Catholic Church took no position on temperance, the movement was led by church prelates—first Fr. Cretin and then especially by Archbishop John Ireland. Neither church teachings nor moral concerns seemed to have been the motive. Rather, their reason for promoting temperance was to raise the standing and regard for the Irish among the dominant Anglo community. As a result of such acceptance, they reasoned, the Irish would advance socially and economically. No longer would they be disregarded as unreliable drunkards. Put another way, the aim was to please pious Protestants

Although church leaders such as John Ireland did not oppose alcohol restrictive legislation, their focus was far more on personal temperance pledges. In this movement, Irish-American women played an important role, not in moving into the public sphere of lobbying and agitation but within their defined family roles as wives and mothers. Throughout the temperance reform movement years, although personal pledges likely never exceeded 10% (of Irish-Americans in Minnesota) and there was considerable backsliding, this personal, family, social and economic improvement goal remained a part of the Irish-American approach to temperance.

While Irish Americans might have experienced a minor schism between “wets” and “drys,” that can’t be said of the German immigrants, at least not before The Great War. They were “wets” for certain. Drinking, especially drinking beer, which Germans regarded as healthful, was integral to a culture that German immigrants sought to sustain in America. As a result, for the vast majority of German-Americans the temperance movement threatened their very being. German culture, of course, was not just about beer. That culture in Minnesota, where Germans were clearly the largest number of immigrants, was, although Meyer doesn’t mention them, expressed best through the Turnervereins. These German cultural centers were located in at least 25 Minnesota cities, although only one, in New Ulm, survives. In Red Wing, for example, the Turnerverein built an impressive brick structure which housed a gymnasium, literally for gymnastics and other physical culture activity, theater seating for locally produced as well as traveling musical, operatic and stage performances, and a rathskeller where beer and German foods were served. For Germans it was all part of a package—German music, literature, opera, philosophy, physical culture, and of course food and beer. They were inseparable. What’s more, as Meyer writes, German immigrants held a rather superior attitude about their culture. That attitude, it’s possible, though Meyer doesn’t make the connection, may have helped to put them in the bullseye when war fever heated up in 1916. Importantly, because beer was part of a larger cultural existence which included families and the wider German community, German-Americans opposed, resisted, and flaunted legal restrictions—local option, high-license, Sunday closing, and hours limits—on saloons and alcohol sales. Above all, German-Americans felt that alcohol restrictions were attempts to limit their personal freedom—a

key reason they had come to America—and to destroy their culture for the sake of assimilation.⁷

The third ethnicity that Meyer writes about is the Swedes. Statistically how important the Swedes were in the temperance movement Meyer doesn't say. But she does document that a considerable number of Swedes were attracted to temperance. The first Swedish immigrants in Minnesota, around 1850, were Rev. Norelius's farmer group that settled in Vasa, a community they created in Goodhue County between Red Wing and Cannon Falls. But the bulk of Swedish immigrants came later, after the Civil War. By that time much of the better farmlands at prices they could possibly afford, were taken. As a result, many Swedes found themselves in urban St. Paul and Minneapolis where they worked at whatever labor was available. In St. Paul they initially settled on the city's east side in a rather squalid community called Swede Hollow. As they bettered themselves they gradually abandoned Swede Hollow but for the most part remained on the city's east side.

Swedes emigrated for many reasons—second and third sons who did not inherit farmland, the lack of available farmland, the fact that Sweden was rather tardy in industrializing compared especially to England and Germany, conscription, a rigid social hierarchy, and religion. Swedes were Lutheran and there was (and is) a state supported Lutheran church. There was also a pietistic sect known as the Swedish Covenant or in America generally as the Mission Covenant Church. The Mission Covenant church was an important presence on St. Paul's East Side and it is my view, although Meyer does not engage this point directly, that Swedish-Americans who joined and supported the temperance

⁷ It's important to note that in Meyer's account religion, for German emigrants were both Lutheran and Catholic, seemed largely irrelevant at least before WWI, i.e. culture trumped religion and that may also have been true of pietistic Germans as well although Meyer does not deal directly with that question.

movement would have been largely of the Mission Covenant faith. In my own lifetime experience, for example, Mission Covenant members have been, and are, very often, alcohol abstainers. Thus, in the case of Swedish teetotalers, there was a direct connection between temperance and religion and a weak, at best, connection to ethnicity.

Place.

In Meyer's telling, gender, religion, and ethnicity all converge in St. Paul. And they do. In addition, she suggests that its history makes St. Paul a special place and that place matters apart from gender, religion, and ethnicity. At first exposure to this notion it makes some sense. St. Paul from the days when it was Pigs Eye Landing was a wide open, lawless, liquor-dealing Mecca. And, throughout much of the seventy-year history of the temperance movement up to Prohibition in 1920 that's exactly what it remained.

But there are problems with this concept. To begin, in its early days, St. Paul's Anglo-American Protestant arrivals from eastern states were a powerful force that helped greatly to pass a strict Maine Law. Although that law was struck down because of a technicality, the point is that by the early 1850's, St. Paul's prior history as a liquor utopia didn't matter. Then, after the Maine Law was overturned began the flood of German and Irish immigrants--the two groups that despite Archbishop Ireland's best efforts remained solidly wet. They and their children contributed mightily to St. Paul's growing population which swelled to 80,000 in 1880 and to 234,000 when Prohibition began in 1920.

During the city's growth, Anglo-American Protestants fled, not from the city, for it was still St. Paul, but to the then "suburban" Midway area (closer to the more pietistic Minneapolis). It was there, for example, that the two protestant denominations most closely associated with temperance—Methodists and Presbyterians—began their colleges

(Hamline and Macalester) of higher learning. And it was the Midway that became St. Paul's center for temperance advocacy. Elsewhere, St. Paul remained reliably "wet." The city was so "wet" that saloons regularly ignored numerous state-imposed liquor restrictions such as hours of operation and Sunday closing laws. In doing so, saloon-keepers were supported by the city's police and public officials who chose not to enforce those laws. St. Paul was clearly a high-consumption city. The combination of many working men, large German and Irish-American communities, the political influence of brewers, liquor distributors, and saloon-keepers, and a city government beholden to all of those influences are important to be sure.

But while those factors explain much about St. Paul they don't make it unique in Minnesota. Other communities had similar constituencies and experiences—Brown County (New Ulm) and Stearns County (St. Cloud) most especially. Elaine Davis, in her excellent book about Stearns County during prohibition, *Minnesota 13: Stearns County's 'Wet' Wild Prohibition Days*, for example, writes that in the years before prohibition Stearns County distillers regularly supplied North Dakota (a dry state) with moonshine without local law enforcement interference and that during prohibition the county remained a center for high alcohol output and sales without much interference from local authorities.⁸ Thus, place may matter somewhat but it is simply true that certainly most places with large Irish and German communities as well as a sizeable working class tended to be "wet."

Where Meyer comes up short, in my view, is that she fails to give class its due. One need only drive the length of Summit Avenue through the core of St. Paul's Midway. "There," as Willie Sutton was said to have

⁸ See Elaine Davis, *Minnesota 13: Stearns County's 'Wet' Wild Prohibition Days* (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Printing Co., 2007), reviewed by Thomas L. Olson, "The Noble Experiment in Minnesota" (MLHP, 2018).

remarked in a different context, “is where the money is.” Temperance was always about more than religion, gender and ethnicity. It was also about social and economic control. Sober workers would show up on time and be more productive and acquiescent. But it was more than class warfare from the top down. It was also about working class cohesiveness and identity. Meyer comes close to making this case when she writes about saloons as laboring class men’s clubs and about Irish immigrants who try to improve their image for Anglo-Protestants. But always she backs off in default to identity—gender, ethnicity and religion, and even place.

When she writes about the anti-German sentiment in the lead-up to American entry into World War I, Meyer describes how German-American solidarity on temperance as an issue of personal liberty and cultural identity crumbled in the face of a broad attack on German-Americans as disloyal, traitorous, and un-Americanized. But there’s more to the story. A nasty aspect of the wartime anti-civil liberties initiatives in Minnesota was the 1917 creation of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety. Led by Governor J. A. A. Burnquist, the commission was composed of white Protestant business leaders who were or became staunch prohibitionists. This was significant because, as Meyer says, saloons were not only working men’s social clubs but places where unionism, strikes, and populist politics were discussed. Shutting down saloons was a means to bully labor, unions, and perceived radicalism. It was, quite simply, class warfare of the wealthy upon the poor, capital upon labor. Meyer treads gently on this reality but in the end doesn’t do what I think is necessary—straightforwardly add class to the already complex gender, religion, ethnicity and place components of her otherwise outstanding book.



Reviewer.

Thomas L. Olson died on September 29, 2020, at age 78. He was born and grew up in Red Wing, Minnesota. He earned a bachelor's degree from Wisconsin State University at River Falls and a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Minnesota. He taught at Mankato State University and the University of Minnesota and then enjoyed a career in university administration and in philanthropic development for educational, arts, and health care organizations.

He is the author of "Blockbusters: Minnesota's Movie Men Slug it out with Studio Moguls, 1938-1948," one of the most frequently downloaded articles on the Minnesota Legal History Project website. His reviews of Elaine Davis, *Minnesota 13: Stearns County's 'Wet' Wild Prohibition Days* and Elizabeth Dorsey Hatle, *The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota* are also posted on the MLHP.

His book, *Sheldon's Gift: Music, Movies and Melodrama in the Desirable City* (North Star Press of St. Cloud, 2009) recounts the stormy history of show business in Red Wing, especially its iconic Sheldon Theater. More than local history, the book addresses the unique predicaments of entertainment enterprises, highbrow and low, in small cities. The book also has a good deal of courtroom drama in relating the story of movie-related lawsuits in the 1930's and again in the 1950's that challenged municipal theater ownership.

