South Carolina's Dispensary Era: A Time of Riots, Shooting and Lots of Drinking

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SOUTH CAROLINA’S DISPENSARY ERA
A TIME OF RIOTS, SHOOTING AND LOTS OF DRINKING

By Carleton Allen Naylor

The era of the South Carolina Dispensary, from 1893 until 1907, represents a fascinating period in South Carolina history; a period when the state monopolized the distribution and sale of alcoholic beverages, a period of intense public interest in and demand for total prohibition, and also a period full of riots, shootings, graft and corruption, not to mention a lot of liquor consumption.

A scheme of Governor Ben Tillman, the dispensary system was proposed at a time when prohibition was a major political issue in South Carolina politics. It provided a relatively palatable compromise between the forces of temperance and total freedom, between the “drys” and the “wets.”

Under the system, liquor would still be available but on a vastly limited basis. Instead of being sold and consumed freely in hundreds of saloons, the system as it was proposed would allow only one dispensary in each county, the exception of Charleston and Richland counties. Charleston would be allowed ten and Richland six due to their larger populations. To obtain liquor or beer in a dispensary, a purchaser had present a written request, giving name, home address, age, the kinds and quantities of liquors they wanted, and for whose use the liquor was being bought. Liquor and beer could only be sold in daylight hours, for cash, only one purchase was allowed any one person a day, and it could not be consumed on the premises.

The law went into effect on July 1, 1893. Charleston, perhaps as opposed to the system as it was to prohibition itself, refused to participate. For their obstinacy, Gov. Tillman vowed he would make Charleston “the driest place on Earth.” Considering the amount of illegal liquor sales that went on during the dispensary period in Charleston (and elsewhere), Tillman’s threat seems more hopeful than practical. And it was in Charleston that the first arrest for violation of the dispensary law was made.

Opposition to the dispensary law continued until March 1894 when, as John Evans Eubank notes in his book “Ben Tillman’s Baby”:

the smoldering fires of bitterness, ceaselessly fanned by the Conservative press, burst forth in a rage that for a time threatened the state with a conflagration of civil war, and the people of the state were gripped with excitement that has seldom been surpassed in its history. Seldom has feeling run so high or disaster come so near riding in on a gale of fury as during what Tillman called South Carolina's “Whiskey Rebellion.”

The trouble started when a constable in Darlington, where opposition to the laws was as strong as it was in

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Charleston, asked for reinforcements in his efforts to stem illegal liquor sales. Gov. Tillman sent three officers to join the constable and ordered the local sheriff to keep the peace. When this proved ineffective in quelling the growing unrest, the governor called upon the local militia to aid the somewhat reluctant sheriff. Yet, things got progressively worse with citizens opposed to the law and opposed to what they considered Gov. Tillman’s heavy-handed enforcement tactics began to openly carry guns and threaten to shoot the constables. Gov. Tillman responded by calling up the Sumter Militia and sending them to Darlington. He also sent another 18 constables from Charleston to aid in relieving the situation.

The additional constables and troops seemed to stem the uproar. However, while the constables were waiting at the train station to return to Charleston, a large, angry and armed crowd gathered. A fight broke out followed shortly thereafter with shooting. When the smoke cleared two citizens and one constable had been killed, one constable and the chief of police severely wounded, and several other citizens and constables less critically injured. The remaining constables, fearing for their lives, took off on foot to hide in nearby swamps with the mob close on their heels.

In the meantime, Gov. Tillman, having heard the news of the “revolt” in Darlington, called up all companies of the Columbia militia. Without exception the various companies refused to go to Darlington. Luckily, the fleeing constables had successfully eluded their pursuers and as things quieted down further action was avoided.

Following the Darlington riot, the dispensary system endured several legal challenges, and by the turn of the century was fairly well established. However, about this time a cancer was beginning to threaten the health of the system. It was a cancer that took many forms, all of which were called corruption. And it didn’t take long for the corruption to reach from bottom to the top of the system, to become part of the system itself, and its various forms included graft, embezzlement, bribery, and pay-offs. The system also had to compete with the illegal liquor business which was condoned on a large scale. It is estimated that there were more than 200 speak-easies, or “blind tigers,” in Charleston alone.

Corruption and the problem of enforcement eroded public support for the system and it was abolished in 1907. However, counties were allowed to establish their own dispensaries and many did. By 1915, 15 counties were operating their own dispensaries and were making substantial profits from them.

These local dispensaries proved no less full of corruption than did the state system and as cries for prohibition increased in South Carolina, as well as the rest of the nation, the South Carolina legislature called for a popular referendum on prohibition. The referendum passed and state-wide prohibition took effect January 1, 1916, more than two years before national prohibition.

What did the South Carolina Dispensary system accomplish? Despite its primary intent of decreasing alcohol consumption in the state (with the implicit benefits of reducing crime, drunkenness, and vice), liquor sales actually increased during the dispensary era. And figures show that drunkenness, crime and lawlessness in general also increased during this time. Some good did result since much of the profits from the liquor sales during the period went into education. But, without a doubt, even more of the profit went into the pockets of the corrupt officials.

Another result of the system was the manufacture of dozens of varieties of distinctively embossed dispensary bottles. These bottles are still around today and are commonly found by sport divers. The South Carolina Dispensary bottles will be the subject of part two of this article.

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Steve also included some excellent photographs of historic period ceramics found in the Waccamaw River. The photograph shows four sherds (from left to right): a creamware or pearlware handpainted portion of a jug (late 1700’s to early 1800’s), an Ironstone plate base (1800’s), and two delft sherd (1600-1800’s). Notice the archaeological scale in the background. Steve was one of our fieldschool participants and is collecting artifacts to use as a comparative collection to aid his students in identifying their finds.

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