

# L.A. SHERIFFS' MUSEUM

By Chris Miller and Mike Fratantoni  
Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum

## PROHIBITION IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY, PART 1

The large wave of German immigrants who came to the United States after the American Civil War brought along with them a thirst for beer. Breweries began springing up and saloons became a gathering place for gossip and camaraderie. Free lunches were served, consisting of salty foods such as cold cuts, pork and beans, pretzels and smoked fish, making the customers thirsty so they would drink more beer. Since most saloons were dirty and rowdy, sawdust was spread on the floor to hide spilled beer and poorly aimed residue from customers chewing tobacco. Although the patrons were predominately men, women also drank but preferred not to do so in public. Instead, they would slip through a side entrance of the establishment and purchase beer to consume at home. Other women would discreetly contact a druggist and acquire a liquor-based cure for almost any ailment. This widespread drinking resulted in drunks wandering the streets and alcoholism becoming prevalent.

Alcohol became an accepted part of all social gatherings, and everyone drank at events, including weddings, funerals, elections and even public hangings. Families drank at every meal, even breakfast. In many towns, a bell would ring twice a day to remind men of grog time, when work would come to a halt so employees could down some booze. Physicians recommended various types of alcohol to their patients, saying it was much better than polluted water from muddy rivers or stagnant pools.

Stopping by a saloon after work offered the chance to talk, laugh and relax after toiling for long, hard hours in factories, mines and offices. Many considered it a well-deserved break from the responsibilities

of life, including the wife and kids waiting at home.

On payday, many men would head straight to the saloon, where they would blow their entire paycheck. When they got home drunk with no money left to buy food or pay the bills, their wives, understandably, became upset, which too often led to physical violence. Abused and abandoned, with no food or shelter, women and children became the real victims of men's alcohol consumption. The men drank to show they were real men, but when they got drunk, they couldn't perform their jobs or provide for their families. During this time, divorce was not discussed, and law enforcement was not notified about domestic violence or marital rape.

## BREWERIES

Most saloons were owned by breweries, carrying only their name brand of beer. Because of this, multiple saloons could be found in any one area, each offering its own distinct brew. It was not uncommon to find drunken men lying in the street, and many people felt the only way to combat such drunkenness was to completely abolish alcohol.

## THE CHINESE MASSACRE

The Los Angeles Police Department wasn't created until 1875, so when the Chinese Massacre occurred in 1871, the city of Los Angeles was policed by the Los Angeles County Sheriff and the City Marshal. Los Angeles had experienced a large influx of Chinese laborers into an area filled with bordellos, saloons and gambling halls known as the Calle de Los Negros, located near today's Los Angeles Street and First Street. By fall 1871, public hatred of the Chinese had grown to a fever pitch. On October 24, 1871, around 5:30 p.m., the shooting of a white man by a Chinese

man triggered a rampage of violence the likes of which had never before been seen in Los Angeles.

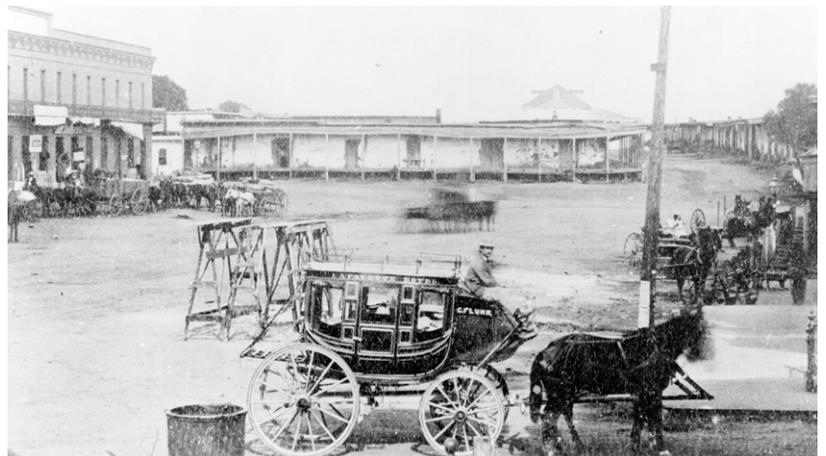
As word of the shooting spread, a small but angry crowd of men bent on avenging the death left the saloons and began to gather on the street outside the Coronel Building, which housed the core of the Chinese community and was filled with shops and tiny apartments. Several Chinese men panicked and, in a desperate attempt to escape, burst from the Coronel Building and began firing into the crowd. A 15-year-old boy was struck in the leg while another bystander was hit in the hip. Within minutes, an angry, drunken crowd of 500 began marching toward Chinatown. Caught up in the hysteria, Broderick and Reilly's Bookstore donated rope, while a housewife offered her clothesline to hang the shooter.

Los Angeles County Sheriff James Frank Burns stood on a dry-goods box and ordered the irate, alcohol-fueled crowd gathered outside the Coronel Building to disperse, promising that he would arrest the men responsible for the shooting. Before he could finish his speech, however, the fragile box beneath him broke and he fell to the ground. The crowd roared with laughter. The Sheriff then posted volunteers around the building to protect the Chinese people inside, but this did no good, as the crowd shouted, "Damn the Sheriff! Shoot him! Hang him!" Sheriff Burns knew the only way to stop the crowd was to get additional help, so he rushed off, leaving the City Marshal in charge.

One Chinese man opened the front door of the Coronel Building, and the crowd responded by firing more than 40 bullets into the building. Another tried to escape by running away, but was



A scene of domestic violence fueled by alcohol consumption



The site of the Chinese Massacre in what is now downtown Los Angeles



An illustration depicting the Chinese Massacre

instantly gunned down. A terrified man fleeing down a dark alley was captured and hanged. The crowd wanted to burn the Chinese out of the building but were sternly warned by officers that the first person to light a match would be shot.

Retrieving ladders, men climbed up onto the roof, where they used axes to break holes, then began shooting through the openings. The people inside panicked and ran outside, where they were captured by rioters. For three long hours, screams, yells, curses and gunshots shattered the night. Innocent Chinese residents were shot or hanged while rioters broke into their homes and stole everything of value.

The highly respected Dr. Chee Long Tong, an innocent bystander, was grabbed by the mob and taken to their makeshift gallows. Begging for his life, he frantically told them they could have all his money, but the ruthless gang hanged him anyway, not only taking his money but also cutting off a finger to remove a valuable ring.

Robert Widney, a local real estate baron, lawyer and judge, knew things were out of control and getting worse. When he tried to interfere, he was told, "A good lot of white men ought to be hung too." It was then that Widney retrieved his Colt Navy pistol and approached one of the instigators. He jerked the man back, stuck the gun in his face and said, "You won't do any more hanging!" The gang immediately backed off and released their captive. In order to protect the victim, the judge asked a group of armed supporters to take the man and lock him in jail under armed guard. He confronted other lynch mobs and, with pistol in hand, demanded the release of captives. Cameron E. Thom, the county's prosecuting attorney, asked Widney what he was doing. Widney replied, "I'm stopping a massacre!" In the end, Judge Widney saved the lives of 22 Chinese people.

Sheriff Burns swore in 25 men as deputies to assist him in stopping the uprising. He then announced that everyone in the Coronel Building who did not



Bodies laid out in the jail yard after the Chinese Massacre



Members of the temperance movement often sang hymns outside barrooms.

live there would be placed under arrest unless they dispersed immediately. Finally, after four hours of mob rule, the crowd disbanded.

Everywhere you looked, bodies could be seen hanging from makeshift gallows, and, when all was said and done, 19 Chinese residents had been killed. Word of the massacre spread throughout the country and world, serving as an extreme example of how the influence of alcohol caused average citizens to become cold-blooded killers.

## TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

Alcohol became the scapegoat for every problem facing society, including prostitution and domestic violence. Women felt that if men were not tempted to drink, they would have a perfect husband, marriage and community. The answer seemed obvious: Alcohol needed to be banned. Drunkenness was a problem, and temperance movements began to spring up around the country.

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) started in Ohio in 1874 and spread across the country, all the way to California. Its purpose

was to close saloons and put a stop to drinking. The women marched outside of saloons and confronted patrons attempting to enter. They also went inside and prayed until the owners agreed to close down. Although the temperance movement was inspired to protect families, without laws to keep the saloons closed, most of them reopened within a year. Another project that the WCTU implemented was the building of water fountains in parks and busy village squares to encourage people to drink water instead of alcohol.

The WCTU decided that the best way to combat and ultimately eradicate alcohol was to educate the children. In order to do this, they created the Department of Scientific Temperance Instruction, which enabled them to get temperance textbooks into schools. When teachers didn't use the books, the Temperance Union campaigned to pass laws

requiring schools to teach students the damaging effects of alcohol on the body. Some students were required to memorize and recite long passages on the evils of alcohol, while others learned the anti-alcohol message from poems and songs. By 1901, temperance education was taught by schools in every state. The textbook used by teachers described alcohol as a liquid poison, causing brain and nerve damage and turning muscle into fat. Some children found the information so disturbing that if they saw a parent take just one drink, they become very upset.

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This still from a Thomas Edison motion picture is likely a satire of female temperance activists, but the slogan on the sign was a real motto of the movement.

the safety and protection of others. But as we all know, that protection comes at a very high price.

A few sobering statistics:

- Every 60 hours, a peace officer is killed protecting our families and communities.
- Each year, there are over 58,000 assaults and more than 5,000 injuries of law enforcement officers.
- On average, 146 officers are killed in the line of duty each year.

With this in mind, the new general (Sergeant Padilla) at Carson Station will be overseeing the ride, making sure we all make it back in one piece. Everyone please continue to be safe, and riders have a safe ride... Until next time! ☆



## Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum *continued from page 13*

### ANTI-SALOON LEAGUE

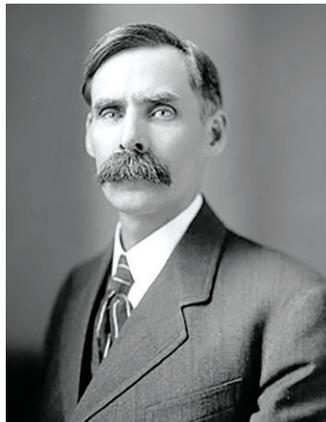
Another temperance organization was the Anti-Saloon League, founded in 1893. It gradually built up a sufficient political base, and by 1906, more than 30 states had passed laws allowing towns and counties to vote themselves dry. At the annual Anti-Saloon League convention in November 1913, Indiana Governor James Frank Hanly declared that the group's goal was to wipe out liquor entirely by passing an amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

### INCOME TAX

Prior to 1913, taxes imposed on the sale of alcohol were essential to fund and operate the government. The more alcohol that was sold, the more money that was collected. In 1913, the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed, allowing the government to impose an income tax on all citizens. This meant that if sales and distribution of alcohol were abolished, the loss of revenue would no longer matter. Years later, during Prohibition, failing to pay income tax on money obtained through the sale of illegal alcohol would be the downfall of Al Capone and other gangsters.

### WORLD WAR I

At the onset of World War I, the Anti-Saloon League focused on closing German breweries. Since Germany was now the United States' enemy, the Anti-Saloon League was able to convince the public that German beer was linked with treason. They were able to place restrictions on grains sold to brewers and distillers. When the United States entered the war, there had been 1,000 German breweries; within a matter of months, half were out of business.



*Representative Andrew Volstead*



*A protest against the Volstead Act*

### VOLSTEAD ACT

Although some cities and states were dry, all their residents had to do to purchase alcohol was go to the neighboring town or state. It quickly became apparent that the only way to truly restrict alcohol was to ban it nationwide.

The Reverend Billy Sunday said that with the elimination of alcohol, slums would disappear, and jails and prisons, no longer needed, could be turned into factories and warehouses. Promises like this finally convinced people of the need to ban alcohol.

The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified on January 16, 1919, prohibited the manufacture, sale and transportation of intoxicating liquors.

The Volstead Act, also known as the National Prohibition Act and named after U.S. Representative Andrew Volstead, was passed by Congress on October 28, 1919, as a means to delegate enforcement responsibility for the 18th Amendment. It became effective on January 16, 1920. The Volstead

Act defined what an intoxicating beverage actually was, and the penalties for violating the amendment. Producing or selling intoxicating beverages was now illegal and punishable by six months in jail or a \$1,000 fine.

It was illegal to sell alcohol, but it was not illegal to buy or drink it at home. It was also legal for priests and rabbis to buy sacramental wine for religious services. Some purchased extra bottles and sold them for profit to their congregants, but when one synagogue in Los Angeles grew from 180 to 1,200 members, the rabbi finally had enough and abruptly quit, saying he would not violate the law.

Alcohol purchased before the law went into effect was legal to own; however, it could not be sold and could only be consumed by the person who bought it. Some people, however, created their own labels and backdated them to before Prohibition began.

This story will be continued in the next issue of *Star News*.

*Edited by Jan Jenkins (ret. LASD). ☆*