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At Back River

The Blue Laws of 1723 and 1834

Back River is the answer of the plain people to the rigors of Baltimore's ancient Blue Laws. Forbidden by Chapter 16, Section 10, of the acts of 1723 to engage in "gaming, fishing, fowling, hunting or other unlawful pastime or recreation" on the Sabbath, and warned by Chapter 244 of the acts of 1834 to frequent no "dancing saloon, opera house, tenpin alley, barber saloon or ball alley," they go down to Patapsco Neck, where the Blue Laws do not run, and get whatever pleasure they can out of the primitive vaudeville, the games of chance, the cool breezes and the gushing beer of Hollywood.

So far as the Blue Laws are concerned, the whole Back River section is a bit of foreign territory set down in the state of Maryland. At Bay Shore, River View, Electric Park and Gwynn Oak the lid is down, and even at the roadhouses out Pimlico way one must buy a beefsteak to get a mug of Pilsener, but at Back River everything is wide open. The waiters never try to force food on the thirsty. Hold up a finger and they will bring you a bottle of beer. Hold up two fingers and they will bring two. It is a simple system and there is a certain hearty openness and frankness about it. The county police recognize and approve it. Between the Bayview and the Middle River bridge the Blue Laws are perpetually suspended.

The Shrieks Of The Young

All of this, of course, is frightfully immoral, but if you proceed to the assumption that Back River itself is frightfully immoral you will be assuming a good deal too much. In the old days, perhaps, it was a pretty turbulent region, and even today there are a few so called "parks" wherein the ladies of the stage descend to the stalls and urge the besotted to buy more beer, but at Hollywood and the other more ambitious places nothing of the sort is permitted. Hollywood, in truth, is one of the most assertively moral resorts within reach of Baltimore. Its groves and halls are crowded in evening, not by rowdies, nor even by the flirtatious jejune, but by sedate families, parties of the common people. There are fully as many babies as at River View or Tolchester—perhaps even more. Their squalls drown out the cacophony of the carrousel and the barking of the grafters and all the way home, on the rickety trolley cars, they set up their ghastly music.

The natural situation of Hollywood is unsurpassed. It lies on a bluff along the east bank of Back River, just south of the Eastern Avenue road, and the view from that bluff, particularly on a moonlight night, has a strangely haunting beauty. To the left the broad river stretches out into the distance, lost in shadows; in front runs the Eastern Avenue bridge, with its moving lights; to the extreme right, beyond the bridge, is another broad stretch of river—a stretch alive with silver ripples and bobbing boat lights. Gasoline launches go chug-chugging up and down;

the people aboard them sing; the whole aspect of the placid stream is Venetian and romantic. One half expects, at every moment, to hear the barcarolle from "Hoffman's Tales!"

At Coatless Hollywood

Behind the row of tables along the brink of the bluff there is less romance. A score of big buildings shoulder one another in the whitewashed grove—a pretentious two-story hotel, a roller coaster, a popcorn bazaar, a shed for the eaters of boiled hard crabs and an enormous casino. The latter probably has room for 3,000 spectators, and on hot nights it is always crowded. At one end is a small stage, upon which acrobats in their shirt sleeves do painful tricks with tables and barrels, and decayed beauties warble sentimental songs. Just in front of the stage a sweating orchestra wrestles with the scores of Harry von Tilzer and George M. Cohan. The musicians, like the acrobats, are coatless. So are the waiters. So are nine-tenths of the spectators. The idea at Hollywood is to escape the horrors of existence. No attention is paid to the hollow forms of etiquette. If you want to take off your coat, you take it off; if you want to take off your collar, you take that off also. At some of the nearby shores, indeed, it is even possible to dispense with your shoes, stockings and shirt.

The waiters at the Back River parks are not the groveling sycophants of the hotels. Like the waiters of the Spring Gardens and Curtis Bay resorts, they are free American citizens, and they seem to be eager that everyone recognize the fact and applaud it. When one of them is halted in his mad career and pauses to take an order, he does not pause long, nor does he offer respectful suggestions. The most he can be induced to say is, "Well sport, what do you want?" If you don't tell him at once, he passes on and a good deal of bawling and arm-waving is necessary to get him back. He has no time to waste upon the soft flatteries of the ordinary waiter. If you offer him a tip he takes it, but usually in a shame-faced sort of way. He wants it distinctly understood that he is the equal of any man in the house, bar none. At Hollywood last Sunday night a waiter in the casino demanded the loan of a spectator's cigar to light a cigarette.

Independent Waiters

The waiters at all of the Back River resorts wear the same costume. Its sole symbol of servitude is a long, white apron, and this is less a symbol than an object of utility. Slinging beer "down the road" is a messy business. The bottles are damp and sweaty; the empty glasses are sticky with foam. If the waiting gentlemen wore no aprons they would soon have their clothes soaked with beer. The rest of their garb is simple. They wear neither coats nor vests nor headgear. Their trousers are rolled up for six inches. Their collars are usually of celluloid and their neckties are adorned with large, dubious diamonds or jeweled emblems of the fraternal orders. Their hair is clipped short behind and brushed in oystershell fashion before. Some smoke, some chew tobacco and others content themselves with chewing gum.

But the patrons are more interesting than the waiters. Unlike the latter, they often show a distinctly foreign caste of countenance. Out of every hundred family parties at Hollywood last Sunday night probably 30 were not of American nativity. The Jews of Eastern Europe seemed to be in the majority, and after them came the Italians, the Bohemians and the Poles. Foreign tongues were heard on all sides: the very bawling of the babies seemed exotic and unintelligible. These foreigners ran to large families. Every woman had a baby in her arms and another tugging at her skirt. Two or three others played about the table. The head of the house sat gulping his

endless schooners—silent, stolid and apparently buried in depressing thought. The mother looked after the kids—nursing this one, walloping that one, mopping the face of the other one. Over all hung an air of wooden domesticity, of almost oppressive respectability.

No Interest In Gambling

Back in the woods a young fellow with a wheel of chance tried hard to interest a few idlers. He sold chances for boxes of candy, offering to buy back the prizes from those winners who preferred beer to sweets; but he seemed to win few patrons. Further back, the man at the hard crab stand was far more prosperous. He had huge piles of boiled hard crabs before him, but they were so quickly exhausted that they had to be constantly renewed. His patrons labored at the hard shells in a long dimly lit shed. The sound in “Tex” Richard’s phrase was that of a wagon running over a soda cracker.

Last Saturday night, according to the old-timers, was a record-breaking night down the road. The trolley service was not equal to getting the crowd home and hundreds paid a quarter each for seats in farm wagons. Other hundreds, more sensible, stretched out on the grass by the roadside and enjoyed a rest under the open sky.

“But I don’t see how they could sleep,” said a waiter Sunday evening. “Them babies was bawlin’ all night.”

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Library Media Center, Microfilm Collection)