

Toronto Star Weekly
July 2, 1921

Chicago Never Wetter Than It is Today

Chicago.—For a time after Prohibition set in there was a romantic aura about obtaining liquor in Chicago. The wily hooch-seeker was accustomed to make various cabalistic signs to the watchful bartender. Cults of the lifted finger and the thumbed car flourished. There was a certain pride in being “known.” That has all passed.

Anyone wanting a drink in Chicago now goes into a bar and gets it. Known or unknown, he will obtain it if he has seventy-five cents. It is safe to say that no one in Chicago is ever more than three blocks away from a saloon where whiskey and gin are sold openly over the bar.

Visitors from other parts of the States are astonished and amazed. It seems unbelievable. But the explanation is very simple.

In Chicago the city police take no part in enforcing the Eighteenth Amendment. Chicago always voted wet, and the Chicago police, with the splendid bovine mind of the American “Bull,” still consider it wet.

There are eight federal Prohibition-enforcement officers in Chicago. Four of them are doing office work, the other four are guarding a warehouse. And the city is, except for the price of liquor, as it was before Prohibition became a reality over the rest of the country.

Then there is beer. St. Louis was the greatest brewery city in the States. When Prohibition came into effect, the St. Louis brewers believed that the end had come to the brewery business, and at once turned their big plants into soft-drink factories. Chicago saw the handwriting on the brewery wall, but didn’t believe it for a moment. They shut down for a while and then commenced making beer again—real beer—with a greater percentage of alcohol than had been allowed for a long time before the Eighteenth Amendment.

Now we have the interesting spectacle of the St. Louis breweries fighting to have Prohibition enforced. For the tremendous flow of real beer from the Chicago breweries, that have been running full blast, is killing the demand for near beer.

When the breweries first started on their old pre-Prohibition schedule of production, there was a great deal of beer to be had in the city, but it cost fifty cents a stein. Then some bars and restaurants started cutting prices and now real beer can be had all over the city for thirty cents a stein—fifteen cents a glass or fifty dollars a barrel.

The other day in a Loop restaurant I saw three mounted policemen seated at a table with tall steins of beer before them. Their horses were hitched outside the restaurant. As we sat at our table the headwaiter came up and requested that we excuse him just a moment while he moved the table. We rose, the table was pushed to one side, and a trapdoor opened. Out from the trapdoor four white-uniformed bartenders rolled twelve barrels of beer. As they were rolled across the floor, past the policemen’s table, the three looked lovingly at the big brown casks.

“It’s the real old stuff, Bill,” said one appreciatively, “the real good old stuff.”

So much for police enforcement of Prohibition.

Of course there are shakedowns. Every bartender who runs openly has to pay his bit for police protection, and that keeps the price of liquor up. To combat this necessity for charging a high tariff for drinks the "Athletic Club" has appeared.

The Nowata Athletic Club is a type of this institution. Its reason for existence is to eliminate the weekly slush fund for police. So far it is highly successful.

Passing a lynx-eyed, derby-hatted, red-faced observer who stands with his hand toying with an electric bell at the entrance, you climb three flights of stairs to the clubrooms. Entrance is barred by a chain lock, and is only effected by presenting a blue card bearing your name and number, and the name of the club. After the card is scrutinized, you are admitted to the clubrooms.

Furnishings of the Nowata Club consist of a number of tables and chairs. As soon as you are seated a Negro waiter appears with a number of drinks equal to the number of men in the party. The charge is only fifty cents a drink and the whiskey is slightly older than that bought over the adjacent bars.

"Fred," the waiter is instructed, "there are some gentlemen here who want to become members of the club."

"Yassuh?" Fred is very dignified. "If they will be so kind as to write theah names on this slip of papah, I will be honohed to tendah them membeahship cahds."

In a short time the membership cards are brought to the members of the party and the Nowata Club's membership is again increased.

There never has been any record of anyone being blackballed at the Nowata Club. Its membership is well over a thousand now and it bids fair to be the largest club in Chicago. Brokers, board of trade operators and men from the La Salle Street bond houses form the bulk of its membership.

Present conditions cannot last in Chicago. The government will send more Prohibition agents or there will be a less liberal administration, but it is a strange situation at present, a city legally bone-dry, in which liquor is one of the leading occupations.