

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

(Note: Although I was too young to have much first hand information on the early days of the sale of hard liquor in Tuscaloosa and very little is written in histories of the time, I am writing the following largely from hearsay, but from sources I believe were correct.

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There is probably one outfit or group that was the first to manufacture and sell hard liquor in Tuscaloosa County and they have continued to operate to this day. They are the "moonshiners" and the "Bootleggers." The moonshiners were the manufacturers while the bootleggers were the salesmen.

They often encroached on each other's profession. Through the vagaries of the national handling of hard liquors - high taxes, probation, limited hours of sale - the illegal production and sale of hard liquor grew by leaps and bounds and yielded high profits.

During national prohibition the criminal element of this country became more than adequately financed.

There is a legend in this county that two brothers operated during the period of about 1850 to 1910 and they made a superior grade of whisky. One had a federal distillers license but was illiterate and kept no records. When the federal agents called he merely pulled out a large roll of greenbacks (paper money) and offered to pay whatever they said he owed.

A plan was worked out where he was required to keep all invoices of containers (bottles, jugs and demi-johns) that he purchased for his operation and the revenueurs settled on this basis. No accounting was made of cash sales to those who brought their own containers although the price per gallon was the same.

The other brother operated without a federal license. He said that he made

more money by operating his still for two or three years before being caught and then getting six months rest in jail.

Before the days of taxes on whisky the firm of TJR & R Maxwell, who supplied a large area in this section with groceries and foodstuffs, imported English whisky in barrels which they sold for one dollar a gallon. In their cool basement they had a row of barrels containing whisky, molasses, kerosene, and linseed oil. You brought your own container.

Open saloons, duly licensed, operated in the city (circa 1890-1910). The White Elephant was located in the corner of the old McLester Hotel. The Red Light was on the opposite corner just east of the White Elephant while the Globe (or Ralph's) was located on the corner of 5th St. and 24th Ave. (present site of Brown's Department Store).

National prohibition knocked out the open saloons and the "speakeasies" joined the moonshiner and bootlegger in the illicit sale of whisky.

A unique plan was worked out by State Sen. (and bank president) Frank Sims Moody called the "dispensary." ("Local option" was a plan worked out when national prohibition was dropped.) Local communities could license the sale of whisky. Mr. Moody had the State Legislature legalize the sale of whisky in Tuscaloosa County through its own store called a dispensary. The whisky was purchased in bulk in barrels and bottled at the dispensary before being sold.

All glass bottles were embossed "honest measure." The evils of saloons were considered eliminated by the following rules set up by the dispensary.

1. Sold only in sealed glass bottles.

2. Could be purchased from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. only on weekdays. (The foot races after 5:30 p.m. were interesting.)

3. Could not be consumed on the premises or in any public places.

4. Not sold to minors.

It was considered that the above rules, which was rigidly enforced, did away with the evils of a saloon, gave honest measure of good quality and low price. A person was expected to take his purchase home to consume.

Another unique method of controlling legal sale of whisky during the local option period for legal sales was developed whereby you could order from an out-of-state vendor a maximum of two quarts a month to be shipped in by express. The burden was placed on the express company not to deliver more than two quarts a month to any one individual. This went a long way to prevent excessive use or resale.

When the national prohibition law was repealed Alabama set up state liquor stores as the legal method of control of the sale of liquors based on a wet or dry referendum by counties. I recall when after a long dry period Tuscaloosa went wet. It required about three months for a liquor store to open up for sales. After two years of operation the county had a referendum and voted dry. The next morning after the election the liquor store did not open for business. There was a large crowd awaiting outside to make a final purchase and I noticed quite a number that had voted dry in the election.

After two years of being dry another referendum was called and Tuscaloosa County voted wet and that's the present status.