

“The Anti-Saloon Campaign”

This is a great movement for humanity. The saloon must go. It cannot long survive. Let us get into the line of march with the purpose of Almighty God. Slavery is gone. Polygamy is gone. The rum traffic is going for God has decreed it.

--Rev. Lewis Guild, San Diego's First Methodist Church, April 1, 1909.

In 1909, a “dry wave” was growing in America. Temperance laws were slowing liquor sales in cities throughout the country. Saloons were a particular target. A spokesman for the national Anti-Saloon League called the drinking establishments “a disgrace to the American people” and “an insuperable obstacle to the growth of good society.” But the League could boast of growing success from voter-approved laws, which closed 11,000 saloons nation-wide in 1908.

On November 3 of that year, San Diego County voters approved a “no-license” ordinance that closed saloons in unincorporated areas. As bars from El Cajon to Julian shut their doors an election was scheduled for April, that threatened closure of all saloons in the City of San Diego—fifty-five bars, in all.

It was a spirited election campaign. Giant campaign banners hung from cables across downtown streets and enthusiastic rallies were held in churches, schools, and public halls. While the ballot included the mayor's contest and the election of five city councilmen, the anti-saloon issue overshadowed all other races.

As Election Day approached San Diego “drys” scheduled their biggest gathering at the Garrick Theatre at Sixth and B Streets. One thousand people crowded the building on April 1 to hear local trade union leaders and church ministers rail against the evils of the saloon.

Dr. H. S. Jordan, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, promised the anti-saloon vote “would not take away the personal liberty of any man who wanted to take a glass of liquor.” The purpose of the movement, he argued, was to close the licensed saloon, “thereby taking the public temptation out of the way of the boys and girls, and the morally weak men and women who would not otherwise be enticed to drink.”

Rev. Lewis T. Guild, of the First Methodist Church, appealed to the mostly blue-collar crowd by saying, “You workingmen are anti-corporation. Do you know that 75 percent of the saloons in the land are owned by breweries and the breweries are owned by the whiskey trust?”

Two nights before the election, the San Diego “wets” held their own “Liberty and Prosperity” rally at the Garrick. In a two-hour meeting the city's business leaders attacked the prohibitionists as “anti-business” and threatening to personal freedom. Speakers warned that the anti-saloon campaign was an “opening wedge” and that closing of theaters on Sundays would be next.

**FATE OF SALOONS
IN HANDS OF
ELECTORS AT
POLLSTODAY**

Climax of Long and Bitter
Fight to Be Reached With
Choice of Voters

TEXT OF ORDINANCE

Both "Wets" and "Drys"
Await Result of Weeks of
Strenuous Campaigning

The big issue before the people at the polls today is the question of saloon or no saloon.

Each side has its forces lined up in solid phalanx so that the victory will perch on the banner of that which proves numerically the stronger. If the no-saloon ordinance is adopted 55 saloons will be forced to close their doors. The sample ballot is so arranged that, under the heading comes first the paragraph for which the voter who is in favor of abolishing the saloon marks his cross. It reads as follows:

"FOR an ordinance for police regulation relating to places where intoxicating liquors are deposited and sold, and making unlawful the sale, distributing or giving away of such liquors."

Immediately beneath it is the paragraph opposite which his voter who favors the continuance of saloons marks his cross. It reads:

"AGAINST an ordinance for police regulation relating to places where intoxicating liquors are deposited and sold, making unlawful the sale, distributing or giving away of such liquors."

While there has been little betting on the result, there has been plenty

The last speaker on the podium was a fiery playwright and John D. Spreckels associate, H. Austin Adams. “I know the spirit that animates the anti-saloon league,” Adams warned. “It is the spirit of intolerance. I denounce the leaders of this temperance cause as bigots—I denounce their cause as one of infamy.”

The weekend before the election, the proprietors of San Diego saloons and restaurants agreed to stop all liquor sales from midnight Saturday until the polls closed at 6 p.m. on Tuesday. Placards posted throughout the business district announced the self-imposed prohibition and proclaimed: “Vote wet and such a dry spell will not occur again in San Diego.”

The anti-saloonists closed their campaign with a series of moving, open-air meetings. Speaking from automobiles and accompanied by a band, the “dry” leaders toured the principal streets, stopping at prominent corners, where they addressed the crowds for an hour at a time.

Their final act was a huge parade. At 4:30 on Monday afternoon, with a platoon of mounted policemen and the City Guard band in the van, “the great temperance demonstration” wound its way through the downtown streets as spectators crowded the curbs and sidewalks.

Nearly 200 vehicles, ranging from high-priced cars to pony carts, all “bearing the no-saloon slogan on a thousand different placards,” were followed by hundreds of men and boys on foot. Horse-drawn floats sponsored by churches and temperance organizations displayed slogans such as “Vote to Save Us,” and “We Want Sober Men for Husbands.”

The *San Diego Union* was impressed, calling the demonstration “the most novel and spectacular parade ever witnessed in this city.” But the newspaper couldn’t help but notice that most of the demonstrators were non-voters.

The polls opened at 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday, April 6. In the next twelve hours, men from San Diego’s pool of 9,200 registered voters cast their votes. Members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union greeted the men at the polls. Carefully placing themselves at least 100 yards from the voting stations, as required by law, the ladies handed each voter a bouquet of flowers—hoping their floral offering would remind the men of the correct way to vote.

The voting results were a shock. In San Diego’s biggest election ever, voters chose two to one to reject the anti-saloon ordinance. Without question, San Diego had gone “wet.” To emphasize and celebrate that point, saloon sympathizers paraded in the streets wearing raincoats and carrying umbrellas.

Initially dumbfounded by their defeat, the anti-saloonists recovered enough to bravely announce: “The fight just closed was only a skirmish, just a little preparation for the final battle which will be fought in the near future.” On July 1, 1919, the saloons finally closed when Prohibition came to California. The “Great Thirst” would last more than thirteen years until the repeal of Prohibition in December 1933.

Published in shorter form as “LOCAL EFFORT TO MAKE SAN DIEGO DRY WAS ALL WASHED UP,” by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 24, 2011.