

WAUKEGAN HISTORY MUSEUM EXHIBIT *WET V. DRY: PROHIBITION IN WAUKEGAN*

NATIONAL PROHIBITION

The National Prohibition Act enacted the 18th Amendment which prohibited the sale, manufacture, and transportation of alcohol for consumption. The law went into effect on February 1, 1920. By the time the national law, prohibition was already four years old in Waukegan, Illinois.

TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

The origins of the temperance movement started in Europe in the 1820s. Some of the first settlers to the area brought the discussion of limiting or eliminating liquor from their homelands to northeast Illinois. In the earliest days of Little Fort (Waukegan), some citizens were concerned with the amount of alcohol consumed in the village.

In 1845, as the temperance movement grew, the Washingtonian Temperance Society formed in Little Fort. At a meeting on July 4 it was stated, "There is no town in the west where temperance reform is needed more than this, there being seven places within the village where liquid poison is vended."

WAUKEGAN AND LIQUOR

By 1910, Waukegan had a population of over 16,000. The industrial city was bustling with nearly 70 saloons as well as the popular and successful Besley's Waukegan Brewing Company. Major beer distributors such as Miller, Blatz, and Pabst even had their own depots on the railroad line in Waukegan.

With all of the liquor activity in Waukegan, the topic of temperance again came to the forefront.

THE FIRST VOTE

In 1912, the issue of liquor was no longer just a subject to be discussed and debated. Now it was an issue for the citizens of Illinois to vote on. In this first vote, the "wets" won in Waukegan with 1,813 votes over the 1,138 "drys." The "wets" had strong support from top officials throughout the city and it was claimed at the time that the money collected in liquor permits and licenses, which amounted to over \$30,000, was needed to help cover city operations.

As the prohibition movement was heating up, another movement, women's suffrage was about to score a major victory.

IMPACT OF SUFFRAGE

After a long struggle, women gained the right to vote in Illinois in 1913. Women had a strong voice in recommending change in Waukegan and it was now apparent that they would also have an impact at the polls. Many now realized that women could be the deciding factor in whether Waukegan would be a dry or wet city. Women had played an important role in the temperance movement and now their vote would play an important part in the prohibition movement.

THE SECOND VOTE

The vote for prohibition was brought to the polls again in 1914 by petition. The “wets” won a narrow victory this time in Waukegan, carrying only a 54 percent margin with a vote of 3,064 to 2,642. In this vote, five townships in Lake County went dry. Prohibition in Waukegan seemed imminent.

WET V. DRY

In 1916, the issue of prohibition was placed again on the ballot. In the months leading up to the vote both the “drys” and “wets” in Waukegan held special public meetings and it was covered extensively in the local papers.

On April 6, the “drys” carried the day with a majority vote of 876. Waukegan went dry officially on Sunday, April 30 but most saloons closed their doors the night before.

The battle for Waukegan’s fate with liquor had been long and hard fought.