

NEW YORK

# New York Town's Decades of Prohibition Might End Next Month

Referendum asks residents whether to be wet or dry

*By Jimmy Vielkind Photographs by Richard Beaven for The Wall Street Journal*

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ARGYLE, N.Y.—Rick Dennis is a farmer and former contractor who raises Christmas trees, pumpkins and barley on a plot that has been in his family for four generations. He might also become the man who sells the first legal drink in this town in a century.

Mr. Dennis, 56 years old, is part of the Repeal Argyle Prohibition Committee, which successfully petitioned the town for a referendum in November on repealing its dry laws. They say that the statutes are archaic and that throwing them out would help residents including Mr. Dennis capitalize on the craft-beverage boom.

“What has dry ever done for Argyle? Has it created a job? Nobody visits Argyle because it’s dry. Nobody vacations in Argyle because it’s dry,” Mr. Dennis said.

There are eight fully dry towns in New York, according to the State Liquor Authority, all of which are in rural areas. Argyle is the most populous. Residents over 21 can drink—and many do—but the sale of alcoholic beverages to be consumed either on the premises of a bar or restaurant, or by a store, is forbidden.

More than 10 referendums to repeal Argyle’s dry laws have failed since the 21st Amendment ended Prohibition in 1933, according to the Glens Falls Post-Star. A would-be restaurateur pushed to allow on-premises sales in 1989, but the question went down 2 to 1. In 2000, residents thought repeal would help lure a grocery store back to town. Two measures failed by hundreds of votes.

The wets say they are optimistic this time. They raised around \$200 for 50 “Argyle Wet Town Now” lawn signs and have formed a Facebook group with 291 friends.

There are a few jokes now about the parallels to “Footloose,” the 1984 musical about teenagers lobbying to overturn a ban on dancing. At one point, churches actively lobbied against repeal, but the main opponent now seems to be inertia.



The Presbyterian church on Main Street.

“I hope it doesn’t go through; we’ve got enough all around us,” said Bob Zink, 80, a retired dairy farmer who lives in the town and voted against the last referendum.

Indeed, Mr. Zink was a rare voice against the push among residents interviewed during a townwide festival and garage sale on Oct. 12. Roughly 3,700 people live in Argyle, a farming town halfway between the Hudson River and Vermont, about 45 miles north of

Albany.

The main drag in the village features a hardware store, pizzeria, a Stewart’s convenience store and two churches—Methodist and Presbyterian. Melissa Barber, 39, who grew up in a dry county in Texas, supports repeal, but finds the whole situation humorous.

“It’s kind of a joke that when people have visitors, they send them to Stewart’s to get beer,” she said of the impossible task.

The Rev. Steve McLean, who is stepping down as pastor of the Argyle Presbyterian Church after 33 years, said he had friends who were both for and against going wet. He declined to say how he would vote.

Mr. McLean said the vote was no longer a religious issue but added that a bloc of opponents was lurking. “In a small town like this, folks who are against it don’t talk,” he said.

The wets first started meeting last January at Mary Lou Strode’s farm house. She added leaves to the dining room table and served coffee and cider and baked banana bread. Ms. Strode said the push to make Argyle wet started as a campaign point for local Democrats, but morphed into a nonpartisan effort.

Mr. Dennis joined in. So did Jason Lloyd, a co-owner of Dry Town Hops in Argyle, which helps farmers process the cone-shaped flowers that give beer its bitter flavor. About a dozen people on the committee helped gather 462 signatures—a hundred more than were required—to put four questions about the dry laws on the Nov. 5 ballot.

The committee held a signing party at the Argyle Brewery—which is located in the neighboring village of Greenwich, not Argyle. Brewery co-founder Chris Castrio said he considered setting up



Outside the closed Foodliner store on Main Street.

in Argyle, where he lives, but was blocked by the law.

Instead he took a common joke and turned it into the brewery's motto: "Dry town, wet basements." Mr. Castrio said he became optimistic when an octogenarian neighbor predicted the referendum would pass.

"I asked why, and she said, 'Because all my friends are dead,'" Mr. Castrio recalled.

Opponents have brought up nostalgia, the wets said, adding that repealing the dry laws would force the creation of a police force. Argyle is currently policed by New York state troopers and county sheriff's deputies, and Town Supervisor Bob Henke said he didn't believe that would change even if the dry laws were repealed.

According to the State Liquor Authority, there were 442 craft breweries in New York as of September, up from 97 in 2012. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has convened industry summits and offered tax breaks to some breweries, wineries and distilleries.

In 2012, Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, signed a law creating a special farm brewery license, which allowed small breweries to sell by the keg and by the glass or growler in an attached tap room. The 237 licensees are required to use mostly New York made ingredients in their beer.

The law helped create a market that Mr. Dennis, the Argyle farmer, is now serving. He grew more than 30 acres of barley this year, which he turned into more than 30 tons of malt for five breweries and two distilleries. He has rows of hop vines on the hillside of his tract.

Mr. Dennis learned the basics of brewing from a high-school teacher in the 1970s, and figured he would give it a shot with some of his own ingredients. This year he and a partner installed a two-barrel system in his malt house as well as an attached bar and taproom.

His application for a farm-brewery license is pending, and they have brewed about 10 barrels of IPA, pumpkin, blonde and brown ales. Twenty-five years after the family sold its dairy herd, he hopes brewing will help keep the farm viable and create a meeting place in the town.

"If this goes down, I'm going to look like the dumbest guy in Argyle," he said. "I'm hoping I'm not—I'm hoping this was a smart move."

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