

The Miami Student

Drinking in Oxford: a history

By Asst. News Editor Jake Gold

Since the opening of Oxford's first tavern in 1816, patrons have packed Uptown's drinking establishments. There was a time, however, when bar owners in Oxford were not excited to have their establishments filled with upper-class white women: the 1880s.

These women weren't dancing, and they sure weren't drinking.

No, the Women's Temperance Crusaders were singing hymns, reading scriptures and praying — all in a concerted effort to persuade barkeepers to change their profession and close their shops.

Alcohol in Oxford has had a paradoxical relationship with its citizens' opinions. When residents were most concerned about the effects of alcohol, the danger just wasn't there, but as alcohol got more dangerous, locals became less concerned.

A teetotaling town

In the beginning, Oxford was pretty dry.

Temperance (anti-alcohol) movements were fairly common across the nation in the mid-1800s. They were especially popular with well-off, Protestant white women. Men started the movement in Oxford, however, with the founding of The Temperance Council. Local women followed up by establishing the Women's Temperance League. At one point, the two organizations joined, but women did most of the protesting.

There was even an organization on campus, the Young Men's Temperance Society of Miami University, formed in 1852 to limit alcohol consumption on campus.

"We the subscribers, members of Miami University in view of life evils arising from the manufacture and consumption of ardent spirits do solemnly pledge ourselves that we will totally abstain from the use of intoxicating liquors as a beverage," reads the preamble to the Young Men's Temperance Society's constitution.

After two major "Crusades" by religious anti-drinking activists, the major protests faded, but the prohibition experiment was only beginning. Over several

years (starting in 1888), the citizens of Oxford waged a minor — and bloodless — civil war.

City council banned alcohol sales and consumption from 1888 to 1891 through a city ordinance. Then, in 1902, a dryness referendum failed by two votes, but another in 1905 passed. It was intended to only last for two years, but the 1905 initiative stuck around until national prohibition began in 1920.

From temperance to ‘trash cans’

After national prohibition was repealed in 1933, state law declared 3.2-percent alcohol-by-volume beer legal to manufacture, sell and consume. More colloquially, this beverage is known as 3.2 beer. Even a municipal ordinance or local option couldn’t prohibit it. Still, all other alcohol was forbidden — at least in Oxford.

And thus, to the chagrin (and sometimes amusement) of students, Miami became “the 3.2 beer capital of the world,” a term used frequently by students, historians and, once, the Cincinnati Enquirer.

It’s famously difficult to get drunk on 3.2 beer. Miami alumni from the era often say that “you get full before you get drunk” or that “it’s like drinking water.”

So, high-risk alcohol consumption was rare, even when playing Oxford’s most popular drinking game in the late 1950s, “Century Club.” In the game, which was played at the three Uptown bars, each player takes a shot of 3.2 beer every minute for 100 minutes, totaling approximately 6.4 standard drinks over two hours.

For context, consuming five standard drinks in two hours is considered “binge drinking” for men, according to the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. For women, binge drinking is defined as four drinks over the same timeframe.

“There was no emphasis at all, anywhere or anytime, at getting drunk,” Miami alumnus Jim Bodmer (’60) said. “You just drank to get happy.”

But soon enough, the students thirsted for more. They craved different kinds of drinks with heavier alcohol concentrations. This gave Oxford business owners an opportunity: high-content beer, wine, mixed drinks or even straight liquor.

In November 1969, a “local option” — essentially a referendum — was put to voters. There were four questions raised, all rooted in one idea: Should high-content alcohol be available for sale and consumption in Oxford?

The individual questions asked were more exacting. In all following local options, the city separated alcohol into two classes: Beer, wine and mixed drinks are

grouped together in the first category, and liquor is the second. The city also stratified the place of consumption — on-premise (sometimes dubbed “by-the-glass”) as you see at bars and restaurants, or carry-out, as you can find at liquor stores and supermarkets.

In 1969, all four were voted down by a 2-1 margin, leaving Oxford a dry town, as reported by The Miami Student.

In 1971, the United States government adopted 18 as the national voting age. Previously in Ohio, only 21-year-olds could vote. In a town where more than half of the residents were Miami students, this had two major implications. The first was that Oxford graduated from a township to a city due to its higher voting-age population, granting it additional liquor permits.

The second? Voting interests of the students overpowered those of full-time Oxford residents.

So, despite vocal opposition by residents, another local option in 1975 legalized carry-out purchasing for all classes of alcohol, but due to state regulations liquor could only be sold by a state-run liquor store.

For the 3.2 beer capital of southwest Ohio, this was a shakeup.

It was especially big because, prior to the local option, if a Miami student wanted hard liquor, he or she had to travel across state lines to Indiana, said Miami alumnus Mark Klingbeil (’78).

For years, Miami held a strict no-car rule for residential students — even if the vehicle were kept Uptown. Getting to Indiana was difficult without knowing a commuter student.

Then, in 1979, the local option came back, pushing for on-premise consumption of all classes of alcohol. Only two of Oxford’s 13 precincts voted on this version of the referendum. One of those precincts included a significant part of modern Uptown — High Street.

“Saloon Row?” reads a 1975 flier by the Pro-Oxford Group, an advocacy group hoping to strike down the local options. “Is that High Street’s future?”

Today, 19 of Oxford’s 59 liquor licenses — 32 percent — are held by High Street establishments, according to Ohio’s division of liquor control web database.

The Pro-Oxford Group (categorically called a “vote-no” group) played a large role in lobbying against pro-alcohol pressure. Their rationale: If the culture of Uptown revolves around bars instead of a holistic community, students will show up, drink, graduate and then leave.

In contrast to a student population that “disregard[s] the long-range welfare of the Miami/Oxford community,” members of the Pro-Oxford Group saw themselves as upstanding and high-class members of the Oxford Community. They were generally permanent residents, just like the temperance activists over a century earlier.

During this time, the drinking age in Ohio was 18 — but only for 3.2 beer. Everything else was restricted to 21-year-olds, but the effectiveness of those restrictions is uncertain. In a report compiled by the university’s Student Life Research Service in 1979, nearly one-third of students and 40 percent of seniors believed that student drinking was a serious enough problem to warrant greater attention by the university.

In 1980, a final alcohol referendum was put to vote, again only in two primarily-Uptown precincts (the reasoning behind choosing these two regions is unclear). By a 2-1 margin, Sunday liquor sales were authorized in certain parts of Oxford.

With that, Oxford’s metamorphosis from a temperance-controlled village to a college drinking haven was complete.

Oxford’s population transformation

Full-time Oxfordians who took issue with the local options were, unsurprisingly, upset by the transformation of their city. They felt their small town would become a “Mecca for noisy, rowdy, non-collegiate crowds,” according to a Pro-Oxford Group advertisement.

It was self-exacerbating: liquor options passed, locals moved out, students moved in and even more liquor options passed. It was after the first wave of local options in the 1970s that houses in Oxford went from 72 percent owner-occupied to 33 percent, a shift documented in 2007 by Oxford’s League of Women Voters.

Along with the permanent residents, the temperance and vote-no movements disappeared, too. With students wielding the democratic power, most precincts across Oxford quickly voted to allow liquor sales.

This story is part of a series on drinking in Oxford. Over the past month and a half, The Student has asked dozens of students, administrators and Oxford residents the same question: “How do you define Miami’s drinking culture?” Our coverage, both in print and in the form of a documentary (released on our website April 14) explore the ways in which alcohol is regarded and consumed by Miami students. Our reporting addresses the societal, historical and mental health-related issues that surround drinking in Oxford. Read more of the series [here](#).