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Story of tippling in U.S. lets reader go with the flow

By G.E. MURRAY

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The holiday season might inspire a collegial cup of grog, but you would be wise to remain sober while indulging in the many intellectual pleasures and cultural insights of Eric Burns' "The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol."

Burns, host of "Fox News Watch" on the Fox News Channel and author of "Broadcast Blues" and "The Joy of Books," offers an insightful exposition on the value and vacuity of "booze, liquor and hooch" in America.

This comprehensively researched and incisively written social history may surprise readers in terms of how drinking, or not, dramatically influenced the flow and growth of the great American experiment. Burns maintains that alcohol consumption - for better or worse - informed much of the politics, polemics and passions that created the United States.

There were folks swigging fermented drink in Asia Minor long before the arrivals of Christ, Buddha or Muhammad. But for our nationalistic purposes, envision Henry Hudson in 1609 steering his ship Full Moon into what would become New York harbor. The explorer learned the name Manhattan derived from the native term "manhactanienk," which means "the island of intoxication." Some 400 years later, that characterization remains accurate on numerous levels.

Our Founding Fathers imbibed, apparently to advantage. According to Burns, some of the most important moments in early American history occurred at such locales as the Indian Queen Tavern in Philadelphia, where Thomas Jefferson began writing the Declaration of Independence, or the Catamount Inn, where Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys loitered, or the City Tavern, first meeting place for George Washington and John Adams, to mention too few.

Burns proves - variously - witty, inquisitive, occasionally even poetic but always informative. He tells, for instance, that Washington lost his first run for public office because he didn't provide enough liquor for his constituents; that John Hancock, first signer of the Declaration, was "patron saint of rumrunners." Then there is this: "Insurance companies in colonial times raised their rates for non-drinkers because they believed in the medicinal properties of alcohol."

Yet Burns is far from a proponent of drinkers (the "wets") and thoroughly balanced in presenting the strong case of prohibitionists (the "drys"). He adroitly chronicles American life with the Volstead Act, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the rise of Alcoholics Anonymous and MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving). Burns turns his creative-nonfiction hand to tales of famous anti-drinking crusaders as Frances "Frank" Willard, the Rev. Billy Sunday, television-made-famous Eliot Ness and his "Untouchables," and the hatchet-wielding Carry Nation with her mantra "Smash! Smash! For Jesus' sake, smash!" Burns relates an eye-opening tale of Ms. Nation calling out retired heavyweight boxing champ and saloon owner John L. Sullivan, and winning. But some of Burns' finest writing comes in portrayals of lesser-known but enormously interesting characters.

A favorite is Izzy Einstein, "master hooch hound and the most famous Prohibition agent," who "looked like a keg of beer" standing barely 5 feet plus at 225 pounds. Burns also gives life to anti-drink crusaders Pussyfoot Johnson, Neal Dow ("Father of Prohibition") and "Lemonade Lucy," wife of President Rutherford B. Hayes. You need to read the entire book to get the scoop on the

meaning of the bizarre "15-Gallon Law," what Abraham Lincoln thought about Gen. U.S. Grant's notorious drinking, the significance of the Whiskey Rebellion, Joseph Kennedy's alleged connections with mobsters Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello, origins of the terms "bootlegger" and "real McCoy," and whether drunks have fallen victim to "spontaneous combustion."

This is that rare vintage of a book: both a fascinating read and a reliable historical reference. Burns delivers a beauty.

G.E. Murray's latest collection of poems is "Arts of a Cold Sun" (University of Illinois Press, 2003).

"The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol"

By Eric Burns

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