

PROHIBITION IN BOLIVAR COUNTY

BY FLORENCE W. SILLERS

There are three periods to be outlined in the history of prohibition in Bolivar County: (1) the period from the organization of the county to 1893 when local option was introduced; (2) the period from 1893 to state wide prohibition in 1908, and on to 1919; (3) the period of national prohibition, 1919-1933.

During the first period whiskey was legally sold up to 1893. In giving the conditions prevailing in Bolivar County before the local option law was passed in 1893, some consideration must be given to the special conditions that governed the Delta about that time. Bolivar County was organized in 1836 and settled by representative citizens of the older states, together with a sprinkling of the lawless element of those states. Previous to the War Between the States, drinking prevailed over the county in moderation among the best citizens, to excess among the poorer citizens. But the planter controlled the Negro, and there was no drunkenness among the slaves.

After 1865 it was different. There always follow in the wake of war, evils of all kinds—lawlessness, drunkenness, disease, crime, and the lowering of all moral standards. The government of the county was in the hands of the Radicals and carpet-baggers and their horde of Negro henchmen, a "tragic era" indeed for Bolivar County. For the first time the Negro was free to gratify his natural love of whiskey. Drunkenness prevailed among their women and men, and also among the white men.

I came to Bolivar County in 1885, a very young girl, and to Rosedale in 1887, as a bride of seventeen, and the impression made upon me was, and is, that whiskey is an evil thing and should be outlawed.

In 1887, Rosedale was the only county seat, with mail by boat twice a week, no railroad, a few board walks, block crossings of streets, a courthouse and jail, a post office, two or three general stores, some residences, a hotel, and several saloons. In every saloon there were gambling rooms, always well patronized.

The sessions of the circuit court were great times for the citizens of the county. Those attending court came from all over this big county, and it was no easy thing to get to Rosedale over the incessantly bad roads, impassable from mud in spring and winter and dust in summer. These visits to court always meant a week's visit, and as Rosedale did not connect with the east side of the county, it required a full day and night to come by train from Cleveland.

It was always a gala week in Rosedale when court was in session. The churches gave dinners galore; the young folks gave dances. It was fun to watch the men riding into town, and from my window in the front of the hotel, I could see everything, more than was intended for me to see.

One of the saloons was directly opposite my window, and I soon observed that all the visitors went first to this saloon before coming to engage rooms at the hotel. This was habit—the saloon habit.

In those days it was not proper for a young woman to appear among a crowd of men, so I stayed in my room and, after the fashion of Solomon, looked out of the window. Having been reared, under Puritan ideals, in the country, I was entirely ignorant of the ways of men. I soon had a liberal education in the "sins of the world," such as gambling all day and night, Sundays included, the daily sight of drunken men, colored and white, midnight brawls across the street, political conventions, where all the delegates were drinking or drunk, many of whom "passed out" as they say now-a-days, and were tenderly propelled to their beds in the hotel or to their homes by their more lucky friends.

The man who did not drink, and often to excess, was the exception, and not the rule at this time. The saloon on every corner became a habit that was held sacred by those who formed it. Gambling always went hand in hand with saloon drinking. At every gathering of men, political or otherwise, the saloon was the first place visited, and often some of the crowd never came out for the meeting.

Women were not allowed on the streets or roads on Saturday or after night, because of drunken Negroes and white laborers. The Negro women were especially offensive when drinking.

More than eighty-five per cent of all the crimes committed in the county were directly traceable to whiskey, and the jails were always filled with criminals, both white and black. Every Saturday night there were drunken brawls and shootings and killings, over the county.

Every plantation and crossroad store sold whiskey, and every small town or hamlet could boast of having several saloons to one other store.

There was no drinking among the white women; they saw too much of it and were always strongly opposed to whiskey. It is possible that the old custom of not allowing ladies in certain public places, such as hotel lobbies, fronts of steamboats, and courtrooms, was due to the drinking always found in these places. Although ladies were accustomed to seeing their own men folks under the influence of whiskey, it was improper for them to see other women's men folks in like condition.

I always rebelled against being obliged to enter a hotel by the side door—like a servant—and to stay in the "ladies' cabin" or the back guards of a boat; and I was the first woman in Rosedale to go to the courtroom when court was in session. While now this is the universal custom everywhere, it was rather shocking at that time—1890.

Realizing that the universal drinking was retarding the progress of our county, a few representative citizens united in a movement to secure local option for Bolivar County. Under the direction of these

patriotic lawyers and citizens, a young Methodist minister, Mr. W. W. Woollard, stationed at Rosedale, led the campaign. He has contributed an accurate account of it, which follows.

HISTORY OF THE LIQUOR FIGHT IN THE EARLY DAYS OF BOLIVAR COUNTY

BY W. W. WOOLLARD

In the fall of 1892, two years after the Constitutional Convention, Mr. W. B. Roberts remarked to me that under our new constitution it would be possible to have local option in Bolivar County, as well as in many other counties of the state. After some investigation we concluded that practically all the Negroes and all the drifting and parasitic elements of the white people would be disfranchised under the new election laws. I advised with a number of my friends in Rosedale and other parts of the county. Among them were E. H. Moore, Fred Clark, Walter Sillers, Dr. J. C. Brooks, Dr. Sparkman, Dr. Sutherland, George Faison, William Connell, George Shelby, Sr., and others.

We decided to circulate petitions calling for an election on the local option question. I made a quiet canvass of the entire county, seeing the leading planters as well as the ministers of each of the towns. The saloon men paid no attention to the matter and laughed at me for what I was doing. They appeared to think that it was simply a young preacher's pipe dream. The saloon keepers in Rosedale were all my friends, and one of them, Dick Purnell, came to me and said, "Why did you not bring your petition to me? I would have signed it." To them all, an attempt to close the saloons was a big joke.

But quietly, with no sensational meetings or oratory, we pushed the securing of signatures for an election. When the petitions were finally brought to me, we saw that nearly all the planters of the county, the most of the merchants, the professional men, and a good majority of the stable citizenship had signed the petition.

We had no organization so far, but at this period of our campaign I called together a representative number of the gentlemen mentioned above, to consider the presentation of the petition to the Board of Supervisors. Up to this point, I had acted largely on my own responsibility, always advising, however, with the gentlemen named, each of whom was fully committed to the movement. W. B. Roberts was more active in the campaign, perhaps, than any other layman. He and I went before the Board of Supervisors and presented the petition calling for an election.

Under the law it had to lie on the table thirty days, during which time a counter petition might be secured. At the next meeting of the Board such a counter petition was presented. This, however, was

easily overcome, and at that meeting of the Board, I think, an election was ordered. Three commissioners of election were appointed—W. B. Roberts, Fred Clark, and Harry Adams. One of their duties was to make up from the registration books a polling list.

At the last county election something like 2,400 votes had been cast; but the people had not awakened to the effect of the new constitution on the qualifications of electors. The nonpayment of taxes, the shifting of residence, the conviction for statutory offenses and other disqualifications found by the election commissioners, had cut down the 2,400 to less than 500. These 500 were the highest type of citizens of the county.

When the full situation dawned on the saloon men, they became panic stricken. They then went out to engage a lawyer to represent them in the matter; but it was of no avail, for the election had been ordered. Then there was begun a very intensive campaign among the qualified voters.

I wish I might recall the names of those who were most active in this work. But I recall only a few—Dr. H. L. Sutherland at Benoit, Price Blanchard at Gunnison, Isaiah T. Montgomery, colored, at Mound Bayou, George Shelby at Shelby. There was little organization in the movement. My residence at Rosedale put me at the center of the county; and the active co-operation of most of the members of the bar there, with a fine team spirit and sympathetic attitude toward the movement, made little organization needful.

I think it essential to the statement of the facts of the case to say that it was, in the main, a movement of the Methodist Church in the county. The ministers made it distinctly a religious issue and made earnest appeals from the pulpit. The women of the churches were thoroughly committed to the reform and gave their aggressive support to the campaign. Without their work the election would likely have gone for the continuance of the saloon. The planters looked on it as an economic step in the interest of their labor.

When the votes were counted, it was found that the county had gone dry by about 35 votes, a close margin. I recall the one incident that shows how we came near losing the election after we had won it. A certain saloon keeper of Rosedale wrote out a telegram to a friend at Shaw saying that if the Shaw box disappeared, the wet side would win; but if the boxes came in as reported by wire, the drys would win by about 35 votes. The telegraph operator, who was a warm friend of mine, came over to town and told me that such a telegram had been filed. I immediately saw its meaning and had the operator delay sending the message until I had gotten in communication with our friends in Shaw and advised them that an effort was on to steal that box, which had gone by some 40 or more majority for local option. The saloon men talked of a contest but were advised by their attorney

that he saw no real grounds for a contest. So, in due time, the saloons were closed.

As to the men of the county who were the real leaders, I would unhesitatingly give the first place to W. B. Roberts. He was then a young lawyer with some real convictions, with all his future before him, and with the brain and the heart to fight a good cause through. As indicated above, it was he who first suggested the possibility of closing the saloons, and he gave himself as entirely as any one else to the campaign.

Dr. J. C. Brooks of Deeson gave his time and influence in active support of the movement. I recall an incident that was told me by one who knew of it. One of the Edwards boys was an election judge at Deeson. He went to Dr. Brooks and asked him how the election ought to go. His reply was, "Well, we had better help the preachers out in this, and it will help us on the plantation." So that Deeson box, as did others, went practically for the dry side.

Dr. H. L. Sutherland, one of the most noble characters of Bolivar County or anywhere else, gave active support to us in the campaign, and he, with others, carried all the southern part of the county.

I must not forget to say that of the 500 voters of the county under the new law, about ten per cent were Negroes. Isaiah T. Montgomery, who had been a member of the recent Constitutional Convention from Bolivar County, of Mound Bayou, at that time the leading Negro of the state, gave himself fully to the dry side and caused practically every Negro vote in the county to be for local option. I shall not forget a visit I made to him at his home, seeking his co-operation, which he gave without hesitation.

I must not overlook the name and activity of Mr. H. D. Chaney, who, after W. B. Roberts, was probably the most active worker in the campaign. He was a druggist of Rosedale and one of the finest men in the world. I gave to him a list of the voters of Rosedale, and as they came to his store for business or other matters, he made a personal appeal for their support. No man in the county did more effective and faithful work than Mr. Chaney.

THE SECOND CAMPAIGN FOR LOCAL OPTION

BY W. B. ROBERTS

I have read with interest the statement of Brother W. W. Woollard regarding the prohibition movement in Bolivar County. His statement is correct according to my memory, with the added fact that the election was really, at last, carried in favor of the dries by a campaign waged the night preceding the election by many preachers and others, including the colored preachers of the county, then of great influence. These protagonists in the cause of local option urged everybody to go to the polls the next day and quietly vote; their

appeal brought out probably one hundred dry voters and thus produced the slender margin by which the election was carried.

I will add to Brother Woollard's statement that very little attention was paid to the law for a year or two, as licenses had nearly a year to run, and nobody was greatly interested. As a result, a large number of places were developed, rather by consent of local people, in which liquor was sold—in huts over the levee and in secret places near the towns.

One condition was imposed: the dealers should keep and sell good whiskey to the white people, and keep orderly, quiet places. This agreement was generally scrupulously kept, and sellers were not molested for several years.

After a few years, a few big-minded men, like D. Reinach, W. E. Ringo, J. H. Biscoe, J. H. Stafford, and others who had large stores, not being willing to violate the law, circulated another petition for an election, which was held as the law required. At this time there developed a rather powerful influence in this very large number of liquor dealers who paid no privilege tax. As the annual tax had been advanced to \$1,200 per year, they found it much cheaper and more profitable to carry on business as they were doing. Accordingly, at the second election, the dry side, headed largely by the preachers and church people, were backed by this illicit saloon element, making a rather strange combination for an election.

The writer was a sort of chairman or go-between for the two strange bedfellows and had a difficult task handling a rather strange and delicate situation at the second prohibition election. The combination proved too strong for the wets, and the election—again with the aid of the colored preachers—was easily won. The majority was so overwhelming that no further effort was made to make the county wet.

In order to refresh my memory and verify the correctness of the statements made by Brother Woollard and me, I have gone to the records and found the proceedings set forth on the records in the office of the chancery clerk as stated by us. Surely this memory of the evils that flourished in Bolivar County with the open saloons will forever forbid any return to those conditions.

WAR ON THE WHISKEY BOATS

BY FLORENCE W. SILLERS

There have always been violators of the whiskey revenue laws, and it is not surprising that in quick succession there sprang up on all sides first, the "blind tigers" or hidden saloons, and then the "whiskey boats" on the river. The blind tigers were furnished from the whiskey boats—house boats fitted up attractively and supplying every known drink and many gambling devices.

Especially attractive these boats seemed to the young boys who had no other experiences, and it was because of the death of one of these boys from alcoholic poisoning on one of them, at eighteen years of age, that war was declared on the whiskey boats by the women of Rosedale.

Standing by the dead body of this boy, the son of a prominent family, I deplored the helplessness of the law to prohibit such tragedies. My husband, Walter Sillers, Sr., replied, "We are not helpless—only apathetic." And he explained to me that public sentiment controlled conditions in any community. At this time it seemed that public sentiment rather favored than opposed the whiskey boats and would have to be changed before conditions could be changed.

So, under his direction, and with the enthusiastic co-operation of the mothers and all the good women, the task of changing public opinion was undertaken and finally accomplished.

The most important of these whiskey boats were the three stationed at Rosedale, Beulah, and Stormville landings. We circulated petitions; interviewed grand juries, district attorneys, and circuit judges; talked it in the home and on the streets, in season and out of season; and were told we were wasting our time and energy.

We had more real encouragement from the drinking men than from those who never drank, because they knew so well what an evil these boats were from their own knowledge of them.

I was especially interested in helping the boys by keeping this temptation away from them. I had one boy of my own, and my home was always full of boys—dear, fine, clean young fellows—that the law should protect and did not. So we never let up or faltered in our purpose, and the word failure was not in Mr. Sillers' vocabulary.

I am glad to state that in the many presentations of petitions only one man consistently refused to sign any of them; that man subsequently drank himself into imbecility, and if still living he is in an institution for the insane. At that time he was young, good looking, and held a responsible position.

After about two years, public sentiment was strong for the removal of the whiskey boats. The Federal Government controlled the Mississippi River, and Arkansas was wet. To many it seemed impossible of achievement to get rid of the boats on the river; even though the patrons of the boats were all citizens of Bolivar County, and the county was dry, our laws could not reach the boats. When threatened with arrest by officers of the law, these boats would withdraw from the Mississippi banks into midstream or anchor on the Arkansas banks.

As a lawyer, Mr. Sillers appealed to the courts of Desha County, Arkansas, for co-operation, with what result is told in an article by Dr. H. L. Sutherland, one of our finest citizens and co-workers, published at that time in a local paper. This article is given here later.

When our plans were ripe for action, E. F. Noel, Governor of Mississippi at this time, effectively assisted us by sending two good detectives, who promptly obtained all the evidence necessary for arrest, which Mr. Sillers arranged for in a most diplomatic manner. One of these detectives, Mr. Evers, became quite a hero in the eyes of my son and Charles Clark, and they were in perfect harmony with us in the fight against the boats.

The owners and operators of the Stormville and Beulah boats were arrested, the boats with all contents burned in a most spectacular manner, and no attempt was ever made to bring them back.

The Rosedale boat was harder to handle, as it had withdrawn to the Arkansas side of the river and was transporting its patrons to and fro by skiff and motor boats. The owner collected all disgruntled whiskey men, together with a supply of guns and ammunition, barricaded the boat, and "dug in," as the soldiers say, for a long siege or an attack. The detectives favored an attack, and during the temporary absence of Mr. Sillers, urged me to assist them in getting out a large posse by the sheriff and end the trying situation by seizing the boat and contents by force of guns. I was terrified and called for Mr. Sillers to return at once and stop this action, which he quickly did, substituting a parley under a flag of truce. The whiskey men refused to deal with anyone but Mr. Sillers, in person, at the boat. With feeling running so high against us by the whiskey men, in view of what had been done to the other boats, it took all my courage to consent for him to go across that river.

He went and agreed to stop all proceedings if the boat should be taken away from the Rosedale vicinity, beyond the confines of Bolivar County, never to return. This was done immediately, and that was the last of the whiskey boat in Bolivar County.

The following is, in substance, an article written by Dr. H. L. Sutherland for the *Bolivar County Democrat* and preserved in a scrapbook.

Only a few months ago a movement began in a meeting of a few ladies led by Mrs. Walter Sillers, whose untiring zeal soon aroused others, both men and women, and it culminated in the demonstration of July 14th, when perhaps 150 leading citizens of Rosedale and vicinity went to Arkansas City on the "Kate Adams" to protest to Judge Grace and his grand jury, then in session, and lay before them evidence which would convict whiskey sellers.

All remember the result. Notwithstanding the notice which had been given the judge before our coming, and the importance of it to us, when we reached the courthouse, court had adjourned to attend a game of baseball which the Governor of Arkansas was to umpire.

They had the laugh on us! Subsequent events, however, showed the folly of this disrespect to us. Little did they know the temper of our adviser and leader, Walter Sillers, who on that day swore that, with or without the help of the Arkansas court, he would drive the whiskey boats out, no matter at what cost in time or money.

The result speaks for itself, and we owe Mr. and Mrs. Sillers a debt of gratitude.

We are, also, indebted to Governor E. F. Noel for the readiness with which he extended Mr. Sillers every help within his power. It was he who sent us the detectives, Messrs. Pinson and Evrs, who did their work cleverly and thoroughly. Within three weeks of their advent to Bolivar County, every whiskey man was asking for clemency, and the traffic ended, we hope and believe, finally.

After this, whiskey drinking declined among both the old and young, white and black, to an appreciable degree. Whiskey, beer, and wine were brought into the county in small quantities and consumed in the homes, but there was never enough consumed at one time to produce drunkenness. It was always possible to buy whiskey from some blind tiger, but there was never any evidence of drinking on the streets or at public places; it seemed that we had learned our lesson.

NATIONAL PROHIBITION

When the Eighteenth Amendment became a part of the Constitution in January, 1919, Bolivar County had twenty-five years of local and state dry laws to her credit, with much experience with illegal whiskey sellers and many victories over them.

I was in the gallery of the Senate Chamber, January 9, 1918, when our state legislature ratified this amendment—Mississippi being the first state in the Union to take this action—and I joined in the rejoicing over what was thought would prove the greatest blessing ever given any country.

Intended solely for the benefit of our people, the Eighteenth Amendment, together with the Volstead Act, which was designed to supplement and strengthen it, was more abused and more flagrantly violated, perhaps, than any other national law. Because of the attitude of the people, this law became a great disappointment to its advocates. Immediately after its passage, plans were made to circumvent it; and this was especially easy to do in Bolivar County, because of our geographical situation. Just across the river from us, there lies a large area in Arkansas unprotected by levees, lying between the mouths of the Arkansas and White Rivers and covered with virgin forest. This region quickly became the bootlegger's paradise where large quantities of corn whiskey were manufactured and shipped out over the entire country. Of course much of it passed through Rosedale into the county, and some of it stayed in Rosedale and all other towns in the county. There was one good thing about this whiskey—it was said to be non-poisonous pure corn whiskey, less harmful than most whiskeys bootlegged. With my experience of the open saloon days in Rosedale, and my knowledge of conditions present during national prohibition, my opinion is, that bad as national prohibition was, the saloon days were far worse. And our condition during the whiskey boat era was a paradise compared to that endured

during national prohibition. It was very easy to keep a continuous flow of liquor from Arkansas into Bolivar County, and there seemed to be nothing we could do about it.

The bootleggers were well fortified in their forest fastnesses, were most formidable to officers of the law of both states, and were not molested. It was certain death by ambush for any outsider to enter the notorious borders of this bootleg kingdom, and there was no way to secure the evidence necessary for any arrests. This condition was finally cleared up by Federal officers, chief among whom was Mr. Ellis Chapman, whose name soon became a terror to the bootleggers. Many of the leading offenders were arrested; the court dockets were filled with bootleg cases; and there was a constant trek of convicted bootleggers to the Federal prison at Atlanta.

With the repeal of the prohibition law in 1933, the bootleggers lost their markets, and a more orderly liquor traffic developed in Bolivar County. Bolivar County, in 1945, is still "dry," though the story goes that we vote dry but drink wet. The sale of liquor is controlled wherever it is allowed to be sold, and a whiskey store is known as a "package store." You buy your liquor and take it with you. It is never opened in the store. Looking back over fifty years of experience, I believe the picture of the present looks better than the other three periods just recorded.

INCIDENTS OF COURT ROOM HUMOR

BY EDWARD H. GREEN

Circuit Judge, and Past County Prosecuting Attorney

The McLemore trial, a sensational trial for murder in the early 1900's, created wide attention in the county because of the prominence of the defendant, who was acquitted on the second trial. Mr. R. M. Dakin tells an interesting story of the case. He was summoned to Rosedale on the special venire, and when called to the jury box, he was excused because he had formed and expressed an opinion.

Thereafter several Negroes were called to the jury box, and qualified. During the noon hour Mr. Dakin went over to McLemore and said,

"Mr. McLemore, I am very sorry that I disqualified because I think that every white man should be tried by a white jury."

Mr. McLemore replied, "That is all right, Mr. Dakin, I had much rather be acquitted by a Negro jury than hanged by a white one."

As it happened, the eight Negroes on the jury were for acquittal, the four white men for conviction.

Transportation was difficult in those days and those summoned for jury duty usually had to spend several nights in the county seat. There was a circus in Rosedale, which was being moved after the night per-

formance by train to Cleveland. So Mr. Dakin and the other jurors from Boyle and Cleveland who had been excused, went to the circus, waited until it was loaded on the cars, and went back home on the circus train.

The best and shortest argument ever made was in Mississippi, but not in Bolivar County. This story has greatly appealed to me for the last four years: A demurrer to the indictment was filed, and the attorney representing the defendant made a very lengthy and able argument. The Judge then asked the District Attorney what he had to say.

Without rising, the District Attorney said, "Judge, you and I have hanged six Negroes on indictments drawn exactly like that." The demurrer was over-ruled.

Bolivar County has the distinction of having an attorney who made the longest argument ever made to a jury in a criminal case, four hours and forty-seven minutes. The defendant was convicted.

Mr. Fred Clark was attorney for a defendant in a murder case, and, as was usual in that time, the wife of the defendant spent the night at Mr. Clark's house.

The next morning while sitting in front of the fire with a mouth full of snuff, she said, "Well, my husband killed him in cold blood, and he done a damn good job of it."

Mr. Clark cautioned her to keep her mouth shut if she wanted him to get her husband out of trouble.

In the McLemore case, when the Judge asked the jurors if any of them were common gamblers or habitual drunkards, a juror from Boyle said, "Judge, I take a drink every chance I get, and I gamble every night." The juror was excused.

Some years ago a juror answered that question in Cleveland by saying, "No Judge, I am a *good* gambler."

Mr. Dakin says that the first time he ever met Mr. Sillers he thought he "cussed nicer" than any man he ever heard, and that he is still of this opinion.

In the grand jury room I asked a Negro witness what kin the defendant was to the deceased.

The witness said, "That was his much-right woman."

I asked what a much-right woman was, and he said the defendant had as much right to her as anyone else.

Once we were trying a criminal case in Cleveland that went over Sunday. I asked the attorney representing the defendant if he would agree to the bailiffs taking the jury to church.

He said, "Yes, but I want it understood that they will not take this jury to hear a sermon on sin; the text must be on the forgiveness of sin."