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OLD BERRIEN

Newsletter of the
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Volume 5 Number 1

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TAMING BLIND TIGERS



While reading issues of the old Nashville Herald newspapers, during the years 1904 through the 1930s, a reader will often come upon the term “Blind Tigers” in certain news accounts. It is mostly used in reference to some law enforcement action involving the making and

selling of illegal alcohol, commonly called “moonshine”, but also included, wine, beer, and soured cane syrup skimmings, called blanket juice or Berrien Beer.

The term “Blind Tigers” is derived from two methods of selling illegal alcohol. When prohibition laws were first instituted, they forbid the “selling” of any intoxicating

Pictured during a 1930 “moonshine” raid of a distillery operated by a group of “Blind Tigers” in the area between Alapaha and Glory, are Chief Bruner Shaw (black hat) of the Alapaha police department with Deputy Sheriff Wesley Griner, W.W. Griner, and Brooker Shaw (holding shotgun), half-brother of Chief Shaw.

drink. So innovative marketers of the hooch advertised the displaying of some wild animals, such as a tiger, for which they charged a fee, but conveniently offered alcoholic beverages for free.

The other practice that was used, protected the identity of the seller so the buyer could not see who the seller was and the seller didn't see who the buyer was. At some location a small hole was cut into the wall. The buyer would tap on the wall and slide his money and an empty bottle through the hole. In a few minutes, out would slide his bottle filled with the beverage. Thus the name "Blind Tiger". The term was used for the location as well as the operators.

Prohibition in Georgia

The manufacturing of intoxicating drink preceded the arrival of James Oglethorpe in Georgia in 1733. Native American tribes had been making their own fermented beverage for centuries. Oglethorpe was a British General and member of Parliament seeking to resettle debt prisoners in Georgia.

To curb public drunkenness among the colonists and Native Americans, King George's Trustees issued a decree forbidding the sale of strong liquor in 1735. However, that initial act was overturned just seven years later amid mounting protests from merchants who claimed that it was harmful to the colony's trade.

Though temperance groups made attempts to limit the sale and use of alcohol during the first half of the nineteenth century, it was not until after the Civil War that reformers achieved some success with a series of legislative victories including elimination of alcohol sales on election days, the imposition of a twenty-five-dollar annual state tax on all liquor dealers, and the prohibition of liquor consumption in gambling establishments.

In 1885, the Georgia legislature



passed the General Local Option Liquor Law. Though it did not prohibit the manufacture or sale of wines and ciders or of medicinal or sacramental alcohol, the law did allow voters to prohibit the sale of liquor at the local level. By 1898, Berrien County had chosen to become one of ninety-one "Dry" counties. Lowndes, Colquitt, Brooks, Irwin, and Coffee Counties all remained "Wet."

Enforcement of Early Prohibition

Since Berrien County was "dry" even before the state-wide prohibition law went into effect, enforcement of the prohibition laws in the county began as early as 1900.

An article in *The Tifton Gazette*, August 10, 1900 reports:

Saturday night, Messrs. A.J. McCrea, Ivey Rhoden and Ben Willis, captured a blind tiger and James

Wilcox, a negro, who was running the tiger near Brookfield. They took possession of their man and the two gallons of whiskey, and landed him in Nashville jail.

On May 22, 1902, Adel City Marshal A.W. Hyers was attempting to arrest a group of negro gamblers that were thought to be operating a "blind tiger." As Marshal Hyers approached the men, 17-year-old Boisy Bryant turned and fired his pistol at Hyers, mortally wounding him. After much fear of lynching the whole group of blind tigers, a trial was held in the Nashville courthouse, and Boisy Bryant, a mentally challenged young man, was found guilty and was sentenced to hang. His execution was the first hanging in the newly built jail in 1902.

Later that same year an editorial published in the September 6, 1902 issue of the *Newnan Herald* proclaimed:

his fingers in his face.

The arrival of the cane juice season also brought the usual cautions from the superior court circuits through Berrien and surrounding counties. In the charges to the grand jury, the judges always reminded the jurors that anything that makes a person drunk, regardless of its name was sold or possessed in violation of the state prohibition law.

Articles detailing various raids and arrests continued to fill the newspapers through two decades.

On June 26, 1918, Georgia ratified the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors in the United

States and the law took effect in January, 1920.

However, thirst for strong drink never abated, with criminal elements benefitting from the demand.

Finally, after over a decade of nationwide prohibition, on December 5, 1933, the Twenty-First Amendment repealed the Eighteenth Amendment, with Georgia and seven other states never even considering the repeal.

Though the national repeal had taken place, Georgia remained dry. Facing a dire economy and sustained advocacy from prohibition critics, in 1935, the Georgia State legislature called for a statewide ref-

erendum on the issue of repeal. In 1938, Governor E. D. Rivers effectively nullified all remaining statewide prohibition statutes.

Even after the repeal of statewide prohibition, laws designed to enforce religious standards—better known as blue laws—placed some restrictions on alcohol in Georgia.

In 2011, Governor Nathan Deal signed a bill allowing communities to vote for the first time on the question of Sunday alcohol sales at convenience stores. Georgia was the last southern state with a “blue law” banning Sunday sales. So you still can’t buy a drink on Sunday in Berrien unless you can find a “blind tiger”.

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**BERRIEN
HISTORICAL
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Crusade Against "Blind Tigers"—In the County Court at Tifton, Berrien county, last week five negroes were tried for running "blind tigers" and heavily fined—the fines ranging from \$100 to \$500. Tifton has been overrun with "blind tigers," and some half a dozen murders committed in that community during the past year or so, all of which were traceable to liquor. It wrought the people up to a pitch of indignation that resulted in a general crusade against this class of law-breakers. The citizens of Tifton seem to be very much in earnest, and have inspired such a wholesome fear among the negroes engaged in the illicit traffic as to cause a general exodus.

For the next few years the "blind tigers" were subject of frequent news and editorials in The Tifton Gazette.

October 23, 1903—The blind tiger is not so rampageous in Tifton just now, but an occasional growl can be heard from its lair.

March 9, 1904—The local tiger is past the blind stage, indeed, the blindness only appears to extend to those whose duty it is to entrap him.

A blind tiger was roaming about the streets of Tifton Saturday night. Several men were seen who had met it, and they were so frightened they could scarcely walk.

November 23, 1906—Enigma is rapidly assuming city airs, and caught a blind tiger last week. His honor assessed a fine of \$50 against the culprit, who was a negro woman, and she was later turned over to the Berrien County authorities, who sent for her.

Statewide Prohibition in 1907

In response to the 1906 Atlanta Race Riots, which were blamed to a great degree on the consumption of alcohol among the African American men, the Georgia General Assembly

passed a state-wide prohibition bill on August 6, 1907. Georgia was the first southern state to go "dry."

This brought about even more "blind tiger" activity in Berrien County, as county citizens could no longer obtain legal liquor in the surrounding "wet" counties.

The hot bed of "blind tiger" operations was located near Sparks, in the county. While the authorities were getting more aggressive, the tigers were getting more resistant. Finally in February 1909, The Nashville Herald reported:

Battle of Bullets With Blind Tigers—Sheriff I.C. Avera and a posse of special deputies, John Bradford, C.H. Shaw, W.H. Smith and J.B. Griner of Nashville, J.S. Cone of Adel and Policeman Mullis of Sparks raided a den of blind tigers and gamblers at Bowden's old mill three miles west of Sparks, Saturday night and made nine arrests. The tigers resisted arrest and a warlike fusillade of pistol and gun shots were fired. Four of the prisoners were wounded, one being shot in the shoulder, one in the leg, and two in the body. The whole lay-out was tried and convicted in the City court of Nashville, Monday morning.

In an article in The Nashville Herald, December 22, 1910, it declared—War on Blind Tigers

War has been declared against blind tigers in Berrien County. Minnie Austin and Hannah Gover, of Adel, were recently convicted on the above charge and fined \$300 and \$250, respectively.

While most of those arrested for their "blind tiger" activity, an occasional white man was charged for the offense. A December 23, 2010 article in The Nashville Herald reads:

King Convicted of Making Whiskey—Leonard C. King, a young white man from North Georgia, was tried and convicted in City court here Tuesday on a charge of making

moonshine whiskey. Last March Sheriff Avera and Deputy Griner found a sixty gallon still in operation in a swamp several miles north of Nashville. They took of the outfit and a United States revenue officer came and destroyed the still by smashing it with an axe. No arrests were made at the time. Mr. King was arrested at his farm east of here about a month ago by Sheriff Avera. Judge Buie sentenced King to the chaingangs for twelve months, to be released upon the payment of \$300, including costs.

Farmers Bend Blind Tiger Laws

Though with all this pressure being put on enforcement of "tiger laws", many thirsty farmers still found ways to provide an intoxicating beverage from their legitimate farm products, especially corn syrup. This beverage was commonly called "blanket juice". The creation of this vile drink was best described in this Tifton Gazette article on December 16, 1910—

"Blanket juice" is a combination product of the national internal revenue law, prohibition, hard times, the high cost of living and a desire to celebrate Christmas in appropriate style, despite adverse circumstances.

The decoction is made from the "skimmings" of cane juice, while it is being boiled into syrup. These "skimmings" are set aside to sour, and then boiled in an ordinary washpot. A blanket, spread over the pot, catches the steam from the boiling fluid, and this steam condensed into liquid is wrung from the blanket into a vessel, and then boiled again.

While the decoction thus obtained would probably not appeal to an epicures palate, it is said to make "drunk come" with astonishing celerity, and that a few swigs of it will make a rabbit climb over the muzzle of the hunter's gun and wriggle his