

ROYAL MELENDY

Saloon Culture (1900)

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the most popular places for working-class Americans to spend their free time were saloons and dance halls. Saloons were the poor man's social clubs. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were more saloons in the United States than there were grocery stores and meat markets. New York City alone had ten thousand saloons in 1900, or one for every five hundred residents. Critics claimed that saloons aggravated an array of social problems such as alcoholism, family abuse, and absenteeism. Researchers, however, reported that saloons served important social roles. They were in effect public homes, offering haven and fellowship to people who often worked ten hours a day, six days a week. The following article by sociologist Royal Melendy reveals how the saloons in Chicago met a range of social, economic, and cultural needs.

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The popular conception of the saloon as a "place where men and women revel in drunkenness and shame," or "where the sotted beasts gather nightly at the bar," is due to exaggerated pictures, drawn by temperance lecturers and evangelists, intended to excite the imagination with a view to arousing public sentiment. I am not charging them with intended falsehood, but with placing in combination things which never so exist in real life; with blending into one picture hideous incidents taken here and there from the lives of those whom the saloon has wrecked; with portray-

ing vividly the dark side of saloon life and calling this picture "the saloon."

. . . The term "saloon" is too general to admit of concise definition. It is an institution grown up among the people, not only in answer to their demand for its wares, but to their demand for certain necessities and conveniences, which it supplies, either alone or better than any other agency. It is a part of the neighborhood, which must change with the neighborhood; it fulfills in it the social functions which unfortunately have been left to it to exercise. With keen insight into human nature and

into the wants of the people, it anticipates all other agencies in supplying them, and thus claims its right to existence. In some sections of the city it has the appearance of accomplishing more for the laboring classes from business interests than we from philanthropic motives. The almost complete absence of those things with which the uninitiated are accustomed to associate the drinking of liquor, and the presence of much that is in itself beneficial, often turns them into advocates of the saloon as a social necessity—an equally false position.

Hedged in on every side by law, opposed by every contrivance the mind of man could invent, the saloon persists in existing and flourishing—"it spreadeth like a green bay tree." The very fact of its persistence ought to cause us to realize that we have not yet struck at the root. The saloon in Chicago is restricted by every kind of law, yet it sells liquor to minors, keeps open door all night and Sundays, from January 1 to January 1. True, some of the down-town saloons close at 12 o'clock. But why? In obedience to the ordinance filed away in the archives of the city hall? Not so; but in obedience to another law—the law of demand. Those who in the daytime patronize the down-town saloons have returned to their homes and have joined the patrons of the saloons of their immediate neighborhoods. This is the law—and almost the only law that they will obey, and it is this law that we must face and deal with unflinchingly.

The Saloon in Workingmen's Districts

When the poor, underpaid, and unskilled laborer returns from his day's work, go with him, if you will, into the room or rooms he calls "home." Eat with him there, in the midst of those squalid surroundings and to the music of crying children, a scanty, poorly cooked meal served by an unkempt wife. Ask yourself if this is just the place where he would want to spend his evenings, night after night; if here he will find the mental stimulus as necessary to his life as to your life. Is there no escape from the inevitable despair that must come to him whose

long hours of heavy physical labor preclude any mental enjoyment, if his few leisure hours are to be spent in the wretched surroundings of a home, or, worse yet, of the ordinary cheap lodging-house, either of which must constantly remind him of his poverty? Are there not places in the neighborhood where the surroundings will be more congenial; where his mental, yes, his moral, nature will have a better chance for development? Are there not some in the neighborhood who have recognized and sought to satisfy the social cravings of these men, which the home at best does not wholly satisfy?

Yes, business interests have occupied this field. With a shrewd foresight, partially due to the fierce competition between the great brewing companies, they have seen and met these needs. The following table, made by a careful investigation of each of the 163 saloons of the seventeenth ward—a fairly representative ward of the working people—shows some of the attractions offered by these saloons:

Number of saloons	163
Number offering free lunches	111
Number offering business lunches	24
Number offering newspapers	139
Number offering music	8
Number offering billiard tables	44
Number offering stalls	56
Number offering dance halls	6
Number allowing gambling	3

In the statement, now current among those who have studied the saloon "at first hand," that it is the workingman's club, lies the secret of its hold upon the vast working and voting populace of Chicago. . . . As you step in, you find a few men standing at the bar, a few drinking, and farther back men are seated about the tables, reading, playing cards, eating, and discussing, over a glass of beer, subjects varying from the political and sociological problems of the day to the sporting news and the lighter chat of the immediate neighborhood. Untrammelled by rules and restrictions, it surpasses in spirit the organized club. That general atmosphere of freedom, that spirit of democracy, which men crave, is here realized; that men seek it and that the saloon tries to

cultivate it is blazoned forth in such titles as "The Freedom," "The Social," "The Club," etc. Here men "shake out their hearts together." Intercourse quickens the thought, feeling, and action. . . .

This is the workingman's school. He is both scholar and teacher. The problems of national welfare are solved here. Many as patriotic men as our country produces learn here their lessons in patriotism and brotherhood. Here the masses receive their lessons in civil government, learning less of our ideals, but more of the practical workings than the public schools teach. It is the most cosmopolitan institution in the most cosmopolitan of cities. One saloon advertises its cosmopolitanism by this title, "Everybody's Exchange." Men of all nationalities meet and mingle, and by the interchange of views and opinions their own are modified. Nothing short of travel could exert so broadening an influence upon these men. It does much to assimilate the heterogeneous crowds that are constantly pouring into our city from foreign shores. But here, too, they learn their lessons in corruption and vice. It is their school for good and evil.

The saloonkeeper, usually a man their superior in intelligence, often directs their thought. He has in his possession the latest political and sporting news. Here in argument each has fair play. He who can win and tell the best story is, not by election, but by virtue of fitness, the leader. The saloon is, in short, the clearing-house for the common intelligence—the social and intellectual center of the neighborhood.

Again, some saloons offer rooms furnished, heated, and lighted, free to certain men's clubs and organizations. For example, a certain German musical society, occupying one of these rooms, fully compensates the saloonkeeper with the money that passes over the bar as the members go in and out of the club-room. In like manner some trade unions and fraternal organizations are supplied with meeting-places. A saloon on Armitage Avenue has a bowling-alley, billiard tables, and club-rooms, in which nonpartisan political meetings were held during last spring's campaign. It is also offered to the people for various neighborhood meetings. In such a room a gay wedding party celebrated the

marriage vow. It is, in very truth, a part of the life of the people of this district.

But the young man, where does he spend his evenings? Leaving the supper table he takes his hat and sets out from home, to go where? Let us follow the boy in the crowded districts—in the river wards of Chicago. As he comes out of the house into the street he is surrounded for miles with brick and mortar; not a blade of grass or a leaf of green to be seen. Placing his fingers to his mouth he gives a shrill whistle, which is answered by one and another of the boys, till the little crowd—their club—has gathered. Seeking to join informally such a crowd of the older young men, the only question asked on eligibility was: "Can you run?" Short words, but of tremendous significance. It is this: As soon as a small crowd of boys collects it is dispersed by the police. Having been arrested once or twice, these young men learned the lesson, and I was told "to scatter" at the word "jiggers," the warning note given at the sight of an approaching "cop." Driven about the streets like dogs by the civil authorities (whether it be necessary I am not now discussing); provided with no place for the healthy exercise of their physical natures, or even an opportunity to meet and tell stories, they have recourse to but one of two alternatives: to dodge the police, hiding in underground caves and under sidewalks until they become hardened against the law; or to enter the places the saloon has provided for them.

Thus again business interests have seized the opportunity that has been let slip, and have taken advantage of boys' necessities. Rooms, well lighted, furnished with billiard and pool tables, tables for cards and other games, are placed at the disposal of these boys. Five cents is charged for a game of billiards and a check which entitles the holder to a glass of beer, a five-cent cigar, a box of cigarettes, or a soft drink. The table shows 27 per cent of these saloons thus equipped. Much less numerous are the saloons furnishing handball courts. These courts, models of attractiveness when compared with the neighborhood in which they are located, are used by young and old. Shower-baths are provided free. The boys must pass out by the bar of the adjoining saloon, where, heated by the game and feeling

somewhat under obligations, they patronize the saloonkeeper. Some saloons have gymnasiums, more or less fully equipped. Bowling-alleys and shuffle-board are among the attractions offered.

For the large floating population of these districts, and for the thousands of men whose only home is in the street or the cheap lodging-house, where they are herded together like cattle, the saloon is practically the basis of food supply. The table shows that 68 per cent furnish free lunches, and 15 per cent business lunches. On the free-lunch counters are dishes containing bread, several kinds of meats, vegetables, cheeses, etc., to which the men freely help themselves. Red-hots (Frankfurters), clams, and egg sandwiches are dispensed with equal freedom to those who drink and to those who do not. For those desiring a hot lunch, clam chowder, hot potatoes, several kinds of meat, and vegetables are served at tables, nearly always with a glass of beer. . . .

While it is true that a vast army of the laboring men and boys find the saloon the best place in

their neighborhood for the development of their social, intellectual, and physical natures, they find there also things which appeal to their lower natures. Almost without exception the saloons exhibit pictures of the nude; in the higher-class saloons by costly paintings, in the smaller saloons by cards furnished by the brewing companies. As the saloon is "no respecter of persons," even in the best of them vile persons find entrance. That the youths are here corrupted is too well known. . . .

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In addition to alcohol, what services did saloons provide their patrons?
2. What roles did the saloonkeeper play in addition to bartender?
3. Why have saloons declined in importance?