



Who Was Carry Nation?

A look at the Temperance Movement's most notorious figure

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Prohibition happened 100 years ago, and while we know it as this nasty law that was an affront to the distilling industry we love, you might not know anything about the people that pushed this country toward the Noble Experiment. This is fine — you don't need to know the players to understand the game — but there is one person who demands your attention. Her name is Carry Nation, and she was a radical member of the temperance movement. The nefarious shenanigans your state's ABC board puts you through is mild compared to what she did to purveyors of pre-Volstead Act hooch.

The Basics

The first thing you need to know about Carry Nation is she looked like the absolute archetype of an extremist teetotaler. There aren't an abundance of photos of her online, but what primarily does exist are antique images of a dour-faced woman, one whose deeply etched frown lines, and bunched, protruding brow create a scowl of utter contempt so thoroughly carved it nearly looks like a woodwork. Each of these photos judges you beyond the grave for working in the industry, enjoying a tippie,

or even admiring bottle art. One could say she looks like she could use a drink, but such a suggestion would be too easy if not a bit gauche.

It's perfect that Nation looked like a near-cartoonishly meddlesome sorehead, because it nicely sets up the second thing you need to know. She had a terrible habit of walking into barrooms and smashing everything booze-related with a hatchet while singing church hymns and quoting Bible passages, although it's safe to assume she never quoted the part of scripture where Christ turned water into wine at the Wedding of Cana. Even though Nation died in 1911, nine years before the 18th Amendment passed, it's still easy to build a case for her being the temperance movement's most notorious figure.

This is usually where the Cliff's notes version of Nation's story ends for those that like to grouse about her actions. It's easy to stop here, since it succinctly paints her as an intolerant frump with a vicious streak. There's certainly truth to that, since her vandalizing behaviors were unjustifiable and criminal. Dig a little deeper, however, and her story becomes a little more complex than just some crazy individual wrecking saloons.

Hatchets and "Holiness"

Carry Nation (or Carrie Nation, depending on the source) was born Carrie Moore in Kentucky in 1846. The first act of her life was brutal. She grew up sickly in a poverty-stricken home governed by a mentally unstable mother. She pulled herself up from this quagmire and in 1867 married a physician named Charles Gloyd. Unfortunately, Gloyd was an alcoholic, and Carrie left him after a few months of matrimony, shortly before their daughter was born. Gloyd would die from alcoholism a couple of years afterward, and a vehement opposition to liquor of all kinds was understandably born.

Carry eventually married a lawyer/journalist/minister named David Nation, and in 1889 the two settled in Kansas, a state whose existing Prohibition laws weren't really being enforced. Once there, she established a local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and started verbally harassing bartenders. Then around 1900, she claimed to receive a vision from God that told her to up her game. Things escalated quickly.

Empowered by the Almighty, Nation used rocks to smash up bars' inventory. When her husband jokingly suggested she should use



a hatchet instead, she took him seriously. They divorced the next year. Her plan of attack during this time was always the same: show up at an establishment dressed in black and white accompanied by a gang of hymn-singing women, walk into bars, and destroy the inventory while she sang and prayed. She was arrested some 30 times between 1900 and her death in 1911, but she never spent too much time in the pen. When she wasn't smashing up saloons, she'd make money by giving paid lectures about alcohol's evils and by selling souvenir hatchets, giving her plenty of scratch to pay her jail fines and set herself free.

Can You Defend the Seemingly Indefensible?

Nation's "hatchetations," as she called them, were abhorrent. This isn't up for debate. Yet it's important to remember the context surrounding her behaviors before branding her as a complete villain. Kansas was the first state to enact a ban on liquor when it passed Prohibition laws in 1881,

so the places Nation targeted were technically illegal. Kansas was also the perfect location for Nation to deploy her shenanigans, given their notorious stance against liquor. To wit: It was still illegal to make or sell spirits in Kansas until 1948, and it was also illegal for a Kansas establishment to sell liquor-by-the-drink until 1987. Given this history, it's not too much of a stretch to theorize that a healthy chunk of Kansas state officials appreciated her handiwork, even if it was grounds for arrest.

It's also important to remember that Nation wasn't exactly demolishing bottles of Pappy Van Winkle 23-year. Liquor was generally unregulated and dirt cheap in the late 18th century, a horrible combination that constantly threatened to create any combination of social ills like overconsumption, severe disease violence, and all the other miscreant factors that led to Prohibition. These factors seem to dovetail with Nation's own unfortunate experiences with liquor. All of this doesn't excuse what she did, but they do provide some insight as to why she had such a hatchet to grind.

A Complicated Individual

Nation's legacy is one that's fascinatingly twisted even beyond her vandalism. She applauded President McKinley's assassination in 1901 because of his alleged drinking proclivities. She also railed against the evils of foreign foods in her lectures, a stance that leans heavily into the nativist/racist/xenophobic rhetoric of her time. At the same time, she was a vocal advocate for the women's suffrage movement, and she also established a shelter for the wives and children of alcoholics, an act some consider to be the prototype for the modern-day women's shelter.

These last two actions prohibit Nation from being viewed as a completely evil person. Make no mistake, she's certainly an intolerant frump with a vicious streak as mentioned earlier. But given the rest of her story, it does feel fair to also consider her to be misguided with a few redeeming qualities. That may be why she works so well as a symbol of Prohibition. Her legacy is a lot like the 18th Amendment itself. AS
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