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City drenched in 'dry' history

By MARY McCONNELL
Westerville ThisWeek
Contributor

Corbin's Saloon and the Anti-Saloon League Headquarters, in Westerville's architectural review district, shaped the history of the "dry capital of the world" during early temperance movements.

In 1858, the same year the city was incorporated, a local law banned the "sale, barter or gift of wine, fermented cider, beer, and spiritous liquors." However, in 1873, the state ruled that local governments could not prohibit the sale of alcohol.

So when Henry Harrison Corbin opened a saloon in 1875, he had the backing of the state and his liquor license, but not of the townspeople or Otterbein faculty who honored the town's dry tradition.

The July 1 opening of the saloon on Main Street was met with large demonstrations. People prayed and made speeches with the ringing of the town's firebell, church bells and school bells in the background.

A pledge was signed by 637 people declaring the signers' refusals to conduct business with anyone entering the bar. A vigilance committee of 20 to 30 men was set up to take note of all who entered the business.

The "Whiskey War" had begun. Henry Corbin and his wife, Poleyana, continued to run the saloon despite stonings, fires and eggs thrown through windows. Corbin kept two shotguns at hand

to protect his bar, and remained in business.

Then, on Aug. 4, 1875, an explosion lifted the roof four inches off the building. Corbin closed the saloon a few days later and opened a second saloon in 1879, which met a more complete destruction and is no longer standing.

In 1909, the American Issue Publishing Company, a predecessor to the Anti-Saloon League, set up its offices and factories in Westerville. The brick building on State Street also became the headquarters for the Anti-Saloon League, founded by Rev. Howard Hyde Russel.

In 1915, Russel embarked on a coast to coast tour through the "wet" states, conducting 125 rallies in 63 days.

After the repeal of prohibition, the Anti-Saloon League building became the Temperance Education Foundation. Ron Norris is currently a co-owner of the former Corbin's Saloon building. His wife, Eleanor, runs an antique business in the building.

The Anti-Saloon League building is now owned and operated by the Westerville Public Library with a museum dedicated to the Anti-Saloon League's campaigns. ♦

This article is the third in a five-part series on historic buildings in Westerville.

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