

A boozy tale

The Bethlehem Gadfly Spanish Flu April 20, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the Spanish Flu 

For perspective on our current coronavirus situation, we are following the entrance of the 1918 Spanish Influenza, that paragon of pandemics, into the minds and bodies of Lehigh Valley residents who got their news through the Morning Call (the files of the Bethlehem Globe are closed to us at the moment).

Associated Press, “Pennsylvania liquor stores to reopen today at these locations for curbside pickup.” Morning Call, April 20, 2020.

In Bethlehem, 30 E. 4th St.: 610-861-2109

The noon WFMZ telecast led with the news. Booze now available. Huzza!

You’ve seen the letters to the editor: **“Keeping these vitally essential stores open could’ve helped ease a lot of tension,”** and **“We as Americans have a right to pick and choose what we want,”**

Makes you think, doesn’t it? What’s essential and what isn’t?

To many, liquor is essential.

Morning Call articles in the month of October 1918 tell a funny story of how our ancestors handled liquor deprivation during the Spanish Flu pandemic.

The state health department turned down a petition for an exemption of the ban from the Wholesale Malt and Liquor Dealers Protective Association. An association protecting the right to imbibe?

A brewing company presented a conundrum to the Allentown Health Board when it “requested the privilege” of selling a beverage one half of one percent alcohol. The Health Board debated whether such minuscule content constituted an alcoholic drink — a debate reminiscent, no doubt, of such questions as “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

presented to St. Thomas Aquinas. Nice try by the brewers. No resolution is reported.

The local Health Board was no place for dummies. A special meeting was required because physicians were issuing prescriptions to liquor dealers for liquor. Health Department headquarters in Harrisburg was called in on this one. The hope was that they would restrict such permissible requests to a quart or less. Can you see the label? Take two shots and call me in the morning.

Farmers found cider so in demand to quench thirsts that they could get “the fancy price of 35 cents a gallon.” A jug by any other name . . .

Black market booze went for \$3 a quart. You can hear the babies around town crying for lack of milk.

Saloon owners did lose licenses for illegal sales as they succumbed to the siren call of illegal demand. Why don't we use the term “saloon” much any more? It has such a delightfully wicked aura.

Wouldn't you have loved to know serial slurpers “Brindamour” and “Brick ” O'Donnell, surely among the most colorful anti-heroes of the local pandemic? Good boys, I imagine them, whose mother the widow Mary Kate Brogan O'Donnell, sat nightly by the fire chewing the hem of her apron in terror at the roar of gunfire rattling her humble crockery, but who, “driven to desperation by the quarantine of saloons,” crossed over into denizens of rat holes and railroad yards as a result of their addiction to the demon drink.

As in previous cases, Brindamour's pal in the attempted robbery was out of luck and suffered capture. He was Hugh "Brick" O'Donnell and he will be given a hearing this morning at police court charged with attempted burglary. About 2 a. m. yesterday Patrolman Harsch in making his rounds discovered the basement window of Sam Roth's saloon open. Making an investigation he found "Brindamour" and "Brick," driven to desperation by the quarantine on saloons, tapping a keg of Roth's best whiskey.

In his usual well known and unexplainable fashion, "Brindamour" made a duck, a jump and disappeared through the window. Harsch was after him and emptied his revolver at his flying coattails as he legged it down Second street. "Brindamour's" pal was picked up from behind a whiskey barrel in a state of stupefaction and hustled to the police station. Then began the hunt for the elusive "Brindamour" in every rat hole and railroad yard in the First, Sixth and Fourteenth Wards. But it is still a hunt as it always has been with the odds on "Brindamour."

Brick was captured in a "state of stupefaction," but Brindamour, showing moves that earned him that football scholarship to Notre Dame and maternal dreams of a fulfilling career, danced around the flying bullets of that committed North-Ireland foe of fun Patrolman Harsch ("Harsh"!) to live and slurp again as he matured into a life of lovable criminality. There's a Cagney movie based on him.

But seriously.

THIRSTY PHILADELPHIANS OVERWHELM CAMDEN

(By Associated Press.)

Philadelphia, Oct. 25—Alarmed by the great crowds of Philadelphians who poured into Camden, N. J., tonight, E. P. Davis, president of the Camden Board of Health at 10 o'clock issued an order closing every saloon in the city "in the interest of the public health."

The saloons had been closed for three weeks owing to the **influenza** epidemic but the ban was lifted shortly before noon today. It was not long afterward that it became necessary for the ferry companies to place in service every available boat to accommodate the crowds bound for the New Jersey side of the Delaware side of the river. Early in the night extra details of police were called out but the crowds became so great that Dr. Davis decided to again put the ban on. At police headquarters it was said the quarantine would remain in effect until it is lifted in Philadelphia.

Open bars cause an emigration like the Muslims fleeing the Middle East.

If you had a boat capable of crossing the Delaware in October 1918, you could make some money. Like selling parking spaces in front of your house during Musik-Fest.