

By the mid-1890s, at the height of the great boom, Washburn was in some respects a well-established community, with nine churches, three schools, a large commercial district, public library, an opera house, and a thriving cultural life. But like other boom towns in northern Wisconsin, Washburn was a wild and wide open town. The mill hands, lumber jacks, and dock workers were a tough, rowdy lot, who thought little about the future, spending their hard earned money on drinking, gambling, and cultivating the acquaintance of women of questionable virtue. They were happily assisted in their dissipation by the numerous saloons that lined Bayfield and Omaha Streets. To many people, particularly the women, the saloon was a fountainhead of immorality and lawlessness, and they demanded the prohibition of saloons, or at least a high license fee to reduce their number. To their working class patrons, on the other hand, the saloon was an important part, if not the center of their lives, so they supported the saloon keepers in their efforts to keep the annual license fees low.

At its first meeting in April 1884 the town board made only two decisions—it appointed a village police chief, and despite the threat-

ening presence of several saloon keepers, it set the saloon license fee at \$500. A high license fee, while vigorously protested by the saloon owners, did not reduce the number of license applicants. The town board had a self-interest in approving most

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applicants, for to deny an application was politically dangerous, while more saloons meant more money from license fees for the always impoverished village coffers.

The victory of the high license fee proponents was short lived, for in April 1885 a new town board, favorably inclined to the saloon owners, reduced the fee to \$200 and then to \$100. But by the fall the people had had enough of the rowdiness and lawlessness for which they held the saloons responsible, voting in a special referendum to raise the license fee back to \$500 for three years. Then in 1895 the saloon owners revolted against town board, claiming

that the legal license fee was \$200, not \$500. They were unsuccessful, the board insisting on the higher fee while denying licenses to the leaders of the revolt. There were then 13 saloons, or one saloon for every 400 persons, or more to the point, one saloon for every 240 males. This was the pattern for the next 18 years—the license fee varied between \$100 and \$500 dollars, while the number of saloon remained between 14 and 16, except in 1909 when 19 were licensed.

Apprehension regarding the evil consequences of saloons appeared to be justified when Washburn's first killing occurred in May 1884, in the Diamond Front saloon in Omaha Street, between Central Avenue and First Avenue East. John Murray, described as a dive keeper, accused Prescott Wade, similarly characterized, of enticing a girl away from his place in Hayward. Murray attempted to kill Wade, who shot and killed him in self defense. Wade's dive was located on the western edge of the village, where young girls were kept as virtual prisoners. In March 1887 his wife was arrested in St. Paul for procuring girls, her husband having fled beforehand. But the "notch," as it was called, continued to operate until closed by the sheriff in the fall

of 1887. In November it burnt down, to the great joy of the village, no effort being made to extinguish the fire. The town board finally approved several ordinances intended to clean up the village. The activities that these ordinances prohibited—drunkenness, prostitution, gambling, misuse of firearms, bawdy public entertainment—reflected the wide open climate of the village. However, the rules, indifferently enforced and generally ignored, had little effect.

The Women's Christian Temperance Union, the International Order of Good Templars and other temperance groups were active in the community, supporting high license fees, opposing the saloon interests, and performing charitable work. Beginning in 1896 they sponsored a no license proposition in every local election. The proposition was defeated each time until April 1914 when it was approved by 26 votes out of 554 votes cast, and so Washburn went dry. But as its opponents had predicted, the evils created by prohibition were as bad as those which were abolished. In a few years that lesson would be learned at horrendous cost when the nation embarked on that great experiment, national prohibition.