



WHAT PROHIBITION DID TO CONEY ISLAND

“PRETTY soft!”

The fat man with the baby blue eyes who uttered these words had paused to contemplate the labyrinth of soft drink stands through which filtered the sweltering human freight poured forth from elevated and subway trains at Coney Island. Having removed his saturated collar and his damp, cerise cravat, the fat man was shoving these portions of his apparel into separate compartments of his palm beach suit.

“Pretty soft,” he repeated in admiration as he elbowed his way to the front rank of the perspiring host clamoring for service before the buttermilk shrine nearest the transit lines’ exit gates. “No beer competition at all.”

“You see, I got my first business training in a line like this. That was back in Cincinnati when I was a kid. I sold lemonade. There was a saloon just across the street from the streetcar barn that I selected as a likely place to do business, and the saloon quenched most of the thirsts that afflicted those cable car motormen and conductors at the end of each trip to Fountain Square.”

“Wet Your Whistles With The Sensible Drink!”

“Yah, come on, what do you think this here is?” complained one of the white-coated buttermilk salesmen. “Give somebody else a chance to get (here he raised his voice) a sensible drink. Come on, folks. Wet your whistles with the sensible drink.”

The fat man wasn’t offended. He was a business man himself. He merely clamped a friendly hold on the elbow of his newly acquired listener and guided the way to the adjoining booth, which advertised:

“The pineapple drink; nature’s thirst quencher.”

“Two,” ordered the fat man, laying a dime on the sticky, wet oilcloth covering the counter, being careful to keep the ball of his thumb planted firmly on the coin until he and his guest had been served.

“I was about nine years old then, and I wanted to raise pigeons. I knew where I

could get a pair for 60 cents. I had a nickel and I wheedled a dime out of my old man. My mother helped me make my stand. I got a soapbox and nailed a board across the top. She fixed an oilcloth cover on that and hung a little curtain over the open side of the box so that I could use the inside to store lemons and sugar.

“Then she gave me, or rather loaned me, her bean crock. The supplies ate up my capital. Ten cents for two pounds of sugar and 5 cents for five lemons. I planned to depend on my knowledge of the carelessness of ice wagon men for ice. They’d haul half a dozen 300-pound cakes out of the van and onto the sidewalk in front of that saloon across from the car barn. Then they’d shove them down a wooden chute into the saloon basement. Pieces as big as you head’d be knocked off of some of the cakes and I planned to grab those pieces.

“I loaded my stand and supplies on a little express wagon and, accompanied by my dog—he was a water spaniel named Jack—set out upon my business career. I was barefooted.”

“Say, mister,” interrupted the pineapple drink woman, “I pay rent for this place.” She snatched the fat man’s empty glass from his hand and began to fill it for another customer.

“I’m still thirsty,” said the fat man without replying to this sarcastic announcement, and he piloted the way to a stand on the opposite side of the narrow seething passage. A huge glass vat filled with a purple liquid occupied most of the space within the white inclosure that was advertised by a sign “Grape Drink” and the strident voice of the spieler yelling:

“Everything but the kick for a nickel.”

“Two,” said the fat man, ignoring the feeble protest of his companion that he be allowed to buy this one, and then resuming his story:

The Fat Man Resumes His Boyhood Tale

“I unload my stand at a shady spot against the wall of the car barn, right beside the loop of track upon which the cable cars changed front for the return trip to the center of the city. It took them an hour to make the round trip. Presently a couple of streetcar men waiting to go on duty strolled over and gazed critically into the muddy concoction that I had prepared.

“Lemonade a cent a glass,” I suggested.

“One of the men unfeelingly inquired: ‘Did you stir that with your feet, son?’ Then they left, crossing to the saloon opposite and emerging after a few minutes wiping the backs of their hands across their mouths.

“Presently two of the jerky little cars swung around the loop. There were no passengers. The motorman disappeared in the barns, but the conductor, who wore a Van Dyke beard, came over to my stand and laid down a penny. “I poured out a glass of the warm liquid and hastily pocketed the cent before he could

change his mind. He gulped the drink, though, and departed, after suggesting that I have some ice in it by the time he returned from his next trip to the city. He jerked the bell cord and my first customer was whirled away.”

The grape drink spieler was beginning to cast sour glances at the fat man, so he suggested to his listener that they move on to the next stand, an orange drink place that contained a “mill” which had the appearance of devouring bushels of oranges, although really the fruit merely traveled in a circle except for a segment which was exposed to the public.



People don't seem to get excited like they used to

Actually the concoction was prepared with a red powder mixed with water. There the listener insisted on buying, and the fat man permitted this, but hastened to finish his tale:

“When my customer returned from his second round trip to Fountain Square I had made two other sales to dissatisfied customers and had succeeded in getting a chunk of ice from the pavement in front of my rival, the saloonkeeper.”

“Anything else, bo?” asked the orange drink merchant savagely.

“Nothing, nothing,” answered the fat man hastily and started out of this maze of strange drinking places into the sunlight and din of Surf Avenue. Pausing only to purchase a pair of hot dogs that had the appearance of being varnished, he wound up his yarn:

“My conductor friend bought a glass of lemonade at the end of each of his ten round trips that day, and once he persuaded his motorman to have one. When I started home that night I had 30 cents and an enormously increased respect for the saloon business. If it had not been for the competition of beer I should have sold out my wares several times as often as had been the case. I tried this business a second day, and succeeded in quitting with a total of 74 cents, but long before the middle of that second day I had lost my first backer. He apologized once during the afternoon. Said his stomach wasn’t just right. Anyway, I gave back to my mother her bean crocks that night and early the next morning I had purchased a pair of brown, iridescent-breasted pigeons and locked them in the sultry loft of the woodshed. If it hadn’t been for that saloon competition, though, I’d have made a young fortune with that lemonade stand. That’s all this drink stand mushroom growth cut here is—just kid lemonade stuff in six colors.”

The fat man’s garrulity had raised a question. What has prohibition done to Coney

Island? How has it changed the crowds that swarm there through Saturdays and Sundays? How has it changed the people behind the ticket grills, the ballyhoo men, spieler, cappers, stalls and gyp artists extraordinary, and, in fact, all the folks for whom Coney Island represents a profession akin to mining engineering, who see in the throngs of visitors so much gold-bearing sand that must be sifted through their refining process?

Edward F. Tilyou, son of the late George Tilyou, who invented most of the fun making devices used in Steeplechase Park, was reared

drinking fighting liquor. The sailors seem to be the only boys who are getting the stuff this year.

“The game down here now is more business-like. There are fewer showmen and more business men operating. I just strolled down Surf Avenue past the hangar of a passenger airplane. I discovered that my tailor—he runs a clothes pressing establishment in Brooklyn—and the cobbler next door to him have gone into a side line partnership. They bought this airplane, hired an aviator and are cleaning up money at \$10 per passenger. But there isn’t nothing of the gyp artist about their work. An airplane ride is worth \$10 to any one who never has been up in the air.”

“What do you mean by gyp artist?” inquired the fat man who had returned from the theater with the brief announcement that the short skirts blow higher.

“Gyp artists?” repeated Tilyou in a contemptuous tone that revealed to the fat man the depths of his ignorance.

“These people who run these prize-winning races along the Bowery qualify. So do many of the other prize contests. You’ve seen people lined up before these Kentucky Derby outfits, where tin horses race under the impulse of a wheel turned by the hand of some one who has paid a dime for the privilege of operating it with a chance—a fat chance—of winning a 30-cent plaster doll? Well, some of those are conducted by gyp artists. They are operated in chains, and the proprietors employ cappers and stallers who go from one to another ‘winning’ the dolls. Many of the stallers are Janes, who stand around and jolly men in to play on the plea that they want a doll. It is usually other stallers who win the races.

A Trap No Sober Man Would Walk Into

“There was another gyp game that doesn’t work so well now that Coney Island visitors are drinking milk and other kickless drinks. A drunken man of prosperous appearance would weave his way along the Bowery and be invited to have his picture taken in one of those mercury lighted studios, where the subject’s features take on the color of a corpse. Somehow drunken men always seem filled with a desire to have their pictures taken, anyway, and they were easy game.

“About the time the man had been posed in a pint-size automobile or astride a stuffed horse to winnow prance a flashy looking Jane who would insist on having her picture taken with the man. It rarely proved difficult to persuade the drunk to stand for this, and sometimes the woman would get in his lap and twine her arms about his neck. Bing! The photograph is taken. No charge until the pictures are delivered, the photographer

“Gyp” Artists Suffer Most From the Dry Spell

Before leaving, with one end of his cerise cravat dangling from his rapidly wilting palm beach suit, he explained that he wanted to learn the effect that compressed air shot through holes in the floor had on the short skirts that represent this year’s fashion. His departure gave an opportunity for conversation with young Tilyou, who grasped the point of questions submitted without hesitation.

“The legitimate stuff is cleaning up down here since prohibition,” he said. “It’s the gyp artists who suffer. The crowds have more money to spend on attractions that give them their money’s worth. They drink. Yes, they drink anything, but the stuff doesn’t cost them so much and they can keep their heads.

“Yep, it’s the gyp artists who are losing out. There ain’t any more of that quick money. In the old days if they couldn’t get your money away by any other method they’d hit you over the nut with a bottle and take it. But now, with a sober crowd, mere noise won’t sell the attractions. The people are more orderly, too. We don’t have to eject nearly so many. There is a tremendous improvement in that line over last year. Then every one who came down here seemed to be

would explain. This was a stall to get the victim’s business address. Usually he’d fall, although if he demanded his photograph immediately they were equipped to give it to him inside of five minutes.

“However, if he did give his address a few days later he’d have a visitor at his Manhattan office. It would be the Jane delivering the photographs. Instead of the 25 or 50 cents that had been the agreed upon price she would announce that the price of the photographs and the plates would be \$250.

“If the victim demurred the visitor would produce one of the photographs, showing him loering into his visitor’s eyes. A suggestion that perhaps his wife might be induced to pay more than \$250 usually brought the sober and contrite husband into a different frame of mind. The price of these photographs varied, of course, according to the means of the victim ensnared.

The Short Change Game Is Doing Badly, Too

“The spieler of those photo studies was the most important adjunct of the place. He could lure men with half a skate into the place faster than the camera man could operate his machine. That is a sample of the genuine Coney Island gyp stuff,” concluded Mr. Tilyou, “but nowadays you got to give ‘em their money’s worth—that is, most of ‘em.”

Michael McKenny, who has been a ballyhoo man at Coney for twenty years and now rests his weary frame on a ticket seller’s seat at one of the “rides,” and who dresses in a scarlet coat trimmed with green velvet, and covers his white hair with a cap of similar color scheme, expressed a positive conviction that Coney Island is a better place than it used to be.

“The short change gang don’t make so much money as they used to,” he said. “People take their fun more seriously, but they do take it. There is less of the rough house stuff, too. I see fewer cryin’ women and not so many ballyhoarin’ men.”

The short changers were real artists in olden times. They achieved perfection in the beer halls of pre-orange juice days. A waiter would give a victim \$8 in change instead of the \$9 coming to him. When there was a protest a bull-necked bouncer would edge up to the table and growl:

“Who’s is makin’ all the trouble?”

Generally the victim meekly pocketed the short change without further protest. If he continued to “holler” sometimes he got his dollar back, and sometimes he was tossed out on his ear.

There were fewer children at Coney then and more hard, painted women. Nowadays it’s the drinks that are painted, but they are far from hard. The truth is they are “pretty soft.”



It's all right, but you don't even get dizzy at it



Where the most potent thing on the end