

## "The Baraboo Whiskey War" & "The Lawsuit and Whiskey Rebellion of 1854"

### **"The Baraboo Whiskey War"**

By H. E. Cole in his book  
*Stagecoach and Tavern Days in the Baraboo Region.*

and

### **"The Lawsuit and Whiskey Rebellion of 1854"**

by

Nelson W. Wheeler

Also known as "Old Thunderbolt"

Note: These versions, one by H. E. Cole and the other by Nelson W. Wheeler are abbreviated.

(Cole) *"The Baraboo Whiskey War,"* probably the only war that Baraboo ever experienced, began in the saloon operated by Michael Kornel in the **Wisconsin House**. During the spring of 1854 a great temperance wave engulfed the village, the leading spirit in the movement being Rev. W. Cochran, pastor of the Congregational church, Rev. W.H. Thompson, the Methodist minister, and other well-known citizens. Conditions in the village had been growing gradually worse and worse as far as the drinking of alcoholic beverages were concerned and with the revival instituted by the ministers it was decided by some of the women of the town to attack King Alcohol in its dens of iniquity. Needless to say the "war" created intense excitement.

At the time there lived in Baraboo a hard drinker who was a good citizen when not "in his cups." He was a habitual patron of the Brick Tavern bar, his appetite resulting in the neglect of his family, and at a desperate moment an attempt to take the life of his wife. The proprietor of the bar was beseeched to refrain from selling rum to this individual when the drinking led to such deeds of violence, but the appeal was not heeded. At last death intervened and the earth closed over the inebriate, leaving a widow and fatherless children.

The following Sabbath, Rev. Thompson becomes eloquent over the sale of liquor in the village, then numbering about one

thousand persons. He said he wished "to God the thunderbolts of heaven would shiver the Brick Tavern and its contents, animate and inanimate." Attorney Pratt a few days later said that he would be happy to see "all the liquor in the village poured into the streets." The indignation did not abate but gathered momentum as the days advanced. An impromptu meeting was held and a few bold ladies of the village decided to attack with berserker fury. A writer describing the scene says:

'Hark! There's a sound of devastation--a sudden unloosing of liquid devils. The bar room of the Brick Tavern is in the process of female invasion. Fumes of liquor infect the air. "Rye," "Bourbon," and "Fine Old Tom" meet a common fate and are rapidly absorbed by the parched earth in front of the hotel. The wholesome dispenser of these evil spirits is wrapped in slumber, for it is early morn and none but sober citizens are abroad. The righteous work of destruction proceeds so quietly that his repose is not disturbed. In dispersing of the empty bottle, a corrugated "Schnapps" is deposited in an adjacent dry goods box in which a reveler of the previous night has taken lodging. The breaking of the fallen bottles does not molest him, but there is a familiar smell about it that brings him to his feet with all the alacrity of a toper invited to drink; and he looks upon the strange scene and weeps.'

(Wheeler) About 10:00am on the morning of May 16th in 1854, forty women-more or less, middle aged and young, married and unmarried, were seen marching two by two towards a little hotel at the north end of the village kept by an old and very quiet and good-natured German who was absent from home and who actually did sell beer and whiskey, and that quietly and decently, and his wife, a fat, pleasant woman, and an excellent hired girl, were in possession of the premises.

The group marched up boldly to the hotel, had a short parley with the inmates, and then demanded that they surrender up to them for immediate destruction all beer, whiskey and other liquors that were on the premises; which was very politely and firmly denied.

## "The Baraboo Whiskey War" & "The Lawsuit and Whiskey Rebellion of 1854"

As soon as their demands were refused the battle commenced, and the avengers ransacked the hotel from cellar to garret; before they commenced they arranged the inmates by scaring one and tying the other--carrying out kegs of beer and rolling barrels of whiskey, and with hatchets in their hands larger than the one used by George Washington, split the heads of the barrels and kegs, spilling their precious contents into the unsuspecting bosom of old Mother Earth, cheered by the excited crowd, which was rapidly increasing in size every moment.

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(Wheeler) Then they marched in a southeasterly direction and halted in front of an old widower's or old bachelor's little grocery, followed by their lovers, who were enjoying the bravery of their sweethearts; by husbands too, who knew before then that their wives were endowed with large quantities of pluck, and blest with some temper; and by brothers who were surprised to learn that their supposed delicate sisters could carry single-handed and alone such awful big kegs of beer with so much ease and grace.

One of the major generals walked up to the elderly proprietor and in a loud voice demanded the surrender to them all beer, whisky and all other intoxicants. He then repaired to the back of his grocery, rolled out a little keg, and with tears in his eyes, said, "ladies, here it is," and it was instantly seized by the blood-thirsty corporals, carried into the streets and its contents emptied. Thus ended the second battle of the great campaign.

They then marched in a westerly direction to another grocery store, in which they had heard that there was a keg partially filled with beer. The army then divided with part of them going to the front door where they were met by the owner who was armed with an axe who informed them that they must not enter. However, the others had silently crept around to the back door and after entering, found a keg partly full of beer, which they carried out and shortly dispatched of.

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*(Cole) After the visitation to the "Brick Tavern" the band of women marched to a place nearby where they found the proprietor had scented trouble and locked the door. The ladies made a proposition to purchase his wares but while he hesitated on setting a price entrance was affected at the rear by some of them and there was a quiet turning of faucets, which soon flooded the floor. By the time they reached "**French Pete's**" the news of the revolution had spread throughout the village and a crowd gathered upon the scene to learn the facts. As one of the ladies attempted to gain the entrance to the **Van Wendell Saloon** she found the way blocked by a patron. He was caught by the waistband and rudely jerked aside, the suddenness of the attack causing some of the fastenings to give away. Deputy Sheriff Chapman advanced and began to read the riot act, calling upon the crowd to disperse. Addressing one of the ministers, he said, "Mr. Cochran, you disperse!" The man of the cloth informed him he did not know how.*

(Wheeler) They then determined that they were all present, well and healthy, and ripe for another engagement; so they started for a large and rather attractive saloon, kept by a wiry and fiery little Frenchman about thirty rods east, which they soon reached, drew themselves up in battle array in front of the saloon, and then with great military gusto, imperatively demanded his liquor of all kinds. The Frenchman then and there very indignantly ignored, and flatly refused compliance therewith. His wife then stalked out of the saloon -- and her situation, dress and appearance showed that she cared more for her personal comfort than that of beauty or modesty -- and walked up and down in front of the establishment, suddenly stopping and facing the little band of "temperance heroes" and in a voice full of energy and fire, addressed them as follows: "Women, for you are not ladies, you see my situation; go home and mind your own business and let us alone," and then went

## "The Baraboo Whiskey War" & "The Lawsuit and Whiskey Rebellion of 1854"

back into the saloon. In a short time thereafter, her husband seized an old shotgun, and with a terrible oath in French, forced the barrel through a light of glass, discharging its contents into an old dry goods box standing hard by.

At this particular moment, a noted parson who was following the Lord at a distance to great to annoy, was seen walking to and fro near the saloon, evidently for the purpose of encouraging the women in their great work of love, too discreet to take a hand, but brave in advising.

His walk was suddenly checked by a deputy sheriff who thinking something should be done read the riot-act to the ladies in a loud clear voice and then turning upon the renowned elder, said, "Elder Cochran, disperse." The Elder replied with great solemnity, that he could not without flying all to pieces, and the faithful deputy, not wanting to take a chance of such a fragrant calamity, said no more, and the struggle went on.

In a short time a few men, friends of the Frenchman, entered the saloon and before they could bar the door a few of the most daring soldiers rushed in after the men, but only to be told to keep their hands off the liquor. This remark so enraged the cruel and determined soldiers that they grabbed a rather uninvited chap, who appeared to be there in the interest of the Frenchman, and in a twinkling tore off a large part of his somewhat dilapidated pants, which he had worn since the Blackhawk war, converting him into a traveling fortification, which no weak stomach could encounter with safety, leaving the disrobed individual in a state of constructive *nude um pactum*. Justice however compels us to say that the husband of the woman who so savagely riddled his pants bought him another pair.

The ladies, finding they could not get at the Frenchman's whiskey, left the saloon, broke ranks, and repaired to their respective homes, covered with perspiration, perfumed with the pleasant fragrance of stale beer, uncertain whiskey, and chock-full of military glory.

That evening a large meeting was held in a small church, which was filled to overflowing with backers of the raids and those opposed. Nothing was settled.

A couple of days after the battle, the landlord whose property had been so ruthlessly destroyed counseled with lawyers as to what his rights were. At the advice of his lawyers, he went before a justice who conducted his business in Sauk City, made a complaint, and a warrant was issued for the arrest of a few of the most prominent ladies engaged in the whiskey war.

The deputy sheriff armed himself with a revolver minus a lock, and in a most masterly manner arrested the defendants and conveyed them to the village of Sauk City in carriages, as good as the law ever provided to criminals.

Upon arriving at Sauk City they were politely escorted to the office of the justice, who was a German, about fifty-five years of age with fine natural abilities.

Shortly after the trial commenced, it was thought by some men that ice cream was a great luxury in the army, and would be heartily relished by the gallant lady soldiers, and accordingly quite a purse was raised and judicially invested in the precious fluid, and then, in dishes temptingly large, was passed to the ladies, who, in turn refused to touch it.

The trial was long and very interesting; the lawyers labored hard and persistently for their clients, for justice, money and some glory. The lady warriors were not happy, and refused to be comforted; but such is life.

The trial eventually closed and the justice, whose mind appeared to be made up and that even under a republican form of government the right to destroy personal property was not one of the rights referred to in the Declaration of Independence.

The judge then announced (it is believed) that he "should have to hold them to bail, and in the sum of \$500.00. to which their attorney advised the judge that" *they would not give bail*".

A warrant of commitment was then made, and they were transferred in comfort, to the jail in the village of Baraboo, and as the officer was about to deliver them to the jailer, they were

## "The Baraboo Whiskey War" & "The Lawsuit and Whiskey Rebellion of 1854"

removed from his clutches on a writ of habeas corpus, , which was immediately brought to a hearing before a clever, dull, but very kindly disposed county judge, who held them to bail for six weeks, and said that at the expiration of said time he would announce his decision. At the expiration of said time he did, and decided that the defendants had not committed a crime, and discharged them.

It appeared that between the time he had held the defendants to bail temporarily and his final decision, some of the ladies of Baraboo and probably some of the defendants suppered, toasted and flattered the good natured judge, thereby polluting just a little the fountain of justice, and besmirching quite a good deal the judicial ermine; and by their adroitness and cunning muddled the torpid brain of the judge, who was better arranged by flattery than for legal investigation.

Our client again counseled us and we advised him to bring suit against some of the defendants and their husbands for the value of the property destroyed, which he did; the husbands of the defendants, to sensible to contest, settled it, paying \$200.00 or thereabouts, which was equally divided between the lawyers for the plaintiff; our client insisting we should take it all, claiming that the amount was very small compensation for the services rendered, and rather than have any difficulty with him we cheerfully consented to keep it all.

This ended the great Whiskey Law Suit of 1854

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*(Cole) Among the fair raiders were the following, Mrs. Barton Anderson, Mts. Flanders, Mrs. Maxwell, Miss Ida Feegles, and Mrs. Newsom, Mrs. Rockwood, Miss Newsom, Mrs. Cain, Mrs. Eber Crandall, Mrs. Lowell, Mrs. Cowels, Mrs. Parish and Miss Martha Battles.*

*Some days later a number of the ladies were given a ride to lower Sauk by Sheriff Munson that an impartial trial might be held.*

### *Sixteen women against one lone sheriff*

*Upon arriving at Sauk the sheriff requested that the women get out of the wagon and enter the jail. But the ladies had enjoyed their jolting ride and preferred the wagon to the cell, so they refused to budge. The sheriff then threatened to have them removed forcibly but they called his bluff. Finally the sheriff unhitched the team and put them up for the day. One of the ladies, taking advantage of the sheriff's absence got out of the wagon and procured lunch for all. They enjoyed the situation much more than the sheriff did. At last the officer gave it up and took the triumphant women back to Baraboo.*

*On Monday the prisoners were brought before the Hon. E. G. Wheeler. When Judge Wheeler called the case in circuit court the damage was fixed at \$150 that immediately was paid, (or not paid, depending on who's history one reads) thus ending the Baraboo whiskey war".*

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So...how did it really turn out...we may have to wait for a third rendition of the story to help us decide.