Prohibition
Is Here to Stay

The Reverend Edward S. Shumaker
and the Dry Crusade in America

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Introduction

In February 1929 the Reverend Edward S. Shumaker, the leader of Indiana’s “drys”—those who opposed the drinking of alcohol and supported its prohibition—left his Indianapolis home for Putnam County. The route was one he had traveled many times before in his lifelong struggle against the forces of Demon Rum. Indeed, he had gone to college in the county, at DePauw University in Green- castle, and had begun his ministry in its outlying communities. But this trip was different. It came at the end of a protracted legal struggle, and Shumaker was going not to deliver a temperance address in defense of Prohibition but rather to surrender to authorities and to begin serving a prison sentence for contempt of the Indiana Supreme Court. With his devoted wife of nearly thirty years at his side, the sixty-one-year-old minister-reformer headed toward martyrdom for the dry cause.¹

There are no monuments to Shumaker in the Hoosier State. But if one looks closely, traces of his reform and the culture that produced it are visible, despite the common assumption that Prohibition was an utter failure and properly done away with when the Twenty-first Amendment repealed the Eighteenth in 1933. In the Indiana statehouse rotunda, a place where Shumaker held sway from 1907
until his death, there are plaques commemorating Frances Willard’s
elevation to the presidency of the Woman’s Christian Temperance
Union (WCTU), another touting the first organized religious meet-
ing in the capital city (a Methodist gathering, which happened to
be Shumaker’s denomination), and another displaying the motto of
the American Legion (whose national headquarters is a few blocks
north of the statehouse), “For God and Country.” The main floor of
the rotunda, with its public displays of religious faith and political
activism, is just one story below the Supreme Court chamber where
Shumaker was found guilty of contempt. They are visible reminders
that the “wall of separation” between church and state in America is
hardly as solid or as historic as has often been suggested.

Had Shumaker lived in another time, he almost assuredly would
have been counted among the “moral values voters” of the 2004
election, who placed social issues, as shaped by their religious faith,
ahead of economic and foreign policy issues. If this at times con-
fuses observers, it should not. American culture has always had an
exceedingly moral cast because of the influence and importance of
evangelical Protestantism in the nation’s history. Understanding the
relationship between that faith and politics is fundamental to under-
standing both America as it is now and how many people think it
should be.

In the early twentieth century, the defining moral issue for many
Americans was Shumaker’s reform, prohibition. A Methodist minis-
ter, Shumaker served for nearly a quarter of a century as the head of
the Indiana Anti Saloon League, the state arm of one of the most suc-
cessful Progressive Era reform groups. Historians have identified him
as “a great person, violent in his hate for liquor . . . for many years the
most powerful man in the prohibition movement in the Midwest,”
and as a “potent force in Indiana politics” among “the half dozen
most politically powerful men in Indiana” during the first third of
the twentieth century. His life and work offer us an opportunity to
understand better and appreciate both the dry worldview and the
larger interplay of religion and politics in wider American culture.

Shumaker’s story is that of an America in the midst of a dra-
matic transformation in its search for the proper path to follow. Born
into an agrarian world where the frontier remained a reality, Shumaker witnessed unprecedented immigration, industrialization, and urbanization along with all their associated problems. Reformers in his mold believed they needed to craft an orderly society to deal with this state of cultural flux, which both venerated the past as well as embraced the modern world. They acknowledged that their vision was only one possible path for the country to take; and if it were to be followed, it needed to be contested in the public square. Following his conversion to Methodism as a youth, which came at the same time as his conviction that alcohol was a sin that needed to be eradicated, Shumaker accepted the call to the ministry. Though at first he seemed destined for a life within the pulpit, his faith and the dry cause continually pulled him out into the wider reform world. By the time he was forty years old, Shumaker was the leader of the Indiana Anti Saloon League and on his way to becoming a first-rate political tactician whose reform was consistently part of the landscape of both the state and nation. Shumaker’s life is a shining example of the dry crusade, and it illustrates the evolution of prohibition over time, its attraction to people, and how it sustained itself. Furthermore, his life is a window into how drys themselves wrestled with the consequences, both personally and professionally, of their crusade.

The “noble experiment” to which Shumaker devoted his life was not an “aberration,” as historians have discovered, but rather one of the “central currents in American culture” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This reform movement spawned a massive political mobilization that ultimately amended the Constitution to achieve its goal. Rather than an unpopular reform forced upon the country, the Eighteenth Amendment was the result of nearly a century of local and state activity by drys such as Shumaker, a reform that, as historian Norman Clark reminded readers, succeeded. During national prohibition, most Americans never saw the inside of a speakeasy, alcohol consumption fell off dramatically, and crime stayed remarkably in check, despite constant and eventually successful calls for repeal.

Constitutional Prohibition was the capstone event of the dry movement within evangelical Protestantism that saw alcohol as the
central vice affecting the United States. It was achieved during a time of immense struggle between competing visions of American culture. Drys such as Shumaker argued for a homogeneous national culture built upon reforms such as Prohibition, while their opponents sought a more heterogeneous America that avoided any hint of cultural imperialism. Both sides saw this clash as real, with one’s cultural worldview being paramount to economic or political considerations. The United States of the twenty-first century is a product, in part, of this struggle.

Not surprisingly, this cultural confrontation and its flashpoint reform have generated considerable scholarly attention. Prohibition has been used as a critique of drug policy, a demonstration of pressure group politics, an example of how interest groups utilize the law, and a sign of an old America searching for a symbolic victory over the new one. Often these accounts have failed to engage one another, and while a good deal is known about what happened during the dry years, the cultural impetus for the reform is often submerged beneath interpretive and narrative frameworks. Furthermore, the beliefs of drys have often been slighted even when their reform and organizations have not. The reasons for this vary, but they are often rooted in the perception of the reform as a failure and in a reluctance to investigate the evangelical Protestant portion of mainstream American culture. This study seeks to rectify that situation.

The Prohibition story cannot be told without taking seriously the role played by religious faith in its rise and fall. Without evangelical Protestantism, there would not have been Prohibition in America. Studies such as Mark Thornton’s libertarian economic critique of Prohibition fail to take seriously the moral component that those drys such as Shumaker believed crucial to the reform. Religion was central to why drys became involved in the movement. As one Tennessee Baptist said of alcohol in 1903, “it is the arch destroyer of all that is dear to man and the chief opponent to the work of the Church.” If religious people took drinking that seriously, then historians must take them seriously as well. Paying lip service to ministerial credentials and church-based organizations is not enough to fully understand the dry crusade.
Listening carefully to religious voices is imperative. According to Samuel P. Huntington, “in the modern world, religion is a central, perhaps the central, force that motivates and mobilizes people.” Historian Jon Butler has urged his colleagues to consider religion as a real force in people’s lives. And James G. Moseley has argued that historians should treat religion “with a great deal more intellectual respect” than they often do because for many believers, their faith is not confined to their houses of worship; it compels them to act in the world. Drys such as Shumaker were living their faith and changing their world as a result.

Taking religious conviction seriously, however, challenges the prevailing definition of religious experience and how it should be understood. Scholars must be willing to move beyond William James and his insistence upon “original expressions” of “personal religion” since he left no room for “institutional,” “ecclesiastical organization,” or “systematic theology” in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. To him, the former was all that mattered. Lives such as Shumaker’s, however, do not readily submit themselves to such neat categories. Shumaker’s faith was not just personal; it was also institutional. He did not work alone, but was part of something much larger than himself. In order to understand Prohibition, we must investigate Shumaker’s entire culture—how he shaped it and how it shaped him.

Shumaker and his fellow drys did not live in a historical vacuum. Evangelical Protestantism emphasized one’s being active in society and government, and it traces its roots back to the very beginning of the American experience. In the colonial period, Jonathan Edwards, among others, believed that religion and politics were intrinsically linked to one another on the spiritual battleground that was the world. As Barry Alan Shain has argued, evangelical Protestant ideas expressed by pastor politicians such as John Witherspoon, rather than classical thought, influenced the vast majority of those who launched the American Revolution. Many of the founding generation believed that community standards were equal in importance to personal morality, with everyone having a stake in eradicating sin if all were to receive God’s blessing. Founders such as Alexander Hamilton argued that the national government, in representing the
will of the majority, had to prod the minority forward toward the greater good.  

Such religious and ideological notions continued to influence American politics throughout the antebellum period. Evangelical Protestantism, in the wake of the market revolution and Jacksonian politics, sought to establish an orderly society both on the frontier and in the growing urban areas of the country. In government, as Daniel Walker Howe and others have pointed out, “the sanctified of God” blended “pragmatic innovations with long-standing tradition and its explicit programs with implicit values.” These Whigs believed in civil order because they feared what men would do if left to their own devices. Individual liberty was not a license to do wrong; rather, it was to be used by individuals to promote the common good.

In the Midwest during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evangelical Protestantism merged with Yankee capitalism and Republican politics into a middle class that believed it was not only the sole arbiter of social progress but also in the best position to define what America was. Its causes and institutions, which had once been revolutionary, were now the mainstays of an American culture that had to be preserved in the face of massive immigration, large-scale industrialization, and rapid urbanization. Shumaker and others like him saw themselves as a force for progress and order. Drys were not out to overtly control, but rather to create, a system that harnessed individual passions and decisions in order to avoid the chaos of the mob. They believed that the causes of societal disorder reeked of alcohol; and, if drinking were ended, that everyone would benefit. As a result, the dry ideal, while in competition with other visions, became a contributing force to the creation of modern America.

This Midwest consensus is essential to understanding the dry crusade for Prohibition. While many observers believe the region to be a place more often shaped by “the coasts” than a crafter of American culture, as Lewis Atherton and Robert F. Martin both argue, one cannot understand the United States and its values without looking at the Midwest. Shumaker is a prime example. He was born in Ohio, raised in Illinois, and made his home in Indiana. He lived
in the midst of the Hoosier Golden Age, when Indiana laid claim to dominating both national politics and culture. The state, perhaps better than any other in the region, represents the American heartland. Therefore, we may consider Indiana the perfect place, and Shumaker the perfect example, to investigate the dry cause.

What follows is an attempt to recapture the era and synthesize the vast literature on Prohibition within a cultural biographical framework. My study considers the multifaceted nature of the dry crusade and how it marked the intersection for religion and politics during a crucial period in American history. Among the questions considered in the pages that follow are: How did dry culture transform itself from a reformist cause to a national crusade? How did its most successful organization, the Anti Saloon League, function at the local and state levels? How did its message evolve over time? How did white evangelical Protestant reformers reach out to other groups, such as African Americans and Catholics, and why did this rhetoric of inclusion come to be superseded by a more reactionary vision of America put forward by the Ku Klux Klan? And, perhaps most interesting, how did the dominant reform of the largest religious segment of American culture come to be repealed and considered a failure? To attempt to answer these questions, we must begin not on the road to Putnam County but rather in Ohio, in the years immediately following the Civil War.