

Sobriety Just Grew, Without Awaiting Dry Laws

Look at the All-American Seaside Resort, for Example: Atlantic City Became a Mirror of Decency Before It Knew Prohibition



Atlantic City—The Boardwalk.

Irving Vnderhill.

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

ATLANTIC CITY is the evidence, ladies and gentlemen, that the American people can grow into decency without the iron mitt."

It was old Sam Gale who emitted this sociological saw. He was at the wheel on his boat, the John E. Mehrer II, and we were, on this sizzling July afternoon, making straight for the horizon. Captain Sam Gale is, as any old residenter of Atlantic City can tell you, the whole works at the jetty of the grand fleet of mosquito water fliers at the Inlet. For fifty years he has sailed grandpa, sonny, and grandson out over the sand bars, around Brigantine Beach, and down to the White Elephant. His two kid brothers, George and Charley Gale, have boats also, but as they have been only about forty-nine years sailing the seas, Sam thinks they ought still to be playing baseball on the back lots. Since Attorney General Palmer's agents swooped down on Atlantic City and dusted the bars of everything except the 2.75 water sickled o'er with the pale cast of chemicals, the boats of the Gale boys are about the only things thereabout that are half-sea-
over.

At Atlantic City in Summer and at Palm Beach in Winter almost since the birth of both resorts there has been no phase of American life that Captain Sam Gale has not come in contact with. His observations to his audience when he is at the wheel are always "under the skin." He has learned his human lore, like hundreds of seamen, from the hundreds of thousands he has carried in storm and sunshine. It is said that prison and the sea strip the civilized being to the marrow. There is a fundamental huddling instinct in the human soul that floats to the top in cells and boats. The smaller the boat, the greater the trepidation and exchange of confidences. There is a democracy of instinct and action and speech that reduce human beings to their uncoated and unflanneled selves. Sam Gale has studied, unconsciously maybe, the evolution of American manners and morals just in this way for fifty years. And when he makes an observation, it's a private distillery to a glass of goat's

milk that it has something in it of the vigor and mathematical precision of the tides and the stars.

The observation quoted above of old Sam squares exactly with what any visitor to Atlantic City for the last thirty years knows. Atlantic City is, par excellence, the representative American city during the months of July and August. Coney Island is essentially New York's. Revere Beach is essentially Boston's. The lake front in Chicago is essentially of the Windy City. The only near rivals of Atlantic City in cosmopolitanism are the Pacific Coast resorts, but the population that feeds the New Jersey city by the sea is probably fifteen times that of the California seaside cities.

Summertime is the period, by common consent, for physiological and psychological reasons which would make a beautiful essay by itself, when the human being relaxes his manners and his morals to the utmost consistent with the most primitive police regulations. Hot weather loosens brakes. And those who remember how loose the brakes were in Atlantic City twenty-five years ago and how they have gradually tightened up without any outside pressure will assent to the truth of Skipper Sam's dictum, that the average American needs no iron mitt—constitutionally fist-ed or otherwise—to make him decent. And what is true of Atlantic City is true of the whole American people.

"There was a time," said Sam again as the boom swung toward Spain, "when seven out of ten men got on my boat here with flasks in their pockets, and on Sundays the crowds I took out were half loaded before they got on and jagged to the scuppers when I landed them. Within late years, long before they put over prohibition on us, not one passenger in twenty—yes, not one in fifty—that I carry has anything on his hip, and on Sunday I do not carry one intoxicated man or woman in a hundred. Is there any rum on board now?" he asked, negotiating a roller that looked like Davy Jones's own private make.

Chorus: "No!"

"The American people vindicated

again!" said Sam, twirling the wheel à la roulette.

Without a doubt. As dead as Bret Harte's West is the America of drinking orgies, open gambling, parading street vice, and all-night corner singing quartets. They've moved into the "movies." The dives that peppered Sixth Avenue, Chatham Square; the Barbary Coast, out in Frisco town; the Levee in Chicago, the Hooligan Midway in the Ninth and Vine Street district of Philadelphia, and the Yoshiwara of Boston are all "pulled" now in million-dollar studios, where "Bill" Hart and "Kitty" Gordon and Dorothy Gish revive for us the "palmy days" when "everything went" and our nights were just one series of high jinks after another. It's like looking at ancient history.

Twenty-five years ago the great attraction in Atlantic City was Schaufler's mammoth beer garden. It was on North Carolina Avenue near the Pennsylvania Railroad station. On the site at present is a near sky-scraping office building. The triumph of the Golden Calf over old man Gambrinus. Schaufler's, with its uniformed military band on the platform in the middle of the garden, was the rendezvous in those days of the gilded youth—sans oxfords and soft collars—of Philadelphia. From 8 P. M. till 2 A. M., and on Sunday mornings till later, wine and beer were guzzled to an extent unknown today, (that is, before the 1st of July.) Everything went in those days, as it did at Coney Island and Gloucester. Hotel registers were bourgeois. To get up before noon meant that you worked for a living. A vacation in Atlantic City was a spree or a debauch that lapped over into the return home.

"My boat was a regular psychopathic ward in those days," said the Captain as we swung around toward home opposite the big Steel Pier.

It was not many years ago that Atlantic Avenue, the Broadway of Atlantic City, "went" all night. It was a decayed and seedy Paris, with its organs, bands, wheezy wind instruments, and chemical soubrettes. Every kind of "game" flourished openly. There was

the swell brace man from New York or Philadelphia, the little tin-horn and the barroom gambler, who would throw dice for hats.

The Boardwalk south of the Casino was given over to the dives, music halls, and ginmills. Vice flourished openly. Doyle's, Gouvernator's, and Flanagan's razzledazzle—ask any visitor of those days to Atlantic City and he will make a grimace of disgust. Curious thing, everybody looked on at this abominable mixture of a tin-horn Monte Carlo, a Whitechapel Moulin Rouge, and West Street ginmill with good humor and complacency.

Further up the Boardwalk, beyond the Casino, where the "élite" were corralled, the orgies in some of the oceanfront hotels were gilded and painted to look like "recreation," but beneath they were as bad, and even worse, than those on the southern side of the Casino.

America was loose and untamed, the rowdy among the nations, and Atlantic City was, as it is today, its faithful mirror. But it is another reflection we Americans get today if we look at ourselves in that mirror. There has been no "clean-up," no raids, no violent spasm toward virtue. For New Jersey is, as we all know, a Peck's Bad Boy among the forty-eight. She believes in personal liberty to the limit. When Philadelphia closes up, Camden always makes the signal of radiant hospitality, as Jersey City and Newark do to the thirsty Sunday morning Manhattanite. New Jersey will have nothing to do with amendments to anything. She will not take orders from the outside. Her nickname is "Spain." She is only in the Union on condition. She ratifies her own likes and nothing more. But if "Jersey lightning" describes her impenitent Rabelaisian morals "Jersey justice" also asks you to take notice. Try to get anything over on her because she's easy, and you'll find yourself a member of the Warden's circulation library.

Atlantic City is now the spick-and-span city of the country. She is clean without being puritanical, she is "open"

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without hypocrisy, she is pleasure-loving to her last resident inhabitant without being noisy or vulgar; in a word, she is what the American has today become and would become to a much higher degree if the uplifters, the bigots, the kill-joys, and the water souses could be persuaded to deport themselves to some sanctimonious Utopia at the other end of anywhere.

If New York is "Bagdad-on-the-Subway," Atlantic City is Bagdad-by-the-Sea—a colorful, decorous, quiet Bagdad, a poised and restrained Bagdad. Pleasure is here now more of a purely mental and emotional state than a purely boisterous physical state, as of old. The giant carrousel at South Carolina Avenue and the Boardwalk, which was packed at night with bejeweled and bejaded Fashion, is long no more; in its place has come the rolling chair, where one reads, sews, converses, or stares and evaporates in the eternal mystery of the sea.

The symphony concerts on the piers have taken the place of the loud-mouthed soubrettes and the horror of the nerve-shattering tomtom. The Boardwalk book-stores are crowded, and in their windows one reads the names of Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, Galsworthy, Conrad, Freud, and Schopenhauer. And these books are bought, read, and discussed on the pavilions and in the hotels.

South Atlantic City was never "cleaned up"—it just evolved. People got sick of the moral stench. The nostril is a

great progressive. For miles today this Midway of the East is lined with shops, Japanese ring games, and, at the very worst, the chop-suey garden. The "dives" have given way to great bath-houses. It is hard to find a beer sign down there, although licenses in Atlantic City may be had for the asking. The people simply don't care much about it—but they want it when they want it; and that's another tale.

The morning dip; the yacht, automobile, or airplane ride in the afternoon, the rolling chair with your "home paper," (from Vancouver to Tampa,) the symphony concert, the "movie" or the promenade in the evening; bed at midnight or before—that is the life in America's great cosmopolitan resort today. Always avid of novelty, the Boardwalk would be taken off its feet if it ever saw a "drunk" along that ten-mile promenade. It is as rare a sight as a prohibitionist spendthrift.

"Man's a curious cuss," said Captain Sam over his seidel of beer at the Inlet pavilion. "Leave him alone and he'll go decent; rough-house him and he'll backslide. I fear for a 'dry' Atlantic City. They'll begin to hanker for the old things—maybe."

"Don't believe it, Sam," said Charley Gale, throwing in his soda-pop with one jerk of the arm; "the country's gone dead sane, and for that reason, take it from me, that Eighteenth Amendment was dead before it was born. The country doesn't need to be told what to do and what not to do—it's doin' it."