Saloons From the Past

According to historians and archaeologists, the first establishment to be called a saloon was opened in 1822 in Brown's Hole, Wyoming. It was opened to serve fur trappers who were traveling through the region. The earliest saloons were not like those usually depicted in films of the Wild West. As people made their way west, liquor might be sold from wagons, and saloons might be built from whatever materials were at hand.[1]

In looking back at the history of saloons in Fairmont, an interesting article entitled "Gentleman or Roughneck, City Had Saloon for You," appearing in the October 18, 1878, edition of the *Sentinel*, reported the following: "The merchants of North Avenue speak in emphatic terms concerning the drunkenness and rowdyism which is almost daily manifest upon their street. They admit that a lady cannot travel the street in safety and without being compelled, oftentimes, to listen to vulgarity, obscenity, and profanity. A good marshal is needed to restore a civilized condition of affairs."

The merchants of that era were obviously quite concerned about the effect that saloons, or at least those individuals frequenting them at the time, had on their business. It seems that in those days it was the habit or custom of some men, occasionally referred to as the "floating" population, to become intoxicated on cheap liquor and stand in front of the saloon and leer at women or make insulting remarks to whomever happened to pass by, often attempting to simply pick fights. Consequently, fights and brawls were practically a daily occurrence causing those "respectable" citizens wishing to quench their thirst to be confined to "side rooms" whereby admittance was typically based solely on the discretion of the bartender. Those of the so-called "floating" population were rarely arrested. If, however, they were arrested, they were usually given a week in jail with free room and board, and when released they were escorted to the city limits and told to move on, most likely ending up in neighboring communities causing similar problems.

According to the *Sentinel* article cited above, the Fairmont bar scene of the late 1800's was said to have three distinct classes of saloons. The "first class" saloons, such as Rudy Henry's and Rockwells, frowned upon roughnecks and rowdyism. Their bartenders didn't hesitate to bodily remove customers if necessary.

The "middle class" of saloons served a somewhat diverse cross section of Fairmont's society of that time. Their patrons felt that they could be exuberant and boisterous to a certain degree without fear of being thrown out of these establishments.

The "third class" of saloons catered to the roughnecks, bums, and those rugged individuals who often provoked fights and brawls after consuming a few shots of cheap whiskey. In this category of saloons, falling down drunkenness was tolerated, if not considered routine. As a result, the floors were strewn with sawdust up to one-half inch thick in order to more easily remove the remnants from any of their drunken customers that might "upchuck" on the floor.

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[1] http://www.google.com/search?q=history+of+saloons&hl=en&sa=X&rlz=1T4ADBF_enUS248US249&tbs=tl:1,tll: 1822,tlh:1822&prmd=ivns&ei=_DESTeW_H4P7lwfR0-TTDA&ved=0CCYQzQEwAA

In sharp contrast to either the "middle class" or "third class" of saloons was Rudy's Place, owned and operated by Rudy Henry. Rudy Henry, highly respected locally and considered a gentleman's gentleman in demeanor, came to Fairmont from Chicago. He was known for his dapper appearance, the diamond stickpin he wore, and his apparently unlimited financial resources. Interestingly enough, although Henry owned a saloon, he himself was not a drinker.

The bar in Rudy's Place was made of solid mahogany, which also trimmed the mirrored back bar. Just inside the entrance were two "side rooms," essential in those days for a well run saloon. It was in these "side rooms" where the well known and respected business and professional men of that era would quietly enter and enjoy the liquor of their choice. These individuals usually were served by Mr. Henry himself, not merely serving liquor by the drink, but rather serving these customers a full bottle of liquor. When they finished, there was a button conveniently located in the room that could be pressed whereby Mr. Henry would come to collect his bottles and glasses as well as what he was owed.

Although Rudy Henry loved Fairmont, when the city voted "dry" in 1915, he knew that his bar, which incidentally had no sawdust on the floor, would have to close. In a matter of a few weeks, Henry moved back to Chicago saying, before he left, that he would be back. However, he passed away before having the opportunity to return to Fairmont.

Another respected saloon keeper of that period was Harry Rockwell. He was known to operate a clean, respectable place of business that also catered to what was referred to as Fairmont's most outstanding business and professional men. This was in the day when the "free lunch" was a significant feature of the so called "best saloons."

One of the characteristics of Rockwell's lunch counter was a huge steam vat that could hold nearly a quarter of beef. Presiding at the vat was a somewhat chubby man named Eddie Smellie, whose name apparently didn't deter customers. Mr. Smellie, always impeccably dressed, was the person that would carve the beef for the customers, carefully placing a slice or slices on rye bread with the customer's choice of pickles and onions. He would then ladle a cup of soup and serve with the sandwich on a warm plate. The customer would also most likely wash his sandwich down with a foaming schooner of beer.

The word "saloons" may for some invoke images from the TV show, "Gunsmoke," where Doc Adams, Miss Kitty, Chester, and Marshal Dillon would meet in the Long Branch Saloon to discuss the current affairs of Dodge City, Kansas. However, Dodge City wasn't the only town to have saloons, as well as those colorful characters associated with them.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.