

WHY AMERICA WENT DRY

# Alcohol Effect Is a Drug Effect



Healthy Brain Cell  
(Diagram)



Brain Cell Injured by Alcohol  
(Diagram)



1. Healthy Spinal Nerve Cell



2, 3, 4, 5. Spinal Nerve Cells, Injured by Alcohol

The alcohol that every alcoholic liquor contains is a narcotic drug.

It injures body cells, especially brain and nerve cells, first in their action, later in form.

Thus, it disorders for a short time, or permanently if continued, nerve control of the body, reason, will, self-control, morals.

## The Alcoholic is a Drug Addict

Illustrations: Alcohol and the Human Body.  
REPRINTED 1930

PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN SCIENCE PUBLISHING COMPANY  
WATERVILLE, U. S. A.  
SERIES E. NO. 51

Prepared and Copyrighted 1920  
By The Scientific Temperance Federation  
Boston, Mass.

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In 2018, I wrote a piece on Oliver Sipple, the gay man who foiled an assassination attempt on President Gerald Ford. In the aftermath of that attempt, Sipple's life, including his sexuality, became public. In the years since he stopped the assassination his drinking had increased, which exacerbated some of the other mental health diagnoses he had received. In 1989, Sipple's friends at a local bar reported that he had not been seen for days, and when someone checked on him, they learned that he had died. What I found intriguing about this episode beyond the fact that a gay man became a national hero and the issue of "outing" was the role that alcohol played in

Sipple's life. He apparently used the substance to cope with the pressure that he faced, and when he did not show up to the bar where people knew him that was a sign that something had gone wrong. Alcohol has a place in American society that has been widely accepted as a "natural" part of social interaction but has also been hotly contested. What has not been explored extensively in the historical literature is the role that alcohol addiction plays in the gay community. Here, the issue of morality and sexuality intersect and provide a point of analysis to add to the issue of public health and addiction.[1]

Alcohol use has had a lengthy history in the United States dating back to the colonial era. Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, wrote of the deleterious effects of overconsumption of alcohol on a person and advocated in favor of temperance. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Women's Christian Temperance Union organized to bring about a complete prohibition of alcohol consumption believing that excessive drinking was ruinous to the family, especially as it regarded the male breadwinner. If the male head of the household spent his money on excessive consumption of alcohol, then that meant that he might visit prostitutes or resort to beating his family. Before the rise of the social welfare safety net, there was little option for women without husbands (Lender and Martin 106-107). Each of these examples carried with them some critique of the moral failings of those who engaged in excessive alcohol consumption.

By the mid- to late-1970s, as science and technology evolved, excessive drinking took on new moral implications. For example, the establishment of fetal alcohol syndrome as a medical condition cemented the connection between a mother's actions—and the realization that women could use alcohol excessively—and the health of her baby when it was born (Golden 44-48). Additionally, a flurry of federal and state legislation began to regulate drunk driving in the late 1960s, but the push toward action began in 1978 when Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID), a precursor to Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), held its first meeting in New York State. RID argued that justice needed to be served to the victims who suffered from or were affected by drunk drivers (Lerner 77-78). Morality, justice, and science and technology shaped how Americans reacted to the negative effects of excessive alcohol consumption, but what did this mean in the context of the gay and lesbian community?

By the 1970s, the gay and lesbian community had created a political movement that came to include alcohol as a part of resistance and organizing. The emergence of the bar as a space in which gay men and lesbians provided opportunities for networking by forming friendships and seeking intimate relationships (D'Emilio and Freedman 290-291). Additionally, they came to be sites of active resistance to state sanctioned oppression, as evidenced by the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969 (D'Emilio and Freedman 318-319). Additionally, in 1977, in San Francisco, the gay community joined with Local 366 to boycott Coors Beer over the company's employee contract that stipulated that employees could be asked about their sexual orientation during a polygraph test (Blake). Alcohol was a pivotal component of gay and lesbian life, but what is one to make of alcohol addiction and its health implications during this period?

Alcohol addiction and being a gay man or lesbian were subject to stigmatization and charges of moral failing. As seen above, the choices of one person's alcohol consumption had the potential to negatively affect the lives of those around them. The same seemed to apply to gay men and lesbians, even as homosexuality was removed as a mental illness, society did not automatically correct its perception of sexual orientation. Katie Batza has recounted gay health activists' coining of the phrase "oppression sickness," which explained that "the problems of the gay community were rooted in its oppression and...explore[d] the ways in which homophobia literally made gay people sick" (Batza 25). The phrase itself was all encompassing and applied to the facets of life that affected the health of gay men and lesbians, which disrupted the notion that medical and political problems were distinct and separate from one another (Batza 25-26). Oppression sickness is useful in thinking through how gay men dealt with issues related to health, such as alcohol addiction.

In 1980, two writers identified only as Barbara and Frances held that social oppression does not cause addiction among gay men and lesbians (Barbara and Frances). While this may be partially true, oppression did affect how gay men and lesbians viewed themselves and their place in society. Thomas O. Ziebold drew parallels between life as a gay man and the coming out process and living with an alcohol addiction. "Can you recall the fears of rejection by family and friends, of losing your job if anyone found out? Do you know the pervasive feeling of anxiety of trying to live a double life, keeping one part of you 'straight' while letting the other be gay?" (Ziebold 36). For Ziebold, gay men and lesbians with addicted to alcohol led to stigma as a double minority in society. Not only were they subject to moral judgments about one's sexual orientation, but their addiction was viewed as a personal failing. The medical profession's limited view of homosexuality was a barrier to gay men and lesbians being able to get the help that they needed to handle addiction (Ziebold 41).

For those seeking help with their addiction, organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Alcoholics Together (AT) became central to working towards sobriety. In particular AT and Gay Alcoholics Anonymous were organizations established for gay men and lesbians that used the AA program. What made these programs important was that gay men and lesbians could meet others who shared the same experiences, while maintaining the privacy expected of programs such as AA (Michael 4-5). John Michael, a pen name for an author of two pamphlets related to gay men and alcohol addiction, spoke of surrendering to the disease, which was a way of acknowledging when the person needed to seek help and guidance. The notion of surrender is a fascinating concept in a period in which gay politics was highly charged, and gay men and lesbians refused to do so in the face of attacks by organized conservatives such as Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign. In many ways, to surrender to alcohol addiction is to acknowledge that more could be done to better one's place in society while still saving face. John Michael applied this concept to being gay, "I was gay yesterday, I'm gay today. In all probability I will be gay tomorrow" (9). By acknowledging this fact about himself he was better able to deal not only with his sexuality, but also his addiction to alcohol.

In thinking about the history of alcohol addiction, it is important to consider the historical context that shapes stigma, especially among marginalized communities, and to begin to think through

the far-reaching consequences of discrimination on people's ability to get the help that they need. For gay men and lesbians, it was important that they receive the opportunity for recovery, but it had to be accepting and open to considering how society helped to shape the extent to which someone excessively consumed alcohol. The depth of historical analysis reaches beyond the limitations of this piece and should be considered in future scholarship on queer history.

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[1] I avoid using the word "alcoholic" or "alcoholism" except where quoted in the sources or as the name of organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous because of the stigma associated with the word. According to the Mayo Clinic, the more commonly accepted phrase is "alcohol use disorder."