

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 96 - The Six O'Clock Swill. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons. Last time, we talked about New Zealand's flirtation with prohibition a bit more in depth. Today we will focus on a specific part of that which we have also discussed before, the closing time for pubs known as the six o'clock swill.

Introduced in 1918, the six o'clock swill was the colloquial name for the legally enforced closing time for pubs. The New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Union presented the first of what ended up being three petitions to parliament calling for the end of liquor sales. This petition had 67,000 signatures. The other two petitions were presented alongside the Alliance which helped push forward the government's decision to not give them what they wanted but to give them something else, which was the swill. Later when the govt was thinking of getting rid of the swill, the Union campaigned to keep it, but obviously were unsuccessful. You may remember that the idea of the whole thing was to stop blokes from being drunk and instead be more productive for the war effort. Although it was meant to be a temporary war time measure, the swill would continue until the late 1960s. The thing was that although the law said pubs had to close by 6pm, hotels got a little more leeway. Drinking could occur after 6 if the person was staying in the hotel. This led to some 'hotels', which were just glorified pubs, only having a couple of rooms just so they could say it was all above board. Often they would do everything they could to stop customers from booking the rooms. If they did get a room, they had to sign a book to say they were staying and were allowed to drink after hours. It wasn't uncommon for people who were actually staying in the hotel to be asked to sign in for perfect strangers to allow them to also drink 6pm.

Drinking after hours and trying to find booze when no one was meant to sell it to you was a popular and kinda national pastime. Many times, especially in Otago and the West Coast, closing times were ignored by pubs. Some closed the shutters and doors so no light escaped into the night and some had preplanned escape routes should the cops come knocking. In many towns if the police hit one pub due to a noise complaint, the publican would ring the other outlets to let them know that the fuzz were likely on their way. Sometimes it was the police themselves who would call ahead so they could save themselves the trouble of arresting and taking drunks to court. Occasionally there was a police commander who really did try to stamp out the drinking after hours but they would often be disliked among their peers. Many pubs would also give Christmas gifts of booze to the cops as a kinda bribe to hopefully convince them not to hit the pub in the coming year. In general, the police wouldn't hit pubs unless they were super overt in their operations or if they got a particularly large amount of complaints about it from the public. So at least in those two regions, the swill wasn't very well enforced cause the cops were kinda in on it.

Since the six o'clock swill last for quite a long time, about half a century, it had a profound impact on the drinking culture of New Zealand. So much so that overseas scholars took note. Robin Wink, an anthropologist and historian from the University of Colorado came to Aotearoa in 1952 and remarked on NZ's drinking culture "To the psychologist, the high drinking rate [in New Zealand] is a reflection of the same tendency which the high suicide rate shows – that the New Zealander is wrapped up in himself, turned inward, an introvert who exerts aggression against himself rather than aggression against others. New Zealanders not only do not appreciate good liquor when it is presented to them, they are unable to drink and hold it with any grace. I have seen youngsters intoxicated on three bottles of beer, an unheard of phenomenon in the States. How is it possible to lose control of one's sense on beer is a question all American visitors have raised. With the exception of weak American tinned beer, New Zealand beer is often weaker than American brews." Wink was obviously exaggerating and was stepping beyond the bounds of his expertise given he is a historian not a psychologist but weirdly claims all of this is obvious to one of that profession. He did

proceed to get closer to the real answer though, "Perhaps the excesses of the New Zealander are caused by the closing hours. The drinker, feeling that he has got to get his daily grog in a hurry, drinks too fast, often on an empty stomach and is unable to control himself. Purists seem to feel that they have found the best means of limiting drinking. It is a fruitless argument to point out that the person who wants his drink will find some way to get it even if actual prohibition is enforced – America learned this sad lesson – and therefore if the length of time in which he can drink is spread out, he will drink more slowly and seldom become truly intoxicated."

An actual American psychologist did write about NZ's drinking and also missed the mark most of the time, saying that it was due to boredom, self hatred, lack of self fulfillment in our jobs and other such things that were wrong with Kiwis. Just like Wink though, he did manage to find out the real reason, "The antiquated and restrictive liquor laws that close the pubs at 6pm and prohibit restaurants from serving alcoholic beverages greatly aggravate the seriousness and uncouthness of New Zealand drinking habits... Yet despite all public grumbling, successive governments have been reluctant to amend the law for fear of alienating the 'wowsers' vote".

So from both these quotes it looks like people from overseas were a bit perplexed with our liquor laws and even found them noteworthy enough to write about a few times. Americans in particular seem to have had an issue with it cause their background was one of hard national prohibition which didn't work at all, as well as the fact that they had no pub culture to draw from so they didn't quite understand the historical context of Kiwi drinking to begin with. In the end they do seem to hit the nail on the head, that the Kiwi binge culture wasn't because we all hate ourselves and are constantly suicidal, it's just cause everyone works until 5pm and in the 50s we only had an hour to get all our drinking done until last call. The culture wasn't to sit at a pub and leisurely have someone bring you a drink, the law wouldn't allow that to happen in a timely fashion, especially when you consider all the other patrons who needed to get a brew. You would stand and try to get drinks as quickly as you can and the facilities were designed around this fact. The pubs had standing tables and a long bar to get as many people around it as possible so that the maximum amount could be served. Decor was generally limited since you weren't there to enjoy the atmosphere, as such pubs looked less like your local sports bar and more like a high school science classroom. So even if you wanted a nice quiet beer while you hung out with your mates for a few hours, barring the issue of the law, the pubs just structurally weren't built like that. You were there for a good time, not a long time. To add to this, no one wanted to spend money on facilities lest they get shutdown in a couple of years, since the three yearly prohibition votes were still going on.. What is quite interesting though is that the pricing of a beer was a hot topic. The New Zealand Herald had an editorial in the 19th century that made a whole thing about the right of a working man to have a reasonably priced beer and up until the 1970s, papers would have reporters who were meant to keep an eye on beer prices to report on it. It also was common for patrons to want to make sure that not only were they getting a fair price but that they were getting the amount of beer advertised. So sometimes govt inspectors would go to a pub, buy a beer and measure it to make sure it was 8oz or whatever the pub was advertising it as. To this day, New Zealand doesn't have a standardised measurement for how much a pint should be.

Until the 1950s, due to the aforementioned lack of investment in facilities, pubs and hotels were pretty fucken dingy, mostly just being hardwood floors with some sawdust and the beer would be served straight from the cask as it sat on the bar. Once the Licensing Control Commission was set up in the 40s, it sought to raise the standard of pubs, ensuring they had lino or vinyl flooring and that the bar itself was much cleaner. Bars were still pretty dirty though since lots of guys smoked, making the surfaces black or even pock marked from ciggies that were left burning on the bar or being put out incorrectly. This also meant that cigarette butts were everywhere and the smoke would hang in

the air for hours even after the bar had closed. Eventually new licences led to the construction of larger pubs with big carparks. These were known as 'booze barns' due to how big they were. Unfortunately, unlike the smaller, local pubs that had always been around, these bigger ones encouraged people to bring their cars due to their large car park, which led to another issue around drink driving.

Although the swill lasted until 1967, there was an attempt to end it in 1949 and extend closing to 10pm. This was decided in the same manner as all prohibition decisions were, by national referendum. However, the wets were defeated and the swill continued because 3x as many people voted to keep it. Not a single electorate got over 50% of the votes for 10pm closing. Only four electorates came close, two on the West Coast and two Māori electorates. This was despite a 1945 commission recommending that the closing time be extended due to the law being breached so often all across the country effectively meaning it basically didn't matter anymore. So according to the public they were happy with the status quo from 1918 and the brewing industry were happy with the compromise cause it meant that prohibitionists had calmed down so the threat of a total ban was much reduced.

As time drew closer to the 60s, Aotearoa was getting a taste of other lifestyles. TV was bringing with it scenes of other ways of life, Kiwis were travelling internationally more and seeing what life was like in other countries, as well as what their drinking habits were. Things like cocktails, beer and wine with dinner or even just the fantastical idea that one could have a relationship with alcohol that didn't involve getting wasted. This kinda resulted in New Zealand realising that the swill was the thing holding us back because if we wanted all of these nice things that the rest of the world was enjoying, the swill had to go.

The National Party did have a policy in 1962 to change the law to remove the swill but the memory of the one in 1949 was still fresh in their mind. This was despite another report in 1960 which recommended extending closing hours to 11:30pm. Prime Minister Keith Holyoake didn't want to change the law without clear public endorsement, especially with a mandate from 18 years prior that showed the country wanted to keep the swill. As such the government would only consider extending closing times if another referendum showed that the public wanted change.

The first move was made by the Licensing Amendment Act 1961 which allowed licences to be issued to restaurants so people could have a wine or beer with dinner. This was really the first time anyone in NZ could order a drink with dinner at a restaurant and it began to change the way Kiwis drank. Only 10 licences were available for the whole country in the early years, with only nine being issued, mostly in Auckland and Wellington with one in Rotorua and one in Chch. The tenth wasn't issued since no other restaurant met the standard required. The main problem with this change was that it was a bit elitist, the licences were issued to high end restaurants and wasn't really in the reach of people with lower incomes which, according to former Prime Minister Walter Nash, wasn't fair. This is also where we see BYO culture starting to develop for restaurants.

In 1967 it was decided that two referenda would be held, one to decide whether the public preferred 6 or 10pm for the closing of hotels, pubs etc. and the other, unrelated, as to whether parliamentary terms should be three or four years. Debates on the closing time issue revolved around things like whether bars should have a meal break in the evenings by just closing for a bit and whether opening hours should be the same across the country or be different depending on the needs of each region. Police were generally supportive of the proposed changes and in an interesting about face, so were a lot of religious leaders, the Anglican Bishop of Auckland, Right Reverend Gowing saying of NZs drinking that it was one of our most degrading national habits.

The referendum showed that Kiwis had changed their opinion over the last two decades on how booze should be sold and regulated, the 10pm closing getting nearly double the vote of 6pm. Interestingly, in the electorates of Westland, Buller and Southern Maori, three of the four electorates that nearly voted in favour in the 1949 referendum, were close again for this one! In other words, even though the rest of the country had had a drastic change of opinion on the swill, these electorates had stayed mostly the same. For the West Coast ones, this maybe could be explained by the fact that those electorates were largely ignoring the closing times anyway so there hadn't been any real noticeable change over the last 20 years.

With the government being given the clearest mandate they were ever going to get, legislation to end of the swill quickly followed, the final day of 6pm closing being a month after the referendum results came in. The first night of a later closing did see the odd issue, with some hotels closing their doors as workers refused to work past 7pm until a new night pay rate was introduced. Some patrons also had to remind pub owners, who were used to getting home pretty early, that they were obliged to stay open until 10pm and in other cases the cops told them to stay open, even if the police themselves had to serve the beer. Overall though, it went pretty smoothly across the country, with a hotel in New Plymouth having a singalong to commemorate the occasion and the patrons in a hotel in Auckland giving the owner and his wife three cheers. Further law changes were made to allow a variety of licences to be issued over the next few years for theatres, airports, cabarets and caterers. From the 1980s onwards the liquor laws were consolidated and the booze industry was largely deregulated, at least from where it had been before.

To round out our discussion on prohibition as a whole I want to bring it back to a higher level. As we have discussed, there were some close calls in the early 1920s with the vote for prohibition nearly getting over the threshold and at the end of the war there were some notable developments globally for prohibition as some nations went partially or totally dry. The most notable of these was the USA in 1919. Naturally, Kiwis followed the US's career with great interest to see how the experiment would pan out. In particular prohibitionists in NZ wanted to see if it could work over there, cause if it did then it would surely work here as well. However, when people talked about the US situation and pulled out statistics to support their arguments, the numbers tended to change depending on who was quoting them. Prohibitionists showed that everything was going well and the economy was flourishing. Whereas the wets said that people were dodging the law all the time and that crime and racketeering were all over the show, which was the true representation of the situation. That's also ignoring the fact that US government was poisoning their own population with intentionally spiked alcohol, which wasn't learned until much later. Eventually prohibition was stopped in the US as pressure mounted, as did pretty much every country that started it after WWI.

America dropping prohibition was a big hit to the movement here in NZ and towards the end of the 1920s it was clear via the voting that the appetite for a total ban was retreating, 40.1% in favour in 1928 and 29.6% in 1935. A stark contrast to the 49% and the 49.7% that was achieved in the two 1919 referendums. There was no prohibition vote in 1931 due to budget cuts from the Depression and from that point on the vote never got more than 30% in favour of an alcohol ban. There was still some background support though even up until the late 80s, one in five voters still supported it but the majority of the general public just didn't care, especially with the swill ending which made drinking able to happen for longer, in a healthier way and thus was more culturally accepted. This ultimately resulted in the vote for prohibition being abolished in 1987 with most of the electorates that were dry going wet by the 1940s but Eden, Roskill and Tawa were still dry all the way up until 1999.

So, in the end after nearly two centuries of experimenting with various forms of prohibition and regulation around the country that just leaves one question; Did it work? Or I suppose to be more accurate, did it improve New Zealand's drinking culture resulting in us having a better relationship with alcohol? Well, in terms of electorates that went dry there was almost always a wet one nearby. This often encouraged people to get absolutely steamed in the next electorate over. The last train to Port Chalmers each day was a famous one cause the port was dry but Dunedin was wet. So the Chalmers guys would get smashed in town and then take the train back home, making 'almost the drunkest train in all Australasia' as reported by the *Sydney Bulletin* in 1903. Probably an exaggeration but this wasn't uncommon across New Zealand or even Australia. People would also purchase beer for personal consumption to take back to baches and campgrounds that were in dry areas, which was perfectly legal since the rules did allow for a certain amount of importing across electorate lines. When an area went dry, often there was a lucrative business opportunity in transporting 10 litre jugs from outside the area into it since the ban was on the sale of alcohol. The alcohol would be sold when within the dry area and that was illegal but that was all done under the table. As an example, Invercargill imported just over half a million litres of booze in the first two years of being dry. This figure also doesn't include the Hokonui moonshine distilled in the hills near Gore or any homebrew people made, the latter being allowed in the law. One person said they remember being in Taihape, which had an unusually large amount of trains in it for the size of the town. He chatted to the drivers and learned that they earned a fair amount of money from taking beer orders by telephone from the dry King Country.

If we go a bit further back, what about the temperance unions? Even if they ultimately were unable to make prohibition a national reality, did their campaigning bring a wider awareness to the issue and result in people drinking less? Well, yes and no. Drinking in general pretty much halved from 1870-1890, the period where the unions were really gaining traction. But that wasn't directly a result of their actions, it was most likely due to more women arriving in NZ and getting married who reigned in their husbands as they moved into a more settled and familial lifestyle. Additionally, the gold rush was ending so a lot of those single, heavy drinkers were moving on. The NZWCTU was an influential organisation during this time so some of these women may have been part of the union or supported their efforts but it would be a stretch to say that temperance unions were the reason excess drinking reduced.

In terms of the swill, we have discussed quite a lot the results of that. The head of DB Sir Henry Kelliher thought NZ should have kept the swill, saying that even though men slammed all of their drinking into an hour, at least they went home at a reasonable time. However, the side effect of that was busses around six o'clock were known to have drunk fellas on them. The swill, by virtue of going on the longest and being the most recent, has had probably the largest effect on New Zealand's modern drinking culture. A whole generation of drinkers were taught that the best way to consume alcohol was to down it as fast as possible and keep going until you couldn't since the system, the pubs, the police, the law, all facilitated that.

So, to go back to my original question; did it work? Do we have a better relationship with alcohol now than say 100 or 200 years ago? Of course that is a somewhat objective question but in my opinion, no. People are always going to find a way to consume alcohol regardless of whether you restrict or ban it. It's a pattern we have seen in pretty much every case of prohibition across the world, humans have been drinking booze for thousands of years and I can't see us stopping now. In fact I would even go so far as to say that the swill and prohibition have done more harm than good cause, in the end, it isn't the drinking, it's how we're drinking. Slamming back as many beers or shots as you can as quickly as possible isn't healthy, not just for your body but that's how you end up

doing things you shouldn't or ending up in dangerous situations with impaired judgement. But there was a time that the Parliament of New Zealand encouraged just that sort of drinking behaviour and it is still affecting our culture today.

Next time, we will go in depth into another event that we just skipped over, the West Coast Beer Boycott which has a link to a series of institutions across the country!

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time.