

“Carry Nation Found R&R in Dry Ottawa“
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In the last 124 years of statehood, Kansas has seen many colorful characters and crusades.

The Legislature’s current liquor debate especially brings to mind an earlier war against saloons, and also the Joan of Arc of the crusade, the notorious Carry Nation.

Mrs. Nation had first-hand experience with the ugly side of alcohol as her first husband was an alcoholic. She viewed liquor as a monster that destroyed marriages, eroded the financial security of families, ruined the characters of young women, and clouded the futures of young men.

With her Bible, Mrs. Nation took the stump to proclaim her message. With her hatchet, she took to the saloons to destroy “those Gates of Hell.”

At a time when her female peers were content to crochet doilies, Carry Nation sought to corral the devil.

Her fame for destruction and nickname of “Cyclone Carry” tended to create an image of a fierce, loud, half-crazed Amazon of a woman. It was therefore sometimes a surprise to those who met her to discover instead a little old lady “with a kindly and motherly expression” and a resolute determination.

The people of Ottawa had just such an opportunity to view and listen to Mrs. Nation in late January of 1901. She came to town not to smash saloons ... there weren’t any ... but to rest and “make some repairs.”

She had had a hard week. After destroying a few bars in Wichita and being thrown in jail, Mrs. Nation had again wielded a hatchet with considerable skill, but received rough treatment in return from the saloon owner’s wife who slugged her, causing a bloody cut above one eye.

Carry Nation therefore sported a badly swollen shiner when she arrived in Ottawa the next day, January 25, 1901. Some of the citizens of Enterprise also had presented her with several rotten eggs upon her departure, which were still spattered across the front of her black dress.

After alighting at the Missouri Pacific depot, Mrs. Nation was taken to 836 E. 7th, the home Mrs. G. M. Hand, president of the local Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Here, the “most famous woman in Kansas” greeted the press and well-wishers as news of her arrival swept through town.

The W.C.T.U. hastily arranged to have Mrs. Nation speak that evening at the First Baptist Church. So sudden were the arrangements that evening that the church’s janitor didn’t have time to get the building heated, and the crowd of several hundred remained bundled in their coats.

Still in her egged traveling dress and cape, Mrs. Nation was loudly applauded as she mounted the platform. Listening intently to her “small effeminate voice,” the hushed audience heard her tell of her recent experiences and her justification of violent tactics.

“There is no illegality in killing a mad dog,” she said firmly.

“Her face is gently expressive of kindness,” the Ottawa Daily Republican reported. “Her eyes brightly flash intelligence, her chin is square and determined.”

The next morning she spoke briefly at the chapel service at Ottawa University. The students noticed that she swayed in time to the songs that were sung.

“I cannot sing,” she explained, “but I like to take part in the exercises.”

A large crowd saw her off at the Santa Fe depot, and she was prevailed upon to mount a box and make a short address. She made several kind remarks about Ottawa and the fact that it was not a “whiskey town.” She also made a prediction that within one year all the saloons in the U.S. would be destroyed. It was toward that unrealistic goal that Carry Nation directed, or misdirected, the remaining 10 years of her life. She took her cause from coast to coast in an effort to recruit an army of volunteer women to assist her, and was thrown in jail over 30 times for her trail of destruction.

Her courageous but lawless campaign eventually helped establish a climate in which the nation attempted its ill-fated Prohibition experiment in 1920. But Carry Nation did not live to see it.