

Historical Hootch

By Terri Olszowy

“To drink or not to drink, that is the question...”

Whether it is judicious that mankind should continue to indulge in such things, or whether it would be wiser to abstain from all enjoyments of that character, it is not in our province to decide. We leave that question to the moral philosopher. We simply contend that a relish for “social drinks” is universal; that those drinks exist in great variety... that he, therefore, who proposes to impart to these drinks, not only the most palatable but the most wholesome characteristics of which they may be made susceptible, is a genuine public benefactor.”¹

Imagine yourself in the 1860’s, as an off-duty soldier living in the barracks, a working man ready to prop his feet up next to the fireplace after a hard day at work or a housewife tired from chasing children about the homestead and have an urge to enjoy a beverage or two. Do you prefer fermented or unfermented libations? Where would you get it? How varied were your choices?

Throughout time, humans have created everything from homebrews to the omnipresent wholesale/retail trade and Civil War era Elmira was no different. It was possible to make all or part of your living from the beverage trade in a variety of occupations that included farmers, mill owners, barrel/ keg makers, shook makers, distillers, maltsters, hoteliers, distributors, draymen, restaurant owners, saloon keepers, bartenders, apothecaries selling medicinal concoctions, circuit riders who espoused the temperance lifestyle and of course, let’s not forget the local sheriff. For the enterprising DIY-er, household manuals and agricultural journals provided various recipes for beers and wine.



Image courtesy Chemung County Historical Society

On the commercial production side, Elmira supported an active distillery, several malt houses and breweries, and lest we forget the members of the Temperance movement, a coffee/tea mill. Water was a primary requirement, whether it was used in the fermentation process or to power the necessary machinery. There were three natural sources within the city limits that drove where these manufacturers located; the Chemung River, Newtown Creek, and the canal system. The Briggs Brewery was located on Second Street near the canal and John Brand had his distillery on the south side of the river near his home just beyond the Buttonwoods. The Weiss Brewery called home near the canal on Washington Avenue, while Hockenberger and Dalton ran the Cold Spring Brewery on Water Street near Main and Adam Mander did his brewing at the foot of Church Street near Newtown Creek.²

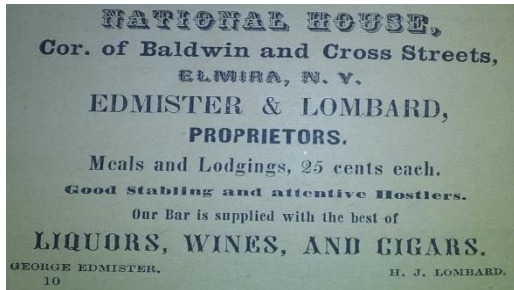
Once the brew, malt & distillery houses completed their product, it was on to the wholesale distributors, keeping the keg and barrel makers in business, along with the drays driven by teamsters throughout town. Vendors supporting the retail trade included the following distributors:



Brigham, A DeLancy, Elmira Directory for 1863 and 64, Hall Brothers, Booksellers & Publishers, 128 Water Street, Elmira, NY, 1863.

Laughlin Dowling (18 Baldwin St), Ephraim W. Howes (9 Fox St), J.H. Loring and company (166 & 168 Water St) and Joseph S. Prescott (5 Baldwin St).³

Among the distributor's customers were a myriad of hotels, taverns, eateries, billiards



Boyd, Elmira Directory, Hall Brothers. Booksellers & Publishers, 30 Water Street, Elmira, NY, 1860.

parlors, saloons and commodity agents buying for out of town customers. These establishments offered a plethora of options suitable for many different situations, whether it be for one or a crowd. A large concentration of drinking establishments was clustered on Wisner and Railroad Avenues, near the Depot. The Dry Dock saloon could be found adjacent to the canal, along with other small saloons catering to the boatmen and laborers working in the manufactories.

In general, the beverages for consumption can be considered to fall into one of five categories; liquor, beer, wine, cider and non-alcoholic or Temperance. One of the leading publications on the art of mixology, during the 19th century, was the book, "How to Mix Drinks or the Bon Vivant's Companion", by Jerry Thomas, initially published in 1862. It contains a dizzying array of selections including flips, nogs, punches, toddies, slings, shrubs, fixes, juleps and effervescing concoctions. The mixed drink bases could include the usual liquors like bourbon, rum, brandy and gin; or porters, lagers and ales; or cider; or wine. The one constant among the recipes or "receipts" as they were called in the 19th century, is that they are not particularly for the faint of heart. Thomas, in his guide cautioned against the consumption of punches, juleps or cocktails unless one was acquainted with such.⁴ The guide also included alcohol free selections, albeit far fewer choices, for those so inclined, because after all, who really wants to ride a horse or drive a buggy under the influence and be seen by the local Reverend.



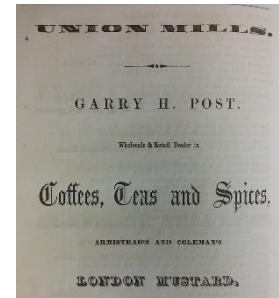
Brigham, A DeLancy, Elmira Directory for 1863 and 64, Hall Brothers, Booksellers & Publishers, 128 Water Street, Elmira, NY, 1863.

Each of the variations mentioned above had individual characteristics. Flips were distinguished by introduction of eggs and a repetitive pouring back and forth between two vessels. Punches almost invariably included the addition of lemons, multiple types of alcohol and were made in large batches designed to serve ten or more people. Some of the more exotic punch names included the Spread Eagle, Philadelphia Fish House, Louisiana Sugar-house and Nonsuch. Shrubs were usually a vinegar/sugar/fruit base mixed with alcohol, although water could be substituted to meet the requirements of any Temperance pledge. Hot toddies and punches were made by adding the spirits before the water, while cold punches and grogs added water before the spirits. In addition to the more mundane straight up cocktails, were drinks with names like the Arf n Arf (porter and ale), Stone Fence (bourbon and sweet cider), Black Stripe (rum & molasses) and the Blue Blazer that was designed to showcase a bartender's prowess with flame.⁵

The quintessential working man's beers included lagers, ales, porters and cream ale. Cream ales developed in the Northeast as a response to the clear pilsners of the Germans.⁶ Popular wines included port, sherry and Madeira. Ciders were made from varieties unique to the US like the Northern Spy, Tompkins, and Baldwin, as well as, imported English and French cider apples bred specifically for use in cider making. It was not unusual to find a barrel of cider working in a farmer's barn. In the winter, the cider barrel often yielded yet another product commonly referred to in the period as applejack. Jack was created by freezing, separating out the unfrozen liquid, discarding the frozen portion and keeping the resulting concentrated fermented cider.

The Temperance crowd was not to be outdone in the drink title department, even if the ingredients were a bit tame, with names like Soda Nectar (lemon, water, sugar and carbonate of soda), Drink for the Dog Days (soda water with lemon ice), Imperial Drink for Families (cream of tartar, lemon, sugar and boiling water) and Effervescing Draughts (fruit juices boiled to syrup consistency, sugar, tartaric acid and water). Time tested standbys like lemonades, sweet cider, coffees and teas filled out the options.⁷

Some of the flavor profiles remain obscure, particularly the ones that use pine, tansy and wormwood, while others like the vinegar-based shrubs are making a comeback. Hunt up a copy of the *Bon Vivant's Companion* by Jerry Thomas, readily available on Amazon or download a free pdf from (<https://archive.org/stream/howtomixdrinks00schugoog#page/n5/mode/2up>), collect a couple friends and step back in time. Whether you prefer your libations fermented or not, the case is easily made for all to be a pleasant way to spend time socializing.



Brigham, A DeLancy, Elmira Directory for 1863 and 64, Hall Brothers, Booksellers & Publishers, 128 Water Street, Elmira, NY, 1863.

¹ Thomas, Jerry, *How to Mix Drinks: Or, The Bon Vivant's Companion*, Dick & Fitzgerald Publishers, New York, 1862, p 3.

² Elmira City Directory, 1861-1862

³ ibid

⁴ Thomas, p 3.

⁵ Ibid pp 5-10.

⁶ Scale House Brewery, Hector, NY

⁷ Thomas, pp 83-86.