

White Man's Wicked Water: the Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802-1892

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1997 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"White Man's Wicked Water: the Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802-1892." *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1997), 286-288.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10972>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

view of the Iowa-to-Utah Mormon Trail experience, 1846 to 1869, intended to spark interest in trail research and study. (Hill has previously authored popular books about the Oregon, California, and Santa Fe Trails.) Not meant to be a narrative, this book instead provides an array of resource information and materials. Hill starts with a thumbnail comparison of the Mormon Trail and other western trails, in which he explains Mormon beginnings, beliefs, and why the Mormons went west. Then he provides a simple chronology of Mormon Trail history to 1869. He gives us short chapters about period maps and trail guides, a brief sampling of trail diary excerpts for 1847, a discussion of the entire route today, and very brief descriptions of selected historic sites, museums, and displays to see. (For Iowa, he devotes one-and-a-half pages to five sites: the 1846 Locust Creek campsite, Wayne County Museum, Mormon Handcart Park in Iowa City, Fort Des Moines, and Council Bluffs. Iowa trail enthusiasts would want at least Garden Grove and Mt. Pisgah to have their own entries, too.) Half the book—a 105-page section—is a “pictorial journey” by state, using 191 fascinating black-and-white illustrations (15 for Iowa) of drawings, paintings, objects, signs, old photographs, and sites today. In the author’s concluding list of recommended readings and bibliography, only the Patty Sessions and William Clayton diaries apply to the 1846 Iowa crossing, slighting the standard accounts by Brigham Young, Willard Richards, John D. Lee, Hosea Stout, Eliza R. Snow, Horace K. Whitney, Helen Mar Whitney, Wilford Woodruff, and others.

By condensing information available elsewhere in separate and larger studies, Hill provides readers a brief, informed, richly illustrated, interesting introduction to the national Mormon Trail, past and present, in an attractive format. The book’s value for those interested in Iowa parts of the trail, however, must come from its overview approach to the entire trail; otherwise, *The Mormon Trail: Yesterday and Today* provides little information, new or old, specifically about the Iowa Mormon Trails’ history and sites.

White Man’s Wicked Water: The Alcohol Trade and Prohibition in Indian Country, 1802–1892, by William E. Unrau. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. xii, 180 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS A. BRITTEN, BRIAR CLIFF COLLEGE

The use of alcohol among American Indians has been an integral component of the so-called Indian problem that has faced government policy makers and reformers for more than two centuries. Scholars

continue to disagree about the particular causes of Indian alcohol abuse, but few would disagree that the long-term effects of the liquor trade have been devastating, to say the least, to the welfare of Native peoples.

But what about government legislation designed to ward off alcohol use among Indians? To what extent were these laws successful? In *White Man's Wicked Water*, William E. Unrau addresses these issues by examining the federal government's efforts to regulate the alcohol trade in nineteenth-century Indian Country. He focuses on how particular conditions in Indian Country provided the *means* for Indian liquor consumption and how frontier judicial processes undermined government-sponsored prohibition.

Unrau begins his study with a discussion of the prevalence of alcohol consumption by Americans—both Indian and non-Indian—in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indian drinking patterns varied considerably depending on the time and place, particularly on the tribe's proximity to whites. In keeping with government efforts to foster attitudes of Indian inferiority and deference to the federal government, federal officials used alcohol (the "father's milk") as an inducement or reward for Indian Nations who negotiated land cessions favorable to the government or who agreed to accept reservations.

Ironically, while government officials used alcohol as a means of securing Indian acquiescence to their policies, they labored simultaneously to protect Native Americans from the debilitating effects of intemperance. Unfortunately, two major obstacles prevented the government from keeping Indian Country dry.

The first problem centered around the ambiguous definition and boundaries of "Indian Country." As increasing numbers of white settlers pushed west of the trans-Missouri frontier and settled, Indian peoples residing in Indian Country were forced to make new land cessions. Military posts and national roads, meanwhile, were constructed throughout the West, paving the way for new legislation (such as the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act) that opened up huge tracts of land to white settlement. As a consequence, the boundaries of Indian Country became hopelessly blurred.

Intimately connected with this problem was the issue of prohibition enforcement. Despite legislation passed in the nineteenth century to curtail the flow of booze into Indian Country, bootleggers and whiskey peddlers, driven by expectations of enormous profits, proved willing to take their chances with the law. Historical precedent was on their side. Frontier courts routinely acquitted liquor salesmen, and when a rare conviction did occur, courts imposed sentences that were little more than "slaps on the wrist." Consequently, government efforts

to curb the sale of alcohol to Indians were ignored, particularly the traffic among those tribes that received annual annuity payments and money to spend.

Unrau provides an important contribution to the study of Indian policy and reform in the trans-Missouri frontier. His study also contains important lessons for residents of Iowa. The Missouri River was a major conduit for the illicit liquor trade to the Sioux, Sauk and Fox, Winnebagos, and Omahas—Indian nations that continue to grapple with the effects of the “white man’s wicked water.”

Becoming and Remaining a People: Native American Religions on the Northern Plains, by Howard L. Harrod. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995. xi, 149 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD H. THOMAS, CORNELL COLLEGE

Howard L. Harrod gives us a remarkably well-conceived and well-documented book. Every paragraph in this short work is crafted. The organization is clear and concise. The author has a case to make, and he makes it with an economy of words, extensive notes, and frequent summaries of where he has been and is about to go. Harrod is an insightful and solid student of the sociology of religion and gives us a highly original and appreciative approach to the place of religion in the tribes of the Great Plains. He argues that religion is a central element in maintaining the identity of these peoples and at the same time enables them to make accommodations to the dramatic changes that came with devastating disease, new technology, and invasions of other Native Americans and Europeans. He suggests that “religious traditions and practice were at the center of the social construction and reconstruction of their identity, and the social change that arose as a response to innovation in their environment [which depended] on religious grounded process of reinterpretation” (102).

The introduction reviews the purpose and content of each chapter and clearly states the perspective the author employs. Harrod seems to be following the lines of thought laid out in his earlier work, *Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality* (1987), and is testing his approach to how religious traditions and ritual practices ensured the survival of the people by providing continuity while enabling them to adapt to change.

The Great Plains groups investigated in this study are the Mandan and Hidatsas (early groups of hunters and gatherers along the Missouri) and the Crow and Cheyenne, who apparently separated from those groups and moved West to become powerful and success-

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.