Carry A Nation: Prairie Radical

You got to love Carry A. Nation, a woman who listened when the Lord God almighty told her to uphold the law in Kansas and bring to an glorious end the miserable indecency of those who pedaled booze in utter disregard of the law.

Her hometown of Medicine Lodge, Kansas, was right down the dirt road from Dodge City, a place whose name speaks the language of "the wild west," and she wasn't in the wrong about the law. In 1880, the state of Kansas passed a bill banning the sale of liquor, a law that was rather prodigiously broken when small-town constables simply looked the other way or slammed down a drink or two themselves, smiling wryly all the while.

Her story has its horrors. Her first marriage ended in disaster when her husband, a young doctor named Charles Gloyd, lost her and everything else to the bottle. Their child had severe health problems her mother forever blamed on drink.

It might just be enlightening to be able to walk the wooden sidewalks of small towns throughout our part of the world and see for ourselves what burdens the bottle laid on frontier families. Carry Nation decided something had to be done; so, one by one, she picked off the seven local watering holes in Medicine Lodge, she and a mob of righteous women loud enough to force bar owners to shut the places down.

They set Mr. Mort Strong on the road to glory by walking into his saloon and filling the place with hymns and prayers and curses so untoward they invoked the fires of hell. Then, emboldened, Carry A. Nation turned her attention on a saloon belonging to a Mr. Henry Durst.

Ms. Nation thought to smoke Durst out by gathering her ladies just outside with a tumult of prayer and singing--and now a then a good strong curse or two or three. Twice a day, her crusaders held prayer vigils so charged with righteous indignation town streets would glow with praise.

Durst wasn’t taking it with his elbows up on the bar. He went right after her. But Carry Nation grabbed his lapels and screamed in his ears that he was bound to hell if he kept selling hooch.
Mostly, however, the ladies practiced non-violence. No matter. Eventually, Durst threw in the bar rag and left town, as did all the other drinkeries, all of them gone. Carry A. Nation cleaned up Medicine Lodge. The law triumphed.

Flush with victory, she and the tee-totalers went down the road to Kiowa, Kansas, where she walked into a saloon brandishing a hatchet and busted up the place as if she were filming a Western herself. With that hatchet, her notoriety grew like a prairie fire into fulsome celebrity, gathering a world-wide following among those who'd come to know the perils of liquor by the drink or by the bottle. Carry A. Nation became her own righteous side show, selling little brass tomahawks as souvenirs of her own brand of hot-blooded moral rectitude.

She gained so much righteousness that she even took on her own husband, Rev. David Nation. He wasn't even a Christian, she said, despite the fact that he was a preacher in a local church. There were Sabbath meetings when she made a circus out of worship by interrupting his sermons to let him know what he should be saying. Eventually, her husband's congregation tossed her the heck out.

No matter. Carry A. Nation knew what was Christian and what wasn't, and if she didn't know, she prayed until she did. It was that easy.

The woman never quit. In her dotage, she still grabbed cigars out of men's chops, made fun of the well-upholstered fat cats, argued for women's suffrage, and battled booze. She'd spent her adult life beating on others and being beaten in return. She knew what jail cells looked like, even from the inside.

She was, I'm sure she'd be happy to tell you, a praying woman, wild as a prairie sky, as great a saint and sinner as any of us will likely ever be.