The Keeley Cure

When Carry A. Nation, as tough an hombre as any Kansas outlaw, married her second husband, they lived in Medicine Lodge, Kansas, just down the road from Dodge City, Main Street of "the wild west."

Carry Nation wasn’t shy about her calling—she was out to enforce a law banning the sale of liquor, a law prodigiously scorned by small-town constables who, often enough, looked the other way before slamming down a drink or two themselves.

Carrie Nation thought something had to be done. With a mob of loud and righteous women, she picked off the seven local watering holes, one by one, locked up the barkeeps too.

Then she picked up the hatchet she used to break those places up—bars and tables and chairs, I’m not kidding—and lugged that tomahawk down the road to the next watering hole.

Whiskey was a goin’ commodity in the 19th century frontier west. Sell it, trade it, steal it, drink it—customers and thieves, red and white, were never far away.

There were no board rooms or country clubs, so if you wanted to get some work done, saloons were where men set up shop, ubiquitous in Dodge City, Nebraska City, and Sioux City. Whiskey consumption way back when was beyond belief. Hold on to your chair: in the early years of the 19th century, three million U.S. males consumed 60 million gallons of distilled spirits, an average of a half pint per day. For a thousand hot shot males there wasn’t much to do beneath them thar’ hills but fight, gamble and guzzle hootch.

And there was an ocean of booze. Most whiskey production occurred west of the Appalachians, where farmers avoided the high cost of transporting crops by using their corn for homebrew. A bushel of wheat made a gallon of whiskey you could sell for a dollar. It cost more than that to ship it to market.
All that booze eventually created the temperance movement, which closed taps in Maine first of all, in 1851, then in a succession of other states following, including Kansas in 1880.

Carry A. Nation had cause to do what she did, even if her methods were, well, intemperate.

For a time at least, so history claims, Dodge City’s saloons, of which there were many, created their own models for cleaning people up, one of which seems a cartoon but is said to have had marvelous success. “The Dodge City Keeley Cure” required a team, wholesale quantities of booze, and a few dedicated hours of work.

Went like this. The mark—let’s give him a Dodge City name like Hooknose Lou—goes way overboard way too regularly. What’s more, once he’s potted, he thinks he’s Billy the Kid. He’s dangerous.

One night his friends want to cure him, so they get him potted so far he nods off, at which point the boys take Hooknose to jail to sleep but not in a cell.

Listen to this. They whiten his face with powder, dress him in funereal black, stick him in an actual coffin, then position a little mirror above his face so that when old Hooknose wakes up, his friends are standing around murmuring prayers, and he can’t help but notice the death-like pallor of his face. Old Hooknose sits up. His friends feign astonishment at the same time Hooknose screams he’s already begun to mend his ways. His drinking days are over, he says, and he’s going to walk down the straight and narrow. This second chance he’s been given, he says, is a miracle, i’n’t it?

Dodge City Keeley Cure, they called it. Ingenious, don’t you think? Sort of like a 19th century watering hole intervention. High drama.

Just as scary and a darn sight better than those hatchets of the WCTU.