

The Public Dance Halls of Chicago

Revised Edition

Text by

LOUISE DE KOVEN BOWEN



PUBLISHED BY
THE JUVENILE PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION
OF CHICAGO

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211-211

This report was written before the
present Chief of Police took office.

211-211

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Reasons for Undertaking this Investigation

The Juvenile Protective Association has always received so many complaints, regarding dance halls, from mothers whose children were attending these halls, or from neighbors who knew about conditions existing there, that six years ago it first determined upon a thorough investigation.

Number of Dance Halls Investigated and Method Employed

The burden of the work was borne by the regular officers of the Association and other men and women who had had experience in social work. These investigators in 1910 visited practically all the dance halls in Chicago, and every year since then have visited a large number of halls, this year the number being 213. These officers mingled with the men and girls, sat in the saloons, danced in the halls and talked with managers, employees and patrons. Their observations were carefully noted on cards prepared for the purpose and filed daily in the office of the Association.

Majority of Chicago's Dance Halls Controlled by Liquor Interests

Unfortunately, the conditions in the dance halls at the present writing seem to be very much as they were when the first investigation was made in 1910, and show that the public dance halls of Chicago are now, as they were then, largely controlled by the brewery, saloon and vice interests. The recreation of thousands of young people has been commercialized in the interest of the liquor dealers, and as a result hundreds of young girls are annually started on the road to ruin, for the saloon-keepers and dance hall owners have only one end in view and that is profit.

Chicago's Dance Halls Frequently Serve as Feeders for the Underworld

The majority of the dance halls in Chicago, although licensed and open under city regulations, and protected by the presence of city police, do not offer safe or wholesome recreation for young people. They are, in fact, a disgrace to our city and too often feeders for the underworld. In the majority of these halls the state laws and the city ordinances are broken; minors are not only admitted unaccompanied by their parents but liquor is sold to them openly. The proprietors of these dance halls either connive at, or participate in this use of their halls and very little effort is made to protect their young patrons.

**Minors
Rendered
Irresponsible
by Liquor** The conditions existing in the dance halls and in the adjoining saloons transform innocent dancing and social enjoyment into drunkenness, vice and debauchery. Saloon-keepers and prostitutes are in many cases the only chaperones, and in many of the halls even young girls and boys fresh from school are plied with alcohol, and with the suggestion of vice, until dancing ceases to be recreation and becomes flagrant immorality.

**No Drinking
Water to
be had in
Majority of
Dance Halls** At the halls where liquor is sold, practically all of the boys and many of the girls show signs of intoxication by twelve o'clock, possibly because it is almost impossible to get drinking water in these halls, in spite of the fact that a city ordinance provides that every dance hall shall be equipped with drinking water facilities. Not only are there very few drinking fountains, but there are no sanitary cups, and in most instances the water has to be obtained at the bar or taken from a public drinking cup, too filthy to use and only found in the toilet rooms.

**Most Dances
Properly
Conducted
until Liquor
begins to
take Effect** All the investigators report that up to about eleven p. m., generally speaking, the dances are well conducted; the crowd then begins to show the effect of too much liquor. Men and women become intoxicated and dance indecently such dances as "Walkin' the Dog," "On the Puppy's Tail," "Shaking the Shimmy," "The Dip," "The Stationary Wiggle," etc. In some instances, little children—of whom there are often large numbers present—are given liquor and become intoxicated, much to the amusement of their elders. Many of them are forgotten by their parents in the excitement of the dance, and play upon the filthy floor, witnesses of all kinds of degradation.

At most halls the crowds begin drinking their liquor from glasses, then later they take it from bottles and toward the close of the evening it is brought in by cases. One investigator counted one hundred empty cases of beer bottles and a large number of empty cases of wine bottles in one room at a recent North Side dance.

At many dances men wear their hats; they all smoke and expectorate freely. It is not uncommon at certain dances to see between twenty and twenty-five couples between the ages of sixteen and twenty years, very much intoxicated. At one dance the investigator saw four young boys sitting at a table with forty-eight bottles of beer between them; they were all racing to see which one could drink the largest amount. At another dance given in a hall connected with a church, an official was lamenting that the door receipts were very small; another official remarked, "Never mind, the sale of booze will bring in a lot of money."

Decency Often Abandoned Where Liquor is Sold at Dances In many of the halls the crowd is so great and the space for dancing so limited, that the dancers are obliged to stand almost still and go through the motions of dancing only. Couples stand very close together, the girl with her hands around the man's neck, the man with both his arms around the girl or on her hips; their cheeks are pressed close together, their bodies touch each other; the liquor which has been consumed is like setting a match to a flame; they throw aside all restraint and give themselves to unbridled license and indecency. One investigator said, in speaking of a dance, "These young people did not appear vicious but rather like children who, with blood aroused by liquor, their animal spirits fanned to flame by the mad music, simply threw caution and restraint to the winds in a manner they would never do elsewhere. Rigorous supervision and no liquor would have made this dance almost an innocent party."

Desired Co-operation of Policewomen Withheld It was hoped that when women were put upon the police force of Chicago, they would be detailed to public dance halls, thus affording protection to young girls and serving somewhat in the capacity of municipal chaperones. The Juvenile Protective Association has made many efforts to secure this service from the policewomen, but thus far has been unsuccessful, and out of all the halls investigated policewomen were only seen once, and then two of them came in late to watch the dance.

Policemen have no Proper Conception of their Duties in Dance Halls The policemen, as a general rule, seem desirous of rendering good service, but in most cases they do not have a proper conception of their duties, and confine their attention to interfering when fights are in progress, or to occasionally closing the bar at midnight. If the crowd is disorderly the policeman is powerless unless he telephones to his station for reinforcements, as the crowds are often very large, numbering sometimes as many as 1,800 people. In one instance, when a policeman closed a gambling device at a dance hall, the women present, who were much intoxicated, shook their fists in his face and threatened to report him if he did not allow it to be reopened. At this dance, not only the pastor of the church, by whom the dance was given, but many little children, were outrageously drunk.

Raffles at Dances At some dances, raffles are conducted, apparently with the idea that they will add to the popularity of the dance; the articles raffled embrace almost everything from chocolates to a goat; in one instance, the latter was won by a policeman who had been attending the dance in his official capacity.

A Policeman Killed by Patrons of Dance Halls Occasionally, a policeman loses his life in his effort to do his duty. A short time ago a dance was given by a reputable association. After midnight when the saloons in the neighborhood were closed, a group of young men entered the hall, evidently to buy liquor. They became so disorderly that the police officer detailed to the dance ordered the sale of liquor to stop. The young men, in defiance of his order, procured bottles of beer which they freely drank. The police officer arrested one of them, took him to the patrol box on the next corner and called the patrol wagon. While waiting, the friends of the arrested man called upon the officer to release his prisoner. This he refused to do. Suddenly a shot was fired at the officer; he endeavored to defend himself but was again fired upon and fell, mortally wounded, dying a few days later.

Violation of Closing Ordinance In many instances the promoters and officers of the club giving the dance are anxious to preserve order and decency, but after the crowd has drunk freely it is almost impossible to control it. In some halls the bar is ostensibly closed at 3 a. m., and at midnight Saturdays, as required by law, but tickets for wine, beer, etc., can be purchased before that hour and redeemed at the option of the holder as long as the hall is open. In other instances, cases of wine and beer are purchased before midnight and placed under the table for late consumption.

How Dances are Advertised Dances are advertised by "pluggers," bright colored cards with the dance announcement on one side and a popular song, often indecent, on the other. They are distributed in the halls and thus become scattered on the floor. Announcements of future dances are also made at the halls through a megaphone and are greeted with cheers and cat calls; the boys at the tables voice their approval by pounding on the tables and backs of chairs with empty bottles and pieces of broken glass, while young girls sit upon men's laps and allow all kinds of indignities.

Two Classes of Public Dances The dances may be divided into two classes—those given by the management or proprietors of the halls, and those given by clubs and societies. At the former the dangers are more subtle, although the halls are cleaner and better order is observed. Drinks are higher priced but more intoxicating. The patrons are better dressed and there is an assumption of decency, but these halls often serve as a rendezvous for immoral men and women, and crowds of young men attend with the sole idea of meeting girls for immoral purposes. While many of the club dances are well conducted, the majority are openly dangerous, and they are nearly all marked by extreme disorder and open indecency.

Immorality Encouraged by Employees and Habitues of Dance Halls The waiters and employees of the dance halls are only too ready to give information regarding the location of disreputable lodging houses, and in many cases the use of the dance hall premises for immoral purposes is connived at by the management. In these halls new comers are treated with great attention; habitues are polite to young girls. Their first effort is to get the girl intoxicated. Older women, sometimes prostitutes, treat young country boys in the same manner. At one hall it was found that a cash prize of a hundred dollars had been offered to the girl who, at the end of a month, had the largest number of drinks credited to her, in recognition of her ability to persuade men to spend money freely.

City Ordinances Violated Many of the halls have little protection in case of fire, and the overcrowding renders unsafe even those which meet the requirements of the building department.

Many Toilets Not Properly Screened and in Abominable Condition In many halls the toilet rooms for men are reached only by going through the bar, and there is an unwritten code that the man who avails himself of this privilege must spend money for a drink. In some halls the men's toilets are not properly screened from the observation of the dancers, although they are often in a most abominable condition.

Thirst Induced by Exercise, Heat and Dust There is but little ventilation. In some cases the windows are boarded up, apparently on the theory that the hotter it is the more thirst is superinduced and the more liquor sold. Even in the halls where the windows are open, the odor of the overheated people, mingled with the tobacco smoke and the fumes from the spilled liquor on the floor, tables and chairs, make the air unbearable. The dust arising from the floor caused by the moving feet and swirling skirts of the dancers is so thick that it makes breathing both difficult and dangerous.

Indecent Dressing at Masquerades. Liquor Given as Prizes The greatest dangers are to be found in connection with masquerade and fancy dress balls, where the costumes often permit the most indecent dressing, many girls attending in male attire, and where prizes are awarded for the best costumes. These prizes consist of cheap jewelry, perfumes, cigars and liquor, donated by the neighboring tradesmen. A barrel of beer is usually awarded to the best group of men, and six bottles of port wine to the best group of girls. A quart of whiskey is often the prize for the best single costume.

Primary Purpose of Many Dances Sale of Liquor, not Recreation The report of the Chicago Commission on the Liquor Problem recently issued, gives 718 saloons having connection to rooms or halls in which dancing is permitted. The saloon-keeper lives and thrives by the sale of liquor, consequently the dances are short, four to five minutes; the intermissions are long, fifteen to forty-five minutes, thus giving ample opportunity for drinking. In the halls where liquor is not sold, the intermissions are short and the dances long. Is not this a proof of the real purpose of the saloon dance?

Demoralization of Unsophisticated Girls In these same halls obscene language is permitted and even the girls among the habitués carry on indecent conversation, using much profanity, while the less sophisticated girls stand around listening, scandalized but fascinated.

Mode of Procedure when Dance is Given in Hall Unconnected with Saloon In dance halls which do not have connection with saloons, the method of selling liquor is as follows: The dance hall keeper procures a government license for which he pays \$25 a year. When a club applies for permission to rent the hall, which the law says may be rented to any association "organized for fraternal, educational or charitable purposes," the dance hall keeper goes with the representative of the club, or loans him his government license, and with this they secure a special bar permit for which they pay six dollars each time. This special bar permit allows the sale of liquor from three o'clock in the afternoon until three

Liquor Sold at Dance Halls After Saloons are Closed o'clock the next morning; under our city ordinance saloons are obliged to close at one a. m. If, therefore, there are any disreputable people in the neighborhood between the hours of one and three a. m. who wish to buy liquor, they get it from these dance halls, although a city ordinance forbids the sale of admission tickets to dance halls after 1 a. m., and it is between 1 and 3 a. m. that the conduct of the dancers becomes obnoxious and that the dangers for young people are most apparent.

Flagrant Violation of Bar Permit Ordinance Our city ordinances require that no organization or individual shall be granted a special bar permit more than six times during the year, and yet the Juvenile Protective Association has evidence showing that organizations frequently secure three or four times this number in one year. In 1914, 5,601 special bar permits were secured; in 1915, 3,650, and from May, 1916, to February, 1917, 2,673 were secured. Over one hundred permits are issued each week in Chicago during the winter.

In the latter part of 1914 an attempt was made to pass an ordinance in the City Council which prohibited the sale of liquor in any dance hall. There was so much objection to this ordinance on the part of aldermen representing foreign-born constituencies that a compromise ordinance was introduced and passed in April, 1915. This ordinance provides that great care must be taken in the issuance of special bar permits; that application for such permits must be made fifteen days before the date on which the entertainment is to be given and that it must contain the names and addresses of the officers of the club seeking the permit; that the City Collector must keep posted in his office a list of such applicants; that any citizen may file an objection to the issuance of the permit within five days of the entertainment; that a bond of \$3,000 must be given with every application for a permit; that if any objectionable feature occurs at the enter-

**Great
Laxness in
Issuing of
Special Bar
Permits**

tainment, it can be reported within five days by any citizen, and if this complaint is sustained when investigated by the second deputy of police, the officers of the organization can be held accountable. So carelessly, however, have permits been issued that in one case the man in whose name the permit was granted had been dead for several weeks. The result of this great laxness is that many bar permits are granted without investigation to "fly-by-night" clubs who have no financial or moral standing, sometimes to organizations without even an address, and again to several individuals who have combined for the purpose of giving a dance solely to make money.

**Some Permits
Obtained by
"Pull" when
Impossible to
Secure them
Otherwise**

It sometimes happens that after investigation, the police refuse to grant a special bar permit. For instance, in one case they refused a permit to a certain club because at one of their previous dances two young girls had been outraged. The officers of the club then secured the services of the alderman of their ward who interceded for them with the chief of police, and a permit was granted by him over the heads of the police committee which made the investigation.

**440 Licensed
Dance Halls
in Chicago.
As Many
More Small
Halls With-
out Licenses**

The License Bureau gives 440 licensed dance halls in Chicago, but it is probable that in reality there are twice that number, as many small halls connected with saloons are used for dancing but are not licensed.

Some of the clubs seeking the special bar permits have a wide range of names, viz.: "The Put Away Trouble Club," "The Merry Widows," "The Fleet Foot Dance Club," "The Gladiators," "The White Rose Benevolent Association," "The Dill Pickle Club," and "The Fraternal Order of Eagles."

**Permanent
Improvement
Can Only be
Effected by
Drastic
Legislation**

The Juvenile Protective Association is convinced that there are fewer disreputable dances given than formerly, but it has been most discouraging to find so little improvement has taken place during six years in the public dance halls. While the Association has reported many cases to the police and has on record some improvements which were made at the time of the complaint, conditions in many of the halls have gradually slipped back again to where they were six years ago. For example, at a certain dance hall in 1911, toward the end of a dance, when every one was much intoxicated, a man passed through the hall calling out, "Goods rooms for rent at ——— Hotel." An investigator of the Association only this winter found the same hotel being advertised for the same disreputable purpose. Some flagrant abuses have been corrected from time to time, but comparing our latest reports with our earlier ones, we are convinced that no real permanent improvement has been effected. Much more could doubtless be accomplished by better co-operation from the police, but the Association is thoroughly convinced that more drastic legislation is needed.

**Almost Im-
possible to
Convict a
Dance Hall
Keeper**

The first investigation made by the Association was in 1910, when 278 dances were attended and 328 halls visited. In the winter of 1912-13 the Association kept six investigators busy visiting the public dance halls of Chicago, and began a campaign against the proprietors who were most flagrantly breaking the laws designed for the protection of young people, bringing many of them into court and charging them with the sale of liquor to minors. In three instances the Association upon request furnished social workers to supervise Italian dance halls, and these workers were paid by the proprietors of the halls. This experiment proved a success and the halls so supervised became thoroughly respectable. In cases where suits were brought against proprietors of halls, it was very difficult to obtain a conviction as most of the proprietors asked for jury trials. The Association finally reluctantly gave up this method of procedure, and during the following winter of 1914-15 it sent its investigators into fifty of the worst halls in the city, and made complaints to the chief of police when these halls were not well conducted.

**History of
two Investi-
gations**

In the winter of 1916-17 the Association secured from the License Bureau of the City Hall a list of clubs who applied for special bar permits. A letter was then written to the official representing the club requesting the permit. This letter asked that he communicate with the Association, as it was desirable that the dance about to be given should be properly managed. In a

large number of cases the officials who had applied for special bar permits called at the office of the Association and promised compliance with its requests. Two hundred and thirteen dances given under special bar permits were investigated at this time and 35 of that number were reported to the chief of police. A much larger number were disreputable, owing to the amount of liquor drunk and its effect on the crowds, but they could not be reported as no overt violations of law were discovered. The investigation this year, as previously stated, was confined to special bar permit dances, and the Association selected for investigation only those dances which it felt might be dangerous for young people.

The following tabular statement summarizes the investigation made by the Juvenile Protective Association in 1910-11 and 1916-17:

DANCES ATTENDED

	1910-11	Percentage of total	1916-17	Percentage of total
Number of dances attended.....	278	..	213	..
Of these				
There were minors present at.....	146	53	193	91
There was indecent conduct at.....	187	67	118	55
There was considerable intoxication at...	...	..	144	68
Whiskey was sold at.....	...	..	50	23
There were fights at.....	...	..	50	23
There were reported to the Chicago Chief of Police for definite violations.....	...	..	35	16

POLICE CONDUCT

	1910-11	Percentage of total	1916-17	Percentage of total
The number of police on duty.....	202	..	424	..
Of these				
The number who can be said to have rendered good service.....	17	8	155	37
The number rendering poor service.....	134	61	182	43
There were seen drinking.....	6	3	106	25
Guilty of improper conduct other than drinking	2	1	35	8

HALLS VISITED

	1910-11	Percentage of total	1916-17	Percentage of total
The number of halls visited.....	328	..	213	..
Poorly ventilated	170	52	91	43
Permitting immoral dancing.....	187	57	127	60
Selling liquor	240	73	205	97
With drinking fountains .....	...	..	24	10

Do not these investigations make clear that we should have more stringent regulations regarding dance halls? Kansas City has established a Department of Public Welfare and part of the business of that department is to supervise the dance halls of the city and see that they comply with the regulations established for their conduct. Cleveland has passed a revised dance hall ordinance which, properly enforced, will eliminate from the dance halls all objectionable features and provide decent amusement for its patrons.

**Sale of
Liquor in
Dance Halls
Prohibited
by City Or-
dinance in
Other Cities.
Why Not
Chicago?**

The sale of liquor in dance halls or in premises where dance halls are located, is prohibited by city ordinance or state law not only in Kansas City and Cleveland, but in Pittsburg, Cincinnati, Columbus, Detroit, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Duluth and Portland, Oregon.

**38 Mayors
of Illinois
Towns
Strongly
Oppose the
Sale of
Liquor in
Dance Halls**

With a view to finding out how many Illinois cities with a population of over 5,000 were having trouble with their dance halls on account of the sale of liquor, the Field Secretary of the Juvenile Protective Association wrote to sixty-two cities, sending a questionnaire to the mayors and asking if they were in favor of liquor being sold in dance halls. Thirty-eight replies were received to this questionnaire and the 38 mayors all expressed themselves as decidedly against the sale of liquor in dance halls. Twenty-four of these replies came from cities in dry territory and practically every one of these mayors said that they had no dance halls so were not confronted with this problem. The 14 mayors presiding over wet towns all replied that they were decidedly against the sale of liquor in dance halls.

**Urgent Ne-
cessity for
State Law
Forbidding
the Sale of
Liquor in
Dance Halls**

The Juvenile Protective Association feels that there should be a state law forbidding the sale of liquor in dance halls. The experience of the Association shows clearly that the evils of the public dance hall are largely the result of the liquor consumed by its patrons. The Association therefore has prepared the following bill which has been introduced at the present session of the Legislature. It is hoped that all those who are interested in the welfare of boys and girls and who really care that they may have the innocent enjoyment, such as is afforded by dancing, without the dangers attendant on the use of liquor, will work for the passage of this Bill:

Your Help in
Securing the
Passage of
this Act most
Earnestly
Entreated

"A BILL FOR AN ACT TO FORBID THE SALE, GIFT AND USE OF INTOXICATING LIQUORS IN ANY PLACE WHILE IT IS USED FOR A PUBLIC DANCING OR SKATING ENTERTAINMENT, AND IN ROOMS AND PLACES PRACTICALLY ACCESSIBLE FROM SUCH PLACE, AND TO PROVIDE A PENALTY FOR VIOLATION OF THIS ACT.

Section I. Be it enacted by the People of the State of Illinois, represented in the General Assembly: That it shall be unlawful to offer, serve, sell or consume any intoxicating drink during any public dancing or skating entertainment as defined in this act (1) in any room, hall, pavilion or rink used for dancing or skating or (2) in any other place practically accessible, without travel over a public street, from such room, hall, pavilion or rink.

Section II. Every assemblage where more than four people dance or skate at the same time and in the same room, hall, pavilion or rink shall be deemed a public entertainment and shall be subject to the provisions of this act (1) if open to the public generally or (2) if admission thereto may be had by payment of money or anything of value or by purchase, possession or presentation of any ticket or token or (3) if a charge be made at such entertainment for caring for clothing or for any service other than of food or drink.

Section III. Whoever (being a corporation or a natural person) as an owner, agent or lessee of real estate used for or in connection with such a public entertainment or as a giver or proprietor of such a public entertainment or as an officer of a club, corporation or association giving such a public entertainment or as a sole assistant or associate manager thereof, shall violate or permit the violation of Section I of this Act shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and shall, for each offense, be fined not to exceed \$200.00; and every giver, proprietor, officer or sole assistant or associate manager of any such public entertainment shall be responsible in law for every violation of this Act occurring at or in connection with that public entertainment, whether such violation occur with or without his knowledge."