

The Carrie Nation-Bob Neighbors Incident

For Elizabethtown resident J. Robert Neighbors, Friday, July 22, 1904 dawned just like most of the other days in his life. However, as the day wore on he was to find himself propelled into history by a woman he had never even met. J.R. Neighbors was the proprietor of the saloon on Main Cross Street (now known as East Dixie Avenue) in downtown Elizabethtown. The event that was to change his life profoundly began with the arrival on the early – morning train of Mrs. Carrie Nation.

Carry Amelia Moore Nation, or Carrie Nation, as she came to be known, was born on November 25, 1846, in Gerrard County, Kentucky to George Moore, a prosperous plantation owner, and Mary Campbell. As an adult she was quite an imposing figure standing nearly 6 feet tall and weighing 180 pounds. Carrie Nation failed twice at marriage, moved to Missouri, Texas and finally to Kansas where she helped organize the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and served as jail evangelist, taught Sunday school, and attended to the poor and needy. In 1900, Divine inspiration called her, to target alcoholic drink. Nation, who described herself as "a bulldog running along at the feet of Jesus, barking at what he doesn't like," felt divinely ordained to forcefully promote



Carrie Nation

temperance. A brief marriage to an alcoholic in the late 1800's fueled Nation's disdain for alcohol. Kiowa, Kansas was the setting of Nation's first outburst of destruction in the name of temperance in 1900. Between 1900 and 1910 she was arrested some 30 times after leading her followers in the destruction of one water hole after another with cries of "Smash, ladies, smash!" Carry was urged by people from other Kansas counties and other parts of the country to "save their towns from saloons. "She promptly obliged, using stones and bricks wrapped in newspaper (later an iron rod strapped to her cane) before taking up the hatchet. Self-righteous and formidable, Nation mocked her opponents as "rum-soaked, whiskey-swilled, saturn-faced rummies." Even Carry's enemies were compelled to acknowledge her extraordinary methods had produced definite and concrete results. In less than six months she did more to enforce prohibition laws than had been accomplished by churches and temperance organizations. Mrs. Nation came to Elizabethtown to further her cause after having just carried on her crusade in Mayfield, KY.

Immediately after arriving, she arranged overnight accommodations at the Berry House, a rooming house located between Mr. Neighbors' place of business and the L. & N. Railroad. Her next chore was to seek out Charlie Warren, the agent of the Opera House, a large auditorium, to reserve the hall for a lecture that

evening. During the course of the morning, Mrs. Nation plodded along the streets of the town clutching a Bible and a hatchet. She passed Neighbors' saloon several times, stopping each time and to give him a tongue-lashing on the evils of the whiskey business.

She then retired to her room to rest from her journey until time to depart for Cecilia, where she was scheduled to deliver a lecture at 2 p.m. following that rally, she returned to Elizabethtown for her evening speaking engagement. While en route from the Berry House to the Opera House, she entered the saloon of Mr. Neighbors with hatchet and Bible in hand. The proprietor having heard of her violent exploits in breaking up saloons in Kansas ordered her out at once. She then continued her journey to the Opera House where she made a fiery address to a large and appreciative audience. Her lecture as a whole was sound, and most of those present agreed with her. However in her address, she advocated that in some instances people were justified in disregarding the law in their vigorous campaign to rid the country of the scourge of liquor. The audience was the largest ever assembled in Elizabethtown for either a lecture or a theatrical performance. The hall was packed; the seating capacity soon taken up; and even standees were crowded. For some time after her address, she sold lapel hatchet pins to supporters.

While Mrs. Nation was lecturing, several mischievous boys around town jokingly informed Mr. Neighbors that Mrs. Nation had said she would make her next address within his café. As she returned to her room, Mrs. Nation passed in front of the saloon and said to Mr. Neighbors who was setting out in front, "You are running a dirty business here!" At that, Neighbors picked up a chair and hit her twice with it, one time on the forehead and again on the arm and shoulder. The wound on the forehead bled profusely. She was taken to the Berry House, where her lacerations were dressed by two local doctors.

Contrary to expectations, Mrs. Nation did not condemn Neighbors for striking her, but used the incident as a weapon against the whisky traffic. She was heard praying for him after her wounds were dressed.

Mrs. Nation declined to prosecute Mr. Neighbors. However, Mrs. E. T. James of Elizabethtown, who witnessed the incident, swore out a warrant for assault and battery against Mr. Neighbors early the following morning. Mrs. Nation was detained by this action, so much so that she had to cancel her speaking engagement in Midway, Kentucky scheduled for that day.

While his action in sudden heat and passion could not be condoned, Mr. Neighbors was not all bad. He did possess a high temper, which he did not always control. However, he was engaged in a legal business, one that the voters of the town permitted him to carry on. Having been told that Mrs. Nation had threatened to come into that business to smash things up, he reacted predictable when she approached. Nevertheless, immediately afterwards he cried like a baby and said he was sorry. Mrs. Nation's injuries were slight when compared to the mental anguish her assailant suffered.

The incident served to greatly agitate the people of Elizabethtown and Hardin County. Local ministers spoke out against Neighbors and the liquor traffic in general. Early the next week, a petition was circulated calling for an election to outlaw the sale of whiskey in the town. Ninety signatures were necessary to cause the matter to be submitted to the voters, which amounted to twenty-five percent of the votes cast in the preceding election. The necessary signatures were obtained; the petition was submitted to the court; and the election set for October 4, 1904. The most recent local option election prior to that time had been held on December 10, 1892, when 315 votes were cast in the town, and the "wets" prevailed by majority of 47.

The dry forces conducted a vigorous campaign. In addition to ministers and other church leaders, The Elizabethtown News, the leading local newspaper, was a strong proponent of the anti-saloon cause. H.A. Sommers, owner of the paper, campaigned tirelessly both personally and through his paper. It was his position that the voters, not the saloonkeepers, were most at fault for the ills brought about by liquor, including the injury of Mrs. Nation. By their failure to vote against legal sales, citizens permitted saloons to flourish; they were allowed by law, and men had a right to operate them.

Many arguments were advanced and refuted on the pages of the Elizabethtown News, as the editor waged his campaign for prohibition. It was argued by some that the loss of revenue from the saloon would result in an increase in property taxes in the town. Mr. Sommers patiently explained on his editorial page that, since the tax rate in Elizabethtown was already set at the maximum permitted by law, under no circumstances would taxes be raised.

Another argument was that there was a reluctance of the county to come to town to trade and to send their children to the local school. Prohibitionists predicted that, as soon as the saloons were abolished, there would be an increase in trade, school enrollment, residential building, and in population.

In the election held on the liquor question on October 4, 1904, the vote was 218 favoring legal sales and 191 against. The margin of 27 votes at first may seem rather narrow, however, the town was small then, women could not vote, and for that time, the whiskey majority was regarded as fairly substantial.

J.R. Neighbors eventually gave up his career as a saloonkeeper; however he did not do so immediately, as on September 16, 1904, the City Council granted saloon licenses for the next six months to him and four local persons. At the November, 1904, term of the Hardin Circuit Court, J.R. Neighbors was indicted by the grand jury for assault and battery for striking Carrie Nation over the head with a chair upon the streets of Elizabethtown. Trial was held on March 8, 1905 and as a result, Mr. Neighbors was fined \$15. 00.

Neighbors later disposed of his interest in the saloon and engaged in the harness and saddlery business. He suffered a stroke of paralysis at his home in the early

morning of May 13, 1911 that affected his entire right side. Nevertheless, he insisted upon being driven to his store. While sitting outside about 9 o'clock, he was seized with a second and more serious attack. He lingered near death at his home until he died on May 27th.

According to his obituary in The Elizabethtown News, he had been in failing health for several years. The source also stated that Neighbors was born near Buckles Mill in Hardin County (now between White Mills and Sonora on Nolin River). He removed to Nolin as a youth and resided there until early manhood, when he came to Elizabethtown. He served one term as town marshal. His widow, Mrs. Elizabeth McDermott Neighbors, survived him by some twenty-seven years.

Sources:

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