

This Matter of Vice – It Boils Down Merely To Supply Meeting Demand

People Blame Police..... Police Blame People

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By Benny C. Sands

Is Johnson City as vice-ridden as it has been pictured?

Note: This article is in response to the naming of Johnson City as one of the “Hot Spots for Vice in the U.S” by Look Magazine.

“No,” say a number of ministers and social workers and other substantial citizens, with a clear tone of optimism ringing through their obviously unqualified replies.

“Yes,” reply those best qualified to draw a factual picture – the police.

To get at the base of the answer, if we want the facts, we have to get at the base of the question, the meaning of the word *vice*.

What then is vice and how does it apply in Johnson City?

Webster’s Dictionary defines “vice” as “a moral fault or failing, especially immoral conduct or habit, as in the indulgence of degrading appetites, as the vice of gluttony.”

Throughout the Bible, we are warned against over-indulgence in anything, not necessarily liquor, but food as well. There is a time for work, and a time for play, and a time to be happy and a time to be sad. In short, the Bible teaches that there is a time and place for all things, and that over-indulgence in any one of them should be guarded against.

Police, who constantly come face to face with vice in its most brazen forms, have therefore a much broader and yet a closer, definition of vice and its import in Johnson City. They must, and do, look upon vice from the practical standpoint.

“Our big problem in Johnson City is not commercialized prostitution, bootlegging, and gambling,” says veteran vice-fighter **Tom Howell**, police chief. Much of this has been suppressed, he said.

“Our big problem is the street walkers, transients and youngsters who hang out at a few shady beer taverns and end up breaking into homes and robbing people.”

Chief Howell said police over the years **have had little trouble resulting from established bootlegging places, professional prostitutes or professional gamblers.**

He explained that established bootleggers handling bonded liquor take care that they do not sell to drunks, juveniles and persons of questionable character, lest it might lead to their discovery. Police, therefore, must search out the bootlegger, who makes his way selling to “the better class of people.” And one bootlegger said recently “you’d be surprised to know I’ve sold liquor to preachers here.”

And while it doubtless is morally wrong, commercialized prostitution has caused little or no trouble in Johnson City, police say. Prior to establishment of the vice squad in November, authorities knew of some 25 known prostitutes who operated professionally in Johnson City, and when they were caught they were fined. Now, authorities said there are only one or two of those 25 remaining in the city. But police say few if any robberies, break-ins, acts of vandalism or injury to person occurred at the instigation of or because of a professional prostitute. Like the cautious bootlegger, the professional prostitute guards against being caught, and against disease, and concentrates on her monetary goal. Accordingly, she doesn’t have time to walk streets, meet male companions at shady taverns, drink beer and liquor for several hours during the night. It’s too much time to waste on one person, and she depends on the quick turnover, said police.

And oddly enough, police insist that they have had little or no trouble from the professional gamblers. These persons have had to be searched out, and more often than not were “smart enough to make a quick switch before police arrived,” Howell said.

“Since they are that smart, they are smart enough to know their crowds, and they don’t cater to questionable characters, would-be robbers and drunks,” the

chief pointed out. Instead, their patrons are persons of reasonable means, and persons who can afford to lose their money.

Summing up, Chief Howell said police rarely receive complaints about fighting from professional prostitutes, professional bootleggers and professional gamblers. Rarely if ever do police get calls from these sources on drunks, vagrants or other offenses, for such isn't permitted by the professionals.

“Bootlegging” is Not Vice

Looking at it broadly, police consider this reasoning. Bootlegging, while illegal, **is not necessarily vice.** In Nashville, where liquor stores are legal, many owners are highly respected persons in their communities, although their wares if over-indulged in can produce vice. The selling and drinking of liquor are not necessarily vice, **unless over-indulged** in to the extent that the person so doing lowers his or her moral standard. The illegality of liquor here does not necessarily make the selling of it a vice. It is merely the violation of a man-made law, not necessarily the lowering of a moral standard, hence vice, say police.

Owners of gambling halls in Nevada and other areas where gambling is legalized are looked upon there as highly respectable citizens, even though an over-indulgence in that type of business by one who can't afford it might constitute the lowering of his moral standard, hence vice. So if it isn't vice in Nevada, why should it be vice here?

Police contend that when persons assume a low moral standard they are apt to indulge in break-ins, burglary, robberies, murder and other crimes. That's what causes crime, say police.

In the investigating of these crimes in Johnson City, Chief Howell said the origin is **rarely ever traced to a pint of bonded liquor** sold by a professional bootlegger, or the professional gambler, or a professional prostitute. Crime after crime begins in the shady tavern, where women and men of low moral fiber congregate, drink beer, consume fuzzy pills or other substances. Crime starts from the hip pocket of **pocket bootleggers peddling low grade white liquor** (*moonshine*) on the streets to low classed individuals who have little or no moral character, Howell contends. If a man has moral character, it wouldn't permit him to commit crimes as a rule, Howell maintains.

So the problem is not with the professional gambler, the professional prostitute, and professional bootlegger when it comes to vice. Each of these protects his interests, catering only to persons of responsibility, say police. The problem is with the street walker, the girl who never lights long enough to be caught. The problem arises when the street-walker, out for a good time, comes into contact with the over-indulger in a shady tavern, and they drink again and again and plot a robbery or break-in.

Over-Indulgers Can Be Tabbed

Among this class, say police, are many teenagers, who in this generation have found it socially desirable to drink.

The police, says Howell, **can keep their fingers** on the professional bootleggers, gamblers and prostitutes, but the whirlwind surrounding the streetwalkers and transients makes it impossible to pin that down. Consequently, it continues, and it grows, and we have crime as a result. **That's vice and it is very real and very present in Johnson City, say police.**

Teen-ager "Pete Jones," a student, presents a typical example of the situation in Johnson City by reason of his viewpoints expressed in his letter to the editor in Sunday's paper.

He admitted he deliberately went to a hotel for feminine pleasure, and bought liquor from a cab driver and **then blames police** because he was able to do so. It is rare that persons arrested by police for doing the same have turned around and thanked the officers for arresting them. Likewise, police ventured that had young Jones been one of the unlucky ones to have been caught in the act by police, he would have hummed a different tune.

Now young Jones is a church-goer, as he admits, and he appears to be alarmed about vice in Johnson City. And while he thinks the whole fault lies with the authorities and police he certainly doesn't say the police twisted his arm and escorted him to the hotel and to the cab driver for the liquor.

Police, therefore, feel that vice in Johnson City reduces down to morality, not laws of men. They look at the strict meaning of the word "vice."

Why should the people blame police? Why should the people blame public officials, the former administration or the present, or the future? The police and public officials can rightfully turn around and blame the people.

It amounts to this: If no one in Johnson City drank alcoholic beverages, there would be no beer taverns or bootleggers. But since a great portion of them drink such beverages, there are many beer parlors and a number of bootleggers who sell a lot of liquor. If no one gambled in Johnson City, there would be no gambling halls, for they can't exist on their health. But the fact that there are some indicates that there are enough patrons interested in that pastime to make its way in Johnson City. By the same token, some 25 professional prostitutes found it financially sound to set up shop in Johnson City, or they would have looked elsewhere.

But all of this could hardly be called vice in the viewpoint of vice authorities here, because it involves the moral standard of the people themselves. If the people want much of it, they'll have it. If they want none of it, they'll have that too, depending upon where they choose to draw that line of demarcation on moral standards.

“Other Line” Below Standards

And then there's that other line far below the terms of moral standards, that class of people who know not the meaning of the term. They're the street-walkers, the vagrants, the loiterers, who bide their time in the shady taverns and dark alleyways to plot acts of violence and acts against the peace.

Since they're liable to be found anywhere about the streets, these people are likely to seek companionship among just anyone who drops his moral standards. You may never know when you're sitting next to one of these, and that goes for teen-agers and school kids. **In short, these characters will find you if you let them.** But the other class, the professional bootleggers, the professional gamblers, the professional prostitutes – **you have to go to them.** It's all up to you. You have either to go there or stay away.

In terms of figures, it looks like this: From January through November of 1951, police **arrested 164 persons** on charges of commercialized vice, that is, prostitution. But they had to go out and raid to do that. They had to search it out. But during the same period, they arrested **232 on charges of vagrancy**

and loitering, and they did that and even after hauling them in right and left, it still flourishes. But commercialized vice, prostitution has dropped off to practically, “nil.”

So there are the battle lines. Certainly there can be on progress made so long as the people blame the police and the police blame the people, while the clergymen and social workers shrug it off with the inane and optimistic reply “things can’t be as bad as they sound.”

Since it is a moral problem, obviously it is rich territory for the clergymen, some of whom, living sheltered lives as they do, choose to assume “things just can’t be as bad as that.”

Many people, by their patronage, have signified they want to drink liquor, gamble, drink beer and seek women in Johnson City, or there wouldn’t be these types of businesses in Johnson City. It’s up to the clergymen or anyone else to convince the people these indulgences are wrong, if they are to be considered vice. It’s a matter of education, not intimidation by police. Thirty-five policemen cannot fight hundreds and hundreds of patrons with any hopes of winning to the end that they could ever “close up the town.” So long as the people patronize these businesses, the most the police can hope to do is drive it behind closed doors, which apparently they’ve succeeded in doing. Meanwhile, the transient element, the real and most serious threat, continues to flourish. They’re the street walkers and the characters who loiter in some shady taverns, drinking, and dreaming up ways of making money without working for it.

Magazine Missed Its Shot

Obviously then, the magazine (*Look Magazine*) missed its shot if it came to Johnson City to picture it as a vice-ridden city, based on prostitution. And if the magazine had widened its study to include professional bootlegging and professional gambling, it still could not have painted Johnson City as a vice-ridden city, within the true meaning of the word “vice.” Had investigators searched out and epitomized the other element, the transients and street-walkers, they could have painted a sordid picture of vice in Johnson City as the police see it. These “floaters” don’t get to the churches, but many of the patrons of the professionals are to be found in church religiously, say police. They’re not beyond the voice of the preacher.