

21-Only; A Bit of History

Now that conservative community killjoys like me have failed to have our way with the 21-only ordinance, it's time for a little perspective.

When I was a little kid in the late 50's and early 60's, adults had to expend some effort to buy liquor – not like today when you can toss it into your grocery cart with the gluten-free bread and soy milk. The state of Iowa had a monopoly on hard liquor sales back then, and it sold everything through its own retail stores.

My dad (for some reason) would take me with him to buy his Jim Beam bourbon. Everyone had to fill out a tiny order form on oversized wood desks that had a large changeable-letter sign over them, showing the names and pricing of everything available. Next, he handed his order sheet to the guys behind the counter so they could pull the bottles off the shelves behind them.

While this was going on, my little brother and I would sit on the floor under the standing-height desks and play with the weights on the end of the strings that went through the holes in the desks and attached to the pencils so they wouldn't wander off. We loved the liquor store.

The mystique was such that I spent most of my adolescence looking forward to turning 21. Back then, drivers licenses were printed on untreated white card stock (no photo), which could be easily altered by anyone with a bottle of Liquid Paper and a manual typewriter. Any idiot (I was exhibit A) could create a pretty good forgery, although I was too nervous to use it much.

Then - with almost perfect timing - the Iowa Legislature lowered the legal drinking age from 21 (where it had been for eons) to age 19 on July 1, 1972, when I was 18 years and 10 months old.

I remember my first legal beer purchase that year, on September 14 - my 19th birthday. The Annex was a popular downtown bar then, and I strode in

confidently and ordered a draw of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I had my hand on my wallet, itching to flash my I.D. to the bartender, but I was bitterly disappointed when he didn't bother to card me.

In an ongoing fit of legislative A.D.D., the Iowa Legislature lowered the legal age to 18 a year later (7/1/73), then raised it back to 19 on 7/1/78 and back again to 21 on 7/1/86.

Not that it matters anymore, but I held my nose and voted for the 21-only ordinance this week. Funny, if I was 18 or 19 there's no doubt in my mind that I would have lobbied energetically against it.

That's a little disconcerting, because I like to think that I consistently put community wellbeing first. I guess I do, as long as it doesn't interfere with my own selfish pleasures.

Speaking of which, I had a refresher in underage drinking a couple of weeks ago before the Michigan State game. The Friday night before every home game, a bunch of Hawkeye Marching Band members get together and make a circuit of many of the downtown bars. They play the Iowa Fight Song, sing other Big 10 fight songs with horribly profane lyrics, and chant, "The band plays for beer!"

That's pretty much what the Alumni Band does after every homecoming parade as well, so I felt uniquely qualified to join them. I was at least 30 years older than every one of the 25 or so musicians that showed up that evening. I felt like the uninvited chaperone, but they let me tag along with my slide trumpet.

The first official stop was The Que. Despite my assurance to bouncer at the door that "It's okay, they're with me," everyone who went inside had to show an I.D. of some kind. We did the usual playing and singing – although I had to mumble the really dirty parts of the Michigan Fight song. Pretty soon, plastic cups of free beer were distributed, passed from one person to the next in a room so full of people there was no way to determine where it was all ending up.

I noticed that a group of band members didn't come inside, so I went out and asked a random girl (holding a cornet) why. To her credit, she avoided saying "Duh," and said instead, "Under age."

"Don't you have a fake I.D.?" I asked. (I'm low on tact when I'm drinking). "Yes," she replied, "But I don't like to use it. This is only a problem at The Que and 808, anyway." I should mention here that there are certainly many other bars where it would also be a problem but I'm sure those aren't on the regular "circuit."

The moral of this story is that kids who want to drink are going to find a way to do so – no surprise there. Argue with me if you want, but the easier you make it for them, the more of it you're going to see.

Maybe the ultimate solution is to go back to the way it used to be and run everything through state liquor stores. If you're underage, I recommend playing with the counterweights on the strings.