

6. WHERE DID IT BEGIN?

Today is now; tomorrow it is history and part of an historians job, apart from research into the past, is to place on record events and lifestyles of today for information of people of tomorrow.

To my mind one such subject relates to today's drug, drinking and smoking scene, especially among young people, and by comparison what I and my contemporaries knew of about them three quarters of a century ago.

As a student at Wollongong High school during the 1914-18 war I am sure that I and my schoolmates had little or no knowledge of drug taking other than being told that a few doctors injected morphia into their veins because they had access to it and the necessary needles. Cocaine we knew was used by dentists as a local anaesthetic. Glue or petrol sniffing was unheard of and in any case glue was a foul smelling substance obtained by boiling down cows' hooves and petrol would

have been difficult to obtain; aerosol sprays were yet to be invented.

We were also told that "Chinamen" smoked opium in so-called opium dens; also Indian hawkers travelled the countryside in horse drawn vans and I remember them smoking a sweet smelling herb in Hookahs or "hubble-bubbles" which probably was hashish.

The first real knowledge that we had of drug taking was in a Frank Sinatra film entitled "The man with the Golden Arm" dealing with the American drug scene.

The matter of alcohol goes back to the First Fleet and the early years of the colony when, in the absence of coinage, grog was the medium of exchange and payment and the community floated on a sea of rum. I have a slight connection with that era as my g.g. grandfather, Major George Johnston was commandant of the so-called Rum Corps, the military garrison in Sydney.

Then in the mid-fifties there came in many quarters an almost puritanical swing against alcohol; most large towns had active temperance societies with temperance halls often being the largest community building in town.

All boys leaving primary school at Albion Park were asked by our headmaster to sign a form issued by the NSW Temperance Society in which we undertook not to touch strong drink before age twenty-one. We were known as "Blue Ribbon Boys" and most of us took the matter seriously, in my case I reached age twenty-four before having trying a beer.

Drinking was more prevalent among the Irish community and I remember wakes being held over the coffin of a dear departed with much grog flowing and accompanying fisticuffs as a result.

Many families bought one bottle of port wine each year from the poet Jack Moses, author of "The Dog Sat On the Tuckerbox", who earned a crust by touring country shows on behalf of a wine companies a salesman. This was kept for special occasions only or for making wine trifle desserts.

I think we all had an introduction to smoking with experimental trials of tea leaves wrapped in brown paper and curls of bark from eucalyptus trees. Cigarettes could be bought for one penny each but this was beyond the scope of our meagre pocket money. These sickening episodes put many of us off smoking ever after.

Back in those days young people were under much tighter parental control, especially in country districts where there were so many after-school chores to be attended to, the term "peer group" was unknown, there were no discos and youth centres, hotels closed at six o'clock, this was strictly enforced by the police who generally took up a position across the road from a pub and woe betide the publican who did not have the bar empty and door closed right on the hour and who, worse still, allowed a teenager into the bar. The occasional lad showing signs of drink would be given a thump over the ear or a kick in the pants and told to stay out of town for several months, or else. It would be inviting a claim for damages for assault for police to act in that manner today.

The youth of today might regard our life-style of sixty years ago as boring and humdrum but I am sure that we were happier and with no fears for the future, an attitude so very prevalent today.

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