Carry A. Nation

The most well-known temperance advocate was a Kansan who promised to Carry A. Nation for Prohibition. She had an imposing presence with hatchet in hand, and a savvy marketing sense that afforded an international stage.

Carrie Moore was born in Kentucky and raised in Missouri where she helped nurse soldiers during the Civil War. After the war she married a Union doctor and soon discovered he was an alcoholic. He died shortly after their daughter was born. Carry turned to school teaching before marrying David Nation. They moved to Texas to operate a cotton plantation; when it failed he worked as a reporter; she managed hotels and conducted weekly church classes, but struggles ensued.
The Nations hoped for better opportunities in Medicine Lodge, Kansas. There he was a pastor; she focused on religious and civic activities. She became known as Mother Nation, trying to help local families in poverty. Kansas voters had passed a constitutional amendment to prohibit the manufacture and sale of liquor in 1880. But Nation felt it wasn’t being enforced. She also blamed the “joints” or taverns and the men who drank and left women and children in dire need. She organized a chapter of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, campaigning for women’s rights, against tobacco, and enforcement of Kansas’ prohibition laws. She helped prisoners in jail, led followers to sing and pray outside local bars, and closed seven illegal operations.

The home defenders wanted to elevate their fight. They raided a local drug store where a suspicious keg caught their attention. Nation announced. “Mr. Day, the ladies of the WCTU want to see what you have in here. Women, this is whiskey.” They rolled the keg outside, smashed and burned it. They smashed six bars in Kiowa with rocks
and bricks. Nation adopted a hatchet to smash the Hotel Carey in Wichita. In Enterprise, she received a black eye.

Then Nation led the campaign to Topeka. In her long black dress with white temperance bow, she confronted legislators and met with the governor. When saloon operators barricaded their businesses, she called out, “Aren’t you going to let your mother in, boys? She wants to talk with you.” Nation tried to convince them to consider the impact of alcohol on families, but the gentle approach failed.

Nation was arrested 30 times before she laid down her hatchet. She began publishing a newspaper called, The Smasher’s Mail, where she shared her opinions. She lectured internationally and sold commemorative hatchet pins and photographs to fund her work.

Carry didn’t live to see the fruits of her labors, she died in 1911, eight years before the nation adopted prohibition. Even after the
amendment was repealed in 1933, prohibition continued in Kansas until 1948.

Today, Nation’s home in Medicine Lodge is a National Historic Landmark, and operated as a museum.