

“Ottawa Wore Strait Lace at an Early Age“
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After its 1864 founding, Ottawa quickly developed into a relatively civilized and sedate town. It especially was tame in comparison with some of the rougher, tougher cow town farther west.

One measure of a civilized society is the laws it places upon itself. In Ottawa’s case, the town fathers compiled a list of 159 laws by 1878, designed to protect the citizenry from danger, disease and the devil.

Those “Revised Ordinances of the City of Ottawa” give an interesting glimpse of how the town sought law and order and shrugged off the crude ways of the frontier.

Most of the ordinances of that day were safety-related, such as the one that forbid horses and mules from being raced through the streets of town. The race track in Forest Park was the only place allowed for showing off the speed of your prized pinto or bay. “Runaways” were likewise a danger, prompting a fine for horses, mules and oxen that were not properly hitched.

However, woe be to the fellow who hitched his animal to a tree or fence in Forest Park. He was liable to be fined anywhere from \$5 to \$50, not for a safety infraction, but apparently for desecrating the park with manure.

Gaping, unattended holes were viewed as a danger to both animals and people. Open wells, cisterns and ditches, even open cellar doors along streets and alleys or sidewalks were all no-nos and subject to stiff fines.

Other safety-related ordinances dealt with concealed weapons, the storage and sale of gunpowder, and improper conduct around railroad cars and tracks. The latter seemed to be designed for the boys in town who delighted in jumping on and off moving trains.

Some ordinances had public sanitation in mind, with rubbish and offensive waste being subject to fines. Another law penalized citizens, with apparently poor senses of smell, who allowed the rotting carcasses of dead animals to lie about on their properties.

Most puzzling is an ordinance that authorized the mayor to enforce sanitary laws not just within Ottawa’s city limits, but also within a five-mile radius.

Fire safety was another concern. Fireworks and bonfires were outlawed between the river and Fifth, and Cedar to Locust. The stacking of hay or straw also was prohibited in the city core.

Likewise, wooden buildings, with the exception of outhouses, could no longer be built downtown along Main Street. Specifications for safe firewalls, metal roofs, flues and chimneys also were detailed.

While safety and sanitation were the town fathers’ first concerns, sin and Satan were a close second.

Gambling was strictly forbidden. Liquor and its sale was restricted and licensed ... it being illegal “to be or get intoxicated” within the city limits.

Anyone caught at a “bawdy house, brothel, or house of ill-fame” was subject to a fine up to \$50. Street walkers or any woman “having the reputation of being a prostitute” were not allowed out on the streets after 9 p.m.

Also restricted were “immoral or indecent shows or entertainments,” and the sale of obscene pictures, drawings, or statues. One also could be fined for appearing “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex.”

Bathing in the Marais des Cygnes River within the city limits was forbidden during daylight hours.

Another “sin ordinance” prohibited Ottawans and those in their employ from working on the Sabbath. There were exceptions to this rule. Livery stables and drug stores could operate all day Sunday, but barbers and butchers had to close by 10 a.m.

Animals running at large were declared nuisances, which meant a flurry of fence building for the town’s supply of horses, dogs and goats. For some reason “milch cows that are not breachy and calfs under six months” were free to roam.

Fowls fared slightly better. Chickens, turkeys, geese and ducks were restricted to their owners’ yards, except from November 1 to March 1. Winter temperatures probably made them happy to be cooped up those months.

Along with the pigs and chickens, the town fathers frowned on having vagrants under foot. They were penned up in the city jail.

The city also was capable of making money through its ordinances by issuing licenses. Peddlers, hired drays, telegraph offices and insurance companies all were licensed. Circuses, minstrel shows and concerts run by non-residents and where admission was charged were required to pay a fee.

Entertainment establishments were licensed, such as billiard parlors, bowling alleys and shooting galleries. They also were required to close by 11 p.m., and have their lights extinguished by 11:10.

Even dogs were being licensed in 1878. Each year every dog owner had to register the animal, complete with its name and description, with the city clerk. A dollar fee purchased a dated tag to be fixed to “Rover’s” collar.

And yes, the collar was required by law, too.