THE PROHIBITION IN THE UNITED STATES
A History From Beginning to End
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Introduction

There can be no doubt that excessive alcohol consumption can cause problems for any society. Violence and crime often go hand-in-hand with drunkenness. However, for a time in the nineteenth and twentieth century, some temperance groups in America became convinced that alcohol was the single most significant cause of poverty and crime. If only alcohol could be removed from society, they claimed, the world would be immediately and irrevocably improved.

Some went further, claiming that if it were possible to outlaw alcohol, slums would vanish from American cities virtually overnight and there would be so little crime that jails could be used as storerooms or sold off entirely. This utopian view of an alcohol-free America gained many supporters, particularly amongst the growing women’s movements. Temperance groups, generally associated with Protestant churches, began to campaign vociferously for what came to be called Prohibition, a nationwide ban on the transport and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States.

The movement for Prohibition produced one of the first political lobby groups in America and made some temperance campaigners so powerful that they became feared at every level of U.S. politics. The campaign for Prohibition was, however, often conducted with little regard for truth or honesty—supporters sometimes made up facts to bolster their arguments and justified this by claiming that they were doing God’s work.

On January 17, 1920, after more than one hundred years of campaigning by temperance groups, National Prohibition came into force via the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. From this day on, it was no longer legal to transport or sell any alcoholic beverage in America. Elated temperance campaigners sat back and confidently waited for the crime and poverty-free future which they felt certain would follow this momentous act.
Chapter One

Alcohol in Colonial America

“Drink is in itself a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness, but the abuse of drink is from Satan; the wine is from God, but the drunkard is from the Devil.”

—Increase Mather

The first settlers who arrived in America in the early 1500s came mainly from Europe, and particularly from northern and western Europe. They brought with them many of the attitudes and lifestyles of Europe, including a generally positive view of alcohol. We don’t tend to think of people like the Puritans as party people, yet when a group of pilgrims set sail from England on board the Mayflower in 1620, the ship carried more beer than water—42 tons of beer compared to just 14 tons of water in addition to over 10,000 gallons of wine. The reason was simple—it was thought safer to drink beer and wine than water.

Storing water back in the early 1620s was an emerging science. No-one had knowledge or understanding of microorganisms, and water which had been stored in open casks quickly became undrinkable and tainted; beer, however, did not. We now know that the alcohol content of beer prevents the survival of microorganisms which means that it stays safely drinkable for much longer than plain water. All the early settlers knew was that beer could be safely ingested with nothing more than the usual ill-effects while water sometimes went bad and could make anyone who drank it seriously ill.

As a result, in that period a vast majority of people drank beer at all times of day, and that included young children too. Beer was very popular, but the early settlers were also partial to wine and spirits when they were available. Alcohol was an effective painkiller at a time when pharmaceutical analgesics were virtually unknown—special high-alcohol content beers called “groaning beers” were brewed to assist women when giving birth. Beer was also a social lubricant and, in moderate quantities, appeared to improve energy and stamina. Overall, the view of these very religious pilgrims was that God had given them alcohol (and it is mentioned approvingly in several places in the Bible), so it was fine for them to drink it.

Importing beer from Europe was expensive, so the early settlers quickly began to set up their own breweries. Wild yeasts caused problems with fermentation of traditional hops, however, resulting in a very bitter beer, so many early beer substitutes were made using local ingredients including spruce twigs and ginger. In early America, beer wasn’t just for fun and relaxation, it was seen as an essential part of a healthy life. When Harvard College was being built in 1636, one of the first buildings completed was a brewery to ensure a regular supply of beer for students. The governing body in Connecticut meanwhile required any new town to ensure that it provided a place where residents could buy beer.

Early settlers also made wine from local fruit and vegetables including strawberries, gooseberries, elderberries, carrots, onions, and celery. They made cider from apples, and it wasn’t long before they began to experiment in the creation of aqua vitae (“water of life”) by
making distilled spirits. Molasses and cane sugar were imported from the Caribbean, and the first rum distillery was set up in Boston in 1657. Within a short time, virtually every town in New England had at least one rum distillery, and the production of rum became important not just to supply the settlers, but as one of the main early exports from New England.

The Triangular Trade involved exporting New England rum to England where it was exchanged for manufactured goods. Traders then took their ships south, down the west coast of Africa where these goods were exchanged for slaves. They then traveled west to the Caribbean where the slaves were exchanged for molasses and cane sugar which was then transported back to New England. With traders making a profit on every leg of this route, the Triangular Trade became a source of great wealth for some people in New England.

Meanwhile, colonists continued to happily consume beer and wine made from a whole range of local produce as well as cider and rum in vast quantities. Alcohol was drunk by everyone from toddlers to the very elderly. In general, alcohol was thought to increase health and vitality and to prevent illness. One early insurance company in New England charged higher premiums for those who abstained from alcohol on the grounds that the abstainers were likely to be “thin and watery, and as mentally cranked, in that he repudiates the good creatures of God as found in alcoholic drinks.”

Taverns were extremely popular and often formed the focus of social life in villages and towns. Taverns were second only to the church or meeting room in terms of social significance. When it became too cold to meet in the church, no-one saw any problem in relocating to the local tavern to complete meetings or to hold religious services there. Almost every social event from weddings to funerals involved some level of alcohol consumption. Alcohol was used to celebrate, to commiserate, to mourn, and simply to promote good fellowship and conviviality. The average consumption of alcohol was around three and a half gallons of alcohol per person per year, much higher than the current level in the United States.

There was little attempt to formally regulate the sale and consumption of alcohol, though it was noted that not everyone was able to manage their alcohol consumption effectively. Although alcohol itself was still regarded as a gift from God, being drunk—and especially habitually being drunk—was not generally tolerated. Drunks often found themselves in stocks in the town square and subject to the mockery and insult of passers-by.

Following the War of Independence, alcohol consumption increased in America. During this period people gravitated to urban areas where poverty and unemployment were serious problems. Heavy drinking and inebriation became more common. It was noted that in areas where there were high levels of alcohol consumption, there were also often high levels of violent crime. People began to wonder whether there were a cause and effect in play, with the consumption of alcohol leading to lawlessness. Others considered that poverty and hardship, the same things which drove people to drink to excess, were also the cause of crime.

It was also noted that taverns, which had previously been the center of social life, were increasingly the domain of men only. This removed inhibitions and seemed to encourage excessive drinking. The situation was made worse by the availability of cheap alcohol. By the early 1800s, there were more than 2,000 whiskey distillers in America, and whiskey was cheaper than tea or milk. Alcohol consumption rose to around ten gallons per person per year, often including a high proportion of distilled spirits (that’s around four times the average current alcohol consumption in the U.S.). Gradually, taverns were replaced by men-only grogshops where men went to consume distilled spirits in large quantities.

In the early years of the nineteenth century religious groups in America, and especially those
led by women, began to ask whether alcohol really was a gift from God.
Chapter Two

Beginning of the Temperance Movement

“*My experience through life has convinced me that, while moderation and temperance in all things are commendable and beneficial, abstinence from spirituous liquors is the best safeguard of morals and health.*”

—Robert E. Lee

One of the earliest people to speak out in public about the dangers of alcohol was Benjamin Rush, a physician and social reformer from Philadelphia and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In 1784, while working at Pennsylvania Hospital, he published one of the first texts to consider the medical implications of overindulgence in distilled spirits (the book ignored wine and beer). *The Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind* was one of the first attempts to explain an undue reliance on the effects of alcohol as a type of disease of the mind that required treatment. He noted, “That this is the case, I infer from persons who are inordinately devoted to the use of ardent spirits being irreclaimable, by all the considerations which domestic obligations, friendship, reputation, property, and sometimes even by those which religion and the love of life, can suggest to them.”

In the late 1700s, several small temperance movements emerged in America, many of them inspired by Rush’s text. One of the first was a group of around 200 farmers in Connecticut who formed a temperance group in 1789. Similar groups were established in New York and Virginia in the early years of the nineteenth century. None of these groups attracted a great deal of attention, and by 1820, all had gone. They did, however, bring the word “temperance” to public attention for the first time. It’s worth noting that these early groups really did support the notion of temperance, i.e., the drinking of alcohol responsibly and in small quantities. Later groups were more focused on total abstinence from alcohol consumption, though they still retained the temperance label.

There was a growing belief that excessive alcohol consumption undermined morals and that alcohol was at least partly to blame for the rising crime levels and lawlessness in some cities. Rising levels of poverty and unemployment were also major causes of crime, but these were rarely cited by people who came to see alcohol as an evil that was undermining American society. Religious groups in particular began to see a link between alcohol and un-Christian behavior, and when what would become the biggest temperance group in America, the American Temperance Society (ATS), was formed in Boston on February 13, 1826, it was started by two Presbyterian ministers, Lyman Beecher and Dr. Justin Edwards. Both were fairly well-known in the New England area, especially Beecher who was rabidly anti-Catholic and anti-slavery (though he refused to allow African-American students to join his Bible study classes at Lane Theological Seminary). During 1826, Beecher preached a series of six sermons against intemperance, the excessive use of alcohol. The text of these sermons was gathered as a short book printed in the U.S. and went through several editions. It was also published in England and
translated to a number of European languages.

The two preachers were joined by 14 other religious leaders to found the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance (later renamed the American Temperance Society). The ATS was the first truly national American temperance group and membership quickly grew. Within five years of its founding, the ATS had more than one hundred and seventy thousand members in two thousand chapters spread across the country. Within ten years there were one and a half million members in over eight thousand chapters.

Although the ATS was founded on the notion of reducing the consumption of alcohol, it gradually evolved to take a position where it recommended total abstinence as the only cure for drunkenness. In the period from 1830 to 1860, many more anti-alcohol groups emerged. Most were pledged to the eradication of drunkenness through the abstinence and the complete removal of alcohol from society, though most continued to use the word “temperance” in their titles. Examples include the Cadets of Temperance (formed in 1846 to prevent drinking in boys aged from 12 to 18 years of age), the Sons of Temperance (which also had branches in England, Australia and Ireland), and the Templars of Honor and Temperance. These groups lobbied Congress for federal restrictions or prohibitions on the sale of alcohol (Congressmen could also join the Congressional Temperance Society). Temperance became a major cause and an important political issue during the first half of the nineteenth century.

In addition to moral objections to alcohol consumption, many of these groups expanded on the original ideas of Benjamin Rush to emphasize that there were also other issues associated with excessive drinking. Some of these now seem rather odd, but at the time they were generally accepted as scientific fact. For example, the fact that alcohol is produced by yeast as a byproduct of its consumption of sugar was used to portray alcohol as a form of excrement. One temperance writer described alcohol as something created when “fungus gorge themselves and leave their liquid excrement.”

Then there was the notion that alcohol is unnatural and the product of decay. It was said by temperance supporters that the human body does not ever produce alcohol and that fermentation is a product of putrefaction and death. Both are untrue, but both these facts were widely repeated by temperance activists. Finally, there was spontaneous human combustion which was supposed to occur as a result of heavy drinking. For example, one temperance supporter confidently wrote that “these cases of the death of drunkards by internal fires have become so numerous and so incontrovertible, that I presume no person of information will now be found to call the reality of their existence into question.”

Despite this tendency to use spurious arguments to support their case, temperance movements continued to gather pace until they were interrupted by the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861.
Chapter Three

Prohibition Propaganda

“Many people are made crazy by the use of alcoholic liquors. In some asylums where these people are kept, it has been found that nearly one half of the crazy people were made crazy from this cause. Not all of these were drinkers themselves. It often happens that the children of those who drink have weak minds or become crazy as they grow older.”

—WCTU approved school textbook

For four years, the Civil War between the Union States in the north and the Confederacy in the south raged over the western part of America. When the war finally ended with the defeat of the Confederate States in 1865, three-quarters of a million people were dead, infrastructure and even cities in many of the southern states were destroyed, and a system of agriculture predicated on the need for slave labor was no longer viable. It took a number of years for Reconstruction to heal the wounds of the Civil War; during the war itself and the period which followed there was relatively little activity from temperance groups.

However, as the U.S. entered the Gilded Age in the 1870s, increasing urbanization and mechanization led to poverty and hardship for large numbers of people living in overcrowded housing in American cities. These factors combined with the continuing availability of cheap alcohol led to increasing abuse of alcohol and drunkenness. Crime rates also increased, and for temperance campaigners the two things were clearly linked. The temperance movement gained new impetus during the beginning of the Gilded Age.

In 1874, what would become the most powerful and vociferous temperance organization in America was officially declared at a national convention in Cleveland, Ohio. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was born out of religious groups and, although originally formed to promote abstinence from alcohol, it expanded to cover other pressing issues of the day including women’s suffrage, women’s rights, and women’s education. The power and reach of the WCTU was striking for this period. This was the first organization to employ a permanent lobbyist whose function was to ensure that the interests of the WCTU were represented in Congress and the Senate. In 1880, the WCTU began to publish a newspaper, The Signal. Three years later it became known as The Union Signal after merging with another paper. By that time the WCTU had gone international with the founding of the World’s Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU). The Union Signal became the most popular women’s newspaper, not just in America but in many parts of the English-speaking world. By 1890, it was selling more copies than any other newspaper in the world.

One woman who was to become particularly influential through the WCTU was Mary Hunt, an ex-school teacher who was opposed to alcohol consumption of any kind and believed that the best way to achieve this was to educate children in its dangers. In 1879, she spoke about this at the national convention of the WCTU. By 1880, Mary Hunt was the head of the newly formed WCTU’s Department of Scientific Temperance Instruction in Schools and Colleges. From that
time on, Hunt used the considerable and growing power of the WCTU to lobby at state level to ensure that textbooks which provided temperance instruction were used in schools across the U.S.

This campaign took time to establish, but by the end of the nineteenth century, virtually every state had legislation in place which made scientific temperance instruction a legal requirement in its schools. In order to avoid the possibility of offending the WCTU, the seven major publishers of school textbooks in the U.S. submitted their physiology books to Mary Hunt for approval. Where required, they amended texts to meet her demands. She stressed that all textbooks must make it clear that there was no safe use of alcohol and that drinking even the smallest amount could lead to an uncontrollable urge for more. Books gaining the WCTU seal of approval were not permitted to mention that alcohol was sometimes used for medicinal purposes and were forced to include a number of dubious scientific facts. These included noting that alcohol is a poison which was known to stop growth in the children of drinkers, that the majority of beer drinkers were likely to die from dropsy (a form of paralysis), and that drinking alcohol turns blood to water.

Recommended experiments suitable for schools included the dropping of a calf’s brain into a solution of alcohol and explaining when it turned grey and flaccid that this was the same effect produced when a person drank alcohol. Diseases which were said to be caused by alcohol consumption included: “Dyspepsia, jaundice, emaciation, corpulence, dropsy, ulcers, rheumatism, gout, tremors, palpitation, hysteria, epilepsy, palsy, lethargy, apoplexy, melancholy, madness, delirium tremens, and premature old age.”

By the beginning of the twentieth century, mandatory temperance instruction was in place in almost every school in America. This meant that virtually every school child was exposed to propaganda sanctioned by Mary Hunt. Much of what was approved by the WCTU as being suitable for teaching to children about the dangers of alcohol was exaggerated, distorted, or just plain wrong, but the temperance campaigners were so certain that their cause was right that they were willing to use any method to advance it, even if that meant lying. One leader of a temperance group proudly said that the lies he had told while denouncing the evils of alcohol “would fill a big book.”

Given that many temperance groups and their members were affiliated with churches, there was also one rather inconvenient proponent of alcohol that had to be tackled: The Bible. In the Bible, it is made clear that Jesus is not averse to the occasional glass of wine and there is even one admonition to drink: “Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake” (Timothy 5:23). After a great deal of deliberation, temperance campaigners decided that this passage actually referred to an ancient Hebrew custom whereby a little wine is rubbed on to the skin of the abdomen. No such custom ever existed, but most temperance supporters eagerly accepted this explanation for a rather inconvenient Biblical passage. Later, the WCTU would employ their own scholars who produced a version of the Bible safely free from any positive mention of alcohol.

Given the fervor with which the WCTU attacked anything to do with alcohol, it’s not surprising that they rejected the notion of drinking in moderation. As far as this powerful group was concerned, alcohol had no place in a modern society and had to be eliminated. By the early 1890s, the WCTU and other groups decided that the time had come to begin a campaign not just to discredit alcohol but to have it banned from America completely.
Chapter Four

The Noble Experiment

“Our country has deliberately undertaken a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.”

—Herbert Hoover

In 1893, a new group was formed, the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). The ASL didn’t promote personal temperance or abstinence; it was a single-issue, non-partisan political pressure group dedicated to achieving the prohibition of alcohol sales in the United States. Leaders of the ASL, including journalist Ernest Cherrington, were keen to stress that this wasn’t simply another temperance group and was not in competition with groups like the WCTU—the purpose of the ASL was solely to convince politicians and the public of the benefits of adopting prohibition. The ASL had a number of high-profile supporters including multimillionaire John D. Rockefeller Jr. Rockefeller was a lifelong abstainer as well as an enthusiastic supporter of prohibition, and he donated over $350,000 to the ASL.

The ASL created its own publishing house, the American Issue Publishing Company (AIPC), at the beginning of the twentieth century. The purpose of this company was to produce pamphlets, books, and other materials in support of prohibition. From the outset, the AIPC employed over 200 people and printed 24 hours a day. Within three years of being set up, it was producing a staggering one billion printed pages of text every four months. The ASL used this formidable propaganda machine to support anti-alcohol politicians and candidates and to smear the reputation of any politician who had the temerity to oppose prohibition.

However, two of the main weapons used by the ASL and the AIPC were racism and bigotry. The churches which supported temperance were exclusively Protestant and mainly located in rural areas and in the south. Many of the leaders of the ASL hated Catholics and Jews almost as much as they did alcohol. Large numbers of immigrants arrived in the U.S. in the closing years of the nineteenth century, many of whom came from Italy and other Catholic countries. The ASL used suspicion of these new immigrants as a lever for prohibition, claiming that to be anti-prohibition was also to be anti-American. ASL leader William H. Anderson claimed that, “The challenge to loyal patriots of America today is to demand the absolute prohibition of the liquor traffic.” The ASL (and a number of other temperance groups) were also supportive of anti-Catholic, racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Anderson claimed that the resurgence of the KKK in the early years of the twentieth century was a welcome and inevitable response to Catholic opposition to prohibition and said that resistance to prohibition in New York City was due to “unwashed and wild-eyed foreigners who have no comprehension of the spirit of America.”

As the world teetered on the brink of World War I, distrust of Germans and Germany increased in the U.S. and the ASL were also quick to capitalize on this as many large brewing companies had German backgrounds. Purley Baker, a leading member of the ASL, referred to
Germans as “Huns” who “eat like gluttons and drink like swine.” League pamphlets were quick to point out that, “Everything in this country that is pro-German is anti-American. Everything that is pro-German must go.” This referred to all brewing companies even though by that time few had any direct connection with Germany.

When the United States entered the war against Germany in 1917, the claims by the ASL became even more hysterical. One ASL member launched a virulent attack on the “un-American, pro-German, crime-producing, food-wasting, youth-corrupting, home-wrecking, treasonable liquor traffic.” Another asked, “How can any loyal citizen, be he wet or dry, help or vote for a trade that is aiding a pro-German Alliance?”

By exploiting fears of the wave of new immigrants which seemed to be swamping some American cities and the anti-German feeling engendered by the war, the ASL was successful in persuading many Americans that alcohol was un-American, unpatriotic, and that prohibition was the only logical way forward. The growing power of the ASL as a lobby group in Congress meant that politicians were unwilling to take a stand against it. It was said of Wayne B. Wheeler, another leader of the ASL that he “held the balance of power in both Republican and Democratic parties and was recognized by friends and foes alike as the most masterful and powerful single individual in the United States.”

The revulsion that the pointless carnage and destruction of World War I raised persuaded many people that it was time to aim for a different and better world. The ASL used this feeling and the justification of protecting the production of grain for purposes other than the production of alcohol to push through several important new laws. On November 18, 1918, the Wartime Prohibition Act was introduced. This act temporarily banned the sale of beverages having an alcohol content of greater than 1.28%, which made it illegal to sell most beers and all wines and spirits. A year prior, on December 18, 1917, the U.S. Senate had proposed the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. This amendment prohibited the production, transport, and sale of any intoxicating liquors in the United States. The Eighteenth Amendment was passed by a substantial majority, and on January 16, 1919, it was ratified as part of the Constitution. Despite President Woodrow Wilson’s veto, it was to come into effect one year later, on January 17, 1920.

However, before Prohibition could become a reality, there was one more piece of regulation required. The Eighteenth Amendment did not define what an “intoxicating liquor” was, and it did not define the powers which could be used by state and federal agencies to enforce the new amendment. The National Prohibition Act (also known as the Volstead Act) defined an “intoxicating liquor” as any beverage containing more than 0.5% alcohol by volume and allowed for the prosecution of any person manufacturing, selling, or transporting such a beverage other than for the purpose of “scientific research and in the development of fuel, dye and other lawful industries and practices, such as religious rituals.”

The ASL and all the other temperance groups had finally attained what they had been demanding for so long. Alcohol was to be prohibited in the United States. Future President Herbert Hoover, a Quaker and lifelong supporter of temperance, later wrote in a letter discussing the Eighteenth Amendment: “Our country has deliberately undertaken a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.” The United States, according to the ASL and the other temperance groups, was poised to enter a utopian period, free from the evils of alcohol and the crime and misery which accompanied it.
Chapter Five

Life under Prohibition

“Let the church bells ring and let there be great rejoicing, for an enemy has been overthrown and victory crowns the forces of righteousness.”

—Invitation to a church celebrating the beginning of Prohibition

Members of temperance groups and many other people expected immediate results following the imposition of Prohibition on January 17, 1920. After all, if alcohol were responsible for so much violent crime, prostitution, and poverty, removing it would surely bring about notable improvements quickly. The popular evangelist Billy Sunday was only one of many who celebrated the arrival of Prohibition. He held a symbolic funeral for “John Barleycorn” and explained that “The reign of tears is over. The slums will soon be only a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses and com cribs.” Some communities were so persuaded by this logic that they actually considered selling their prisons, which they presumed they would no longer need. One member of Congress proudly announced that Prohibition was here to stay. “There is,” he said, “as much chance of repealing the Eighteenth Amendment as there is for a hummingbird to fly to the planet Mars with the Washington Monument tied to its tail.”

In the event, the arrival of Prohibition did not bring quite such immediate and dramatic results as its supporters had hoped. Crime figures did not fall (and in many cases they actually rose following the introduction of Prohibition), and there was little discernible effect on poverty across the United States.

In retrospect, there were a number of reasons why Prohibition did not have immediate and far-reaching effects. First and most importantly, the imposition of the new law did not materially affect alcohol consumption in America. Prohibition banned the manufacture, transport, and sale of alcoholic beverages, but it did not restrict the consumption of such beverages. With more than a year to prepare for the coming of Prohibition, there was nothing to prevent individuals from amassing large stores of alcohol and consuming these for as long as they lasted after the new laws came into force.

Even those who had not been able to stock up in anticipation of the new law were generally still able to procure alcoholic drinks if they wanted. For example, grape growers in California increased the acreage of land used for growing grapes by over 700 percent during prohibition. The reason? They produced a very popular line of blocks of dried grape juice. By adding water to these blocks, grape juice could be produced. However, these products came with a warning that after dissolving the brick water, buyers must not on any account “place the liquid in a jug away in the cupboard for twenty days, because then it would turn into wine.” Given how popular these products became during Prohibition, there is no doubt that many people carelessly ignored this warning and placed their grape juice in a warm, dark place until it became wine. Technically, this did not break the new law. The product being transported, i.e., the block of dried grape juice,
was not alcoholic and if it was left unattended and then turned into wine, that did not count as manufacture. Provided that the final product wasn’t sold, there was no illegality in consuming wine produced in this way.

It didn’t take long for brewers of beer to start a similar marketing strategy. They began selling wort, a liquid that was essentially beer before yeast was added to begin the fermentation process. This could be legally transported and sold because it did not contain alcohol. If the people buying this liquid then chose to add yeast and turn it into beer, well, that was their business, provided that they didn’t attempt to sell the resulting brew. In addition, portable stills became widely available to purchase after Prohibition. Again, provided that the results were not transported or sold, the use of such stills was not illegal.

Alcohol could also be legally purchased where this was for medicinal purposes and supported by a prescription provided by a licensed physician. The government issued official alcohol prescription pads, and physicians prescribed whiskey and brandy for a bewildering array of ailments including diabetes, cancer, and depression. Pharmacies began stocking liquor to meet these prescriptions, and during the first year of prohibition alone, American doctors prescribed over eight million gallons of medicinal alcohol.

However, far more common than the use of legal loopholes to produce alcohol from private consumption were illegal methods of providing alcoholic beverages for sale. The smuggling of alcohol from Canada and elsewhere by sea proved to be a lucrative, if dangerous, activity. Ships loaded with alcohol would legally moor outside the three-mile limit near American cities. Small, fast boats would then unload the booze and attempt to deliver it to shore. Many people died trying to navigate small, overladen speedboats in rough seas, and many more were murdered as criminal groups eliminated competition in the most basic way. Some smugglers added water or industrial alcohol and other harmful substances to make the alcohol they brought in go further. Others built a reputation for only providing unadulterated beer and spirits—the term “the real McCoy” comes from Captain William McCoy, a successful smuggler who provided only high-quality goods which he refused to water down or cut.

Gradually, a new word entered the lexicon of popular understanding in America: “bootlegger,” meaning any person who made, sold, or smuggled alcoholic beverages during Prohibition. There was a vast amount of money to be made in bootlegging. Far from reducing the demand for alcohol, the imposition of Prohibition actually increased it, providing a vast potential market for bootleggers.

There were, however, some major potential problems for the eager customers who bought bootleg liquor. Some bootleggers added wood alcohol, iodine, and even embalming fluid to their smuggled hooch. These substances are highly toxic, and it wasn’t uncommon for those drinking the resulting concoction to suffer blindness, paralysis, or even death. In 1927 alone, more than 12,000 Americans died as a direct result of drinking contaminated alcohol. Many illegal stills used lead piping, causing drinkers to suffer the slow and accumulative effects of lead poisoning.

It wasn’t just the bootleggers who poisoned drinkers—the U.S. government did this too. Alcohol was still produced legally for industrial use, but to ensure that it couldn’t be consumed, substances were added to this alcohol. Some were harmless but unpleasant tasting, like soft soap. Others, like sulfuric acid, chloroform, carbolic acid, acetone, and brucine (similar to strychnine) were lethal. It was known that anything up to ten percent of all industrial alcohol ended up being stolen and consumed during Prohibition, and some people questioned the morality of the government adding substances which were likely to kill those drinking it. Nevertheless, the WCTU and the ASL were keen supporters of making industrial alcohol lethal. When questioned
about this, leader of the ASL Wayne B. Wheeler angrily retorted that people shouldn’t waste their sympathy on those who, knowingly or unknowingly, drank industrial alcohol because “the person who drinks this industrial alcohol is a deliberate suicide.” Around 10,000 people died as a direct result of poisons added to alcohol by the government during Prohibition.

Another common affliction associated with drinking illicit alcohol was “Jake foot,” a form of paralysis which affected the hands and feet. This was specifically linked with drinking Jamaica ginger extract, which contained over 70% ethanol. In 1930, public health officials estimated that at least 12,000 people in the U.S. were suffering from Jake foot.

Ironically, estimates show that Prohibition barely managed to reduce alcohol consumption in America. Although there was a brief dip in drinking in the first year, after ten years of Prohibition Americans were consuming almost the same amount as they were pre-Prohibition. Patterns of drinking also changed during Prohibition. More young people, including women, started drinking, and binge drinking became more common. After all, a person was unlikely to go to the trouble of getting themselves admitted to an illegal bar just to have one drink. Also, help for those who had problems associated with alcohol virtually disappeared during this period. In 1870, doctors had founded the American Association for the Study and Cure of Inebriety to try to understand the causes of alcoholism and to help alcoholics to kick the habit. The association closed down in 1921, and virtually all treatment centers for alcoholics in the United States were closed by 1925.

Prohibition also led to widespread loss of employment. In addition to the loss of large numbers of jobs at distilleries, breweries, and bars, a whole infrastructure of truck drivers, shipping clerks, barrel makers, bottle makers, and others found themselves abruptly out of work.

So, Prohibition wasn’t quite as effective as its supporters had hoped. Americans were still able to make their own alcoholic drinks or have them prescribed by a helpful doctor. Those who were willing to risk blindness, paralysis, and death were able to enjoy smuggled beer and spirits in the convivial atmosphere of illegal drinking establishments. But it wasn’t just the eradication of alcohol that temperance groups had looked forward to, they had also eagerly anticipated the virtual end of crime and the eradication of poverty, both of which they claimed were directly caused by alcohol. In this too, they were to be disappointed.
Chapter Six

Organized Crime and Corruption

“A Prohibition law strikes a blow at the very principles upon which our government was founded.”

—Abraham Lincoln

The sudden cessation of crime which many supporters of Prohibition expected failed to materialize; statistics show that most types of crime increased during this period. In the first year of Prohibition, a study of 30 major cities in the U.S. showed an increase in the total number of crimes of around 24 percent. These included arrests for drunken and disorderly behavior, which increased by 41 percent, and drunken driving, which increased by a staggering 81 percent. In the first 10 years of Prohibition, the murder rate across America increased by 78 percent.

However, these figures hide a number of significant trends which rapidly became apparent during the early years of Prohibition. The most important of these was a growing disrespect for the law and for authority. People who were otherwise law-abiding seemed entirely willing to break the law if this would allow them to enjoy a few drinks with friends. Almost as soon as Prohibition began, illegal drinking clubs sprang up in most major American cities. Unlike the licensed bars which they replaced, these clubs, often called speakeasies or blind pigs, were totally unregulated—anyone could open one. In the first year of Prohibition, the New York City commissioner of police estimated that the city’s 15,000 bars had been replaced by over 30,000 speakeasies. Most cities followed a similar pattern. Even worse than speakeasies were clip joints where customers fuddled by alcohol were regularly overcharged or robbed by the owners.

It was also surprisingly difficult to prosecute owners of speakeasies. Most had elaborate ways of controlling access, including using passwords to gain entry through entrances guarded by thugs. This allowed patrons to flee through hidden rear exits if police raided the club. Given that many police officers themselves patronized these establishments or were paid bribes by them, many clubs were warned about impending raids in sufficient time to avoid major problems. Another issue was that there was nothing illegal about taking your own alcohol to an establishment and drinking it there. If a speakeasy was raided but patrons were willing to say that they had brought along their own booze, there was little that could be done. In New York City there were over 7,000 arrests for breaches of the Prohibition laws between 1921 and 1923. Only 27 of these arrests led to successful prosecutions.

The widespread flaunting of the Prohibition laws wasn’t restricted to members of the public. President Warren G. Harding kept a very large supply of spirits at the White House for guests. Cocktails were regularly served in the halls of Congress between sessions, even sessions discussing Prohibition and its enforcement. The director of Prohibition enforcement in Pennsylvania was found to have appropriated almost three-quarters of a million gallons of alcohol for illegal resale. This had proved so successful that he was also found to have kept a slush fund of over four million dollars to be used to deflect awkward questions from Prohibition...
agents. One magistrate in Philadelphia was found guilty of taking almost 90,000 dollars in Prohibition-related bribes. Large numbers of police officers, customs inspectors, and members of city administrations across the U.S. were convicted of corruption directly related to Prohibition.

Prohibition also provided an irresistible opportunity for criminals to make vast amounts of money. Organized crime flourished as demand for alcohol was combined with an increased willingness on the part of the public to behave illegally and to consort with criminals. During Prohibition, the price of spirits rose by 24 percent while the price of beer rose by over 700 percent. Criminals making or smuggling booze didn’t pay tax or duty, so there were massive potential profits to be made. For example, it has been estimated that crime boss Al Capone made an average of 60 million dollars each year during Prohibition (at a time when the average wage for a working man was around 1,000 dollars per year). A proportion of these profits were used to bribe police officers and other public officials to ensure that the bootleggers could continue to make money without troublesome interference. Of course, being a bootlegger wasn’t completely risk-free. Over 800 people were murdered in Chicago alone during Prohibition as a direct result of involvement in booze rackets. Most were killed by competing gangs aiming to maximize profits by eliminating the competition.

In these circumstances, it probably isn’t surprising that the average American began to lose faith in the system of law enforcement and even the apparatus of government. Many people were disgusted by the hypocrisy of officials who were supposed to be enforcing Prohibition, and some actually had a degree of admiration for bootleggers who were seen as romanticized outlaws fighting an unjust and unfair law. Criminals like John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone, Baby Face Nelson, and Pretty Boy Floyd became virtual celebrities during Prohibition. Not all were involved in bootlegging, but the general disrespect for the law and law enforcement meant that even successful bank robbers were idolized by some people.

During Prohibition, people also began to question the integrity and effectiveness of the church. After all, the promises of lower crime rates and a reduction of poverty which had been made by church groups were clearly untrue, but worse still was the reaction of some temperance supporters to the failure of Prohibition to deliver. It was suggested, apparently in all seriousness, that those found to have contravened Prohibition laws should be executed—or at least publicly whipped and branded. One imaginative temperance supporter even suggested that miscreants should be suspended by their tongues from an aircraft. This hysterical reaction to the perceived failure of Prohibition was combined with the increasing closeness of some members of Protestant churches to the Ku Klux Klan.

In addition to being anti-African-American, anti-Jew, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant, the KKK was also anti-alcohol. This was occasionally expressed when members of the KKK took time off from persecuting members of other religious, ethnic, or racial groups to engage in violent conflict with bootleggers. The resurgence of the KKK during the 1920s was at least partly because it was seen as the militant wing of the temperance movement, and there was a great deal of overlap during Prohibition between members of temperance groups and the KKK (a number of women from the WCTU also held positions in the KKK, for example).

There were a number of instances where the KKK clashed violently with real or imagined bootleggers. In 1923 and 1924, Williamson County in southern Illinois was suffering from the activities of gangs of bootleggers which local law enforcement seemed powerless to resist. A group of KKK vigilantes were deputized to take on the task of maintaining law and order. They were under the command of Seth Glenn Young, an ex-agent for the Prohibition Bureau who had been fired and described by his previous employers as “a distinct and glaring disgrace” and
“entirely unfit to be in government service.”

Young led his Klansmen on a number of raids on the homes of Italian immigrant mineworkers. Several Italian men were arrested and their women assaulted. In the ensuing violence, 20 people died. A local Methodist preacher praised the actions of the KKK, noting that American newspapers (which were increasingly anti-Prohibition) were controlled by Jews and Catholics and that only the Klan could save America.

There is little doubt that the opposition of the KKK to alcohol and the pronouncements of the more extreme elements of the temperance movement helped to erode overall support for Prohibition. The KKK was widely seen as racist, bigoted, xenophobic, and violent, and temperance groups who appeared to support them were often viewed in the same way. For many ordinary Americans, support for Prohibition became associated with extremism and violence, and Prohibition itself was associated with hypocrisy and corruption.

This feeling intensified following a number of high-profile cases where temperance leaders were found to have been involved in cases of fraud or corruption. For example, Methodist Bishop James Cannon Jr. was for a time one of the most feared and respected Prohibition supporters in the United States. Then, he found himself in front of a grand jury facing charges of conspiracy to violate the Federal Corrupt Practices Act. At around the same time, he fell out of favor with church elders when it was discovered that he had been conducting an illicit sexual relationship with his secretary for many years.

Many churches and temperance groups had assured their supporters that Prohibition would lead to a general improvement in public morals. In the event, the precise opposite appeared to be true. For the most part, the Noble Experiment wasn’t turning out to be as noble as many people had hoped and anticipated.
Chapter Seven

Repeal Day

“When Prohibition was introduced, I hoped that it would be widely supported by public opinion and the day would soon come when the evil effects of alcohol would be recognized. I have slowly and reluctantly come to believe that this has not been the result.”

—John D. Rockefeller Jr.

Amongst the unforeseen effects of Prohibition was a need to increase income taxes. The confident assertions of temperance groups that Prohibition would pay for itself through reduced crime and a concomitant reduction in spending on law enforcement turned out to be completely mistaken. Prohibition cost the Federal government somewhere in the region of 11 billion dollars in lost tax revenue as well as costing 300 million dollars to enforce. State administrations lost equally vast amounts in missing excise duty—before Prohibition states such as New York had received up to 75 percent of their total revenues through such duties. Faced with severe budget shortfalls, rises in income taxes were inevitable. However, these arrived at a time when many people could not afford to give more of their income to the government.

On Thursday, October 24, 1929, a loss of confidence began to affect Wall Street, and large numbers of investors started to sell stocks and bonds. By Monday of the following week, concern became panic, and over two days (Black Monday and Black Tuesday) the U.S. Stock Market lost more than 30 billion dollars. A major worldwide economic recession known as the Great Depression then followed the stock market crash. The recession brought several years of high unemployment rates, poverty, declining incomes, and lack of investment to the United States. The effects of this period were still being felt as much as five years after the Wall Street Crash. Many cities were acutely short of revenue, in part because of Prohibition which denied them taxes and duties from alcohol. President Herbert Hoover, who took office in March 1929, was widely (and generally unfairly) blamed for failing to prevent the Wall Street Crash and the recession which followed.

One of the first things that President Hoover did was to establish a committee chaired by former Attorney General George W. Wickersham to look at Prohibition. Hoover was himself a dedicated supporter of temperance and Prohibition, but like many others he had become disillusioned by the failure of Prohibition to curb alcohol consumption or reduce crime. The American public was also feeling disillusioned with Prohibition—a poll by the Newspaper Enterprise Association in 1926 found that 81 percent of those polled favored ending or at least modifying Prohibition. The committee appointed by Hoover reported in January 1931—to the president’s relief—that they were against the repeal of Prohibition. However, the report noted that “the 18th Amendment and the National Prohibition Act have not been and are not being observed. They have not been and are not being enforced. We have prohibition in law but not in fact.”

However, that wasn’t the end of the argument. A woman named Pauline Sabin was the first
female member of the Republican National Committee. She had been a keen supporter of Prohibition but, by 1930 and like many others, she had become so disillusioned by the failure of the Eighteenth Amendment to deliver what it had promised that she completely changed her position and began to campaign for the ending of Prohibition. She formed the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, and many women who were similarly disappointed joined the group. By 1932, it had more than one million members. In contrast, support for the once powerful Anti-Saloon League had dwindled almost to nothing, and the ASL could barely afford to pay its own bills let alone purchase support in Congress.

In the 1932 general election, Hoover was opposed by Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt. At a campaign address in New Jersey, Roosevelt expressed the feelings of many people when he said, “The purpose of achieving a greater temperance by the forcing of Prohibition have been accompanied in most parts of the country by complete and tragic failure. I need not point out to you that general encouragement of lawlessness has resulted; that corruption, hypocrisy, crime and disorder have emerged, and that instead of restricting, we have extended the spread of intemperance.” Roosevelt favored repealing Prohibition, and when campaigning he also claimed that just the legalizing of beer production and sales could increase “federal revenue by several hundred million dollars a year.” Many people agreed. It seemed self-evident both that Prohibition had failed to achieve its aims and that its repeal would lead to the creation of new jobs, the expansion of business, and an increase in tax revenues. At a time when America was mired in the worst recession it had ever seen, these were powerful arguments. Even Republican Pauline Sabin agreed, and she recommended to the members of Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform that they vote for Roosevelt.

When the votes were counted, Roosevelt won by a historic majority—22 million votes compared to 15 million for Hoover, and Democratic majorities were installed in the House and Senate. The Twenty-first Amendment (which repealed the Eighteenth) was proposed by Congress in February 1933. On December 5, 1933, Utah became the 36th State to ratify the new amendment. This was sufficient to place the Twenty-first Amendment into the United States Constitution. On December 5, the federal laws which allowed the enforcement of Prohibition were repealed. National Prohibition was over.

Massive parties were held all over the United States, but this wasn’t quite the end of prohibition for all Americans. The repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment still allowed individual states to enact prohibition and to allow local political subdivisions to vote for or against prohibition in their area. After the repeal, approximately 38 percent of Americans were still living under prohibition due to prohibition legislation in place in 18 U.S. states. It wasn’t until 1966 that Mississippi became the last state to repeal state-wide prohibition. Some municipalities in the United States still have some form of prohibition in place—a 2004 survey by the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association found that more than 500 local areas in the U.S. still have complete prohibition.

Partly due to the way in which Prohibition was enforced and then repealed, there are a bewildering number of different regulations on the sale of alcohol across America today. In some places, alcohol can only be served with food. In some places, alcohol can only be served when at least two walls separate this from the serving of food. In some places, no alcohol can be sold at all. In some states, all alcoholic beverages are sold by state government suppliers while in others private businesses are issued with licenses to sell alcohol.

The Eighteenth Amendment remains the only amendment to the Constitution which was repealed by the enactment of another amendment. December 5 is still celebrated in America as
Repeal Day, with celebrations often timed to commence at 21:00.
Chapter Eight

America Post-Prohibition

“It is becoming increasingly clear that drugs cannot be eliminated by declaring them illegal.”

—Ruth Dreifuss

The end of Prohibition was not the end of the temperance movement in America. Although the Anti-Saloon League virtually lost all power, groups such as the WCTU remained active and influential. When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, many temperance groups campaigned to keep American military bases and installations alcohol-free. The secretary of war, Henry L. Stimson, disagreed as did most US military leaders. They believed it was better to encourage soldiers to do their drinking on bases where consumption could be monitored and moderation encouraged.

Temperance groups pushed for more stringent legislation and perhaps even the return of some form of prohibition. The Stars and Stripes, the U.S. Army newspaper, noted in 1942 that: “Taking advantage of wartime conditions and restrictions, the new prohibition group is working night and day for legislation which will give America prohibition in fact if not in name.” Just as they had in the years before, prohibition campaigners seemed willing to use dubious facts to support their arguments. One temperance newsletter noted that “liquor interests use more than 1,250,000 tons of sugar every year, which is more than the one-half pound ration per week for every man, woman and child in the United States of America.” In fact, the process of producing distilled liquor does not use any sugar at all. A leader of the WCTU claimed that the consumption of liquor in the United States in 1941 was two billion gallons, around ten times higher than the actual figure. In addition, temperance groups blamed the attack on Pearl Harbor on alcohol, claiming that the production of alcoholic beverages used essential supplies during wartime and that alcohol reduced the efficiency of the fighting man. Congress, however, was not convinced and no additional restrictions on alcohol production or sales were imposed during World War II.

During the American involvement in the conflict in Vietnam, from the early 1950s to 1973, there was a debate about the legal drinking age in America. This was generally set at 21, and it was felt unfair that many young soldiers who were expected to put their lives at risk in defense of their country were not able to legally purchase alcohol. As a result, many states and some military bases sold alcoholic beverages to those aged 18 and over. This practice was attacked by the temperance movement, and in 1984, the National Minimum Drinking Age Act passed into law making 21 the legal minimum age for the purchase and public possession of alcohol in the United States. Individual states could not be compelled to enact this legislation, but they were encouraged by the linking of highway funding to states which set 21 as the minimum age for drinking.

Temperance is still a significant issue in U.S. politics. A recent survey suggested that as many as one in five Americans support some form of prohibition. As ever, statistics and figures
are hotly debated and denied by both sides of the argument. The emphasis now is not on the improvement of public morality but on health and safety. For example, temperance groups claim that alcohol is responsible for a large proportion of the 30-40,000 deaths on American roads which occur every year. Opponents argue that the actual percentage of deaths in road accidents directly caused by alcohol is much smaller. Temperance groups claim that the costs to the U.S. healthcare system of accidents, injuries, illness, and deaths directly related to alcohol are massive. Opponents point out that the production of alcoholic beverages provides many jobs and that the taxes and duties alcoholic beverages put into the system amount to much more than these costs.

It doesn’t seem likely that the ongoing debate between those who support consumption of alcohol and those who want it eliminated will end in the near future. However, the failure of Prohibition means that the argument now is about reducing consumption rather than outlawing it altogether. It seems unlikely that we will ever see Prohibition return to the United States.
Conclusion

The Noble Experiment was a failure on every measurable level. Poverty was not reduced, crime increased, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages was barely affected during Prohibition. In addition, the government lost billions of dollars in taxes while a small number of enterprising criminals made huge amounts of money. Even worse, millions of ordinary Americans began to indulge in illegal behavior, something most of them probably wouldn’t have considered before Prohibition. Temperance campaigners seemed to naively assume that making the buying of alcohol illegal was the end of the debate. The truth was that most people either found loopholes in the law that allowed them to continue to drink or simply broke the law. This led to a general loss of respect for laws and law enforcement and even to admiration for the gangsters who flouted these new laws.

There can be little doubt that irresponsible alcohol consumption causes problems. In addition to long-term health problems for drinkers, violence and crime are made worse by drunkenness and are in some cases wholly caused by it. However, the failure of Prohibition tells us that the answer to these problems probably isn’t to make the sale of alcoholic beverages illegal.

When even the highest officials in the country openly flaunt the law, no-one should reasonably expect that the mass of ordinary people will obey it. In retrospect, it’s easy to see that Prohibition was doomed to failure from the start. If laws are to apply to the vast majority of the population, they must also be supported by the vast majority of that population. Prohibition was forced on America by a vocal and well-meaning minority who believed that it would make their country a better place. Their optimism proved to be misguided. Not for the first time in history, Prohibition in America was undertaken for the best of reasons and produced the worst of outcomes.
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