



The Roaring Twenties: Station One



The "Ladies of Logan" sing hymns in front of bars in aid of the temperance movement

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Historical Importance of Prohibition:

Prohibition was a period of nearly fourteen years of U.S. history in which the manufacture, sale, and transportation of liquor was made illegal. It led to the first and only time an Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was repealed.

Dates:

1920 -- 1933

Also Known As:

Noble Experiment

Overview of Prohibition:

Prohibition was the period in United States history in which the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors was outlawed. It was a time characterized by speakeasies, glamor, and gangsters and a period of time in which even the average citizen broke the law.

Temperance Movements

The push for Prohibition began in earnest in the nineteenth century. After the American Revolution, drinking was on the rise. To combat this, a number of societies were organized as part of a new Temperance movement which attempted to dissuade people from becoming intoxicated. At first, these organizations pushed moderation, but after several decades, the movement's focus changed to complete prohibition of alcohol consumption.

The Temperance movement blamed alcohol for many of society's ills, especially crime and murder. Saloons, a social haven for men who lived in the still untamed West, were viewed by many, especially women, as a place of debauchery and evil. Prohibition, members of the Temperance movement urged, would stop husbands from spending all the family income on alcohol and prevent accidents in the workplace caused by workers who drank during lunch.

The 18th Amendment Passes

In the beginning of the 20th century, there were Temperance organizations in nearly every state. By 1916, over half of the U.S. states already had statutes that prohibited alcohol. In 1919, the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited the sale and manufacture of alcohol, was ratified. It went into effect on January 16, 1920.

The Volstead Act

While it was the 18th Amendment that established Prohibition, it was the Volstead Act (passed on October 28, 1919) that clarified the law. The Volstead Act stated that "beer, wine, or other intoxicating malt or vinous liquors" meant any beverage that was more than 0.5% alcohol by volume. The Act also stated that

owning any item designed to manufacture alcohol was illegal and it set specific fines and jail sentences for violating Prohibition.

Loopholes

There were, however, several loopholes for people to legally drink during Prohibition. For instance, the 18th Amendment did not mention the actual drinking of liquor. Since Prohibition went into effect a full year after the 18th Amendment's ratification, many people bought cases of then-legal alcohol and stored them for personal use. The Volstead Act allowed alcohol consumption if it was prescribed by a doctor. Needless to say, large numbers of new prescriptions were written for alcohol.

Gangsters and Speakeasies

For people who didn't buy cases of alcohol in advance or know a "good" doctor, there were illegal ways to drink during Prohibition. A new breed of gangster arose during this period. These people took notice of the amazingly high level of demand for alcohol within society and the extremely limited avenues of supply to the average citizen. Within this imbalance of supply and demand, gangsters saw profit. Al Capone in Chicago is one of the most famous gangsters of this time period.

These gangsters would hire men to smuggle in rum from the Caribbean (rumrunners) or hijack whiskey from Canada and bring it into the U.S. Others would buy large quantities of liquor made in homemade stills. The gangsters would then open up secret bars (speakeasies) for people to come in, drink, and socialize.

During this period, newly hired Prohibition agents were responsible for raiding speakeasies, finding stills, and arresting gangsters, but many of these agents were under-qualified and underpaid leading to a high rate of bribery.

Attempts to Repeal the 18th Amendment

Almost immediately after the ratification of the 18th Amendment, organizations formed to repeal it. As the perfect world promised by the Temperance movement failed to materialize, more people joined the fight to bring back liquor. The anti-Prohibition movement gained strength as the 1920s progressed, often stating that the question of alcohol consumption was a local issue and not something that should be in the Constitution.

Additionally, the Stock Market Crash in 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression started changing people's opinion. People needed jobs. The government needed money. Making alcohol legal again would open up many new jobs for citizens and additional sales taxes for the government.

The 21st Amendment Is Ratified

On December 5, 1933, the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified. The 21st Amendment repealed the 18th Amendment, making alcohol once again legal. This was the first and only time in U.S. history that an Amendment has been repealed.

Source: <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1920s/p/prohibition.htm>