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**The National Prohibition of Alcohol:
Thirteen Years That Changed America**

“After one year from the ratification of this article, the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited” (American History 1). At midnight of January 16, 1920 the 18th Amendment was finally put into effect, and the customary habits of most Americans abruptly came to an end. Following the enactment of the 18th Amendment came the National Prohibition Act. This soon became known as the Volstead Act, named after Representative Andrew Volstead who introduced the bill to congress. It enforced the 18th Amendment and defined “intoxicating liquors” as containing more than one half of one percent alcohol (American History 3).

“The national prohibition of alcohol - the “noble experiment” - was undertaken to reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses, and improve health and hygiene in America” (Thonton 1). The answers to these problems were not to be found in the national prohibition of alcohol. In fact, all of these problems worsened. The prohibition of alcohol in America in the 1920's and early 30's was a failure because it was unenforceable, caused the growth of corruption and crime, and it actually increased the amount of alcohol consumed.

Mayor La Guardia of New York City claimed it would “...take a police force of 250,000 to enforce the Prohibition Act, and another 250,000 to police the police” (American History 6). After the Volstead Act was moved into action, to determine the specific laws and methods for enforcement, the Federal Prohibition Bureau was created to ensure that the Volstead Act was being enforced. However, the Federal Prohibition

Bureau had the highest turnover of any government agency. Nearly 10,000 men held 3,000 jobs in six years (American History 8). The annual budget of the Federal Prohibition Bureau went from \$4.4 million to \$13.4 million during the 1920's, and to these amounts should also be added the expenses of state and local governments. The resources devoted to the enforcement of Prohibition increased along with the consumption of alcohol (Thornton 2).

Bootleggers and many others violated the new laws and enforcement on a regular basis; they would smuggle liquor from Canada, Mexico, and overseas, or steal it from government warehouses. Many people made their own beer, wine, or distilled liquor at home illegally. Also, people bought alcoholic drinks in illegal bars called speakeasies. By 1925 there were over 100,000 speakeasies in New York, almost twice the number of legal saloons prior to Prohibition (American History 3). Many physicians could be found who gave their patients prescriptions for legal "medical" alcohol (Kyvig Prohibition 3). Americans found every way possible to work around the law. Many would mask bottles of alcohol and create ingenious hiding places, such as hip flasks, false boots, and hollow canes (American History 3). More than 1 million gallons of liquor was smuggled into America each year from Canada in these ways. It also was smuggled into this country from ships located just past American waters in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the Caribbean Sea. "Neither federal agents nor state and local officials could stop the widespread violation of national prohibition" (Kyvig Prohibition 3).

As a result of the lack of capable enforcement of the Prohibition Act, combined with the creation of illegal alcohol industries, an increase in crime occurred. The Prohibitionists hoped that the Volstead Act would reduce drunkenness in America which would decrease the crime rate, in particularly in large cities. Although towards the beginning of Prohibition this purpose seemed to me fulfilled, the crime rate soon skyrocketed to nearly twice that of pre-prohibition. In large cities the homicide rate went from 5.6 per 100,000 population during pre-prohibition period, to nearly 10 per 100,000 during prohibition, nearly a 78 percent increase. Serious crimes such as homicide and assault and battery increased nearly 13 percent, while other crimes involving victims increased 9 percent. Many supporters of prohibition may argue that the crime rate

decreased. This is true if one is examining only minor crimes though, such as public swearing, mischief, and vagrancy. The major crimes, however, such as homicide and burglaries increases 24 percent between 1920 and 1921 alone. In addition, the number of federal convicts over the course of the prohibition period increased 561 percent (Thornton 8-10). The crime rate increased because “prohibition destroyed legal jobs, created black-market violence, diverted resources from enforcement of other laws, and increased prices people had to pay for prohibited goods” (Thornton 9).

The number one contributing factor to the sudden increase of felonies was the organization of crime, especially in large cities. Because liquor was no longer legally available, the public turned to gangsters who readily took on the bootlegging industry and supplied them with alcohol. On account of the industry being so profitable, more gangsters became involved in this money making business. Crime soon became so organized because “criminal groups organize around the steady source of income provided by laws against victimless crimes such as consuming alcohol” (Thornton 11). Territories were divided by groups of organized crime that became known as the Mafia. These territories were decided by violence and death, both against each other (American History 2). The alcohol trade was highly profitable, and bootleggers battled each other for control of alcohol supplies and markets. Violent gang wars erupted in many large cities, and gang members killed one another at a furious pace (Kyvig Prohibition 3). In Chicago alone, there were over 400 gang related murders a year (American History 2).

It was hoped that Prohibition would eliminate the corrupting influences of alcohol in American society. Instead, Prohibition became a major source of corruption. “Everyone from major politicians to the cop on the beat took bribes from bootleggers, moonshiners, crime bosses, and owners of speakeasies” (Thornton 11). The Federal Bureau of Prohibition was no exception. During the time of Prohibition the Federal Bureau of Prohibition was dubbed a “training ground for bootleggers” (American History 3).

The National Prohibition of Alcohol has been labeled the “Iron Law of Prohibition.” That law states that the more intense the law enforcement, the more potent

the prohibited substance becomes. ...When alcoholic beverages are prohibited, they will become more potent, will have greater variability in potency, will be adulterated with unknown or dangerous substances, and will not be produced and consumed under normal market constraints. (Thornton 3) The Iron Law appears to weaken the idea that enforcement may be necessary. It appears as if “prohibitory laws, all going to show that they do not prevent intemperance, that they do lead to the use of other stimulants, that they undermine the character of the community, and that, ... , they must be considered harmful to the individual and to the state” (Salem 127).

The Americans that supported the prohibition laws argued that when drinking is not allowed, then Americans would drink less. Although the consumption of alcohol did fall initially after the beginning of Prohibition, there was then a steady increase after less than a year. After the start of prohibition, because manufacturing and importing alcohol were illegal, people needed to find ways to avoid being caught. Because beer had to be transported in large quantities, which became difficult quickly, the price of beer went up and Americans began to drink less of it. Instead, they began to drink more hard liquor, which was more concentrated and easier to transport, making it less expensive. Because then of prohibition, Americans began to drink more potent drinks, and so became more drunk by drinking less. Another down fall of prohibition was that the illegally made alcohol didn't have any standards. “The death rate from poisoned liquor was appallingly high throughout the country. In 1925 the national toll was 4,154 as compared to 1,064 in 1920” (Thornton 5).

Those against prohibition opposed it for a number of reasons. “They argued that the ban on alcohol encouraged crime and disrespected the law. They also claimed that prohibition gave the government too much power over people's lives. ...Many people argued that prohibition took away jobs and deprived the government of badly needed revenues from taxes on liquor” (Kyvig Prohibition 3). The Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR) argued that prohibition was fundamentally wrong.

Because it conflicts with the basic American principle of local home rule and destroys the balance established by the framers of our government.... And because its

attempt to impose total abstinence by national government flat ignores the truth that no law will be respected or can be enforced unless supported by the moral sense and common conscience of the communities affected by it. We are convinced that National Prohibition, wrong in principle, has been equally disastrous in consequence in the hypocrisy, the corruption, and tragic loss of life and the appalling increase of crime which have attended the abortive attempt to enforce it.... (Kyvig Women 473)

Although alcohol consumption appeared to alleviate itself initially, it later increased again causing all sorts of problems:

Alcohol became more dangerous to consume; crime increased and became more 'organized'; the courts and prison systems were stretched to the breaking point; and corruption of public officials was rampant. No measurable gains were made in productivity or reduced absenteeism. Prohibition removed a significant source of tax revenue and greatly increased government spending. It led many drinkers to switch to opium, marijuana, patent medicines, cocaine, and other dangerous substances that they would have been unlikely to encounter in the absence of Prohibition. (Thornton 1) The Hon. James H. Duncan of Haverhill said the following before a state committee about restrictive laws, "My observation and convictions are, that temperance has not been promoted by the prohibitory law; ... it has been productive of more mischief than good, and I think it an unwise act" (Salem 13). "By adopting prohibition we have changed the social and economic fabric of the Nation, uprooting one habit uproots another" (Anderson 37).

It appears obvious that this "noble experiment" was not so noble but rather quite a miserable mistake. Reasonable measures were not taken to enforce the laws and so they were practically ignored. People obviously violated the law, drinking more of a substance that was originally prohibited. The problems prohibition intended to answer, such as crime grew worse and then never truly returned to their pre-prohibition levels. Not only was prohibition ineffective, it was also damaging to the people and society it was meant to help. Prohibition should not have gone on for the thirteen years it was allowed to damage the American society.

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