



Prohibition Rise and Fall

The consumption of alcoholic spirits came with the first settlers to the shores of America. The Pilgrims had onboard their ship more beer than water. By 1775, the colonists were drinking spirits at breakfast; lunch, also called dinner; and supper and then had a nightcap before bed. The total consumption of spirits per drinker was 5.8 gallons a year, and by 1830, the intake was up to 7.1 gallons per year. The term *drunkard* illustrated an economic and social problem during the Industrial Revolution. Drinking in public became a stigma.

Workers were beginning to work on task-orientation machines, and drinking interfered with production. The first country to establish a temperance society was Sweden in 1819, and the United State followed in 1826. There were 14,000 distilleries in the United States by 1810. In Sweden, Magnus Huss coined the term *alcoholism* in 1849, establishing the problem as a disease.

The American Temperance Society had women within the ranks to combat the abuse of wives and children by drunk husbands who were drinking whiskey in saloons. The Women's Temperance Christian Union began a campaign in 1882 to control drinking, and the Anti-Saloon League was formed in 1893.

Whiskey was the drink for Americans before the Civil War, and after the war, beer became the most popular drink. The movement to control drinking moved to prohibiting spirits. The Great War saw a new push to control drinking. The beer industry was run by individuals with German names, and the anti-German sentiment saw beer drinking as an act of treason. The push for an amendment to prohibit drinking was pushed through Congress: the 18th Amendment as well as the 19th Amendment. Many at the time saw that the passage of the 18th Amendment was not going to be possible much later, as the nation was becoming more urban.

The passage of the 18th Amendment was believed to be a prohibition on whiskey and other liquors, not beer or wine. President Wilson vetoed the bill, and Congress passed it over his veto. Then, the bureaucrats took control. Andrew Volstead had a different idea and wrote the Volstead Act that had 67 parts. It made the manufacturing, transportation and sales of all alcoholic beverages illegal. There were exceptions or loopholes that allowed individuals

to get around the law. The public discovered that their freedom to drink alcohol was completely shut down. Bootlegging and speakeasies became big business, along with the increase in organized crime.

Rumrunners would have freighter ships set three miles offshore, and small, fast boats would run the "booze" ashore. A cocktail called the Three-Mile Limit was sold in speakeasies. The British made an agreement to change the limit to 12 miles so that the rumrunners could be apprehended. The cocktail then became the 12-Mile Limit. Canada also became a part of the movement of alcohol into the U.S. by the medical section of the Volstead Act. Joseph Kennedy was rumored to be the supplier of then-president Harding's White House. There were some 3,000 speakeasies in Washington, D.C. It was obvious that Americans wanted their drinks.

The 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote, and that changed the culture. Women before the 1920s did not drink in public, although many of their tonics had alcohol limits of 25% to 40%. Private was one thing, and public was another. The 1920s changed all that with dress hemlines becoming shorter and new hairstyles, and women's public behavior changed. The government was losing the battle on consumption of alcohol.

The penalties at first were fines or 90 days in jail, and the speakeasy was padlocked for one year. Then, the Jones Act was passed, specifying a jail term of five years and a fine of \$10,000. The court system became overloaded with cases. The rise in crime was most notably highlighted by February 14, 1929 and Al Capone's association with the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

The 18th Amendment had been bipartisan, but the law didn't turn out to be what Americans believed it would be. The Democratic Party campaigned to end Prohibition. The noble experiment ended in failure in 1932 with the election of FDR. Today, the average consumption of alcohol per person is around 2.3 gallons per year

D.H. Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com