

# The DROWSY Chaperone

## ***Prohibition in the Roarin' 20's***

Prohibition, also known as dry law, was the era in United States history in which the manufacture, sale and transportation of intoxicating liquors was outlawed. It was a time characterized by speakeasies, flappers, glamour and gangsters. It was also a period of time when even the average, good-natured citizen broke the law.

Herbert Hoover called Prohibition “the noble experiment.” Defenders of Prohibition insisted it would reduce deaths, accidents, divorces and poverty. The national ban on booze was done by way of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution on January 16, 1919. While it was this Amendment that established Prohibition, it was the Volstead Act that clarified the law. The Volstead Act identified “beer, wine, or other intoxicating malt or vinous liquors” as being illegal in the United States if the alcohol content of these beverages exceeded 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 prison sentences for violating the law.

There were a few loopholes for people to legally consume alcohol during the 1920's. For instance, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment did not mention the actual drinking of liquor. Since Prohibition went into effect a full year after the Amendment's ratification, many people bought cases of then-legal alcohol and stored them for personal use. The Volstead Act also allowed alcohol consumption if it was prescribed by a doctor. Needless to say, large numbers of new prescriptions were written for alcohol.

For people who didn't buy cases of alcohol or know a “good” doctor, there were illegal ways to drink during Prohibition. A new breed of crime arose during this period. Gangsters and organized crime ran rampant in America's cities. The gangsters took notice of the overwhelming demand for booze and the limited avenues of supply to everyday citizens.

The gangsters saw major profits from the imbalance of supply and demand. They would hire men to smuggle in rum from the Caribbean (rumrunners), or hijack whiskey from Canada and bring it into the United States. Others would buy large quantities of liquor made in homemade stills – otherwise known as bathtub gin. Makers of bathtub gin used unpalatable alcohol in the process. The poisons were filtered out and ethyl alcohol was extracted and flavored with juniper. The gangsters then opened up secret bars called speakeasies for people to drink and socialize.

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

Almost immediately after the ratification of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment committees formed to repeal it. Most popular of these groups was the nonpartisan Americans Against Prohibition Association

(AAPA). As the twenties progressed, more and more people joined the fight to bring back liquor to the white market, based on the argument that 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 work. The government needed money. Making alcohol legal again would create new job opportunities for citizens and provide additional sales taxes for the government.

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

Prohibition was by most accounts considered a dismal failure. One gentleman of the era quipped, "They might as well have been trying to dry up the Atlantic with a post-office blotter." Not only was Prohibition impossible to enforce, it provided an opportunity for underworld thugs to earn a primary source of revenue, thus creating another set of problems entirely. Today, historians agree that the "noble experiment" affirms sound economic theory, which predicts that the prohibition of mutually beneficial exchange is doomed to fail.

References:

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