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## PROHIBITION: 'THE NOBLE EXPERIMENT'

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The United States is the only western society that has tried to abolish consumption of alcoholic beverages. Prohibition began in 1920 amidst predictions that it would usher in a new era of sobriety, good health and public morality. It closed in foamy celebrations thirteen years later when beer was legalized, and in a few months all federal restrictions were lifted. There is reason to believe that people drank more rather than less during the 'Roaring Twenties'. Prohibition encouraged corruption, contempt for the law, and the rise of organized crime. How one of the most ambitious reforms in American history produced such dismal results is an instructive story.

Americans since colonial days were no strangers to alcohol. Contrary to popular myth in the United States, even the Puritans in Massachusetts believed that taken in moderation it was one of God's blessings to be enjoyed as He intended. Drunkenness was condemned and often harshly punished, but fault lay with individual weaknesses rather than drink itself. As time went on penalties for intoxication were enforced less rigorously unless one committed acts of violence or became a public nuisance. Europeans often expressed amazement in their travel accounts at the amount of beer, wine and whiskey colonists drank.

In 1784, after America achieved independence from England, Dr. Benjamin Rush published a pamphlet entitled *An inquiry into the effects of spiritous liquors on the human body and mind*. Rush had been a physician-general during the Revolutionary War and had ample opportunity to see the effect of drinking on soldiers. Despite the temporary sense of well being alcohol might produce, he wrote, it injured health when consumed over long periods even in moderation. Rush's tract was aimed at distilled spirits only, beer and wine in small amounts he thought beneficial. Apparently based on

scientific observation, his pamphlet went through many printings and was widely reproduced in newspapers and almanacs.

Rush's work inspired others, most notably the Reverend Lyman Beecher, who became an ardent foe of alcohol and who organized one of the first temperance groups, The Connecticut Society for the Reformation of Morals. In 1825 Beecher delivered six sermons that in printed form, according to one scholar, "were as widely read and exerted as great an influence as any other contribution to the literature of the reform". Beecher went beyond Rush in preaching total abstinence. Beer and wine might be relatively harmless, he thought, but they inexorably led to drinking 'hard' liquor.

A number of temperance societies was formed during the 1830s, but they achieved little unity. For some temperance meant what the word itself meant: moderation. For others, such as Beecher, it meant total abstinence. Should all alcoholic beverages be opposed or only distilled spirits? Finally, there was disagreement over methods between those who wished to rely solely on moral suasion and those who wanted to enter the political arena as well.

A new development took place in the 1840s. Beginning with the Washington Temperance Society, recovered drunkards came to the forefront of the movement. These men, some of whom were eloquent speakers, lectured from first hand experience against the evils of alcohol. One of the most popular claimed to have given 2,500 talks in ten years, another that he gained 15,000 converts to abstinence.

The campaign for temperance evolved one more step during the pre-Civil War years. It had become painfully obvious that American drinking habits had not changed despite all the pamphlets, meetings and speeches. The problem with mere exhortation was that only a tiny percentage of the population signed pledges or otherwise promised to abstain. And of these converts, how many remained converted? An effective speaker might have members of the audience fighting up the aisles to take the pledge, only to have most resume their habits when emotions cooled. An anti-temperance joke told of those who became so elated by their redemption that they celebrated with a few drinks. Increasingly, temperance advocates became convinced that efforts to save individuals had to be supplemented by legal enforcement.

Prohibition at the local level had been tried for years and found wanting. A village or town might rid itself of saloons and people reeling in the streets, but determined drinkers could lay in supplies from neighboring areas. Indeed clusters of taverns often sprang up just across the borders of a community that had gone 'dry'. Some people concluded that only statewide prohibition could produce the desired effect. Due largely to the effort of a colorful figure named Neal Dow, the state of Maine in 1851 enacted the first general prohibition law in American history. Eleven states followed this example during the next four years.

Prospects for temperance becoming an irresistible tide across the

nation were dashed by the growing sectional struggle that culminated in the Civil War. The great issues of slavery and secession forced prohibition offstage. Results in 'dry' states also dampened enthusiasm. Illegal channels had been quickly formed through which alcohol flowed copiously from bordering 'wet' states, and inhabitants showed remarkable ingenuity in brewing, fermenting and distilling beverages of all kinds at home.

The trauma of war over, temperance once again became a popular cause in the 1870s. This phase was characterized by the role women played. Formerly men had provided the leadership while women provided the numbers. No longer. First there was the 'Women's Crusade', during which women across the nation sang and prayed in front of saloons and taverns to discourage men from entering. This movement died away in a few years, but out of it came the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Formed in 1874 the WCTU soon became an important force in the drive for national prohibition.

Frances Willard dominated the WCTU until her death in 1898. She was a dynamic person who in addition to writing and lecturing tirelessly, transformed the WCTU in the largest and most effective temperance organization in the United States. It produced enormous quantities of literature, provided speakers, lobbied legislators and left few aspects of society unaffected.

The most highly publicized member of the WCTU, and one of the most eccentric, was Carry A. Nation. Like the Women Crusaders, she sang and prayed in front of saloons. When the spirit moved her, she also hurled bricks and other objects through plateglass windows. Her favorite weapon came to be the hatchet, which she used to chop away at bars and furniture in those places unfortunate enough to receive her attention. "Smash! Smash! For Jesus' sake, smash!", she cried as she carried on the Lord's work. Whether her antics helped or harmed the cause is uncertain.

Formation of the Anti-Saloon League in 1895 strengthened the temperance movement. Its name was misleading because the League's goal was prohibition of all alcoholic beverages, not merely abolition of saloons. Saloons were an easy target however for they were perceived as places where women of easy virtue corrupted morals, drunken brawls took place, and men deprived their families by drinking away hard-earned wages. The League was well organized, dedicated to a single issue, and totally unscrupulous as to methods. In southern states, for instance, it exploited racial hatred by constantly alleging that alcohol stimulated lust in black men for white women. The League was most influential in organizing campaigns supporting politicians who voted dry and opposing those who did not.

Success on the state level during the early years of the 20th century emboldened temperance advocates to push for nationwide prohibition. In 1913 the Anti-Saloon League, soon followed by other organizations, launched a drive to achieve this goal by amending the United States constitution. The question received wide attention as numerous bills were



introduced in congress. Elections in 1914 produced further gains. More individuals committed to voting dry were elected to the legislature than ever before, enough to attain a small majority in the house of representatives. This was far short of the two-thirds necessary to begin the amendment process, but to prohibitionists represented heartening progress.

The apparently unrelated entry of the United States into World War I in 1917 proved invaluable to the dry cause. American officials urged the public to reduce consumption of various commodities, particularly foodstuffs, as part of the war effort. This enabled prohibitionists to depict conversion of grains into alcoholic beverages as an unpatriotic act. They posed the issue in stark terms: which is more important, feeding the boys in the trenches or assuring drunks their liquor? The fact that most American breweries and many distilleries bore Germanic names was an added dividend. Some of the more unscrupulous dries professed to see a German conspiracy to undermine the physical and mental health of American servicemen and civilians.

Few politicians could resist the pressure. What would become the Eighteenth Amendment to the constitution was passed by the senate in August 1917 and by the house of representatives in December. The required number of states ratified within thirteen months and the amendment became law on January 16, 1919, to go into effect one year later. The Volstead Act, providing for enforcement, passed congress over president Woodrow Wilson's veto in October 1919. The Noble Experiment would soon begin.

January 16, 1920, was an historic occasion in American history. Prohibitionists rhapsodized about the benefits soon to follow: an end to alcoholism, fathers spending time with their families instead of in saloons, and enormous sums of money that would be available to enrich lives instead of being spent on drink. Dries celebrated across the nation, often conducting mock funerals of 'John Barleycorn', a slang phrase for whiskey. Their jubilation was premature.

Prohibition could have worked only if it enjoyed overwhelming active support by the American public. It would have required that individuals not only abide by the laws voluntarily, but that they cooperate with enforcement agencies in detecting violators. Such conditions would not have eliminated drinking entirely, any more than speed laws prevent speeding, but might have had effects resembling those predicted by dries. Nothing of the sort took place. A large number of people provided willing to flout the law, and they were aided by the indifference of others. Prohibition became a mockery.

Enforcement posed staggering problems. The United State has almost 20,000 miles of coastline and land borders. Ships of all sizes were used to smuggle alcohol, larger ones often stayed outside the three mile limit while fast launches brought the contraband ashore. Some imports were produced by legitimate wineries and distilleries abroad and bootleggers liked to boast

that their products were 'straight of the boat'. Much of what they sold as imported liquor was the worst sort of domestic rotgut bottled with fancy labels, but customers rarely complained with the police. Because neither Canada nor Mexico had gone dry, and had little interest in cooperation, hundreds of thousands of gallons were brought in across borders. Methods ranged from airplanes and convoys of trucks, often protected by bribing officials, to individuals bringing in whatever they could slip by customs inspectors. A favorite practice of small time operators was to wear filled inner tubes around their waists.

Even if coasts and borders had been sealed off, domestic producers could have made up the difference. Consider the options available to the home manufacturer alone. All the equipment necessary to brew beer was available in shops that sprang up everywhere, and ingredients such as malt and hops were sold by grocery stores as food. Wine could be made just as easily. Aside from fresh fruits that could be fermented, bricks and kegs of grape concentrate became popular items. These often bore a label saying "DO NOT", followed by a list of instructions completion of which produced wine. Distilled alcohol was as readily produced. Small stills could be purchased cheaply for those who lacked mechanical bent. Due to the vile taste of most home concoctions, gin became very popular because its flavor could be partially hidden in mixed drinks. 'Bathtub Gin' actually was made in many bathtubs by adding water, glycerine and juniper oil to the alcohol. Sales of juniper oil, most of which was imported, increased hugely during prohibition.

Aside from home manufacture, domestic bootleggers provided the largest quantity of alcohol. This lucrative trade stimulated the rise of organized crime. Like many other infant industries, bootlegging was conducted mostly by individual entrepreneurs who operated in unsystematic fashion. Then, seeing how much money could be made, racketeers began taking over in most cities and began creating a kind of order. They either forced independents out or took a percentage of the profits. Defiance brought swift reprisal. Mobsters often created vertical monopolies: they not only controlled production and distribution of alcohol, but also ran the illegal 'speakeasies' where it was sold. These ran from sumptuous nightclubs to crude 'shock houses', so called because the drinks served shocked customers, sometimes to death when proprietors conserved stocks by adding wood alcohol.

The order racketeers imposed periodically broke down. Rival gangs might try to take over a city entirely, or fall into disputes over control of territory. Bloodshed resulted. Although such violence was commonplace in most large cities, Chicago led the way with an estimated 500 slayings during prohibition. The most highly publicized of these was the Valentines Day Massacre of 1929. Using men dressed in police uniforms to gain entry, members of the notorious Al Capone gang lined seven rival mobsters up against the wall of a garage and machine gunned them.

The growth of organizations and the large sums of money involved, led to widespread corruption. Breweries and distilleries are difficult to conceal if only because of the smell. Speakeasies, especially those featuring jazz and dance bands, could scarcely escape notice by policemen on the beat. Gangsters spent a great deal of money buying the cooperation of public officials and police to protect investments from being raided or confiscated. Indeed in some cities large shipments of alcohol were provided with police escorts to prevent highjacking by competitors. Nor were federal agents immune. In New York City 100 agents were fired in a single day after investigation revealed widespread malfeasance.

Bribing judges and jurors was commonplace, but the legal process was corrupted even in the absence of direct tampering. Although only a tiny percentage of prohibition violators were apprehended, enough arrests were made to flood courts in many cities. This led to the practice of setting aside 'bargain days' on which the accused could plead guilty in return for a guaranteed light sentence without the nuisance of a trial. When trials were held, it was not uncommon for juries to show their scorn for the law by voting for acquittal despite overwhelming evidence.

There was yet another side effect. Whatever deleterious effects alcohol has on the human body, drinkers before prohibition ordinarily got what they paid for from legitimate business firms with reputations to protect. This was no longer true of alcohol from anonymous producers. How many people were killed or made seriously ill from consuming alcohol laced with harmful additives defy estimate, except in a few instances. One example was the malady known as 'jake foot', so named after its source was traced by government chemists to shipments of Jamaica ginger extract containing a substance later used in manufacturing nerve gas. As sold in drug stores the extract provided a relatively cheap source of alcohol. Those who purchased bottles filled from the poisoned batches paid more than they realized when they lost permanent control of their feet. Within three months after symptoms of 'jake foot' began appearing, health officials diagnosed about 15,000 cases.

An obvious question is why prohibition lasted so long despite its failure. There were several reasons. Organizations such as the WCTU and the Anti-Saloon League remained potent, and professed to believe prohibition *was* working however imperfectly. Citing statistics that supported their position, usually those issued by law enforcement agencies with a vested interest in exaggerating the number of stills smashed and barrels seized, they predicted even greater success in the future. They were a determined minority capable of rewarding friends and punishing enemies at election time. Many politicians themselves drank and scoffed at prohibition privately, but voted dry out of expediency. To come out openly against prohibition invited charges of favoring saloons and drunkenness. Finally the easy availability of alcohol inhibited development of an opposition movement. As a popular saying had it: "let the dries have their laws, as



long as the wets can have their booze".

1926 marked a turning point with the founding of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA). Led by the prestigious Du Pont family the AAPA gave the wet cause respectability, and garnered support from corporation leaders and public figures of all kinds. That year a newspaper poll revealed that 81 % of those queried favored modification or repeal of prohibition. Soon both the American Legion and the American Federation formally announced opposition to the Eighteenth Amendment. In 1929 the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform was formed and within a year attained membership of 300,000.

The dry position became increasingly vulnerable. Before prohibition they had attributed practically every social failing to alcohol, and promised a virtual utopia if it were banished. The absurdity of such predictions became plainer with each passing year. Now wets began blaming everything on the existence of prohibition, especially after the onset of depression. They emphasized the number of jobs repeal would create, the boon to farmers of increased grain consumption, and the cost of enforcement that would become available to public relief. By 1932 both presidential candidates favored an end to prohibition.

Congress began the process for repealing the Eighteenth Amendment even before Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed office following his landslide victory in November. Soon after inauguration F.D.R. asked congress to change the Volstead Act to permit sale of 3.2 beer, which was done in less than two weeks. As one historian has written: "Sudsy joy swept the nation". Parades and celebrations of all kinds were held that day, and Americans drank an estimated one and one half million barrels of beer. When Utah on December 5, 1933 became the 36th state to ratify the Twenty First Amendment, Roosevelt signed the proclamation ending prohibition that evening. The 'Noble Experiment' ended to the sound of popping corks and clinking glasses as John Barleycorn reappeared in public.

One should be wary of deriving 'lessons' from history, but certain aspects of prohibition do seem illuminating. Legislation in the area of personal morality is difficult to enforce as long as a sufficiently large number of people are willing to break the law, especially if the act can be committed in the privacy of one's own home. If demand is high for the means of committing these acts, individuals and groups come forward to provide them for monetary profit. And the amount of money involved leads to corruption of public officials. Few people are wealthy enough to 'pay off' a police officer to escape arrest for burglary or murder. Those engaged in activities generating huge sums may be able to purchase immunity, however, because they can offer amounts sufficiently large to make the offer worth the risk. Finally the very fact that an activity is forbidden may entice some to try it precisely because of the added sense of excitement involved.

Readers who wish to pursue the matter in greater depth should consult:

John Kobler,	<i>Ardent spirits</i>	(1973)
Charles Merz,	<i>The dry decade</i>	(1970)
Andrew Sinclair,	<i>Prohibition: the era of excess</i>	(1962)



'Women's Crusade'



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