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# The Noble Experiment

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## THE NOBLE EXPERIMENT

Many in the early twentieth century believed alcohol to be responsible for the many problems plaguing America. Groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League pressed for prohibition laws banning the sale, manufacture and consumption of alcohol in the belief that it would reduce unemployment, domestic violence and poverty. With a massive push that was decades in the making, the Eighteenth Amendment is passed and prohibition takes effect in January 1920.

With the desire to drink still looming over everyone, the illegal alcohol or moonshining business boomed, causing more problems in America and not fixing the old ones. The rate of alcoholism rose, and many even began dying off from the illegal poisonous alcohol they were consuming. Prohibition is when the infamous gangster Al Capone came to light, with many others like him murdering others to make a buck. Prohibition ended as a failure due to many reasons. The American's determination to get drunk and make money overwhelmed the laws passed to prevent it. How illegal alcohol, money, and the people pulling the strings on both sides ended prohibition before it was even able to start will be the focus of my paper.

It's been said that alcohol is as American as apple pie, and to some degree that's right. Alcohol has always played a role in American life dating back to the start of the country with the ever-so American Whisky Rebellion of the 1790's (Johnson 674). With poor standard of living and unsanitary drinking water, it was safer to drink alcohol or beer than it was to drink water. It was a staple of life that was needed to survive. Our first president George Washington was even known to make his own moonshine. Children drank whisky, and ladies drank whisky; it was just a part of life that was mostly accepted as normal. When prohibition of alcohol came, it was seen as a hiccup in American Society, being dubbed "the noble experiment" by President Hoover.

Prohibition started as a measure to get Americans to reduce their drinking habits. The Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union began enacting local prohibition laws. Many believed that if alcohol and saloons were taken out of society, churches and reform groups could swoop in and persuade the people to give up alcohol. They also believed they would be able to better the education system and family life (osu.edu).

Prohibition really got its start in the early nineteenth century. Religious revivalism moved across the United States bringing with it ideas of change. Many believed humanity had the potential to do better and be better if certain things were removed from society. The first prohibition law was passed in 1838 in a town in Massachusetts. It prohibited the sale of liquor in less than fifteen gallon quantities, making it so one could only buy alcohol in bulk (this was mostly for churches who would buy large amounts of spirits for services). This law was repealed in 1840 due to lack of support and enforcement. In 1846 Maine passed the first real state prohibition law (history.com) led by a Portland businessman named Neal Dow. He made a study that related all of America's problems to alcohol. He

believed that the high number of saloons was the cause of excessive consumption. This became known as the Maine Law. By 1855, thirteen of the thirty states has passed their own prohibition laws (Johnson 679).

The Women's Christian Temperance Union, also known as the W.C.T.U, was formed in 1874, after a group of women heard a lecture from a Dr. Dios Lewis. The lecture made the women act out against drinking, going into saloons and holding peaceful sit-ins or "pray-ins" demanding that the saloons stop selling liquor. In a mere three months, the women of the Women's Christian Temperance Union had run liquor out of two hundred and fifty small towns. The group started out just for prohibition of alcohol but turned to put an end to other vices like drug and tobacco usage. They believed prohibition of these things would make things better for women and children. Women didn't have the right to vote at the time and had very limited rights. There was little to no legal protection for women and children, and taking alcohol from the equation was believed to make life less dangerous for them (wctu.org). Many women flocked to the prohibition movement, because it was known that 'dry legislatures' were in favor of women's rights (Johnson 679).

The Anti-Saloon League joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the fight for prohibition in 1893. Founded by Wayne Wheeler in Oberlin, Ohio, he was no stranger to the dangers of alcohol. He lost an uncle to alcohol, and he himself was injured by a drunk farm hand wielding a pitch fork. The fight was near and dear to him. Wheelers word choice is what brought many to his cause, calling breweries "murder mills." He stirred propaganda and fear into the minds of small town Americans, who just wanted their idea of wholesome family life back. By 1903, Wheeler and the League drove seventy legislatures from their post for opposing the Anti-Saloon League. With motion-pictures and radio spreading the Anti-Saloon League and Women's Christian Temperance Union's message became easy and wide spread. In 1909, the League released a film called Ten Nights in a Bar Room, which has often been referred to as the Uncle Tom's Cabin of the temperance movement. It fueled the desire for change and showed the many dangers of alcohol. The film shows a drunk man blowing all of his money at the bar, and when his daughter is sent to get him, she is killed in a bar fight. The man goes through grief while experiencing delirium tremens, a severe form of alcohol withdrawal that involves sudden and severe mental or nervous system changes (basically the man went crazy). Films like these fueled propaganda and fear, because it showed that alcohol could destroy families. Prohibition came to be seen as eradicating an evil in modern society (pbs.org). The Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Movement wanted and desperately fought for a law to put an end to what they believed was tearing away at the fabric of the American family. They wanted and desperately sought the Eighteenth Amendment.

When America entered World War I, The Anti-Saloon League began to appeal to the people's patriotism. During the war, Americans were rationing goods to help the war effort, and making beer or liquor was seen as a wasteful use of the scarce goods. In 1918, the Anti-Saloon League released a campaign poster in Ohio that read:

"Millions of bushels of grain were consumed to manufacture intoxicants while patriotic people of America limited their food. Millions of pounds of sugar were used in making intoxicants while people were doing without sugar. Thousands and thousands of cars were used for shipments to and from breweries when

absolutely essential war-work was seriously delayed by car shortage" (Appleby, Brinkley, Broussard, McPherson, and Ritchie 437).

John D Rockefeller even donated over three hundred thousand dollars to the Anti-Saloon League to help the cause. Henry Ford felt so strongly for prohibition of alcohol he said, "For myself, if booze ever comes back to the United States, I am through with manufacturing.... I wouldn't be interested in putting automobiles into the hands of a generation soggy with drink" (Potsdam.edu). Henry Ford, a known anti-semitic, was a proud prohibitionist. Many prohibitionist were very xenophobic and ethnocentric. They held very nativist views, which drew many to support prohibition just because of these beliefs (pbs.org).

With a vast majority of breweries being owned by people of German descent, it seemed very patriotic and American to give up alcohol. One of the many German brewers who led what became to be known as the Wet Movement was Adolphus Busch, co-founder of the great Anheuser-Busch brewery. Busch was a proud German-American who even wore an Order of the Red Eagle Medal that was presented to him by the German Keiser Wilhelm himself. With America at war with Germany, it made people really uneasy to support a German business. Adolphus Busch grew sick of the discrimination Germans felt at the hands of the Americans, so he founded and poured mass amounts of money into the German-American Alliance. It originally was formed to encourage German culture but quickly turned into an anti-prohibition party. Busch went to great lengths to try to ensure the Eighteenth Amendment wouldn't pass. When needed, he would bribe newspapers to print stories praising beer, buy politicians, and even pay poll taxes for Mexican and African- Americans to ensure that he'd have their vote in his pocket. He advertised beer as "liquid bread" to make it seem like a healthy choice (pbs.org). No matter how much money Adolphus Busch spent, he could not stop the Eighteenth Amendment from happening.

In 1913, the Anti-Saloon League announced it was attempting to achieve national prohibition through a constitutional amendment (osu.edu). The Eighteenth Amendment was proposed by Congress in December of 1917. The amendment moved quickly through both houses and was ratified a month later on January 16, 1919. The amendment was short, just three sections, none stating that the consumption of alcohol was illegal. The first section explains that a year after the amendment is ratified, the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors for beverage purposes was illegal. This was so the alcohol/beer industry could have time to essentially close shop. The "for beverage purposes" aspect was because alcohol was still legal for scientific purposes and still available by prescription (Potsdam.edu). The American Medical Association strongly supported prohibition and went as far as to remove whisky and brandy from the list of scientifically approved medicines in *The Pharmacopeia of the United States of America* in 1917, before the Eighteenth Amendment was even ratified (Osu.edu). Section two states that the state governments and the federal government have concurrent power to enforce the amendment by legislation (work together and pass laws to enforce prohibition). But the third section is the one that could have ended prohibition. Section three states that a majority of the states (two-thirds) have to ratify the amendment within seven years from the date of submission, otherwise the amendment is null and void (law.cornell.edu). If a majority of the states did not ratify the Eighteenth Amendment within that time, it would not become law of the land. The only state that did not ratify the amendment was Rhode Island (Potsdam.edu).

The Eighteenth Amendment was essentially ineffective without what became known as the Volstead Act. After the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified in January 1919, Andrew Volstead, a congressman from Minnesota and a Senate Judiciary Chairman, began drafting the National Prohibition Act of 1919. Though Volstead was the legislation's sponsor, the true author was believed to be William Wheeler of the Anti-Saloon League. The purpose of the act was to prohibit alcohol, regulate the manufacture, production, use, and sale of alcohol for purposes other than drinking. It also made sure that there was enough alcohol for scientific research and other lawful industries like medicinal use (Potsdam.edu). President Woodrow Wilson did veto the Volstead Act, but it was overridden by Congress the same day. The act left many loopholes, because it did not specifically prohibit the consumption of liquor. You could still acquire a prescription for legal alcohol from your doctor (pbs.org). As soon as the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act went into place, Americans had already found ways around the law. With alcohol still legal by prescription, the number of registered pharmacists tripled in New York. Bootleggers realized pharmacies would be great fronts for running liquor. Churches and synagogues could still procure wine for religious purposes, and they began to see a rise in attendance. Many began to buy wine making kits that came with an almost sarcastic warning label that stated "Do not leave in heat, may cause fermentation" (pbs.org). California grape growers increased their acreage seven hundred percent to meet the sudden demand that came with prohibition. Some companies got around the law by selling wort, beer that was halted in the manufacturing process before yeast was added. Consumers could buy it, because it was sold before it contained alcohol. All you had to do was add yeast, let it ferment and filter it, and you had beer (Potsdam.edu).

Tavern owners would go to lengths to still make money while providing alcohol legally. They would charge high prices for crackers and give you a drink for free. One had patrons pay to see a striped pig and then provide alcohol for the viewing (pbs.org). When that wasn't cutting it, illegal secret bars called speakeasies began popping up on every corner. If you had the secret word, or knew the right person, you had a place to drink. In New York, there was an estimated thirty-two thousand speakeasies (Appleby, Brinkley, Broussard, McPherson, and Ritchie, 413).

There were many problems associated with speakeasies. From who ran them to the quality of the liquor received, many aspects came to be dangerous. Death by alcohol was common. From the ingredients added to "bath tub gin" or moonshine, to the type of pipe used in the still that produced it, alcohol was becoming poisonous. If moonshiners used lead coils or soldering on their stills, the lead would give off acetate of lead (a poison). In hopes of curbing the people's use of industrial alcohol to get drunk, the government added many denaturants or additives to make the alcohol poisonous. Wood alcohol was the most deadly. When wood alcohol enters the body, it turns into formaldehyde, which is highly toxic, because the human body cannot convert it to a harmless substance. When not properly diluted or consumed in large quantities, the result could be paralysis, blindness, and death. Some even used iodine and embalming fluid to produce their product. Bootleggers who couldn't get alcohol from the Bahamas or Canada, and moonshiners looking to cut costs attributed to many deaths and hardships in the way they made their trade. In 1927 alone, over eleven thousand deaths were attributed to alcohol poisoning, most being among the urban poor who couldn't afford the pricier liquor from bordering countries. There was a push for Congress to prohibit the use of so much/so many denaturants, but with opposition from the dry side, it was stated by the Women's Christian

Temperance Union that “the person who drinks this industrial alcohol is a deliberate suicide” and the thought was hushed (Potsdam.edu).

These speakeasies were usually ran by organized crime groups. Lots of money was to be made from prohibition, and many jumped at the chance to smuggle and rum run. The Eighteenth Amendment unknowingly created an illegal billion dollar industry. One of the major players in the crime scene was Scarface, Al Capone. Capone came to Chicago from New York in 1920 to join his mentor and street gang leader Johnny Torrio (fbi.gov). The nickname Scarface came about when in his younger years he made a sexually harassing remark to a woman at a bar and was subsequently punched in the face by the woman’s brother, leaving three scars on his face. He ran the streets of Chicago with an iron fist and took out anyone who attempted to step in his way. Scarface is most known for the bloody St. Valentine’s Day Massacre in 1929 where seven members of rival Bug Moran’s gang were found shot to death in a warehouse. Though no one was ever charged for the crime, it has long been believed to be the work of Capone, who was in Florida at the time (fbi.gov). The massacre made the major crime bosses realize that they had to change and clean up their organizations. They came together to form a National Crime Syndicate, essentially organizing crime whose effect are still felt today (pbs.org).

Capone had enough money and power that he was able to bribe many government and police officials. In President Hoover’s eyes, he was public enemy number one. Hoover put U.S District Attorney George Johnson in charge of going after Capone over the Volstead Act and the new Sullivan Decision. The Sullivan Decision was an act passed that made illegal income taxable with no penalty of self-incrimination. Capone had a high class lifestyle yet had never filed a tax return (crimelibrary.com). Johnson felt that Elliot Ness, a prohibition agent, was one of the last honest men in the force. Many agents were being paid off by big players to look the other way. Law enforcement couldn’t get the government officials to fully back the campaign, and juries would often refuse to convict a person in violation of the Volstead Act. The District Attorney put Ness in charge of assembling a task force to bring Al Capone to justice.

Elliot Ness wasted no time assembling a task force of young, single, intelligent men with different skill sets. The team used many dangerous tactics to reach the ultimate goal of capturing Capone. The group became known as The Untouchables. Ness and his men would conduct raids on Capone’s breweries and warehouse simultaneously so word could not get out to others. They were very successful in their raids seizing cars, equipment and even arrested Capone’s top producing distiller. Capone, distraught and wanting to put an end to the raids, had his men attempt to bribe Ness and a few others. Capone’s goons pulled up alongside Ness’s men while driving and tossed two thousand dollars into their car and drove off. The offer was two-thousand a week for the men to back off. At the time they made under three thousand a year. Ness’s men caught up to the goons and threw the money back (crimelibrary.com). Turning down this amount of money showed they were deeply committed to bringing Al Capone down. They were untouchable when it came to bribes.

Although The Untouchables closed down nineteen distilleries and breweries of Capone’s, busts worth an estimated one million, it wasn’t a violation of the Volstead Act that caught up to Al Capone but tax evasion. In 1931, he was indicted on tax evasion. The prosecutor offered Capone a plea deal that would only put him in jail for two

years in fear that Capone would go after any witness that testified. District Judge James Wilkerson rejected the plea deal, and sent it to trial. Capone, with the undocumented deep pockets, began to bribe jurors in his favor. Judge Wilkerson caught wind of the incidents and switched the jury at the last minute. Al Capone was found guilty of evading a lump sum of one hundred and eighty two thousand dollars in taxes, (chicagotribune.com) and sentenced to eleven years in federal prison (fbi.gov).

Prohibition caused massive problems for society the thirteen years it was in place. The voices behind the movement promised positive gains in all aspects of society from family life to economics. That was not the case. Prohibition greatly increased government spending, while at the same time causing the government to lose much tax revenue. In New York about seventy five percent of the state's revenue was from liquor sales. The federal government was hoping that the income tax that was put in place before Prohibition was enacted would make up for the loss, but that calculation was severely off. The federal government lost eleven billion dollars in potential tax revenue from liquor sales and spent three hundred million trying to implement the Volstead Act (osu.edu). One thing that took prohibition supporters by surprise was the decline in spending. They expected many to spend the extra money they now had on entertainment and dining. Instead, no group had any economic growth. Thousands of jobs became eliminated in many industries hurting the already poor (pbs.org).

In the decade before prohibition, alcohol consumption had been on a steady decline. When 1921 rolled around, two years after the amendments ratification, consumption climbed above pre-war levels. The homicide rate jumped seventy four percent from its pre-prohibition period. Instead of eliminating saloons, there became more places to drink. The difference was women were now more accepted at these saloons. Prisons began to overcrowd (cato.org), not turn into churches like Billy Sunday touted. The government and the people decided it was time to put an end to the experiment.

With the United States clawing its way out of the Great Depression, the people needed a morale boost. Franklin Roosevelt ran on repealing the Eighteenth Amendment. This was unheard of, because an amendment had never been repealed before. In December 1932, the Twenty First Amendment was proposed by Senator John Blaine of Wisconsin (Albany.edu) advocating the repeal the Eighteenth Amendment. The amendment got the popular vote in February of 1933, officially repealing The Volstead Act and Eighteenth Amendment (Potsdam.edu). Even after it was repealed, dry groups continued to push for temperance, though it did not gain traction this time around. Prohibition left its footprint on American history in many ways we still feel today. Alcohol is once again regulated and taxed by the government, giving many the idea that maybe the same could be done with marijuana. Big cities like New York still feel the wrath of different crime families that came about from prohibition. A lot was learned and can still be learned from this stage in American society. Prohibition was a failed experiment that many wish did not happen, with long lasting effects that were still felt in the decades that followed.

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