

HOW DRY WE WEREN'T

By Lloyd E. Fisher, Jr.

Prohibition -- that ill-fated American experiment banning recreational alcohol -- was a fascinating period of our history.

Not that Americans have a heritage of avoiding alcohol. About 1630, the manifest of a ship of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, on its way to America, listed some 10,000 gallons of wine and more beer than water. By the middle 1800's, tea was more expensive than liquor. And the so-called "Whiskey Rebellion" in the 1790's was a demonstration against a tax on whiskey.

In the 1850's there was a brief flirtation with prohibition. Neal Dun, a Portland, Maine business man, was a force that drove the Maine legislature to pass a law banning liquor. A few other states followed suit, but in about ten years, all had restored alcohol.

A resident of Hillsboro, Ohio, Eliza Trumble Thompson, began a noisy campaign against liquor in 1873. A daughter of a governor and the wife of a judge, Mrs. Thompson led groups of women to saloons, hotels and drugstores where they prayed, sang, read the Bible and asked drinkers to abstain and sellers to cease. The movement had a brief period of expansion in the Midwest, New York and New England but soon died out.

A 1900 report estimated that there were then about 300,000 saloons in the United States. Prohibitionists were particularly disturbed by the sight of children bringing buckets to the saloons to be filled with beer and taken home.

One of the most colorful opponents of the liquor trade was Carrie Nation. She was six feet tall and attacked bars with a large hatchet, which became her symbol. One report said that she hacked so many bars in one Cincinnati block that she collapsed from exhaustion!

There were proponents of alcohol -- one of the most influential was Adolphus Busch. He came to America from Germany, married Lilly Anheuser and founded the integrated giant that still dominates the U.S. brewing industry. However, during World War I, anti-German feelings and the Anti-Saloon League (founded in Westerville, Ohio) turned sentiment against the brewery.

The dry forces mounted an intensive campaign for a constitutional amendment. By one estimate, there were 20,000 trained speakers urging the banning of intoxicating liquors. The Amendment was proposed in 1917 and the final state adoption came on January 16, 1919. By its terms, that made the effective date of Prohibition, January 17, 1920. During the one year's delay, many citizens stockpiled booze for the coming drought. The mother of actress Mary Pickford bought an entire liquor store inventory and moved it to her

basement. Future President Franklin D. Roosevelt had four cases of "Old Reserve" delivered to his New York townhouse.

On January 16, 1920, there was a celebratory service at the First Congregational Church in Washington D.C. at which famed orator William Jennings Bryan was the main speaker. His forty minute "sermon" pronounced liquor dead. From that day and until its repeal in 1933, Prohibition generated a colorful period of history.

Andrew Volstead was chair of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee that enacted the legislation to administer the Eighteenth Amendment and it was soon called "The Volstead Act". Enforcement was difficult and inconsistent. Bootlegging gangsters, Al Capone and "Bugsy" Moran, became household words as did their pursuer, Eliot Ness. When Capone was finally jailed, it was for income tax evasion and not violation of the Volstead Act!

The Act provided that religious sacramental wine could be sold to priests and ministers and rabbis could authorize sales to individuals. There were some abuses of these provisions but the Methodists formally endorsed unfermented "Welch's Grape Juice."

A Michigan mother with 10 children was given a life sentence for her fourth Volstead violation -- the sale of two pints of liquor to an undercover policeman. Similar incidents began to turn opinion against prohibition. Cynical sentiment included the statement: "Prohibition is better than no liquor at all" and the song; "I Never Knew I Had A Wonderful Wife Until The Town Went Dry." Hearst ran an essay contest about the problems of Prohibition and received over 70,000 entries.

The Roosevelt landslide of 1932 was the beginning of the end. In anticipation, on December 28, 1932, Anheuser-Busch purchased a team of Clydesdales for "advertising purposes." The repeal Amendment was passed by Congress and on December 5, 1933, Utah became the 36th and final state needed for adoption. Prohibition was dead but its effects on America and Americans will provide subjects for social scientists for years to come.

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Sources: "Last Call" -- Daniel Okrent, 2010; "Paths into American Culture" -- John C. Burnham, Ph. D.



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