

The Prohibition era in the U.S.

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.05.17

Word Count **874**

Level **1060L**



Orange County, California, sheriff's deputies dumping illegal alcohol in 1932. Photo: Orange County Archives

In the early 20th century, many Americans thought drinking alcohol was bad for people. This belief became widespread and eventually led to the 18th Amendment of the Constitution, which banned anyone from making, selling, or transporting liquor. This would usher in a period in American history known as Prohibition.

The new laws banning alcohol were difficult to enforce. After passage, there was an increase of the illegal production of liquor known as "bootlegging." Many people opened illegal drinking clubs, and there was more gang violence and other crimes.

All this led to less support for Prohibition by the end of the 1920s. In early 1933, Congress adopted a resolution proposing a 21st Amendment to the Constitution that would repeal, or cancel, the 18th. It was confirmed by the end of that year, bringing the Prohibition era to a close.

Anti-Alcohol Movement

In the 1820s and 1830s, a wave of religious fever swept the United States. This led to increased calls for temperance, or alcohol-free life.

In 1838, the state of Massachusetts passed a temperance law banning the sale of liquors in less than 15-gallon quantities. Though the law was repealed two years later, it set an example. Maine passed the first state Prohibition law in 1846, and a number of other states had followed suit by the time the Civil War began in 1861.

By 1900, temperance groups preaching alcohol-free life were common across the United States. Women played a strong role in the temperance movement, as alcohol was seen as a destructive force in families and marriages. In 1906, a new wave of attacks began on the sale of liquor, led by a group called the Anti-Saloon League.

At this time, evangelical Protestantism, a very traditional Christian way of life, was rising in America. It viewed bars and saloons as corrupt and ungodly.

In addition, many factory owners supported Prohibition. It was a time of increased manufacturing and working hours. Owners hoped to prevent accidents and increase the efficiency of their workers.

Congress Passes Amendment

By 1917, the United States had entered World War I. President Woodrow Wilson instituted a temporary ban on alcohol. Beer and liquor are made with grains, and Wilson wanted to save grain to produce food instead. That same year, Congress submitted the 18th Amendment. It would ban the manufacture, transportation and sale of liquors. The amendment needed support from three-quarters of all U.S. states, which it got in just 11 months.

The 18th Amendment was ratified on January 29, 1919, and went into effect a year later. In October 1919, Congress passed the National Prohibition Act, which provided guidelines for how the federal government would enforce and punish crimes in violation of Prohibition. Representative Andrew Volstead of Mississippi championed the act. The legislation became more commonly known as the Volstead Act.

Enforcing The Law And "Bootlegging"

Both federal and local government struggled to enforce Prohibition.

In general, Prohibition was enforced much more strongly in rural areas and small towns, where the people welcomed such laws. It was enforced more loosely in urban areas.

There were early signs of success, including a decline in arrests for drunkenness and a reported 30 percent drop in alcohol consumption. Still, those who wanted to keep drinking found clever ways to do it. They made illegal drinking clubs and stores, known as "speakeasies." They smuggled



alcohol across state lines. They also made strong alcohol in their own homes, which was called "moonshine" or "bathtub gin."

In addition, the Prohibition era encouraged the rise of criminal activity associated with "bootlegging." The most notorious example was the Chicago gangster Al Capone, who earned an incredible \$60 million annually from bootleg operations and speakeasies. Such illegal operations fueled a corresponding rise in gang violence. At the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago in 1929, several men dressed as policemen - possible Capone associates - shot and killed men in an enemy gang.

Prohibition Comes To An End

Bootleg liquor was expensive to buy. This meant that the nation's working class and poor were far more restricted during Prohibition than middle- or upper-class Americans. Costs for law enforcement, jails and prisons shot up, too. By the end of the 1920s, support for Prohibition was waning. In addition, more harsh, strict fundamentalists were leading the temperance movement, which put off its more moderate members.

By 1932, the country was struggling with the Great Depression. In the Depression, many people lost their homes, money, and jobs. Soon, it became more appealing to create jobs by making liquor legal again.

Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for president that year calling for Prohibition to end, and easily won victory over the previous President Herbert Hoover. FDR's victory meant the end for Prohibition, and in February 1933, Congress proposed a 21st Amendment to the Constitution that would repeal the 18th Amendment.

In December 1933, Utah provided the 36th and final necessary vote for ratification of the 21st Amendment. Though a few states continued to prohibit alcohol after Prohibition's end, all had abandoned it by 1966.