

Prohibition 1919-1933 – Its Effects on Crime and Law Enforcement

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Howard Hyde Russell founded in 1893 the Anti-Saloon League in Oberlin, Ohio as a state society for the purpose of applying political pressure to politicians to eliminate the drinking of alcohol. The League's influence spread rapidly, and by 1895 it became a national organization and was the leading organization lobbying for prohibition in the United States early in the 20th century. The League drew most of its support from Protestant evangelical churches, especially in the South and rural North, and also in the South, the Klu Klux Klan.

From 1913 to 1917, the women's suffrage movement aligned themselves with the anti-alcohol activists. As did a movement to create an income tax that would replace the tax on alcohol, should the latter be banned. The 16th and 17th Amendments were passed and ratified. Prohibition would take a little longer.

By May 27, 1919, the Prohibition Era began in Ohio. The Anti-Saloon League's most prominent leader, Wayne Wheeler, conceived a constitutional amendment and political pressure was applied to the United States Congress. The Eighteenth Amendment passed in both chambers of the United States Congress on December 18, 1917 and was ratified by the requisite three-fourths of the states on January 16, 1919, to wit:

18, 1917 and was ratified by the requisite three-fourths of the states on January 16, 1919. Its language allowed Congress to pass enforcement legislation, to wit:

Eighteenth Amendment

After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited. The Congress and the several States shall have concurrent power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Note that the amendment permitted the federal government to pass legislation to enforce the amendment. Andrew Volstead, a Minnesota representative and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, introduced the National Prohibition Act on June 27, 1919, better known as the Volstead Act, to enforce the new amendment. Congress passed it on October 27, 1919, over the veto

of President Woodrow Wilson, to take effect on January 17, 1920, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages.

Americans had truly little say in the matter. Their federal representatives and the representatives of at least 36 states took alcohol away from them. History should have taught those representatives that Americans, going all the way back to the Boston Tea Party, disdain governmental interference with their property and pursuits of happiness.

Very quickly, the criminal element recognized the opportunity to provide the alcohol to those Americans. Criminal syndicates and associations that had never before existed grew in the underworld. The federal government assumed authority to create federal law enforcement agencies that also had never existed to enforce the Volstead Act.

War erupted between federal agencies and the criminal syndicates, not to mention anyone else harboring or making alcohol. Many citizens of the United States became collateral damage. Murder rates in the country climbed from between 7 and 8 per 100,000 population before Prohibition to 10 by 1933, a 28% increase.

Deaths of law enforcement officers showed an even greater increase. In the Greater Cincinnati region alone, there were more law enforcement officers killed on average per year during Prohibition than at any other time in history before or since, by a factor of three! We know of 212 that have died in our region during the last 173 years. Of those, 46 died during the 14 years of Prohibition.

It did not take long for government representatives to realize their underestimation of the American public's desire for the rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Political pressure mounted against them and against Prohibition.

Furthermore, reducing the number of drinkers and vendors was an abject failure. National Prohibition was repealed on December 5, 1933. Ohio's statutes were repealed on December 23, 1933. The murder rates immediately dropped to below pre-Prohibition rates and did not rise again until the 1970s.

The Anti-Saloon League ceased to be a force in American politics and eventually merged with other groups to form the National Temperance League. Later they renamed themselves the American Council on Addiction and Alcohol Problems.

The criminal syndicates that formed, however, did not disappear. They moved onto gambling, prostitution, and pornography. Nor did the federal agency that was perceived to be authorized by the 18th Amendment disappear. It moved on to enforce extraconstitutional legislation and/or taxation of alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and explosives. Another federal agency, created in 1930, the Bureau of Narcotics, is now the Drug Enforcement Administration. While the Federal Bureau of Investigation began as an investigative agency in 1908, it was not until 1935 that they became a full law enforcement entity, specifically to combat the criminal syndicates that abounded then and now.

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