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History Paper 2

### Amendment 18:

### Alcohol Prohibition

*I am sure the Americans can fix nothing without a drink. If you meet, you drink; if you part, you drink; if you make acquaintance, you drink; if you close a bargain, you drink; they quarrel in their drink, and they make it up with a drink.*

-Frederick Merryat, in *A Diary in America*, about an Englishman's observations of American culture, 1839<sup>1</sup>

In the years between the American Civil War and World War I, alcohol consumption in the United States grew radically. Americans' attitudes towards laws regarding intoxication soon split into two opposing factions. Many people these days wonder how such a law could have ever been enacted in America. The common opinion of many people in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America was that the only way to stop the social problems caused by drunkenness was to prohibit alcohol altogether, regardless of the amount of Americans who drank casually. On the other side of this debate were those who believed that regulation (as opposed to prohibition) was the only truly effective way to control the negative social effects of alcohol. There were many social and financial problems in America which are proven to have increased due to the illegalization of alcohol. Prohibition in America was a complex and divisive issue that incorrectly allowed the personal morality of a few to govern the private rights of all.

In the beginnings of America, social consumption of alcohol was very common. Even the puritans did not believe in alcohol abstinence, which arguably stemmed from the

unhygienic state of drinking water stored during trans-Atlantic ship journeys. Regardless, the consumption of alcohol in the United States began to increase up through the early 1900's. In 1870, there were approximately 100,000 saloons in America; in 1900, there were approximately 300,000.<sup>2</sup> While the population during these years had simply doubled (from about 38,500,000 to about 76,000,000<sup>3</sup>), the amount of bars had tripled. This of course didn't necessarily mean that the amount of alcohol abusers in America had grown, but it did seem to prove the anti-alcohol crusaders' biggest fears- that alcohol was destroying the American family by luring husbands and fathers (and their wages) out of the home and into the bar— an evil place known to be full of prostitution and gambling.

There were two opposing factors that seemed to heavily influence both sides of the alcohol-related beliefs of the nation at this time. The first was the fact that American breweries and distilleries, though these two groups had their own disagreements and distrust for each other, were extremely powerful in the fight against their common alcohol-hating enemy. Pre-Prohibition, in 1909, 70% of saloons in America were in debt to, controlled or owned by breweries.<sup>4</sup> The people who were involved in these industries fought against Prohibition using such organizations as the Personal Liberty League and by supporting the anti-prohibition campaigns of such deep-pocketed businessmen as Gustave Pabst and the Anheuser-Busch family. On the other end of the spectrum, the 1920's in America saw the enactment of many laws which successfully outlawed (or at least severely regulated) the recreational use of drugs such as opium and marijuana. Many who also opposed alcohol believed that the fact that alcohol was more commonly accepted in society meant that it was even more dangerous than other drugs. It seemed an obvious and easy step to make dangerous and counter-cultural recreational drugs illegal, but banning something as culturally ingrained and consistently advertised as alcohol seemed impossible until just a few years before it actually happened.

Another very strong influence had been gaining momentum since early short-lived state-mandated Prohibitions were enacted and retracted in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This movement showed itself nationally when new type of education called “Scientific Temperance Education” was introduced to all American schoolchildren around 1901. This “education” was required by law and stemmed from the tireless lobbying efforts of Mrs. Frances Willard, the leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and her devout followers. Although their name states otherwise, the WCTU's ultimate goal was not to spread the practice of moderate, controlled alcohol temperance but to convince American lawmakers to enact a country-wide Prohibition. Their goal was eventually aided by this “scientific” temperance instruction. It was basically propaganda invented by Frances Willard herself. Lessons learned in the classroom now included many intimidating myths, such as “the majority of alcohol drinkers die of dropsy”<sup>5</sup> (a disease which can be caused by cirrhosis) and “when alcohol passes down the throat, it burns off the skin, leaving it bare and burning.”<sup>5</sup> Many grew up terrified amid such lies (though occasionally gaining additional realistic experience through the pain of witnessing alcohol abuse in their family) and the increasingly influential Protestant society that many Americans were striving towards. When the opportunity arose, these now-grown children did not have a hard time voting to pass Amendment 18.

The social problems presented by legal alcohol consumption were numerous and seemed to be on the rise after the Civil War. Studies showed that by the time of the Repeal of Prohibition, alcohol consumption had lowered to 60-70 percent of its pre-Prohibition rates. Even though actual drinking rates may have decreased, Prohibition multiplied societal problems and their negative effects because of the lack of regulation. The lack of any minimum age for buying liquor (before and during Prohibition) meant that those of any age who were able to access a speakeasy was able to purchase alcohol. Also, since illegal alcohol distilleries were unregulated and dealing with unreliable profits, they often diluted any

properly made alcohol with cheap and easily accessed material such as wood alcohol or embalming fluid- poisons which caused significantly more alcohol poisoning than was occurring previously. From 1920 to 1927 the death rate from acute alcohol poisoning rose from 1 per 100,000 to 4 in 100,000.<sup>7</sup>

Although there were many personal problems which arose from Prohibition, the most damaging economic and social effect Prohibition caused was the growth of criminal elements which gained revenue by becoming involved in smuggling, bootlegging and speakeasies. Tax money gained through the sale of alcohol had disappeared- for example, during the first wave of state-controlled Prohibitions in 1874, federal liquor tax collections were off by \$300,000 in just two revenue districts.<sup>8</sup> According to Henry H. Curran, "From whatever economic gains can be accredited to the disappearance of the saloon, we must deduct at least half a billion dollars annually as the cost of prohibition, including the loss of Federal, State and municipal revenue in addition to the actual appropriations for enforcement."<sup>9</sup> Millions of what would have been tax-dollars were funneled into the hands of criminals, who often used a small amount of the money they saved by not paying taxes to bribe corrupt public officials, who of course were not getting paid very well due to diminished public funds. Prohibition also caused the exportation of money to foreign countries, such as Canada and Cuba, where Americans' dollars were collected through smuggling and increased tourism.

Most people will not deny that alcohol itself causes social problems, but those caused by prohibition seemed to far outweigh these. In the beginning, Prohibition seemed to promise that a pure and Christian American utopia could become a reality. Many Americans had personally experienced the emotional and financial damage that occurs, for example, when a parent abandons the family because of alcoholism. They believed that a law could change a person's morals and that America would soon be free of poverty and crime. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment was one of the few amendments to the American Constitution that restricted

personal rights rather than government rights, the first of which being the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment banning slavery. As Ernest H. Cherrington said, “Just as there is still murder and theft despite the law, so intoxicating liquors are [still] illegally consumed.”<sup>10</sup> Prohibition ultimately proved that imposing morality as law (when such morals are not agreed with by a large majority of the country) is not effective in removing the immorality which is present in all societies regardless of law. Effectively regulating and controlling something, even if you do not personally believe in it, may be the only true way to successfully prevent its side effects from becoming rampant.

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## Endnotes

1. Okrent, 7.
2. Okrent,
3. Wynn, 1.
4. Okrent, 30.
5. Okrent, 21.
7. Cherrington & Curran, 4.
8. Okrent, 13.
9. Cherrington & Curran, 2.
10. Cherrington & Curran, 1.