

Living Prohibition

The 18th Amendment banned the manufacture and sale of alcohol, but not its consumption. Proponents hoped eventually supplies of alcohol would run out, but people everywhere ignored the law, leading to the birth of “speakeasies”—secret nightclubs where alcohol was sold illegally—and organized crime led by gangsters like Al Capone. Enforcing the law proved almost impossible. Smuggling and bootlegging were widespread, there were not enough federal agents, and some agents and cops took bribes to look the other way.

Click [here](#) if you want to rewatch the clip about the social effects of Prohibition that we watched as a class.

A speakeasy in New York City, 1929



Document 1: Count Felix von Luckner was a German naval war hero who visited the United States with his wife in 1927. He provides a visitor's impression of Prohibition.

In time, I learned that not everything in America was what it seemed to be. I discovered, for instance, that a spare tire could be filled with substances other than air, that one must not look too deeply into certain binoculars, and that the Teddy Bears that suddenly acquired tremendous popularity among the ladies very often had hollow metal stomachs.

But, it might be asked, 'where do all these people get the liquor?' Very simple. Prohibition has created a new, a universally respected, a well-beloved, and a very profitable occupation, that of the bootlegger who takes care of the importation of the forbidden liquor. Everyone knows this, even the powers of government.

...Yet it is undeniable that prohibition has in some respects been signally successful. The filthy saloons, the gin mills which formerly flourished on every corner and in which the laborer once drank off half his wages, have disappeared...But, on the other hand, a great deal of poison and methyl alcohol has taken the place of the good old pure whiskey. The number of crimes and misdemeanors that originated in drunkenness has declined. But by contrast, a large part of the population has become accustomed to disregard and to violate the law without thinking. The worst is, that precisely as a consequence of the law, the taste for alcohol has spread ever more widely among the youth...My observations have convinced me that many fewer would drink were it not illegal."

Document 2: "Only Suckers Work," An interview with a former bootlegger, who went by "Callano."

"Work?" Callano said with a laugh. "Me work? Only suckers work."

That was during Prohibition and all the boys was running booze. My brothers, the older ones, had a gang bootlegging. They had a bunch of big old Packards and Caddies. I went in with 'em and we made plenty dough. There was dough in that racket all right, and it was fun to bring it in. Times was good then, everybody had money, everybody was spending it...

We ran mostly ale. We got it in Canada for five bucks a case and sold it here for fifteen or twenty ... A gang from Burlington tried to chisel in but they didn't last long. We high-jacked three of their cars one night...We gave them a damn good beating, we put a couple of 'em in the hospital. They kept away...

We know the officers and they know us. You know, the same an you know football players on another team, something like that..."

Document 3: Samuel D. Mobley, from Winnsboro, South Carolina, recalled life during the 1920s in this interview.

"I have noticed that every attempt to legislate morals into the people has resulted in disaster. I will call your attention to the fact that you and I remember when we had the old barroom system, the State dispensary system prohibition, and the present retail liquor shops. No system is perfect, but the worst of all was the prohibition law. Whiskey caused some trouble in Papa Noah's family and resulted in some confusion in Uncle Lot's household. But religion and morals should be taught and inculcated in the church and home, and self-control and temperance should be read and studied from the Bible rather than the Statutory Code."

Document 4: Effects of Illegal Booze

Improperly distilled liquor had devastating effects, one of which was “jake leg,” which caused partial paralysis in the legs and the inability to walk normally. Frustrated that people continued to consume so much alcohol even after it was banned, federal officials had decided to try a different kind of enforcement. They ordered the poisoning of industrial alcohols manufactured in the United States, products regularly stolen by bootleggers and resold as drinkable spirits. The idea was to scare people into giving up illicit drinking. Instead, by the time Prohibition ended in 1933, the federal poisoning program, by some estimates, had killed at least 10,000 people.

Jamaican ginger extract, called “jake,” was widely used as a bootleg for alcohol during Prohibition by people who could not afford bootlegger prices. US authorities in the 1920s, during prohibition, required the product to be made less drinkable, usually by adding so much ginger that it became unpleasant. It was thought that it was harmless, but in reality it is a neurotoxin. Many victims – numbers are put in the 30,000 to 50,000 range – lost the use of their feet and sometimes hands.

Illegal Product Paralyzed Many All Over U.S.--- Hundreds Made Ill After Drinking It

Because Judge James A. Lowell of the U. S. District Court decided he had lied, Harry Gross of Canton was



Above: Detroit police confiscating brewing equipment.

A Woman ("Flapper") reveals her hidden flask, 1926



A policeman with wrecked automobile and confiscated moonshine, 1922



Document 6: Small Time Bootleggers, 1924

While the big time gangsters like Capone made the headlines, Prohibition also gave small-time crooks an easy way to make money. Some families distilled and sold bootleg liquor as a way to supplement their income, especially in areas where the prosperity of the 1920s did not reach, like small farms.



Some of the People of Prohibition



Roy Olmstead

Nicknamed the "King of the Puget Sound Bootleggers," Roy Olmstead was the youngest and most promising lieutenant on the Seattle police until he was caught bootlegging...



One of the best-known criminal attorneys in the Midwest... Remus became an enormously successful bootlegger, serving as both buyer and seller. When his bribes ran out, he ended up in jail and lost his fortune.



Big Bill Thompson

Chicago's long-time Republican mayor who took and gave bribes to make sure Chicago gangsters had little to fear from the law.



Dion O'Banion

Dion O'Banion was a safecracker and sometime florist whose Irish north side Chicago gang specialized in smuggling liquor down from Canada.