The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 231
"Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

It was in prehistoric times that human beings first learned the trick of fermenting sweet beverages like honey, fruit juices, or malt extracts into beverages containing ethanol.

In traditional times, the fermentation and consumption of alcoholic beverages was practiced all over the world: in Africa, in Asia, in the Americas, and in Europe. But among Europeans especially, and especially among male Europeans. Historically speaking, nobody else drinks like white men.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 231. Evolutionary, Not Revolutionary.

Drinking alcohol is fun. It gets you buzzed. You don't need me to tell you that. But in traditional societies, it had other advantages. Alcoholic beverages, if made and stored properly, will keep for a long time, important in a world that lacks refrigeration. Also, no known human pathogen can survive in an alcoholic beverage, so long as it's above a certain minimum alcohol content, so that's important in places where potable water is hard to come by. The choice between beer and chronic diarrhea is a no-brainer.

This was especially true in Europe. In Asia, many people drank tea, which was made from boiled water, which also solves the pathogen problem. But in Europe, they drank beer. Or wine, in the parts of Europe the Romans once ruled.

Alcoholic beverages made with natural fermentation, like beer or wine or cider or mead, max out at somewhere around 12-15% alcohol. Above that, the alcohol begins to kill the very yeast that do the work of fermentation. Keep in mind that alcohol is a waste product, so far as the yeast are concerned. In the ninth century, Europeans began developing the technique of distillation to create drinks with higher alcohol contents. Distill beer and you get whiskey. Distill wine and you get brandy. Later came rum, vodka, and gin.

By the 18th century, distilled spirits had become cheap and easy to produce. Until this time, they had been luxury products, available only to the very rich; now anyone could afford them, and anyone did. In the warmer parts of Europe, beer and wine were cheap enough to hold their own against the newcomers, but distilled spirits won the day in the colder regions, especially in the Slavic nations and Scandinavia, where they favored vodka, and in England, which favored gin—which is really vodka flavored with juniper berries, but don't tell anyone—with a lot of whiskey consumed in Scotland and Ireland.

And then there was rum, made from fermented sugar cane juice in the West Indies. Simple geography made rum the cheapest and most available distilled spirit in the British colonies of North America, where by the late 18th century, per capita rum consumption is estimated to have been three gallons per year, a remarkable figure, especially when you consider that it includes women and children, most of whom weren't drinking any at all.

Colonial North Americans also drank a lot of apple cider and its concentrated cousin, applejack, also known as Jersey Lightning. These were popular in rural places, anywhere where there were lots of apple trees, really. Beer was available in cities large enough to support a brewery. And rum was ubiquitous. New Englanders even began importing raw molasses and manufacturing their own domestic New England rums.

It's safe to say that white, male colonial North Americans were among the heaviest drinkers the world had ever seen to that time, and booze certainly played its role in the American Revolution. The perpetrators of the Boston Tea Party plotted their scheme in a tavern, and it's a safe bet most of them went out on the raid sloshed. Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence in the back room of a pub. The Continental Army stationed recruiters in taverns, and more than one young American man woke up the next morning with a hangover and the discovery that he had somehow enlisted in the Army last night, even though he had no memory of having done so.

But the Revolution also posed a crisis for every red-blooded white American man: the perfidious British cut off trade from the West Indies, and suddenly there was no rum to be had.

Fortunately, American ingenuity came to the fore. The decades leading up to the Revolution had seen an influx of immigrants from Scotland and Northern Ireland who had settled in the rugged Appalachian region of North America, because all the good land was already taken. These people, whose descendants are still the dominant culture in Appalachian America in our time and who came to be known as the Scots-Irish, brought with them a culture and a skill of backyard distillation, and these frontier farmers fulfilled their fellow citizens' needs with corn whiskey.

I'll pause here to remind my listeners outside North America that here "corn" means "maize." In the pre-railroad, pre-refrigeration era, corn whiskey was easier to keep and transport and fetched a higher price than the corn it was made from. Historically, alcoholic beverages have always been popular trade goods for these very reasons.

After the Revolution was over, rum became available once again, but by that time, it had become associated with the British, while corn whiskey had acquired a reputation as a patriotic, all-American drink. Also, at a price of 25 cents per gallon it was incredibly cheap, even by the standards of the time. It was cheaper than beer, cheaper than milk, cheaper even than coffee or tea. And there was that potable water problem. American corn whiskey was also potent—about 50% alcohol—and clear—more like vodka than whiskey, really—and typically it was watered down and perhaps sweetened with sugar or honey before being drunk, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The average white American man of the early Republic drank a half-pint of corn whiskey every day, and no doubt spent most of his time shrouded within a pleasant buzz.

The new United States government charged an import tariff on rum, which made it even less competitive with corn whiskey, much to the detriment of the heavily-indebted Federal government. Congress tried to address this problem with a matching excise tax on whiskey, which led to the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania as those stiff-necked Appalachian farmers weren't about to let any flunkies from the Federal government mess with *their* livelihoods.

Some things never change.

Drinking was everywhere in the early United States. You couldn't hold a political rally without offering free whiskey. Women did not drink nearly as much as men, because there were taboos against women patronizing taverns or saloons, or appearing intoxicated in public. Men, on the other hand, were now averaging more than ten gallons a year of whiskey consumption.

I said that booze makes for a handy trade good. White Americans offered it in trade with Native Americans, much to the latter's detriment. Indigenous North Americans had previously had little access to, or experience with, alcohol and no cultural norms on how to handle it.

This is not to say that the cultural norms of white Americans were a perfect shield against bad behavior, either. Public drunkenness was commonplace at this time, as were loud confrontations, fistfights, and violence against girlfriends, wives, and children. Newspapers published fretful articles wondering if you could even sustain a democratic government when the class of citizens who were eligible to vote was in their cups all day.

It was at this time that the temperance movement first emerged. Now, the word *temperance* does not mean *abstinence;* it means *moderation,* and the early temperance movement began by preaching moderation and encouraging beer as an alternative to whiskey and other hard liquors. I should note here that wine had always been a luxury drink in North America, since it had to be imported from Europe, and it would remain so until the mid-twentieth century.

The temperance movement and the abolition movement developed side by side. Often they overlapped, with the same people working both issues. Sometimes they came into competition. Temperance supporters were known to argue that drunkenness was a bigger problem than

slavery, because no one would go to Hell for having been enslaved, but they might go to Hell because of drunkenness.

Speaking of Hell, the early 19th century saw the Second Great Awakening in the United States, during which itinerant preachers, especially Methodists like Richard Allen, Francis Asbury, and Harry Hosier, held revival meetings across the nation. This religious movement often took up secular political causes, including abolition. And temperance.

It was also very much a women's movement, with women making up a substantial majority of its converts and women's rights very much central to its message. Also, these revivalist preachers could hardly help but notice how often they saw husbands drive the wagon that brought their wives and children to the revival meeting, then drop them off to hear the Word, while they headed off into the woods to meet up with their buddies and drink whiskey.

Predictably, these preachers began to rail about the evils of alcohol and temperance became a church movement. Methodists and Baptists forbade alcohol altogether among their members. It wasn't only that drinking corrupted the drinker and led him on the road to Perdition. The preachers also pointed to the fistfights and the alcohol-driven domestic violence, a message that seemed to resonate with the wives and children in attendance.

The revivalists promoted other political initiatives like ending mail delivery on Sundays and shutting down commerce on Sundays, with a particular emphasis on the saloons. Sunday drinking seemed particularly unholy. Drinking establishments have traditionally been licensed, as a way of regulating them and discouraging the unsavory and illegal activities that often accompany them, like fighting, gambling, and prostitution. By 1850, a movement began to pass state laws that would permit local jurisdictions to declare themselves dry; that is, no liquor licenses would be permitted in the community at all, effectively outlawing drinking in public venues. You should think of this early form of Prohibition as akin to a zoning law. With drinking came public drunkenness, obnoxious behavior, petty crime, and domestic violence. The better sort of people wanted to keep that kind of thing out of their communities.

These Prohibition initiatives quickly ran into political resistance from the two largest immigrant populations in the United States at the time: German Americans and Irish Americans. Both of these communities have cultures that celebrate drinking. In the 19th century, Germans developed lagering, which is the cold fermentation of beer, producing a beer with a crisp, clean taste that quickly became popular in Germany, the United States, and many other places. The Irish claim to have invented whiskey; the very word is Irish in origin.

The opposition of these communities, who were virtually certain to vote down any prohibition against alcohol in any jurisdiction where they had enough votes to do it, impeded the movement. Then came the Civil War, which halted it altogether. Governments need revenue in times of war, and taxes on alcohol were a reliable source of revenue.

The return of peace in 1865 also marked the return of the temperance movement. The year 1873 saw the Women's Crusade, a series of protests centered in Ohio in which women would gather in or just outside a saloon to pray, sing hymns, and encourage the saloon owner to go into a more wholesome trade. The Women's Crusade led to the formation of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. The name was meant to convey that the organization was not merely a women's group, but that it had a woman's perspective. The WCTU was nominally an ecumenical Christian organization, but in practice it was closely tied to the Methodist churches.

The WCTU was active across the eastern half of the United States. By the beginning of the twentieth century, most states had laws on the books allowing for local Prohibition and six states were completely "dry," as they said back then: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, North Dakota, and Kansas. Other states experimented with systems under which liquor was legal, but could only be purchased in state-owned stores, not privately. This was intended as a compromise, but the temperance movement opposed it, out of the fear that governments that made money off of alcohol would be reluctant to give up that revenue and embrace Prohibition.

Meanwhile, in the western half of the United States, saloons in frontier country did banner business and became part of Western lore and a cultural trope. No film or TV show set in the American West is complete without a saloon. This is even the case in children's entertainment.

Civil War era taxes were set particularly high on whiskey and other distilled liquors, which tipped the scales in favor of beer. The rising popularity of lagers made German-American-owned breweries into big moneymakers, and in the brewing trade, as in American industry generally during this period, large-scale brewery operations drove smaller competitors out of business. Wherever there was a concentration of German Americans, you would find major breweries, notably Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis, and Pabst, Blatz, and Schlitz beers in the city of Milwaukee. Lagering requires cold, making the climate of Milwaukee nearly perfect.

The other major American business innovation of this time was vertical integration, which completely changed the saloon business in the late 19th century. Saloonkeepers were still nominally independent businesses, but breweries and distillers forced them into exclusive business arrangements we would today call franchises, and by the beginning of the twentieth century over three-quarters of the saloons in America were controlled by a brewery or a distiller and would only sell products of that one brand. The brewers set their wholesale prices high and forced the saloons to sell at cut-rate prices to keep the competition at bay. That meant slim profit margins and saloonkeepers had to hustle just to stay in business.

As a result, cleaning and maintenance weren't in the budget, and most saloons of this era were pretty nasty places. Dark, dirty, dingy, dilapidated, redolent of the blended fragrances of stale beer and stale urine, and frequently decorated with paintings of naked women.

Desperate saloonkeepers brought in musicians and dancers to attract customers, or offered free food. This free food was inevitably heavily salted in order to increase the demand for drinks.

Some saloons even tried soliciting women customers, usually in a separate “Ladies’ Room” in the back, often with a separate entrance so women customers wouldn’t have to deal with the riff-raff up front.

Many went even further, welcoming illegal activities like prostitution and gambling, but the prize for the most innovative business model has to go to Michael Finn, proprietor of the Lone Star Saloon in Chicago, who would offer prosperous-looking customers the so-called “Mickey Finn Special,” which was special because it was laced with chloral hydrate. Once the patron became incapacitated, he was taken into a back room, relieved of his wallet and his clothing, then dumped in an alley. Sometimes he was beaten, to make it look more like a robbery. The befuddled patron would wake up hours later, with no memory of what had happened to him. The law finally caught up to Mickey Finn in 1903, and to this day, he bears the dubious honor of his name functioning as a synonym for a spiked drink.

With so many saloons operating under such shady practices, it was easy to demonize the whole trade as a collection of foul and corrupt establishments stooping ever lower to make a few bucks for themselves and their corporate masters in Milwaukee or St. Louis. Hence, the formation of the Anti-Saloon League in Oberlin, Ohio in 1893. The leaders of the League were men, mostly clergy and lawyers affiliated with the Methodist, Baptist, and Congregationalist churches. In the early twentieth century, the Anti-Saloon League would overtake the WCTU and the Prohibition Party, a splinter political party that seldom elected anyone to anything, to become the leading force behind the Prohibition movement.

Even Americans who saw nothing wrong with a glass of beer at dinnertime or a couple of drinks at a wedding could be persuaded to oppose the shady practices of saloons, and that was the genius of the ASL. The organization’s goal was total Prohibition, but its leaders shrewdly made use of a gradualist approach, focusing their public ire on the easiest targets, making them seem more reasonable than the religious zealots of the WCTU or the absolutists of the Prohibition Party. In 1911, one of the ASL’s leaders described the organization’s approach as “evolutionary, not revolutionary,” which I believe is the first use of that particular figure of speech.

The Anti-Saloon League was the first instance of what we today might call a single-issue advocacy group. The League didn’t care whether a politician was a Republican or a Democrat, as long as they were a “dry.” Unlike the WCTU or the Prohibition Party, the ASL was happy to support legislators who were drinkers themselves, so long as they voted the right way in Congress or in their state legislature.

The Prohibition movement was particularly strong in the South. One reason was the prevalence of Methodist, Baptist, and fundamentalist churches in the South. Another was white Southerners’ fear of allowing the now-liberated African-American community, especially the men, unfettered access to alcohol. Breweries and distilleries were cognizant of their African-American customers, and some developed products targeting the African-American market, including a St.

Louis distillery that produced a gin under the brand name Black Cock, with a label that depicted a semi-naked white woman. Real subtle, guys.

It would later emerge that there was a considerable overlap in membership between the Anti-Saloon League and the Ku Klux Klan.

[music: Traditional, "What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor?"]

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the appearance of the temperance movement's most quixotic figure, Carrie Nation, who took up a hatchet in service of the cause, entering saloons and attacking the bottles and the fixtures with her weapon, an act she called "hatchetation." It's worth noting that Carrie Nation began her one-woman campaign in Kansas, which was officially a dry state, although it had many saloons operating more or less openly, in defiance of the law, which went unenforced. Carrie Nation never in her career attacked a saloon that was operating legally. After a few years of this, she took her show into vaudeville, where she would re-enact her hatchetations onstage for the edification of a paying audience. She thought this helped get her message out, although it was more likely she was being made a fool of. Carrie Nation died in 1911 at the age of 64, and her notoriety was more of an embarrassment to the temperance movement than anything else.

In 1907, Oklahoma became the 46th state, admitted to the Union with Prohibition written into its state constitution. The year 1913 saw the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson, the first Southern President since the Civil War. As you recall, the Wilson Administration included some dry Cabinet members, such as Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, who refused to serve alcohol at State Department functions, episode 68, and Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels, who banned alcohol in the US Navy, episode 107. Both of them drew ridicule and mockery in the newspapers for these decisions, but they stuck to their Prohibitionist principles. Baseball player turned evangelist Billy Sunday, with his "muscular Christianity" was a fervent supporter of Prohibition, episode 153. The support of these prominent men made it easier for other men to support the movement by helping to dispel Prohibition's image as the domain of crazy, meddlesome women like Carrie Nation.

The Anti-Saloon League was a major political force by this time, with a large operating budget and a paid staff numbering over a thousand. Its monthly magazine went out to ten million subscribers, while oil magnates John D. Rockefeller, Senior and Junior, who were Baptists, contributed large sums to the group.

The Progressive movement embraced Prohibition, though for Progressives, the shady nature of the saloon business was a more persuasive argument than opposition to alcoholic beverages *per se*. The women's suffrage movement also gave Prohibition a boost. It is not clear that American women of the time were more strongly in favor of Prohibition than American men, although many of the leaders of the temperance movement were women who no doubt took

encouragement from the suffrage campaign and its message of empowering women, and in this era you often heard the argument that votes for women would mean the end of the saloons.

By 1917, 23 of the 48 states had gone dry, but the movement had reached an impasse. Temperance leaders were convinced that a majority of the nation was on their side. Still, big cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco were defiantly wet and had enough electoral clout to prevent their state legislatures from forcing them to go dry. Anywhere you found substantial numbers of German Americans or Irish Americans, you also found substantial votes for keeping booze legal. African Americans were another American ethnic group that strongly opposed Prohibition, though in the South they were largely disenfranchised. Still, their voting clout mattered in the big cities of the Northeast and Midwest.

But leaders of the temperance movement would not be satisfied with a patchwork of wet and dry jurisdictions. They weren't prepared to settle for anything less than full national Prohibition. So long as alcohol was on sale anywhere, it was potentially accessible everywhere. Even in the so-called "dry" states and towns, plenty of alcohol was being consumed. People simply went out of town or across state lines to get it, or it was shipped in from outside, sometimes by mail order. The anti-temperance side felt confident; maybe a little too confident. As late as 1916, figures in the brewing and hospitality industries made defiant public predictions that national Prohibition would never come to pass.

Then the United States entered the Great War.

The war had seen curtailment of alcohol consumption in Europe, a consequence of food shortages. Governments wanted grains to be eaten as grains, not processed into liquor. In Britain, pub hours were curtailed, episode 116. The Imperial Russian government suspended its state-run vodka business for the duration of the war, episode 87. This Russian experiment in Prohibition was roundly applauded in the United States at the time, although in hindsight, historians judge that it deprived the government of desperately needed revenue and may have been a factor in Russia's collapse.

As you know from episode 138, the new Congress elected in 1916 was not required to come into session until December of 1917, but President Wilson was forced to call it into session early, in April 1917, after a declaration of war against Germany was successfully filibustered in the previous Senate. Wilson got his declaration of war, and the nation got a Congress with stronger support for Prohibition than ever in both parties in session and ready to get to work.

The Anti-Saloon League wanted the strictest law they could get, one that would be as difficult as possible to repeal. In the American political system, that meant a Constitutional amendment, and the ASL had been calling for one since 1914. The declaration of war made it more feasible. German Americans and Irish Americans, two of the communities most opposed to Prohibition were also the most opposed to war with Germany. Amidst the new pro-war fervor, their voices had become discredited, as had the heavily German brewing industry.

Revelations of German meddling and outright sabotage in America, episode 119, further discredited German Americans and German-American organizations, like the Brewery Association. So many brewers were German that the Brewery Association kept its minutes in the German language. In this environment, accusations flew that the brewers were in league with the Kaiser to keep American grain from reaching the starving in Europe.

And keep in mind that by 1917, food shortages caused by the war were developing across the world, even in the US, and Prohibitionists made the argument that grains should be preserved for food use by Americans and citizens of allied nations, not wasted on manufacturing booze. One American magazine asked whether the many should go hungry so that the few could have their drinks.

The new Congress enacted the Selective Service Act in May 1917, which incidentally also banned alcohol from military training facilities. Further legislation banned the serving of alcohol to soldiers in uniform. The Army distributed cigarettes to soldiers in place of alcohol. Alcohol made soldiers sleepy; nicotine kept them alert.

Finally, in late 1917, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Eighteenth Amendment, a Constitutional ban on "intoxicating beverages." Canada would follow suit in 1918. Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland also enacted forms of Prohibition. For the American Prohibition movement, the long fight was over, although it would likely never have won this victory without the boost it got from the war.

Only, the movement would soon learn that as tough as it was to enact Prohibition, it would be even tougher to enforce it.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Andrew and Ed for their kind donations, and thank you to Brian for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Ed and Andrew and Brian help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the effect of Prohibition on the United States of the Roaring Twenties. A Noble Experiment, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In the United States, a Constitutional amendment requires the approval of three-quarters of the states in order to take effect. With 48 states, that meant ratification by 36. With 35 states already ratifying, the 36th, 37th, and 38th states all ratified the amendment on the same day, January 16, 1919.

The amendment took effect one year after ratification. It was written this way to give alcohol-related businesses time to transition. As a result, the last day it was legal to buy alcohol in the United States was Friday, January 16, 1920.

When the big day came, it was treated as a festive occasion, something like a second New Year's Eve. Restaurants and hotels put up decorations and hired musicians for the big day. Patrons drank and celebrated, and as midnight approached, offered ironic toasts to the coming dry America.

And as the stroke of midnight passed, in most places, they called for another round. And in most places, they got it. An ignominious beginning to the "noble experiment."

[music: Closing Theme]