

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 232

“A Noble Experiment”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Our country has deliberately undertaken a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.

1928 Republican Presidential nominee Herbert Hoover.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 232. A Noble Experiment.

Forty-six of the 48 states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment. Only Connecticut and Rhode Island declined. Nebraska was the state that took ratification across the finish line on January 16, 1919. By the text of the amendment, Prohibition came into effect one year later, Friday, January 16, 1920. The text of the amendment prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors. Note that it was not illegal to buy, own or consume alcoholic beverages. The one-year delay had been intended to allow brewers, distillers, and saloons time to transition to a different business.

Any booze you bought legally before the deadline was legal to keep. When Warren Harding moved into the White House in 1921, he brought along a substantial liquor collection, which was perfectly legal. J.P. Morgan, Jr., stashed a thousand cases of French champagne in his basement ahead of Prohibition, and the Yale Club of New York stocked up so thoroughly that they were able to keep serving their members until repeal. But this was a rich person’s solution, not available to ordinary people. And one of the big problems with Prohibition would be classism. Wealthy elites regularly bent the rules and got away with it, while the lower classes were getting arrested.

The text of the amendment also spoke of “intoxicating liquors,” without defining the term, which effectively left it to Congress to define. To the surprise of many in the brewery business, and no small share of their customers, when Congress passed the Volstead Act over President Wilson’s

veto in October 1919, “intoxicating liquors” was defined as anything with more than half a percent alcohol, which was everything. The Act permitted individual households to ferment fruit juices to make wines and ciders for personal consumption only, while the production of beer and distilled spirits was completely banned.

There were only two other exemptions. One was Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish clergy, who could buy California wines for religious purposes. Some enterprising clergy resold sacramental wines in the vestry at a substantial markup. The other exception was for medicinal purposes. The use of whiskey and other liquors for “medicinal purposes” was recognized and accepted in 1920. An enterprising Chicago druggist named Charles Walgreen owned nine pharmacies in Chicago in 1916. His stores were happy to fill whiskey prescriptions, and by 1930, he owned 400.

The strict regime Prohibition imposed on the United States was a Methodist preacher’s dream, but it was a rude shock to many Americans who had deplored the saloons but thought their own personal drinking habits perfectly acceptable.

Breweries struggled to adjust to the new reality. Anheuser-Busch proudly announced that its flagship product, the popular Budweiser beer, would be produced in a low-alcohol form to comply with the Volstead Act. Unfortunately for them, nobody wanted to drink it unless it was fortified with bootleg whiskey. Other breweries made a go of it by selling malt syrup, the main ingredient that goes into beer brewing. That was still legal, only, who was buying all this malt syrup? People brewing beer on the sly in their basements, of course. Breweries became major suppliers to people breaking the law.

If you brewed beer in your own basement for your own use, you’d probably get away with it. Your biggest risk was that one of your neighbors would find out what you were up to and demand you share your work product with them or else they’d rat you out. There were those who tried brewing beer and selling it on the black market, but beer is bulky. It’s hard to keep, store, or transport in quantity. If you wanted to get into bootlegging, the smart move was to go into liquor, everyone’s favorite trade good.

I mentioned in the previous episode that the old 19th-century temperance movement wanted people to switch to drinking beer rather than hard liquor. One of the many ironies of Prohibition is that it reversed this trend, pushing people away from beer and toward the harder stuff. Farmers, suffering from low grain prices, found cooking some of their harvest into whiskey an attractive way to stay in the black, but more common was the so-called “bathtub gin,” liquors made in small batches in homes, either distilled or from denatured alcohol, which is alcohol sold for fuel or for industrial purposes. It has chemicals added to it to make it taste bad or sicken you if you drink it. Denatured alcohol was still available even under Prohibition, and amateur chemists strove to remove the unpleasant and dangerous impurities to make it drinkable again. They were not always 100% successful at this, and bathtub gin often had flavorings added to cover up the nasty taste. Adding mixers and making it into a cocktail also helped with the taste

problem, hence the growing popularity of cocktails during this period. Cocktails typically add sugar or fruit juice or other flavorings that help conceal the taste of the liquor.

When it became apparent that people were drinking denatured alcohol anyway, the Prohibition Bureau, egged on by the Anti-Saloon League, began requiring that denatured alcohol contain additives that didn't merely taste bad or make you sick but actually killed you. Methanol, or wood alcohol, was excellent for this purpose. It's chemically similar to the ethanol that's in alcoholic beverages. It will burn the same as ethanol. It acts as a solvent, just like ethanol, and it's very difficult to remove from an ethanol mixture. It's also a deadly poison. The introduction of deliberately poisoned denatured alcohol into Prohibition America led to the deaths of more than ten thousand Americans and serious illnesses for tens of thousands more from drinking bathtub gin. After a spate of deaths and illnesses from bootleg gin in New York City in 1926, one of the leaders of the Anti-Saloon League dismissed responsibility for the incidents, saying, "The government is under no obligation to furnish the people with drinkable alcohol when the Constitution prohibits it. The person who drinks this alcohol is a deliberate suicide."

A safer alternative, if you had the money for it, was imported alcohol. In the 1920s, the US dollar was the strongest currency in the world, and Prohibition blew up the prices for imported booze to five or ten times what it was fetching before the Volstead Act. Americans regularly crossed the border into Mexico to drink legally. I already described for you how rich Americans from Los Angeles celebrated Independence Day by fleeing their home country to party in Mexico in episode 202. Tequila and other spirits from Mexico were also smuggled into the US. Florida, the US state with the longest coastline and therefore the coastline hardest to patrol, was a common port of arrival for wines and brandies smuggled in from Latin America, rum from the West Indies, and whiskeys from Scotland, Ireland, and Canada shipped via the nearby Bahamas.

The United Kingdom had good financial reasons for wanting to maintain friendly relations with the United States, a topic we will explore further on the podcast, I assure you, and so the British government took action to block efforts to ship liquor from the British Isles to the United States, although some thorny issues came up around the transatlantic passenger ships. The shipping companies' understanding of international law led them to conclude that the Volstead Act did not apply beyond the three-mile territorial limit of the United States, and passengers aboard ships plying the Atlantic drank to their hearts' content. But then the US government decreed that no ship carrying alcoholic beverages could dock at a US port, which led to a flurry of diplomatic protests from London. Finally a compromise was worked out. Foreign-flagged ships could carry alcohol on board, provided it was kept under lock and key while the vessel was in US territorial waters. As for US-flagged ships, well, aboard them alcohol was completely banned. This had the commercial impact you would expect, as travelers of all nations, including Americans, turned away from American-flagged ships and stood in line to purchase passage aboard foreign vessels.

And then there was Canada. Canada enacted prohibition at the federal level during the war; it expired one year after the war ended. By then, though, every one of Canada's provinces had

enacted prohibition at the provincial level. The first province to repeal it was Quebec; prohibition was so unpopular there that the provincial government repealed it just months after enacting it. In Montreal in 1924, a businessman named Samuel Bronfman, a Jewish man whose family had immigrated to Canada from Imperial Russia when he was a boy, founded a distilling company with an eye on manufacturing cheap whiskies for the US market. A few years later, he acquired the Seagram & Sons Company in Ontario, giving him some higher-quality brand names, like Dewars and Calvert and Seven Crown, and he made a fortune off of Prohibition without ever breaking the law himself. Distilling was legal in Quebec and the Canadian government was happy to license his products for export. They knew full well what country he intended to export to, but pretended they didn't.

Then there was the case of Hiram Walker, an American grocer who opened a distillery in Detroit in 1858. The rise of the temperance movement in the late 19th century persuaded Walker to move his distillery operation across the river to Windsor, Ontario. Walker's distillery produced a premium whiskey popular in both Canada and the United States. Its target market was gentlemen's clubs, hence its name, Club Whisky. US distillers, annoyed by the success of this Canadian upstart, persuaded the US government to require that imported spirits name their country of origin on the label. Rather than try to conceal his product's origins, Hiram Walker decided to plaster the word Canadian right across the top of the label, which only gave the product that much more cachet. The word Canadian was eventually incorporated into the name, and it became Canadian Club Whisky.

Hiram Walker died in 1899, but his sons were still running the company in the 1920s, and it was estimated that hundreds of cases of Canadian Club were crossing the river into Detroit every day. Canadian Club was the whiskey of choice in Al Capone's speakeasies in Chicago. More about him a little later in the podcast.

Aside from these more upscale brands, which are still around in our time, there were many other Canadian distilleries set up quick and cheap to take advantage of Prohibition in the United States. The US-Canadian border is long and mostly unguarded, offering smugglers many opportunities. So did modern technology. Just months after Prohibition went into effect in the United States, an enterprising pilot flew a small plane from Canada to Iowa, where he landed at a rural airstrip not far from Des Moines with a cargo of eighteen cases of Canadian whiskey. He sold the cases for a whopping \$250 each, about six times what they would have been worth a year ago, and took off again before the police were aware of his operation.

But that's not how Canadian whiskey usually got into the country. It might come across the border, transported by automobile, but that was risky. The Eighteenth Amendment made enforcement of Prohibition the joint responsibility of Federal and state governments, making it unique among provisions of the US Constitution. State and local police might or might not enforce the law, depending on the jurisdiction. Many took bribes to look the other way. At the Federal level, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation, the

future FBI, didn't want his G-men involved, so Federal enforcement was placed in the hands of the new Prohibition Unit of the Bureau of Internal Revenue.

The quality of the people working in the Prohibition Unit was spotty. During the Harding Administration, it was the politically connected who got jobs there. "Politically connected" in this context meant that new hires were likely to be friends and supporters of the Anti-Saloon League. It was said that the only qualification you needed to join the Prohibition Unit was a background as a Methodist Sunday School teacher. (I guess that means I would have qualified.) Unsurprisingly, the agents of the Prohibition Unit tended to be enthusiastic, but not very professional. They also tended to be destructive of property, violent, and trigger happy. They took bribes. They confiscated bootleg liquor, only to take it home and enjoy it with their own families and friends, a practice the Unit encouraged. The corrupt practices of the Unit's agents were well known. The newspaper *Variety* remarked in 1924 that the Unit was doing more than anyone else "to make prohibition detested."

Equipment used to manufacture or transport alcohol could be confiscated by the government. If you had a backyard still, your equipment could be taken or destroyed; your farm confiscated. Your car could be confiscated if you were found to be transporting. In the Detroit region, center of the US automobile industry, bootleggers favored six-cylinder cars powerful enough to outrun the law; these were known as "whiskey sixes." In the Appalachian region, moonshiners customized their vehicles to increase engine power and storage space. They even took to racing each other to show off their handiwork; from these humble beginnings emerged stock car racing and NASCAR as we know it today.

It wasn't only law enforcement that bootleggers had to fear. In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was active in many rural regions of the country, not only in the South, and the Klan was just as zealous about enforcing Prohibition and even less restrained by any respect for the law or decency. Bootleggers were also known to hijack each other's shipments. No honor among thieves, as they say.

So bootlegging by automobile was risky; the longer the distance to be covered, the riskier it got. That's why most of the Canadian whiskey smuggled into the United States did not pass directly across the border. It went down the St. Lawrence River and into the Atlantic Ocean. There dozens of Canadian- or British-flagged vessels were anchored just outside US territorial waters along a line from Cape Cod to Virginia Beach that was known as Rum Row. Every day, the US Coast Guard watched as cases of liquor were transferred onto these ships in broad daylight, perfectly legally. Then by night, small speedboats would zip out from the shore, take a few cases aboard, and zip back again into one of the numerous rural beaches and coves along the US Atlantic coast, all but undetectable to American law enforcement. The Northeastern US was the most densely populated part of the country, dotted with cities and towns hostile to Prohibition, the ideal market for these illicit imports. Once ashore, drivers could ship them by automobile as far west as Buffalo, Pittsburgh, or Cleveland. Sometimes as far west as Chicago.

Because imported spirits fetched such a high price, while the domestic product suffered from deficiencies such as foul taste and a tendency to poison you, the temptation was great to stretch the good stuff by mixing it with the bad stuff. Unfortunately for the consumer, even if the bottle you bought said Canadian Club on the label, you never knew for sure exactly what you were putting into your body.

The most famous rum-runner on the East Coast was a man named Bill McCoy, a man who was popular with his business partners because he kept his word and never diluted his goods with cheap moonshine. You could be sure his booze was the good stuff, and the high demand for what came to be called “the real McCoy” enabled him to charge premium prices.

Because the police and authorities rarely raided private residences, many middle-class Americans drank their illicit liquor in the privacy of their own homes with a few friends, hence the development of the cocktail party. But drinking is a social activity. People want to go out with their friends. Which brings us to the speakeasy, a small private joint where people could meet and drink in a secret community.

The origin of the term speakeasy is uncertain; the word was in use even before Prohibition to describe a secret, unlicensed saloon. The name might be taken to mean you should speak easy, that is quietly, about the place in public, to avoid tipping off the police, or maybe that you should speak easy when inside, so as not to tip off the police about the public gathering. Speakeasies typically admitted only customers they already knew, or those referred by known customers. Some used a password system to control entry. More elaborate speakeasies had lookouts who watched for the police and could warn staff and customers quickly and discreetly to hide the liquor before the police arrived. In some speakeasies, the police were welcome. Their presence helped maintain order and guaranteed the place wouldn't be raided.

Speakeasies ranged from very small operations with just a few tables, to big, raucous places that were virtually nightclubs. In truth, there really isn't much of a difference between a speakeasy and a nightclub, except perhaps for the nature of the entertainment and the quality of the liquor. Speakeasies varied from little basement dives that sold booze likely to make you sick to slick, professional operations that were, as I say, indistinguishable from a nightclub.

There was no community in the United States that was more anti-Prohibition than New York City, and here was where it all came together. Here you found bootleg liquor that came into the city from Rum Row and from small urban distilleries, served up in sleazy basement speakeasies, bohemian Greenwich Village cafés, or in sumptuous nightclubs. New York was home to urban ethnics like Irish and African Americans who had never taken to Prohibition and wealthy elites, the corporate titans, Wall Street brokers, and entertainment celebrities who had enough money to get what they wanted, namely a safe place to indulge and party, no matter what Uncle Sam thought about it. The *New Yorker* magazine first appeared in 1925 and was immediately noted for its promotion of the ritziest of the city's nightclubs.

New York's Democratic governor, Alfred E. Smith, lost his job to a Republican in 1920, but came roaring back in 1922 on an openly anti-Prohibition platform. In 1923, New York repealed state enforcement of Prohibition. This left only about 150 Federal Prohibition Unit agents to police the nation's largest city; the US Attorney in New York estimated that he needed ten times that number. It also propelled Alfred E. Smith into the leadership of the urban ethnic wing of his party and into contention for the 1924 Presidential nomination. It was during this Prohibition era that the base of the Democratic Party began to shift from the white South to the multiracial, multiethnic big cities of the Northeast and Midwest.

A disproportionate share of the speakeasies and nightclubs in the New York of the Roaring Twenties could be found in Harlem, the city's African-American neighborhood, the most famous of these being the Cotton Club. Like the Cotton Club, most of these establishments were owned by white people and catered exclusively to white patrons, although the entertainers and the staff were frequently Black. In other words, wealthy white New Yorkers turned Harlem into their playground. That being said, it was also true that some Harlem clubs were interracial. These were sometimes called "black and tan" clubs, and there white and Black and interracial people drank together, danced together, sometimes did even more intimate things together, and it was here in Harlem that many white people got their first taste of jazz.

While some speakeasies were pioneering interracial clientele, others were pioneering mixed gender. Recall that in the bad old days of the saloons, those were mostly male preserves. It was considered indecent for a woman to drink in a bar, or to drink enough to become visibly drunk. Servers, on the other hand, bartenders and bar maids, were often female, preferably attractive to the male gaze. In the sleazier sorts of saloons, barmaids might also be prostitutes. One-stop shopping, so to speak.

But during the Roaring Twenties, women frequented speakeasies as often as the men. There were a number of reasons for this. First and most important, the social role of women was changing. The flapper was in, women who dressed in revealing clothes, went out alone, drank in public, flirted with men; in short, they did a whole lot of things women weren't supposed to do, and they flaunted it. The younger generation questioned the social norms of their elders; authority figures in general had been discredited by the Great War, which was supposed to have been some titanic battle for the future of Western civilization, but had instead merely shown that Western civilization was not as civilized as it was cracked up to be.

The people who operated speakeasies found that catering to women customers was good for business. Apart from the obvious fact that inviting women customers potentially doubles your take, the presence of women kept the mood light and upbeat, which meant less brawling, a common feature of the old saloons, and a more attractive atmosphere that both women and men appreciated. In the age of Prohibition, brawling was definitely bad; it attracted police attention. Also, an establishment where only men were seen coming and going attracted unwanted attention as well, whereas if the customers were of both sexes, it could just be an innocent

restaurant or cabaret. And of course, women were highly unlikely to be undercover Federal agents, so admitting them was less of a security risk.

Attracting women customers required new ways of doing business, similar to the changes shops and restaurants had had to make during the Belle Époque, episode 7. You could start with brighter lighting, brighter colors, and a more attractive décor. Take down the nude paintings. You might even have to clean the joint once in a while, God forbid. And probably for the first time in the history of booze, drinking establishments hired not only pretty young women barmaids to please the men, but handsome young bartenders to please the women.

[music: “Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes”]

The most famous speakeasy hostess was Mary Louise Guinan, born to Irish immigrant parents in Waco, Texas in 1884. She married, divorced, and moved to New York City, where she began a career singing and dancing in vaudeville and musicals using the stage name Texas Guinan. She cultivated a Wild West image, told tall tales about herself, and incorporated six-shooters into her act. She once accidentally shot herself onstage, but notwithstanding that little accident, she became a celebrity by 1910. She went to Hollywood to work in silent films for a while. But she is best known, and made the biggest bucks, working as hostess at the most upscale nightclubs in New York in the Twenties, during Prohibition. She was famous for greeting patrons with a hearty, “Hello, suckers! Come on in and leave your wallet on the bar.” Despite her mock-predatory greeting, she was noted as a considerate, attentive, and charming hostess who bantered with the famous and the wealthy. She liked to tell her customers that drinking wasn’t the point; the point was to have a good time. One story tells how the journalist Heywood Broun (whom we will meet again in the podcast) brought a date to Texas Guinan’s club and ordered a bottle of French champagne, the most expensive item on the menu, to impress her. Tex refused to accept the order. She later explained to Broun that she knew how much money he made, he couldn’t afford it, and anyway that stuff was for rich out-of-towners with more money than brains.

The authorities finally caught up to Texas Guinan in 1928. She was indicted and prosecuted, but the jury acquitted her. Sadly, she died unexpectedly of dysentery contracted at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933, one month before the repeal of Prohibition. She was 49 years old. One of her pallbearers was Heywood Broun. Texas Guinan, or characters based on her, have appeared in numerous films and television shows, beginning even before her death. She would be portrayed by actors as diverse as Mae West, Phyllis Diller, and Whoopi Goldberg, who, as I’m sure you know, played a centuries-old alien bartender named Guinan on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

But the fact that some of the nation’s wealthiest and most powerful were living it up in New York City, barely bothering to conceal what was going on in their preferred clubs, while others were nipping across the border into Mexico or hosting quiet cocktail parties for their friends with impunity, while more humble folk like Appalachian farmers and small-scale home brewers were

getting their farms and their cars confiscated for far less brazen behavior smacked of hypocrisy and gradually turned the public against Prohibition.

A new generation of young people were coming of age, young people who questioned the truisms their parents taught them and regarded Prohibition with skepticism. “But why can’t we drink?” “Because it’s the law.” “But the law is unpopular. We just fought a war to make the world safe for democracy. Shouldn’t unpopular laws be repealed?” “You can’t. It’s written into the Constitution.” “Why was it written into the Constitution?” “Because we didn’t want anyone repealing it.”

This is not the most persuasive of arguments. Louis Swift, of Chicago meatpacking fame, once gave a reporter an interview in which he praised Prohibition as doing wonders to improve the working class. He had a cocktail in his hand as he gave it.

And then there was the criminal element. Criminal gangs, many of them formed from immigrant men with few prospects, were a fact of life in the big cities of early twentieth century America, where they ran prostitution, gambling, and other black market rackets, including selling booze under the table in jurisdictions where it was outlawed or heavily taxed. The advent of nationwide Prohibition was a tremendous business opportunity for some of the most corrupt and violent elements of American society, and they took full advantage of it. Not just trading in booze, but extortion, hijackings, and other crimes against competitors, and bribes to police and other public officials to look the other way while it was happening.

This, more than anything else, undermined support for Prohibition. Prohibition was supposed to reduce society’s crime and violence, but all the available evidence suggested the opposite was happening. There was more crime and violence than ever, and not just among drinkers. The tentacles of crime were reaching into every corner of American life, even as supporters of Prohibition continued to praise its benefits as if they were living in a different country.

Which brings me to two small-time New York hoods, Johnny Torrio, sometimes known as “Papa John,” and his lieutenant, Al Capone, sometimes known as “Scarface.” Shortly after Prohibition became law, Torrio and Capone moved to Chicago. They set up an operation on the South Side, importing liquor from contacts in New York and Detroit and brewing beer locally.

Torrio and Capone’s predominantly Italian-American South Side gang was in competition with a predominantly Irish-American gang on the North Side led by a man named Dean O’Banion. These two major gangs and a few smaller ones negotiated an amicable division of the city into exclusive territories, but as the bootleg liquor business grew more lucrative, so did the temptations to poach each other’s territory. In 1924, O’Banion was murdered. The North Side Gang blamed Torrio and Capone, and what followed was close to all-out war. A few weeks later, Capone was ambushed, but he escaped the incident unhurt. Papa John was less fortunate. He was attacked and shot a couple of weeks later, although he survived his wounds. The incident shook

up the 42-year old Johnny Torrio. He cashed out his interest in the South Side gang, to the tune of one million dollars, and retired to his native Italy.

This left the 26-year-old Al Capone in control of one of the biggest criminal operations the world has ever seen. He controlled over a thousand employees and bribed hundreds of police officers and elected officials. The South Side gang operated multiple breweries in Chicago in addition to the liquor it was importing from Canada, supplying some ten thousand speakeasies and generating annual revenues as high as \$100 million by the late 1920s.

But the conflicts continued with the North Side gang, now led by George Clarence Moran, known on the street as Bugs Moran. After two of Capone's closest associates were killed by North Siders, Capone devised a plan to take out the entire leadership of the North Side Gang in one fell swoop. The ambush was set up at a garage in the Lincoln Park neighborhood, and was executed on February 14, 1929, immortalized afterward as the "St. Valentine's Day Massacre." Four of Capone's hired killers, two of whom were dressed as police officers, lured Bugs Moran and his men to the garage by offering to sell them a shipment of liquor purportedly hijacked from the South Side Gang. Unfortunately for Capone and his gunmen, Bugs Moran himself had not yet arrived at the garage when they struck. The killers mistook one of the other men arriving for Moran and opened fire at 10:30 in the morning on the seven men present. Five of them were members of the North Side gang, including Moran's lieutenant; the other two did some work for the gang, including one, John May, who was merely a mechanic at the garage.

They were lined up in front of a brick wall and machine-gunned. It was estimated that more than a thousand bullets were fired. One of the victims survived the shooting long enough to be taken to a hospital, where he was questioned by police. When asked who shot him, he replied, "No one shot me." He died later that day. A shaken Bugs Moran told detectives, "Only Capone kills like that." Moran himself survived the attack, but his gang didn't. That was the end of them, and Capone now owned Chicago.

Only, the killings provoked a national outcry. Newspapers from coast to coast published photographs and gory details of the crime and the public reacted with horror. The Chicago police, who until now had been content to take payoffs and look the other way, suddenly found themselves subjected to scrutiny, not to mention scorn and ridicule. The fact that the killers posed as Chicago police officers only added insult to injury.

The St. Valentine's Day Massacre would be remembered, and if there's one moment you can point to and say, "Here is where the temperance movement lost its credibility; here is where the US public turned against Prohibition," then this is it. A few months earlier, candidate Herbert Hoover had declared Prohibition a "noble" experiment, but it was hard to see any nobility in the events in Chicago.

By 1929, Prohibition's days were numbered. But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Kathleen and

Frank for their kind donations, and thank you to John for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Kathleen and Frank and John 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.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can also leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

I've done some long-overdue maintenance on the website, including an expanded bibliography section under "Further Reading." These are the books that were most enjoyable to read and most helpful to me in putting the show together and which I recommend to those of you who would like to know more about some of the topics we've covered on the show. The website includes links to Amazon. If you use the links, the podcast gets a small commission. I know not everyone likes to shop at Amazon, and if you don't, that's fine. But if you do, consider buying it through one of those links. Maybe you need a new refrigerator?

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we leave behind the topic of Prohibition for now and begin the first in a series of episodes on the international economy. After the Great War, everyone mostly wanted the world to go back to the way it had been in the Belle Époque, when steadily growing economies and steadily rising standards of living were the norm. Alas, it would not be so simple. Germany owed reparations, the Allies owed war debts, and the United States had All the Money. Uncle Shylock, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Less than three weeks after the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, Herbert Hoover was sworn into office as the 31st President of the United States. Hoover instructed his cabinet officials to crack down on bootlegging gangs. Local and Federal investigators were unable to connect Capone personally either to the Massacre or to the bootlegging, although his huge undeclared personal wealth made him an obvious target for an Internal Revenue investigation for income tax evasion. In late 1930, frustrated with the lack of results, Attorney General William Mitchell took up a suggestion from President Hoover and created a special unit of Prohibition agents to be sent to Chicago to dismantle Capone's gang. To head up this special unit, he chose Eliot Ness, an energetic 27-year-old agent.

Because Capone controlled so much money and was a master of co-opting law enforcement, Ness assembled his own team of agents who had reputations for honesty and diligence and no

connections to Chicago. They spent the next year investigating and disrupting Capone's operations. Multiple attempts to bribe or intimidate the unit failed, inspiring a Chicago newspaper reporter to dub the unit "The Untouchables," borrowing the term from the outcaste Dalits of India. Capone was indicted for conspiracy to violate the Volstead Act and for income tax evasion, but only prosecuted on the latter charge.

Capone was convicted and sentenced to prison in 1932, at the age of 33. There he was diagnosed with syphilis, gonorrhea, and cocaine addiction. The syphilis damaged his brain, impairing his mental abilities. He was paroled in 1939, due to his poor health. He never recovered, and passed away in 1947, at the age of 48. Capone's underworld gang in Chicago continued to operate under his successors, albeit with a lower profile, even after the repeal of Prohibition.

Al Capone's criminal career both repulsed and fascinated. It inspired three films, Warner Brothers' 1931 picture *Little Caesar*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, which made a star out of Edward G. Robinson, *The Public Enemy*, also a 1931 Warner Brothers release directed by William Wellman and starring James Cagney, and *Scarface*, a 1932 film produced by Howard Hughes and Howard Hawks, directed by Hawks, and starring Paul Muni. These three films essentially created the genre of gangster films, which is still a thing in our time.

Eliot Ness won a promotion within the Prohibition Bureau, and after Prohibition was repealed, worked in law enforcement in various other capacities. Later in life, he went into business, unsuccessfully, and the man who had once turned down a bribe of \$2,000 per week from the South Side Gang, died penniless in 1957, at the age of 54. Alas for Ness, who had been working in collaboration with writer Oscar Fraley on his memoir, titled *The Untouchables*, but which was not published until after Ness's death. It became a best seller and was adapted into a television series in 1959, starring Robert Stack as Eliot Ness. *The Untouchables* was made into a film in 1987, directed by Brian De Palma and distributed by Paramount Pictures, starring Kevin Costner as Eliot Ness and Robert De Niro as Al Capone. Many other adaptations and sequels have followed.

The St. Valentine's Day Massacre would go down in history. The phrase is still a familiar one in the United States today, although most people probably couldn't tell you much about it. Mass killings were not unknown in the United States even then. The Tulsa Massacre, episode 224, had taken place seven years earlier and killed hundreds. There had been multiple incidents of killings related to strikes and labor actions in the early twentieth century. But race violence and labor violence were crimes of passion. It was perhaps the calculated, cold-blooded, mercenary nature of this crime that made it stand out.

The next time seven or more victims would be murdered in a single incident in the United States would be in 1945, when a US Army private killed nine German prisoners of war and wounded 19 others. Four years later, in 1949, a man named Howard Unruh took a stroll through his

neighborhood in Camden, New Jersey and shot and killed 13 people, including three children, and wounding three others. In both of these cases, the perpetrator was found to be mentally ill.

The 1950s came and went in the United States with no mass killings on the scale of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. The 1960s saw one, at the University of Texas, where 17 people were shot and killed. There were four such incidents in the 1970s, ten in the 1980s, and nine in the 1990s. In the first decade of the 21st century, there were 17, and in the second decade of the 21st century, 35, which may help to explain why the St. Valentine's Day Massacre is fading from the historical memory.

The St. Valentine's Day Massacre has been portrayed many times on film and television, including in 1932's *Scarface*, but most memorable is the 1959 comedy film *Some Like It Hot*, directed by Billy Wilder and released through United Artists, starring Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis as two musicians who accidentally witness the killings and are forced to flee Chicago disguised as women in a "all girl band." They befriend a singer, played by Marilyn Monroe, and hijinks ensue. It is regarded as a groundbreaking film for a number of reasons and one of the greatest film comedies of all time.

The Capone figure in *Some Like It Hot* was played by George Raft, who began his career as a dancer, and he performed in a number of stage shows in New York clubs in the 1920s along with Texas Guinan. No less an authority than Fred Astaire credited Raft with "the fastest Charleston I ever saw." Raft's first film performance was in *Queen of the Night Clubs*, a 1929 Warner Brothers film starring Texas Guinan, who got Raft the part. Unfortunately, no copies of that film are known to exist.

Raft got some more small roles as a dancer in Hollywood films, but his big break was a supporting role as a gangster in *Scarface*, which made him famous. It was for that performance that Raft developed the mannerism of repeatedly flipping a coin in one hand, which became widely imitated by other actors portraying gangsters, who made it into a widely recognized visual shorthand for gangster or thug. Many performers have adopted the trick, not least including Bugs Bunny, whose name is probably taken from Bugs Moran, by the way.

In *Some Like It Hot*, Raft was essentially parodying the film that made him a star, even to the point where his character confronts a younger gangster flipping a coin in Raft's signature style. Raft's character says to the younger man dismissively, "Where did you pick up that cheap trick?"

[music: Closing Theme]