

How Prohibition led to one of the First Feminist Movements in the United States of America

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"WET" OR "DRY"

"VOTE WET
FOR MY
SAKE!"



"VOTE DRY
FOR
MINE!"



**Shall the Mothers and Children
be Sacrificed to the Financial
Greed of the Liquor Traffic?**

IT IS UP TO YOU, VOTER, TO DECIDE

VOTE DRY

By Anuraj Singh

Abstract

How does alcohol relate to feminist movements in America. The article talks about how alcohol led to social mobilisation amongst the women and helped champion other rights too eventually such as the right to franchise. Prohibition was historic not just because of it being a state being the morality police but also because of the involvement of women in bringing it about.

Introduction

Alcohol consumption has been an integral part of US history, despite attempts to ban or control it made by the US Government. Over the past 140 years, there have been significant changes in the per-capita alcoholic beverage consumption in the United States. Prior to 1850, per capita consumption had begun to decline from the high levels (6–7 gallons of pure alcohol per adult year) typical of early America. It fluctuated between 1.75 and 2.75 gallons between 1850 and the start of World War I, peaking right before the conflict. Due to prohibition, per capita consumption in the US fell to its lowest point ever—likely to be less than 1.5 gallons. Per capita consumption has been increasing once more since around 1960, with the 1960s seeing a particularly noticeable increase. In contemporary times, it is roughly where it was at the start of World War I. This starts from the puritans' entry to America who came with barrels of beer to even the American Revolution where Washington's soldiers were provided with a daily cup of rum/whisky. Washington started a whiskey distillery once his presidency was over. By 1799, Washington's distillery was the biggest in the nation and turned out 11,000 gallons of whiskey that had not yet matured. Lincoln had a bartending licence (only President ever to have had one), Lincoln and his friend William F. Berry operated a saloon in New Salem, Illinois, called Berry and Lincoln in 1833 (Berry, an alcoholic, finally devoured the majority of the store's stock, forcing the store to shut). There are similar instances of alcohol consumption being closely related to American life and even presidents.

Drunkenness, however, over time, caused a problem within American society, the ill effects of over-drinking started directly affecting the industries as the working hours. Alcohol, probably was the biggest nuisance to women, as they were central to the American household. Therefore, women over time raised their voices publicly, and the industrial revolution led to changes against alcohol. This is a significant moment historically, as it allowed women to become a part of national conversations and can be considered to be one of the first few legislations brought about in large part because of women. The Prohibition Movement had its roots in the mid-19th century and finally materialised during the Great War. During world war 1 when the Wilson administration put a temporary ban on alcohol, to bolster grain production to aid the war efforts. Eventually leading to prohibition which came to effect via the 18th Amendment in 1919(1920 into effect) and it lasted 13 years ending after the 21st Amendment was ratified in 1933.

Women and Alcohol

Drunkenness became an issue as it started affecting the structure of the family. Given the fact that most women at the time did not work, and did not even have basic franchise rights. The men formed the pillars of any family structure as they were the bread earners of the family and controlled all the capital of a household. Drunken behaviour, not only reduced the life spans of men and potentially, caused many kids to grow fatherless and widowed many. It had other ill effects such as domestic violence, causing public damage, living in poverty and so on. This is why women were at the forefront of the Prohibition movement. Interestingly enough, Susan B. Anthony (founder of the Women's State Temperance Society, 1853) put it in 1899, "the only hope" for Prohibition was "putting the ballot into the hands of women." In that way, Prohibition and women's suffrage went hand in hand, with the latter actually happening when the 19th Amendment was ratified only seven months after Prohibition went into effect, on Aug. 18, 1920. Women were at the forefront of this issue both in terms of alcohol's impacts and protesting against it. This is why we see 'Mrs. Firebrand', U.S. Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who at the time was the highest ranking female in the federal government and is one of the first few women appointed to a sub-Cabinet position, oversaw Prohibition through three presidential administrations. Although she did not come from a temperance background she did acknowledge the role of women in ridding the country of alcohol. It heavily aided the women's suffrage movement too and was a complex issue having multiple facets to it. Men would drink their mortgages away or drink enough to destabilise them from going to work the following day. These factors contributed to the inception of the temperance movement. The prohibition movement was led by the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League (the two major players). The two formed a single coalition which lobbied local, state and federal governments to enforce the prohibition on the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages. The former pressured Congress thereby, the Volstead Act (18th Amendment) was the first Amendment with a time restriction (seven – years) in it. However, it was ratified by states within 13 months.

The Volstead Act and its impact on Women

The United States Brewers' Association reported that during Prohibition, hard liquor consumption fell by 50% while overall alcohol consumption fell by 30%. The increased disobedience toward the law and law enforcement, however, is not reflected in these numbers. Only those who wanted to continue drinking were as creatively motivated as the temperance activists. Prohibition's enforcement turned out to be quite challenging. Bootlegging—the manufacturing and sale of alcohol illegally—became widespread, and the federal government lacked the resources and motivation to try to police the law at every border, lake, river, and speakeasy in the country. In fact, by 1925, there were anywhere from 30,000 to 100,000 speakeasy clubs in New York City alone. Since the demand for alcohol was greater than the demand for sobriety or temperance.

Prohibition led to a lady being put in charge of a major happening in American life impacting not just the society but also the economy and the law and order situation of America. M.W Willebrandt's appointment was historic, as John Schüttler (co-author of *Liberated Spirits: Two Women Who Battled Over Prohibition*), remarked, "She was

regarded by the establishment in D.C. as [doing] a woman's job on the basis that women had been the primary movers and shakers in getting Prohibition enacted, and therefore a woman should be in charge of it. And in a very cynical way, men wanted to hang it on women if it failed.” In actuality, the job she was made to take kept her from getting her dream job “[The] opposition of the wets [those who favoured repealing the 18th Amendment] kept me from being appointed as the first female federal judge,” she later told the American Bar Association in an interview. The Volstead Act led to an initial drop in consumption and drunkenness arrests; however, it failed to reach its overall objective in the short term of 13 years. Nevertheless, women as a result were able to become the epicentre of political debate and this helped in welfare reforms such as the woman right to suffrage as the most fundamental right which was granted to women. Throughout the 1920s women made more political progress. Maria C. Brehm running for the first female candidate for vice president when she ran on the Prohibition Party ticket in 1924 is an indictment of this development.

Women's private lives changed significantly during the Prohibition era, in addition to the profound changes that occurred in public and political life. While the men were gone in World War I fighting, women took up jobs, which made them independent. The growth of consumerism and technology occurred during the Roaring Twenties, buoyed by Prohibition and the freedom of women to vote. Catalogues and periodicals, which increased as a result of improvements in printing technology, were a major conduit for the widespread consumption of material items into households. Advertising firms started focusing on women during the Prohibition Era, giving them the freedom to make purchases and spend their own money. During the Prohibition era, there was a significant shift in women's rights and American society that transformed women's lives. Their newly acquired rights and privileges altered how women were perceived by themselves and others, as well as increased their positions within society. These improvements enabled women to transition from the Victorian era's conventional, fundamentally docile roles to the “New Woman” of the Prohibition era.

About the Author

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