

PART SEVEN



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The Roaring and Repressive Twenties

13 Outlawing Satan's Drink: The Prohibition Experiment

PETER CARLSON

The election of Warren G. Harding as president reflected a massive popular reaction against the missionary idealism of Woodrow Wilson and the reformist zeal of the Progressive era. Harding would take the country back to "normalcy," so that Americans might continue their "normal, onward way." Essentially, this meant that federal regulation of industry would be reduced to a minimum, that the business of government, as Calvin Coolidge put it, would be big business.

The popular stereotype of the 1920s is that it was a decade of political corruption, speculative orgies, violence, and the last happy fling before the Great Depression crushed American innocence. But in reality, this decade of "normalcy" was a good deal more complex than that. True, business consolidation under Republican rule continued throughout the decade. True, excessive and irresponsible speculation on the New York Stock Exchange culminated in the crash of 1929. True, organized crime was widespread, and gang wars rocked Chicago and New York. And true, a revolution in manners and morals challenged traditional standards and profoundly upset Americans who clung to the old morality.

Yet for many contemporaries, the 1920s were a time of exhilarating hope and high expectation for the United States. In fact, a number of intellectuals found much in American life to celebrate. Most optimistic of all were the businesspeople, who believed they were living in a new era—a time not only of conservative Republican leadership in Washington but also of striking innovation and change in business itself. As industrial officials happily observed, corporate managers were bringing scientific procedures and efficient techniques to industry. This change, they contended, would raise production so high that poverty would soon be eliminated and the American dream of abundance for all would be attained at last. Their expectations, alas, perished in the crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression, the worst the country had ever known.

In the following essay, Peter Carlson examines yet another side of the 1920s, the effort to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution that banned "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors." Lasting from 1920 to 1933, Prohibition represented, in the author's words, "a conflict between two sides of our national personality—the secular 'pursuit of happiness' versus the religious pursuit of righteousness." Carlson reminds us that the Mayflower, which brought the Pilgrims to these shores, carried "more beer than water." The thirsty travelers had guzzled almost the entire supply of alcohol by the time they reached Plymouth Rock. The author adds that the Puritans, "not known as party animals," arrived in Boston on a ship that carried 10,000 gallons of wine stored among its cargo.

The founding fathers continued this hard drinking tradition. James Madison, a champion of the Bill of Rights, started his day by downing a tumbler of whiskey. John Adams, the country's second president, enjoyed hard cider with breakfast. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, boasted of his extensive wine collection. In 1797, George Washington's Scottish farm manager encouraged the great general to build a whiskey distillery. It soon became the most successful economic enterprise at Mt. Vernon, utilizing five stills and a boiler to produce, by 1799, 11,000 gallons of whiskey. Reconstructed on its original site, Washington's distillery is a popular tourist attraction today.

The United States had such a long tradition of getting "drunk, plastered, loaded, tanked, sloshed, smashed, stewed, and stoned" that one historian named America the "Alcoholic Republic." Such excessive drinking spawned an epic battle against alcohol that started when the temperance movement became a political force in the middle of the nineteenth century. These crusading prohibitionists were driven by a powerful combination of "righteous idealism" and a bigoted view of the immigrants crowding into American cities as "shiftless alcoholics." These reformers wanted to save the country for God, the home, and the native born.

As Carlson's story unfolds, we meet some of the movement's most passionate advocates. There was the six-foot tall, hatchet-wielding Carry Nation and a Bible-thumping evangelist named Billy Sunday. But it was the political savvy of the Anti-Saloon League, founded in 1895, that won the battle for Prohibition by gaining the support of the Progressives. In 1914, when the Great War broke out in Europe, the Progressives convinced Congress to ban the production of alcohol to conserve grain. The Eighteenth Amendment soon followed.

But anyone who wanted a drink in a "dry" America could easily get one, especially in the cities. In 1923, a federal undercover agent calculated how long it took to obtain an illegal drink in certain cities: in New Orleans, 35 seconds; in Detroit, 3 minutes; in New York City, 3 minutes and 10 seconds. Prohibition drove up the price of liquor and allowed bootlegging thugs like Al Capone of Chicago to make fortunes. Other gangsters, including those with Italian, Irish, German, and Jewish backgrounds, became bootleggers like Capone. This gave rise to murderous gun battles between rival gangs in big cities like Chicago and New York. The Prohibition experiment, Carlson asserts, was irrefutable proof "that you don't have to be drunk to come up with a really, really bad idea." Prohibition was so unpopular and unenforceable that American lawmakers repealed it with the Twenty-First Amendment, ratified in 1933.

This sets the stage for Carlson's terrific story about America's struggle with alcohol. For a film about Prohibition that is educational as well as entertaining, we recommend *The Untouchables* (1987), which visually depicts the war between federal treasury agents and Capone's bootlegging empire in Chicago. This "classic confrontation between good and evil" stars Kevin Costner as agent Eliot Ness and Robert De Niro as Capone.

GLOSSARY

ADAMS, SAMUEL The older second cousin of John Adams, Samuel was the leader of Boston's hot-headed radicals in the colonial era and one of the foremost opponents of British tyranny in all of the colonies. A true agitator, he was in the thick of colonial resistance to the Stamp Act of 1765 and led his "boys" to the Boston Tea Party.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (AA) In 1935, two recovering alcoholics, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, formed this organization, which utilizes a twelve-step program to help its members abstain from drinking. With a worldwide following, AA requires regular meetings and the support of family and fellow members.

ANTI-SALOON LEAGUE Founded in 1895, the league endorsed politicians, regardless of party affiliation, who supported the prohibition of alcohol and campaigned for statewide referendums to ban drinking. An influential political interest group with close ties to the Protestant churches, it condemned saloons for encouraging men to waste their wages and neglect their families.

CAPONE, AL In 1927 alone, this Chicago gangster made over \$60 million in bootlegged liquor. Capone and mobsters like him used violence to take control of the market in illegal alcohol. In 1931, a federal court convicted him of income tax evasion and sent him to prison.

EIGHTEENTH AMENDMENT Ratified in 1919, it banned "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors." One of the last reforms of the Progressive era, it was unenforceable and unpopular, especially in the cities. In 1926, a poll reported that only 19 percent of the American people supported Prohibition.

MATHER, INCREASE One of the most influential ministers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he believed that alcohol in moderate amounts was consistent with living a holy life, "but the abuse of drink is from Satan."

NATION, CARRY Swinging a hatchet or a tomahawk, this Kansas minister's wife became famous for her attacks on saloons. At six feet and 175 pounds, Nation was a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and a formidable force in the prohibition crusade.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR STOCK CAR AUTO RACING (NASCAR) Formed in 1947 by Bill France, NASCAR today is second only to the National Football League in television ratings for professional sports. Many of its early drivers learned their craft driving on rural mountain roads while transporting "moonshine" to loyal customers.

PROHIBITION PARTY Formed in 1869 when delegates from twenty states met in Chicago, it is one of the oldest third-party movements in the United States. Opposed to the sale and consumption of alcohol, the Prohibition party lost popularity after the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933. But it has persisted across the decades. In the election of 2008, the party's presidential candidate received only 643 votes.

PURE FOOD AND DRUG ACT (1906) This congressional measure prohibited the sale of impure or improperly labeled food and drugs. It was a reaction to the outrageous conditions in the meat-packing industry that Upton Sinclair exposed in his powerful novel *The Jungle*. Thanks to this landmark law, the public became aware of the high alcoholic content in many patent medicines.

SUNDAY, BILLY A former professional baseball outfielder, Sunday became one of the most popular evangelical ministers of the early twentieth century. He was an outspoken advocate of the prohibition of alcohol.

TWENTY-FIRST AMENDMENT Ratified in 1933, it repealed the Eighteenth Amendment.

WHISKEY REBELLION In 1794, the new federal government passed an excise tax on whiskey. Farmers in western Pennsylvania who raised grain argued that the law was discriminatory and started a rebellion. George Washington, viewing this as a challenge to his power under the Constitution, organized an army that quickly dispersed the protestors.

WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN TEMPERANCE UNION (WCTU) Founded in 1874, the WCTU believed that consuming alcohol was the main reason that so many men neglected and abused their families. By the 1890s, under the leadership of Frances Willard, the WCTU was the largest women's organization in America, with more than fifty thousand members. It supported Prohibition and women's suffrage.

When the news arrived from Utah, cannons boomed in New Orleans, sirens howled in San Francisco, boats in New York harbor blasted their foghorns and the finance committee of the Chicago City Council adjourned to a tavern so the pols could quaff a snort of legal booze for the first time in 13 years, 10 months, 18 days, 7 hours and 27 minutes.

It was Dec. 5, 1933, . . . and the news that sparked the momentous national celebration was the long-awaited passage of an amendment to the United States Constitution: Utah voted to become the 36th state to ratify the 21st Amendment, which repealed the 18th Amendment, which had banned the production and sale of alcoholic beverages across the land since 1920.

"Prohibition is dead!" an electric sign in Times Square announced, and a mob of 10,000 roared its approval. "A thousand bartenders reached in unison for the Scotch, rye or gin," wrote reporter John Lardner, "and 50,000 customers bumped elbows for the honor of absorbing the first legal drink."

In Manhattan, a joyous crowd celebrated by lynching an effigy of "Old Man Prohibition" from a flagpole on Broadway. In Chicago's Drake Hotel, a scantily clad woman popped out of a 10-foot-tall champagne glass as drinkers cheered. In Boston, revelers wandered from saloon to saloon, singing off-key renditions of old drinking songs or engaging in what the *Boston Globe* described as "sidewalk displays of wrestling ability and hog-calling."

But revelry did not rule everywhere. In many places, including Georgia, Kentucky and Washington, D.C., booze was still banned by state or local laws, which tended to throw a wet blanket on the festivities. In Atlanta, the celebration of Prohibition's demise was not nearly as spirited as the celebration of its birth nearly 14 years earlier, when, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported, "The Anti-Saloon League, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and other dry organizations

paraded on Peachtree to Five Points, where old John Barleycorn was burned in effigy."

Today, the long, bitter conflict between "dry" and "wet" Americans seems quaint and absurd, a strange tale from ancient history. But that colorful clash illustrates an enduring aspect of American life, a conflict between two sides of our national personality—the secular "pursuit of happiness" versus the religious pursuit of righteousness. America's epic battle over alcohol is one of the divisive cultural issues that have periodically roiled American politics, like slavery and segregation or the more recent controversies over gay rights and abortion.

Getting drunk, plastered, loaded, tanked, sloshed, smashed, stewed and stoned is an old American tradition. But so is preaching fiery sermons against "demon rum," attacking saloons with hatchets and enacting laws to prevent your neighbors from getting drunk, plastered, sloshed, smashed, stewed and stoned.

The story of alcohol in America is an inspiring tale of courageous men and women who ventured across stormy seas, conquered a teeming wilderness, created a great nation and built an awesome industrial colossus—and did it all while knocking back heroic quantities of strong liquids.

Booze came to America aboard the *Mayflower*. Like most British ships in 1620, the *Mayflower* carried more beer than water. One reason was that beer was safer than water, which was often contaminated with noxious wastes. Another reason was that passengers preferred to pass the tedious nine-week voyage in a pleasant beer buzz.

The Pilgrims drank so much beer on the *Mayflower* that they'd almost run out by the time they reached America, and they may have landed at Plymouth simply because they didn't have enough beer to fuel the search for a better place. "We could not now take time for further search and consideration," one passenger wrote, "our victuals being much spent, especially our beere." Not long after landing, the Pilgrims began making wine out of wild grapes. They served it to the Indians at the first Thanksgiving, although you probably didn't hear about *that* back in kindergarten.

The Puritans are not known as party animals, but they arrived in Boston in 1630 on a ship that carried plenty of beer—and 10,000 gallons of wine. Despite their well-deserved reputation as killjoys, the Puritans didn't oppose drinking—they merely opposed drinking *too much*. "Drink is in itself a good Creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness," wrote Increase Mather, the famed Puritan preacher, "but the abuse of drink is from Satan."

All over the colonies, settlers quaffed vast quantities of this "good Creature of God." When they could get it, they drank imported wine, brandy and port, but such luxuries were expensive and tended to mysteriously disappear en route from England in accidents attributed to "leakage." Consequently, thirsty colonists began making booze out of just about everything, as recounted in this little ditty from the 1630s:

*If barley be wanting to make into malt,
We must be content and think it no fault,
For we can make liquor to sweeten our lips,
Of pumpkins and parsnips and walnut-tree chips.*

Among the most popular concoctions in colonial-era taverns was a drink called "Flip." The bartender filled about two-thirds of a mug or pitcher with beer, added a dollop of rum, sweetened the cocktail with sugar, molasses or dried pumpkin and then stirred it with a red-hot poker, which made the drink bubble, gurgle and steam. Good for what ails you, especially on a cold winter's night.

Tea is the beverage most commonly associated with the American Revolution, but beer and rum are far more deserving of that honor. Even though Samuel Adams was a devout Congregationalist, . . . he recruited his Sons of Liberty in Boston taverns, causing Tories to mock him as "Sam the Publican." And the patriots who dumped British tea in Boston harbor had fortified themselves for their mission by downing several bowls of rum punch. Later, General George Washington boosted his troops' morale with a daily ration of rum. "The benefits arising from the moderate use of strong Liquor," he explained, "have been experienced in all Armies and are not to be disputed."

Unlike today's milquetoast pols, America's Founding Fathers were eager tipplers. James Madison liked to start his day with a tumbler of whiskey. John Adams breakfasted on what his son described as "a large tankard of hard cider." Washington owned one of Virginia's most productive whiskey distilleries. Thomas Jefferson was an avid wine connoisseur and so was Benjamin Franklin, who wrote an ode to drinking that concluded with this lovely couplet:

*That virtue and safety's in wine-bibbing found
While all that drink water deserve to be drowned.*

One of the first crises of the newborn United States of America was caused by whiskey—or, more accurately, by a whiskey tax. In 1791, Congress voted to tax whiskey, which proved to be extremely unpopular, particularly in the Appalachian Mountains, where whiskey-making was not only a passion but a major source of cash income for subsistence farmers. In 1794, near Pittsburgh, a motley army of tax protesters rebelled, attacking courts and tarring and feathering a tax collector. President Washington responded by personally leading a militia army to put down what came to be called the "Whiskey Rebellion."

By then, nearly every American farm contained a sizable apple orchard—not to make apple pie but to make hard cider, which was the country's most popular beverage, guzzled daily by young and old alike. "In rural areas, cider took the place not only of wine and beer but of coffee and tea, juice and even water," wrote culinary historian Michael Pollan. "Indeed, in many places cider was consumed more freely than water, even by children."

The cute little tykes would knock back a tumbler of hard cider with breakfast and then proceed off to school with a pleasant buzz, and nobody worried that it would ruin their chances to get into Harvard, perhaps because Harvard served hard cider in its dining halls.

In the early 1800s, Americans drank more booze than at any time before or since—more than five gallons of pure alcohol per person per year. (Today's figure is about two gallons per adult.) "Americans drank at home and abroad, alone and together, at work and

at play," wrote historian W.J. Rorabaugh in his classic 1979 book, *The Alcoholic Republic*. "Americans drank before meals, with meals and after meals. They drank while working in the fields and while traveling across half a continent."

Meanwhile, America's native-born hard drinkers were joined by hordes of hard-drinking European immigrants who brought the alcoholic crafts of their native lands—Scots-Irish distillers, German brewers and Italian winemakers, each contributing another ingredient to America's melting pot or, in this case, to America's cocktail shaker.

As Americans moved west, the first sign of civilization in many new towns was a saloon—or several saloons. In 1876, for example, Dodge City, Kansas, contained 1,200 people and 19 saloons. Western saloons sold liquor, of course, but they also served as restaurants, dance halls, casinos, brothels, courtrooms, post offices, funeral parlors and, on Sunday mornings, churches.

Saloons also provided their customers with cultural offerings, some better than others. "At the upper end of Main Street is a one-horse beer hall, called by courtesy a concert garden, where a pianist and violinist have performed so far without getting shot," reported the *Anaconda*, Montana, *Standard* in 1897. "Occasionally a woman, whose face would stop a freight train and voice would rasp a sawmill, comes out and assists the pianist and violinist in increasing the agony."

But America's firewater was not always sold in saloons and frequently wasn't even marketed as liquor. Much of it was bottled in patent medicines bearing such wonderful names as "Kickapoo Cough Syrup" and "Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound" and promoted as healthful elixirs.

Sold in drugstores and advertised in traveling "medicine shows," patent medicines were touted as cures for everything from colds to cancer. Actually, they cured nothing but they did provide relief from physical, mental, and spiritual pains with the same secret ingredient found in whiskey—ethyl alcohol. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, advertised as a cure for "female complaints," contained 18 percent alcohol. Peruna, America's most popular patent medicine, was 28 percent alcohol. Hostetter's Celebrated Stomach Bitters

contained 47 percent alcohol—more than your average whiskey—and was said to have steadied the nerves of Union soldiers at the Battle of Gettysburg. Paine's Celery Compound, advertised as a "Nerve Tonic and Alternative Medicine," contained a mere 21 percent alcohol, but the booze was fortified by a dose of cocaine, which no doubt contributed to its popularity.

"More alcohol is consumed in this country in patent medicines than is dispensed in a legal way by licensed liquor vendors," Samuel Hopkins Adams wrote in his famous 1905 *Collier's* magazine exposé of the hidden ingredients in patent medicines, which influenced the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.

Part of the popularity of patent medicines was their appeal to a growing segment of the American population—prohibitionists. In fact, a patent medicine called "Old Dr. Kaufmann's Great Sulphur Bitters," which contained 22 percent alcohol, targeted prohibitionists with ads featuring an endorsement by Mrs. S. Louise Barton, "An Indefatigable and Life-Long Worker in the Temperance Cause." For prohibitionists, such patent medicines were a godsend, enabling them to stay pleasantly (but respectably) tipsy while toiling in the great national crusade to rid America of the demon rum.

Prohibition is incontrovertible proof that you don't have to be drunk to come up with a really, really bad idea. Stone cold sober but intoxicated on the powerful elixir of righteous idealism, American prohibitionists believed that the demon rum and its church, the saloon, were the world's prime sources of evil. "When the saloon goes," said Ernest Cherrington, a leader of the Anti-Saloon League, "the devil will be ready to quit."

The American temperance movement is as old as America itself, but it became a political force in the mid-1800s, fueled in part by a bias against immigrants, including Irish and Italian Catholics, who were stereotyped as shiftless alcoholics. After the Civil War, it spawned two powerful groups—the Prohibition Party and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, whose slogan was "For God, Home and Native Land."

The WCTU's most famous member was Carry Nation, a Kansas minister's wife, who led bands of

women into saloons, where they sang hymns to the patrons and greeted bartenders with a cheery "Good morning, destroyer of men's souls!" When those efforts failed to dry out Kansas, Nation prayed to God for direction and was awakened by a heavenly voice saying, "Go to Kiowa." She went to the town of Kiowa, where she invaded three saloons, smashing the liquor bottles with rocks. Soon, she replaced the rocks with a hatchet and became famous, traveling across America, smashing up saloons with her trademark wrecking tool. Arrested dozens of times, she paid her fines with money raised by selling little souvenir hatchets.



Carry Nation, a minister's wife, was an imposing woman who stood over six feet tall and wielded a hatchet in one hand and a Bible in the other. Nation wreaked havoc on saloons and their patrons and referred to herself as a "bulldog running along at the feet of Jesus, barking at what He doesn't like."

But it wasn't the antics of Carry Nation who won the fight for prohibition; it was the political savvy of the Anti-Saloon League, which added clout to the crusade for salvation of individual drunkards by strong-arming government officials. Founded in 1895, the league pioneered many of the techniques now used by modern advocacy groups. Working through local churches—generally rural Methodist or Baptist churches—it raised money, endorsed candidates and successfully lobbied for laws banning liquor in many towns and counties. In 1905, the league demonstrated its growing power by defeating Ohio Governor Myron Herrick, who had thwarted the league's legislative agenda—an upset that terrified wet politicians.

In 1913 the league kicked off its drive for a constitutional amendment prohibiting liquor with a march on Washington and a massive letter-writing campaign that flooded Congress with mail. The amendment failed in 1914, but gained strength during World War I, when the league exploited America's anti-German hysteria by deliberately associating beer with German-American brewers. "Kaiserism abroad and booze at home must go," declared the league's general counsel and wily Washington lobbyist, Wayne Wheeler.

It worked. Congress passed the amendment in 1918, and the states ratified it so quickly that America's wets barely had time to finish their drinks and start fighting back. When the new law went into effect on January 17, 1920, evangelist Billy Sunday held a funeral for John Barleycorn in Norfolk, Virginia. "The slums will soon be a memory," he predicted. "We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses and corncribs. . . . Hell will be forever for rent."

Alas, it didn't work out that way. Prohibition not only failed to eradicate slums and prisons, it even failed to curtail drinking, a pastime that now took on the allure of a forbidden thrill. Booze was smuggled into the country on "rumrunner" ships, cooked up in countless illegal distilleries, breweries and bathtubs and sold to eager customers in illicit saloons known as speakeasies.

New York City, which had 15,000 legal saloons before Prohibition, soon had 32,000 speakeasies. They came in infinite varieties, and two newspapermen



Buyenlarge/Getty Images

In this 1920s photograph, federal agents pour confiscated alcohol down a sewer. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the sale, manufacture, and transportation of alcohol. It was especially unpopular in cities, where illegal speakeasy clubs soon replaced saloons.

described a few dozen in their 1932 guidebook, *Manhattan Oases*. The oases ranged from the prosaic-Log-Cabin ("designed for the visiting Shriner") to the seedy Julius's ("as weird as a witch's Sabbath and as noisome as the psychopathic ward at Bellevue Hospital") to the elegant 19th Hole ("a nice hide-away for bond salesmen and their customers' wives").

Prohibition made selling booze a crime, which naturally attracted criminals to the business. Gangsters battled for control of the liquor trade, and the winners

became big businessmen, millionaires with bribe-bought political power. The most famous was Al Capone, who survived a gang war that created 500 corpses to become one of the most powerful men in Chicago. "Somehow I just naturally drifted into the racket," he told an interviewer from *Liberty* magazine in 1931. "And I guess I'm here to stay until the law is repealed."

Dry forces were confident that the law would never be repealed. "There is as much chance of repealing

the Eighteenth Amendment," said Senator Morris Sheppard, "as there is for a hummingbird to fly to the planet Mars with the Washington Monument tied to its tail."

Propelled by overwhelming public opinion against Prohibition, a hummingbird reached Mars on Dec. 5, 1933, and celebrations broke out across America.

"Downtown bars were lined five and six deep," the *Chicago Tribune* reported the next day. "'Sweet Adeline' and other old favorites rang in many of the bars as morning neared. Wags made frequent requests of musicians for the WCTU song, 'It's in the Constitution and It's There to Stay,' but nobody could remember the tune."

Repeal did not set off a wild national bender, as some dries had predicted, but it did result in one permanent change in American drinking habits: respectable women began patronizing bars. "Women Flock To Bars As The New Wet Era Opens," the *Chicago Tribune* reported. "Many women are crowding up to be served, something considered not quite right in the days preceding prohibition."

Before World War I, the saloon was largely a male outpost—one reason many women supported Prohibition. But after repeal, women, who'd recently gained the right to vote, seized the right to drink in public.

In 1935, two years after repeal, two middle-class alcoholics with wonderfully American names—Bill Wilson and Bob Smith—founded an organization that proved far more effective than Prohibition in combating drunkenness. Wilson, a former Wall Street whiz kid, and Smith, a doctor, named their group "Alcoholics Anonymous" and it has spread around the world, helping millions of alcoholics kick the habit.

These days, American liquor stores are packed with a dazzling variety of beverages, ranging from gourmet single-malt Scotches and domestic and imported wines, to neon-colored concoctions like MD 20/20 Blue Raspberry, and new alcoholic "energy drinks" like Joose, which mixes booze with caffeine, ginseng and tropical fruit juices. But the United States is, statisti-

cally speaking, a nation of moderate drinkers, ranking somewhere around 20th in surveys of worldwide per capita alcohol consumption, depending on how the data is calculated.

Although our intake is far behind most European countries, American life is suffused with booze. We drink at weddings and wakes—and sometimes at baby showers, baptisms, graduation parties, anniversaries and funerals. We drink to celebrate our triumphs and drown our sorrows—but also just to unwind after another dull day at work.

The influence of alcohol on American culture is so widespread as to be incalculable. Much of America's greatest literature was produced by alcoholics and hard drinkers—Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Edgar Allen Poe, Eugene O'Neill, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Jack Kerouac and Sinclair Lewis, whose classic 1927 novel about a corrupt evangelist begins: "Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovingly and pugnaciously drunk."

Much of America's best art has also been produced by hard drinkers, including Jackson Pollock, who enjoyed spilling paint but not his beloved whiskey, and Robert Rauschenberg, who claimed that he drank a quart of Jack Daniels a day, which might explain why he once made a sculpture by sticking a stuffed goat inside an old tire.

Jazz, America's classical music, was born in the bars and brothels of New Orleans and came of age in Prohibition speakeasies, including the most famous speakeasy of all, New York's Cotton Club, whose house band was Duke Ellington's orchestra. And American popular songs contain nearly as many references to booze as they do to love or lust:

Roll out the barrel . . .

It's another tequila sunrise . . .

Whiskey river, don't run dry . . .

Wasted away again in Margaritaville . . .

Alcohol has spawned many of the iconic characters in American pop culture—the cowboy knocking back a shot of Red Eye, the hard-drinking private eye, the cynical reporter with a bottle in his bottom file

drawer and, of course, the anonymous protagonist of a million jokes that begin, "A guy walks into a bar."

The United States is a sports-mad nation, and our sports are intimately connected with alcohol. We drink a beer while eating a hot dog at baseball games and sip a Bloody Mary while tailgating at football games. World Series winners celebrate by pouring champagne over their teammates' heads. And stock car racing—which came into its own as a sport after World War II—was created by moonshiners.

In the southern Appalachians, the culture of moonshine never died out, nor did the desire to avoid paying tax on it. Moonshiners souped up their cars so they could outrun federal "revenuers" on twisty mountain roads and, in the 1940s, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing began organizing races on dirt tracks. "About all your good dirt track drivers were involved in moonshine," Junior Johnson, the famous NASCAR driver, told me in an interview in 1999. "That's kind of the way it started."

At NASCAR's first official race in 1949, most of the drivers had learned their craft hauling whiskey. Six years later, Johnson, then one of NASCAR's biggest stars, was arrested while tending his father's illegal still in North Carolina and sent to federal prison. When he got out, he started racing again, won the 1960 Daytona 500 and became a folk hero. In 1986 President Ronald Reagan pardoned Johnson for his moonshine conviction. By then, NASCAR's outlaw image had helped to make it a major spectator sport.

"I think it did appeal to people," Johnson told me. "I think the exposure of you being a good moonshiner and having the fastest car of anybody—it was sort of a glorified thing, like Babe Ruth hitting his 714th home run."

[In 2007], Johnson, retired from racing, returned to his first love—making whiskey. He began marketing a legal, 80-proof concoction called Midnight Moon, which he proudly describes as the "best 'shine ever."

It just might be the perfect beverage for drinking a toast to the grand and goofy history of booze in America.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Explain why and how the Twenty-First Amendment was adopted. Why did many Americans fail to cheer this event and continue to ban alcohol through locally enacted dry laws?
- 2 Explain why the author contends that the debate over the legalization of alcohol represented "a conflict between two sides of our national personality." List a couple of more recent issues that have displayed that same clash of values.
- 3 Why did most Americans, including the Pilgrims and Puritans of colonial America, consume large quantities of alcohol? Describe the extent of America's drinking habits. What could "thirsty colonists" use to make alcohol when there was a shortage of imported wine and brandy? Why were patent medicines popular even among prohibitionists?
- 4 Describe the impact of Carry Nation, Billy Sunday, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. What made the Anti-Saloon League, especially after the start of the Great War, so effective? Why was the temperance movement associated with those who opposed immigration?
- 5 Explain why Prohibition failed. Who was Al Capone, and how did he symbolize the negative consequences of Prohibition? Why has Alcoholics Anonymous converted more drinkers to sobriety than the legal ban on liquor?
- 6 Discuss why women "seized the right to drink in public" after the repeal of Prohibition. Why does the author state that the "influence of alcohol on American culture is so widespread as to be incalculable"? Explain whether you agree or disagree with his conclusion.