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APUSH

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On January 16, 1919, an amendment to the constitution was ratified. An amendment that shook the very foundation of American society, and stole the most valuable right Americans had: the right to get wasted. The eighteenth amendment prohibited the production, transport, or sale of alcohol, and ushered America into a 13 year era which would become known as prohibition. Despite the amendments good intentions, it proved financially harmful, hard to enforce, and let to the rise of criminal empires until the 21st amendment repealed prohibition.

Following the civil war, the flood of immigration into American cities caused a boom in the brewing business. While the brewing boom did wonders for German-American business owners, it was viewed by many women and religious folk as evil as immoral. In the 1870s, fueled by a religious sense of morality, women whose lives had suffered due to their husbands alcohol consumption formed the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The movement did have it’s small victories, including lobbying for local laws restricting alcohol, and creating an anti-alcohol education program that was adapted in many schools. However, the most powerful anti-alcohol organization was the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). The ASL, led by Wayne Wheeler, became the most influential single-issue lobbying organization in American history, due to their willingness to cooperate with any group, including democrats, republicans, the KKK, and the NAACP. When the federal income tax amendment was ratified in 1913, the government no longer relied as heavily on tax from the sale of alcohol, and the ASL became more aggressive in their actions. When America entered World War One, the ASL successfully used propaganda to connect bewers to Germany, as many breweries were German Americans. Due to this successful fear campaign, and the fact that most politicians wouldn’t go at odds with the ASL, the 18th amendment breezed by congress. On January 17th, 1920, prohibition went into effect.

However, even though the amendment was passed, it proved to have many unintended consequences. The closing of breweries cost the jobs of not only those who worked at the breweries, but those connected to the brewing process as well. Restaurants were forced to close, due to loss of revenue without the sale of alcohol, and the entertainment industry in general suffered severely. Not only were citizens and businesses affected financially, but the government as well. Many states relied heavily on liquor taxes in order to generate government revenue. In New York, approximately 75% of taxes were lost due to prohibition. Prohibition cost the federal government around 11 billion in lost taxes, while costing over 300 million to enforce. Financially speaking, the noble experiment was a disaster.

Not only did prohibition hurt America financially, but it was almost impossible to enforce. Towards the beginning of prohibition, enforcement was assigned to the IRS, but was later transferred to the Justice Department. Enforcement was fairly easy in rural areas, where more conservative citizens tended to support the law. In cities however, the law proved extremely difficult, if not impossible, to fully enforce. Though it seemed successful initially, the decrease in legal alcohol sales only led to a huge increase in illegal alcohol sales. “Bootlegging”, the illegal production of alcohol, became a rampant source of alcohol, while “speakeasies”, stores or restaurants that secretly sold alcohol, became an easily accessible place to drink. Since the actual consumption of alcohol was not illegal, just the manufacturing or distributing, patrons had little to fear. Additionally, people illegally made cheap liquor in their own home, or smuggled alcohol across state lines. Not only did alcohol still circulate despite all the governments attempts, but illegal alcohol production encouraged the growth of criminal empires. The most famous was Al Capone, who raked in around 60 million a year from illegal alcohol production. The increased gang presence led to bloody gang standoffs, such as the St. Valentine's Day massacre in 1929. On February 14, 1929, a group of men disguised as police officers believed to be working for Capone, shot seven Irish gangsters who were enemies of Capones. Though Capone was never tried, he is widely considered responsible.

These negative effects of prohibition eventually proved to be too much, and when the great depression hit, the jobs that repealing prohibition would create were very appealing. In addition to his other plans to get America out of the depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to repeal prohibition if he was elected. He would fulfill that promise after a crushing victory over Herbert Hoover. On February 1933 the 21st amendment was passed, repealing the 18th. Due to the economic consequences, the difficulty of enforcement, and the subsequent rise of organized crime, the “Noble Experiment” proved to be a failure.