Prohibition in the United States

Adapted from http://www.ducksters.com/history/us_1900s/prohibition.php



What was Prohibition?

Prohibition was a period of time when it was illegal to sell or make alcoholic beverages like beer, wine, and liquor. Ironically, drinking alcohol was not considered illegal.

When did it start?

Throughout the early 1900s, a movement called the Temperance Movement tried to stop people from drinking alcohol. People who joined this movement believed alcohol was a leading cause in the destruction of families and moral corruption. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson put an end to the manufacture of alcoholic drinks in order to ration grain that was needed for food. This gave the Temperance Movement a lot of momentum and, on January 29, 1919, the 18th Amendment was ratified making alcoholic drinks illegal in the United States.

Bootleggers

Despite the new law, many people still wanted to have alcoholic drinks. People that made alcohol and smuggled it into cities or to bars were called "bootleggers." Bootleggers would often have modified cars to help them outrun the federal agents trying to catch them.

Speakeasies

In many cities a new type of secret establishment began to spring up called the speakeasy. Speakeasies sold illegal alcoholic beverages. They usually bought the alcohol from bootleggers. There were lots of speakeasies in most towns throughout the United States. They became a major part of the American culture in the 1920s.

Organized Crime

Selling illegal alcoholic drinks became a very profitable business for organized crime groups. One of the most famous gangsters of the time was Al Capone of Chicago. Historians estimate that his crime business made as much as $60 million a year selling alcohol and running speakeasies. There was a significant rise in violent gang crimes during the prohibition years.

Prohibition Comes to an End

By the end of the 1920s, people began to realize that Prohibition wasn't working. People were still drinking alcohol, but crime had increased dramatically. Other negative effects included people drinking stronger alcohol (because it was cheaper to smuggle) and a rise in the costs of running the local police department. When the Great Depression hit in the early 30s, people saw ending Prohibition as an opportunity to create jobs and to raise taxes from legally sold alcohol. In 1933, the Twenty-first Amendment was ratified that repealed the Eighteenth Amendment and ended Prohibition.