Prohibition Hard to Swallow

Good Beer Was Out; I

Prohibition. It was one of the most curious eras in American history.

It began on Jan. 16, 1920, when the Volstead Act became effective.

Named for Rep. Andrew Volstead, the act prohibited the manufacture, sale and transportation of all intoxicating beverages, as a means to enforce the 18th Amendment to the Constitution.

Many called the act a "noble experiment."

Columnist Heywood Broun, however, called it "a bill to discourage the drinking of good beer in favor of indifferent gin."

Whether it was a noble era or simply an error, Prohibition certainly ushered in one of the nation's most improbable, uproarious and scandalous periods.

Lasting 13-odd years, Prohibition left a lasting hangover on American manners and morals.

Some historians might say that Prohibition was the government's first attempt, since the framing of the Constitution, to view itself as the moral leader of the people.

Not only did the experiment fail, but Prohibition may have proved, perhaps for all time, that the government cannot legislate morality.

Prohibition also represented the first victory, however unlasting, of the "drys" over the "wets," the Anti-Saloon League over the saloonkeepers, the big church temperance societies over the drinking public.

One irrefutable argument of the wets was that the government could not do without the tax revenue it produced. It was estimated later that Prohibition had cost the government $4 billion in lost taxes before the act was repealed on Dec. 5, 1933.

Prohibition, some said, added such words as racketeer and scofflaw to our vocabulary and taught American women and college students to drink.

What Prohibition also spawned was the birth of organized crime, gangland murders and the large-scale corruption of government officials.

The nation's vocabulary also swelled to include the words bootlegging and rum-running — activities which became common in coastal communities like Fall River, Dartmouth, Tiverton, Portsmouth and Newport.

These were favorite dropoff points for the fast rum-runner boats, which often, amid gunfire, fought their way in and out of local ports, with Coast Guard patrol craft and other government gunboats in hot pursuit.

Local newspaper accounts of the day trace the persistent but futile effort of the government to enforce the Volstead Act.

One day, out of the fog off Tiverton, came shots across the bow of a peaceful civilian's yacht. Government gunners had become trigger-happy from the long fight.

Another day, bathers at Horseneck Beach ducked for cover as a rum-runner boat and a Coast Guard patrol boat clashed offshore in a hail of bullets at high noon.

The British ship Accuracy was seized by customs officers off South Dartmouth shores on still another day with a cargo of $250,000 worth of smuggled liquor ready to be put ashore, as even European nations vied for the booze market profit here.

Despite the effort of the government officers to stem the tide of illegal liquor traffic, most of the stuff made its way to a thirsty American public.

The enormous money to be made from bootlegging quickly brought about widespread corruption of public officials and the birth of the organized gang.

The speakeasy was a favorite meeting place for the elite and the elected as well as for the general public.

Police here and elsewhere were kept busy locating hundreds of moonshine stills and home brew caches, only to have hundreds more come into existence to replace those confiscated.

Not all citizens were involved in the then illegal trafficking of liquor, but many were at least

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making home brew or knew where to get it. When the government realized this, the battle was over.

All this came to an end with the states unanimously ratifying the 21st Amendment, repealing Prohibition.

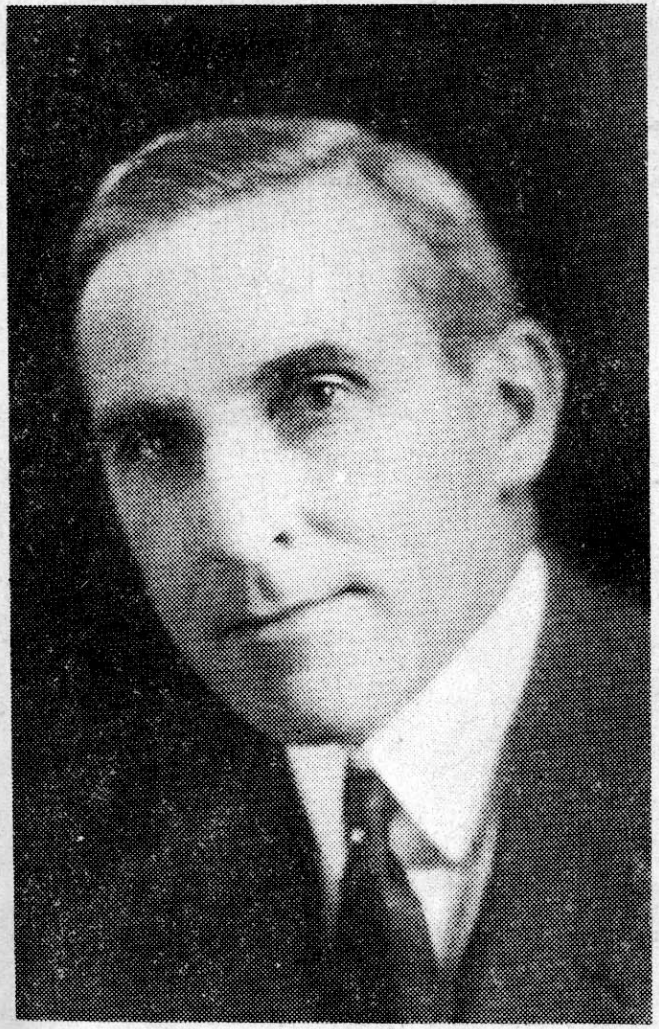
The end of Prohibition's wild era came on a surprisingly casual note.

Boston hotels and hostelries readied elaborate setups as legal liquor began to flow again. Repeal was toasted by the wets. But the celebration was anticlimactic, for the wets had long since known that Prohibition was destined to fail.

Headlines flashed the news across the front pages of newspapers, but the story of repeal ranked third, at best, among the top stories of the day, behind the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his closing of some banks.

The temperance societies and their legion of drys went back to the drawing boards. One of the first efforts at assessing the chaotic results of America's enlarged bent on booze-guzzling was this pearl of wisdom:

"First a man takes a drink. Then the drink takes a drink. Then the drink takes a man."



Edward F. Hanify, presiding justice of Second District Court during the early days of prohibition, tried numerous illegal still operators and moonshine sellers. In one instance, he fined an Eagle Street woman $100 and sent her to jail for 60 days on charges that she sold pints of "whiskey" for 50 cents. It was her second appearance before the jurist. Hanify was later named a Superior Court judge by Gov. Allen.