

The great gatsby and prohibition

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The 1920s in America was an era of excess, a time when the free market thrived and could be afforded. Even products that were declared illegal could be bought from the underground. One product in particular was alcohol, a product restricted by prohibition.

Prohibition stated that the production, distribution, and purchase of alcohol was illegal (Kelly). This policy had been built up by a variety of organizations across the nation, looking to dry America. By the 1920s, their efforts brought into effect the 18th amendment, which states that one year after its ratification, the manufacture, sale, transportation, importation and exportation of intoxicating liquors was declared illegal (Constitute: Amendment XVII). This amendment would launch America into the era of Prohibition, and all the consequences that came with it.

Realizing the popular, and sometimes desperate, demand for alcohol, despite its recently stated illegality, the American mafia groups began intricate bootlegging operations and profited immensely, gaining wealth and power. This devious and opportunistic criminal activity and other issues caused by prohibition, would cause the government to later reject its previous decision and repeal prohibition. In his novel, *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses prohibition and its byproducts as part of his societal tapestry, showing its effects and influence on his characters.

In the time of *The Great Gatsby*, the 1920s, people were living in excess. Despite this, prohibition was in full effect, since the implementation of the 18th Amendment on January 7, 1920 (Burns, Novick). The American brewing companies struggled to stay afloat with this law in place, and many of them

largely disappeared. (““ Pennsylvania Ave Pilsner and a Rochester beer legacy.””) ““ After Prohibition, there were only four that came back(““ Pennsylvania Ave Pilsner and a Rochester beer legacy.””). The law and its effects were largely ignored and disregarded by most average people, privately owning alcohol, as well as doing their drinking at speakeasies, secret buildings that were equivalent to a bar(Taylor, Kazmers). One such speakeasy was attended by Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby when they were having lunch with Gatsby’s business partner, Wolfshiem (Fitzgerald). This ignorance of and disregard for the law was rarely punished, as the US government at the time was not as powerful as it is today, allowing much personal freedom.

One of these personal freedoms was women’s ability to vote, through the implementation of the 19th amendment to the US constitution. This and other new freedoms for women gave rise to flappers, expressive and rebellious women of the 20s whose likenesses were captured and preserved in several photos from the era. These young woman had their own careers, their own interests and personalities, and worked to satisfy themselves. These new women were the antithesis to the subservient women who came before them. Women participated in the rebellion against prohibition as well, joining their male counterparts in speakeasies in addition to participating in other alcoholic activities. According to the Flappers article on ushistory. org, more young women consumed alcohol in the decade it was illegal than ever before. Prohibition gave many people a chance to rebel and demonstrate personal freedom through disobedience, as well as giving shady individuals and groups a chance at profit.

The origins of prohibition stretch back to the 1800s when the habit of excess drinking and alcohol driven abuse was common and a serious problem.

According to Ken Burns's and Lynn Novick's *The Roots of Prohibition*, By 1830, the average American over 15 years old consumed nearly seven gallons of pure alcohol a year. To combat this, people like affected women, religious leaders, and popular societal figures founded anti alcohol groups such as the Christian Women's Temperance Movement and the Anti-Saloon league (Burns, Novick). Some of these temperance supporters were former abolitionists who fought against slavery and later came to see drink as an equally great evil to be eradicated (Burns, Novick). These groups lobbied, educated, protested, and allied themselves with other political and activist groups until they gained the influence they needed. The activities of these groups would cause problems and conflict in places where brewing was popular, hurting reputations and economies ("Pennsylvania Ave Pilsner and a Rochester beer legacy."). Soon, a proposal was passed to the US government to delegate on. According to *Repeal of Prohibition*, By January 1919 three quarters of the states had ratified this proposal, and it became effective on 16 January 1920. The temperance groups had succeeded in drying America with the 18th amendment. This would start the well known and resented prohibition, however, this law really wouldn't stop the production, transportation, distribution, sale, or consumption of alcohol at all (Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin.). At this point, even with good intentions, the biggest mistake of the 1920s would be made.

With Prohibition in effect, crime lords like Al Capone saw an opportunity at profit and the consolidation of power. Capone had a brilliant criminal mind,

and he focused it on organizing an international bootlegging ring (Taylor, Kazmers). Using their gangs, they began setting up their bootlegging operations, secretly transporting and selling illegal alcohol across the nation and beyond. They would also set up secret bars known as speakeasies to sell their bootlegged products and provide a safe haven for drinkers (Taylor, Kazmers). These speakeasies were hidden and heavily guarded by the gang's enforcers to ensure that their business wasn't threatened. Through their bootlegging and speakeasies, organized crime across America gained much wealth and power. Sometimes, they would use this to gain even more through a method known as racketeering.

Racketeering was, in a basic definition, the forcible infiltration of a business to gain control over its funds and products. Some mafia would do it by disguising themselves as workers' union members, other would do through sheer deadly force, or a variety of other methods. A gang would racketeer legitimate businesses and even their criminal rivals to amass their influence and wealth. (Taylor, Kazmers) To add to the talk of influence, crime lords like Capone would also successfully bribe and divert law enforcement, allowing their gangs to continue their operations unhindered and without fear of legal punishment, ensuring and preserving profit. This power and influence allowed organized crime syndicates to have a hand in other criminal enterprises, many of them already a part of their bootlegging operations (Parkinson). With all of this, these crime syndicates now had a near monopolistic control over the production, transportation, distribution, and sale of alcohol in America. In *The Great Gatsby*, it was revealed that Gatsby was a bootlegger, working for the gangster Meyer Wolfshiem. Through this

less than legal activity, Gatsby gained the extreme wealth and mystery he was famous for (Fitzgerald 133-134). Also, Gatsby had a positive reputation with the New York police commissioner, most likely through secret deals and bribery. He uses this reputation to avoid punishment, such as when he avoids getting pulled over when he and Nick were driving to lunch (Fitzgerald 68). Organized crime was a very significant and memorable aspect of 1920s America, as well as a reminder and a warning to those who wanted to implement policies banning popular goods.

Increasingly, professionally brewed alcohol wasn't the only drink sold in these speakeasies. Gangs would also sell a kind of do-it-yourself alcohol, nicknamed Bathtub gin. One such instance of the creation and selling of bathtub gin is when the Genna brothers' gang gave local poor families special home brewing stills to make drinks (Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin.). The families would connect these stills to their bathtub spigots, hence its name, and would create the strange drink. This was mainly due to the fact that their bottles often were too tall to fit under the spigot in the kitchen sink(Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin.) The gang would afterward buy these drinks to sell in speakeasies. According to Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin, few could tolerate the bad taste of this bathtub gin. Bartenders in speakeasies blended ounces of it with various mixers from bitters to soda pop, juices and fruit garnishes, to hide the flavor of the poorly made alcohol. Nevertheless, this method of making alcohol became popular and would spread across the nation. For example, the infamous career of moonshining became further entrenched and become well known in the south around this time. However, while popular and more insidious, the practice of making Bathtub gin was not

always safe for the consumer. As previously stated, sometimes the mafia would racketeer businesses (Taylor, Kazmers), however, this was not always for money or power. At this time, some gangs, seeking control over alcohol production, would racketeer businesses for ingredients to be used for bathtub gin (Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin.). In one instance, a gang gained control of a large amount of industrial grain alcohol, using it to make a toxic, and sometimes deadly, breed of bathtub gin that made purchasing bootlegged alcohol a major risk. Industrial alcohol had additional toxic additives placed there by regulation in hope of dissuading a thirsty public from consuming it. It didn't work. Bathtub gin would be one of the reasons for prohibition's later repeal. (The Poisoner's Handbook) In conclusion, people would try to make alcohol to save money, time, and to try to avoid trouble with law enforcement. However, these drinks were not the safest to consume and became a risk.

The efforts made to enforce and preserve prohibition were failing, people were secretly purchasing alcohol, the mafia was selling it and providing places to drink, and some people were making their own, often poisonous, alcohol. Stopping many of these issues was extremely difficult, for example, the mafia's leaders would bribe law enforcement into avoiding them and refraining from investigation, allowing the gangs to exist and expand unhindered (Taylor, Kazmers). Also, despite the selling and purchasing of alcohol's illegality in America, there were those who were able to get around this restriction by buying it from other places. According to Repeal of Prohibition, Liquor dealers in Canada, the Caribbean, and Europe provided a ready and unimpeded source of alcoholic beverages, and there were many

who were prepared to risk arrest to take advantage of the opportunities afforded. These workarounds and a general disregard for the law wasn't helping support for prohibition. It also wasn't helped by the fact that the mafia now possessed immense power, wealth, and influence from their bootlegging business (Taylor, Kazmers). Neither was the fact that tainted homemade alcohol was being brewed, sickening and even killing those who consumed it (Bootleggers and Bathtub Gin). Something had to be done to gain control of this situation.

The woman appointed to handle cases regarding the enforcement and disobedience of prohibition, Mabel Walker Willebrandt, found a lack of commitment as well as corruption on the part of some of her colleagues, as well as that she lacked authority to deal with the enforcement and violations of the 18th amendment. (The Repeal of Prohibition) According to The Repeal of Prohibition, sixty-nine hundred arrests had been made during one three-year period, but only twenty convictions had been obtained. Willebrandt, had also found that US attorneys from around the country were not committed to enforcing the law, only adding to prohibition's failures. Forced to deal with these and other difficulties, Willebrandt gave up, leaving the corrupt and uncommitted around her to figure out the problem for themselves.

Things would soon change after the Stock Market Crash occurred and The Great Depression set in. Prohibition would become unpopular. The common opinion, according to The Repeal of Prohibition, was that Prohibition simply no longer fit the American lifestyle. The Democratic Party would soon take interest in this new revelation, and use it to their advantage. They added the

repealing of prohibition to its election platform, and gained popular support. This would all soon come to a head when the 21st amendment was passed on December 5, 1933, bringing an end to prohibition.

Even after prohibition's repeal in 1933, many of its consequences exist and thrive today. One such consequence is that prohibition did somewhat work as intended. According to Ten Legacies of Prohibition, the pre prohibition era average American consumed about 2.6 gallons of alcohol per year, while the post prohibition era average American consumed about 2.2 gallons. So people actually drank less during and after prohibition. This abstinence from drinking, could possibly be caused by the fact that it is harder to find drinks now than during the prohibition era. According again to Ten Legacies of Prohibition, the United States government has passed a variety of laws, 18 to be exact, that direct and control the sale and purchase of liquors. Also, some states and counties have certain drinking jurisdictions that regulate how much, as well as what kind of alcohol can be sold in those areas. In addition to these purchase regulations, the creation of bathtub gin, as well as other distillery based drinks remains, to this day, illegal. Liquors are also heavily taxed, Ten Legacies of Prohibition states that In 2014, the feds took in \$7.9 billion in federal excise taxes on liquor, which by U. S. estimates is a \$400 billion to \$500 billion per year industry employing about four million people. This makes selling alcohol in the modern era a very expensive business.

Throughout the prohibition era, organized crime ran rampant, profiting and enforcing their bootlegging operations (Taylor, Kazmers). In The Great Gatsby, Tom Buchanan find out about Gatsby's criminal history, saying He

and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of these side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter (Fitzgerald 133.) When prohibition ended, the mafia, realizing their loss of a source of profit, either continued to sell alcohol legally, or moved on to other questionable activities. The latter turned to the usual Mob rackets of illegal gambling, prostitution, loan sharking, narcotics and murder-for-hire.(Ten Legacies of Prohibition) Present locations, such as Las Vegas, exist and thrive because of the mafia's procession from one profitable vice to another.

Prohibition has some present day political implications as well. Founded in 1869, the Prohibition party was the first party to allow women to be members, as well as the nation's oldest third political party to date. Despite its historical influence, the party is rather insignificant today compared to its popularity back in the day. In 2012 the party's presidential candidate only garnered 512 votes according to Ten Legacies of Prohibition. Suffice it to say, this party seems to be more of a an artifact of political history rather than a powerful force of decision making.

One very beneficial present day consequence of the Prohibition Era is women's rights. In addition to the implementation of the 19th amendment, women would drink alongside men in speakeasies at this time, a very taboo concept before prohibition and the previously stated 19th amendment. Women were also gaining power in the political field, in 1923, a woman named Pauline Sabin became the first woman on the Republican National Committee(Ten Legacies of Prohibition). This was as well as a woman named Maria Brehm became America's first female candidate for vice-president.

One final, and arguably, the most memorable example of an important woman in the 1920s is Mabel Walker Willebrandt.

Mabel Walker Willebrandt was a female lawyer, best known for her time serving as the United States assistant attorney general from 1921 to 1929, and her relentless attitude toward the enforcement of the 18th amendment. However, one other important thing she was involved in was the reform of the prison system. According to Naomi Blumberg in her article about Willebrandt, Willebrandt was largely responsible for establishing the first federal reformatory for young male first-time offenders. Also, Willebrandt had noticed the growing number of women violating prohibition laws, leading her to advocate for female only federal prisons. In 1927, the first of the female only prisons opened in Alderson, West Virginia. Later in her life, she would support the Screen Directors Guild during the communist Witch Hunt lead by Joseph Mccarthy in the 1950s. Sadly, not long afterward, she would die of lung cancer on April 6th 1963(Blumberg). Willebrandt was woman who proved the capabilities of women in the political field and left behind many legacies of reform and progress.

Now that the history of prohibition its legacies have been discussed, we will discuss Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby's* connections to it. One such example are the gangsters. They were seen at Gatsby's party, as well as in the speakeasy that Nick and Gatsby were having lunch in. (Fitzgerald 69-74) In addition to gangsters, bootleggers were also seen. In the later events of the book, Gatsby was revealed to be a bootlegger, using a medicine business to secretly sell alcohol (Fitzgerald 133-134). Gatsby also had connections in the

underground, to a gangster named Mayer Wolfshiem (Fitzgerald 63-73)

Lastly, while seemingly minor, the most pervasive connection to prohibition is the ownership and consumption of alcohol itself. All throughout the book people are drinking alcohol, serving it, keeping it around, or transporting it. For example, when Nick, Jordan, Gatsby and the Buchanans go to the hotel, taking alcohol along (Fitzgerald 120). In addition to alcohol being a central consumable at Gatsby's parties. (Fitzgerald 39-60) In conclusion, prohibition was an important aspect of life in the roaring 20s, and while a very seemingly minor detail in the grand scale of Fitzgerald's book, it was a pervasive underlying detail and there is evidence of it all throughout. It supports Gatsby's wealth, mystique, facilitates his generosity, and overall puts the Great in Great Gatsby.