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The Wine Exchange: The legacy of Prohibition

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The 18th Amendment formally established the prohibition of production, sale, and transport of “intoxicating liquors” in 1916 after Congress compromised on a six-year ratification deadline. This deadline was thought impossible to achieve by the anti-prohibition forces who were surprised and dismayed to see it completed in January 1919 and take effect in January 1920.

However, the amendment did not define intoxicating liquors or provide any penalties. To clearly define these “shortcomings,” the Anti-Saloon League’s Wayne Wheeler (longtime temperance leader) conceived and authored the National Prohibition Act of 1919 named after House Judiciary Chairman Andrew Volstead, who managed the legislation. The bill was immediately vetoed by Woodrow Wilson and promptly overridden by both houses within a day.

The Volstead Act became the law that governed Prohibition. It was far stricter (limiting all alcoholic drinks to 0.5 percent alcohol) in its wording and intention than the Amendment itself. This went beyond the intoxicating liquors envisioned in the 18th Amendment and affected all products including wine and beer.

The Volstead Act became law at midnight on Jan. 17, 1920. Its first documented infringement occurred less than an hour later in Chicago with the theft by six gunmen of \$100,000 of “medicinal” whiskey. And so the lawlessness of Prohibition began. To the astonishment of the “drys,” many individuals, gangs and others from the start saw an opportunity to capitalize from this law while satisfying the thirsts of the “wets.” Cash began to flow and police bribery became the norm.

A few exceptions were included in the Volstead Act. Home winemaking was permitted up to 200 gallons annually per household but only for family consumption. Licensed physicians, using a specific government-issued prescription form, could prescribe one pint of “medicinal alcohol” (aka whiskey) to their patients for a variety of maladies. More than six million prescriptions were written and filled by pharmacies.

There were also specific religious exemptions that allowed for sacramental wine geared mostly to the Catholic and Jewish faiths. Priests were allowed to serve wine in accordance with religious practices in their churches. And since many Jewish celebrations are largely held in homes, rabbis were allowed to issue permits for their congregation members to purchase 10 gallons of wine per year from authorized dealers.

Both of these measures were manipulated and exploited throughout the years of Prohibition with synagogue memberships soaring and so-called “rabbis” from all faiths and ethnicities suddenly appeared to sell the needed permits beyond the synagogues. Demand for sacramental wine among Catholic churches also skyrocketed and saved wineries with strong Church ties (such as Beaulieu Vineyard) from collapse.

North Coast wines began to achieve national and international prominence in the late 19th century when phylloxera suddenly reared its ugly head in several growing areas. Vineyards were ripped out to lay fallow before being safely replanted. Affected growers were financially strapped and wanted to replant with varieties that were relatively disease resistant and capable of bearing large crops leading to a more rapid recovery.

Varieties such as Zinfandel, Carignane, and Alicante Bouschet were among the favorite choices. A few decades later during Prohibition, these decisions proved fortuitous as they were also well suited for packing to survive the challenges of shipping across the country for home winemaking.

Joel Peterson, founder and winemaker of Ravenswood and now proprietor/ of his own Once & Future Wines, is a noted authority on heritage varieties and vineyards. He noted that “while wineries were closing and many vineyards were being replanted to prunes and other fruits at the

outset of Prohibition, the net planting of vines actually increased during this period to satisfy the home winemaking demand.”

Peterson was quick to point out as an example that the Dickerson Vineyard in St. Helena (one of Napa’s premier Zinfandel vineyards) was planted in 1920 and came into full production in the midst of Prohibition. Areas such as Sonoma and Lodi greatly expanded their plantings and took advantage of nearby railroad hubs for shipping.

Winegrape growers prospered during this time as prices increased dramatically in the early years of Prohibition when supplies were limited. Yet, as new plantings came on board, prices dropped in the later years but remained above pre-Prohibition levels.

Warren Winiarski was Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars’ founder and winemaker and now is the proprietor of Arcadia Vineyards in Coombsville. He has received many honors throughout his iconic career and was the winemaker of the legendary 1973 Stag’s Leap Cabernet Sauvignon that won the famous 1976 Judgement of Paris tasting.

In looking back at Prohibition, Winiarski regretfully points out, “The habits of mind, soul and body of winemaking were lost for a generation.” While this is a sobering thought, he also sees its repeal “as the opportunity for a fresh start in Napa Valley.” Two very astute observations.

In no way does the “fresh start” opportunity undermine the horrific consequences of Prohibition for the evolving wine industry. But it did offer growers and vintners a clean slate to begin again with the right grapes planted in the right places and the implementation of new vineyard techniques.

Winiarski referred to UC Davis professors Maynard Amerine and A.J. Winkler’s “California Wine Grapes: Composition and Quality of their Musts and Wines Bulletin 794” published in 1963 as the seminal reference on vine selection in relation to the amount of heat each area receives during the growing season based on “degree days.”

Together, Amerine and Winkler developed the Winkler scale that classified winegrowing regions from the coolest Region I to the warmest Region V. Their 1963 publication analyzed 100 grape

varieties and their optimum growing areas from 1946 to 1958 and was a supplement to a prior study from 1935 to 1942 published by them in 1944. "Bulletin 794" served vintners and growers as a dependable guide to a thoughtful redevelopment of vineyards after the scourge of Prohibition.

The temperance crusades

The battle for temperance did not start with the 18th Amendment and its effects on the domestic wine industry did not end with its repeal by the 21st Amendment in 1933. In 1826, Presbyterian Minister Lyman Beecher co-founded the American Temperance Society in Boston. Within five years there were 2,220 local chapters scattered throughout the U.S and 170,000 members pledging to abstain from distilled beverages.

The movement gained strength through the mid-1800s with, among others, Mayor Neal Dow from Portland Maine banning all production and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Devout women's groups, including Susan B. Anthony's Daughters of Temperance, joined with religious leaders to carry on the fight for abstinence that was derailed during the Civil War as both sides initiated taxes on brewers and distillers to finance their war efforts and medicinal anesthetics were in short supply for treating the wounded.

But after the war, the movement again picked up steam where temperance events and groups were initiated across the country resulting in civil protest backed by prayer. Frances Willard founded the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1883 and worked with suffragists encouraging local actions to outlaw alcoholic drinks.

In the 1890s Carrie (the Hatchet) Nation was the founder of a local WCTU chapter and embarked on a destructive run in Kansas when armed with a hatchet and Bible, she single-handedly destroyed bars and saloons all the while singing prayers. She claimed this was, "Her mission from God." While some viewed her as a crusader, others saw her as a crank.

Howard Russell founded the Anti Saloon League (ASL) in 1893 in Ohio that went national in 1895. This was one of the first political movements formed with the purpose of administering political retribution. Russell's theme was, "If you're with us we'll elect you. If you're against us we'll destroy you." Russell was the mentor to Wayne Wheeler (remember his Volstead Act) who

worked in all states to pit rural America against the metropolitan cities and Protestants vs. Catholics.

Around the turn of the century, anti-alcohol leaders felt a constitutional amendment was necessary rather than a range of state and local measures to ensure their movement's success. By making Prohibition part of the Constitution, it would lend credibility and permanence. Since no amendment had ever been repealed, the battle would be won in perpetuity.

The idea of an amendment was vigorously fought by distillers, brewers, saloons, and others along with the U.S. government since they were collecting taxes. After the federal income tax was established in 1913, Congress moved on and ushered in the 18th Amendment.

Once Prohibition became law, saloons closed and speakeasies opened. Millions found themselves out of work, businesses shut down, crime reached extraordinary heights and no one seemed in control of the situation. Amazingly, the ASL teamed with the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) to act as enforcers. The ASL, largely through political means, and the KKK through activism, violence, and unrest voiced a strong anti-Catholic message and used abstinence as a recruiting tool across the country.

With the 21st Amendment ratified in 1933, Prohibition ended. But the ill-effects of its existence persevered for decades. In wine country, some growers felt unsure of changing conditions and resisted converting orchards to their historic place as vineyards. Existing wineries attempted to reposition themselves to the pre-Prohibition days, but the public was slow to re-adapt to wine and generally preferred beer and spirits.

Napa Valley saw no new wineries built for the next 33 years until Robert Mondavi established his in 1966. The 1970s saw a strong re-growth with the birth of many new and successful wineries that set the Valley on a strong and progressive path forward.

Some say Prohibition was necessary since excessive intoxication was destroying so many families through the 19th Century. Others say, it was "The Noble Experiment." But in retrospect, it was a calamitous time.

According to the Cato Institute, “Prohibition was undertaken to reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses, and improve health and hygiene in America. The results of that experiment clearly indicate it was a miserable failure on all counts.”