

The Gazette

Two pandemics: One dry and one very wet

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Iowans have made this a very boozy pandemic. Cheers.

Maybe you saw the reports last month on Iowa alcohol sales during fiscal 2020, which ended June 30. Iowans spent a record \$367.3 million on liquor. More than 28 million bottles were sold.

I seriously doubt temperance took hold in the last half of 2020, when the weather got cold, nights got longer and the coronavirus pandemic filled our hospitals and nightmares.

And we drank the 1918 pandemic under the table. Not difficult at all.

And that's because Prohibition became the law of the land in Iowa in 1916, four years before the 18th Amendment made national Prohibition law on this anniversary date, Jan. 17, 1920. So liquor was illegal in Iowa during the 1918 flu pandemic. No quarantines for you, at least not legal ones.

You might be asking why I'm digging through the archives now with all the current insanity gripping the nation. What are you drinking?

Well, this column is due Tuesday. As I type, I'm not even sure who will be president by Sunday. I can depend only on history to hold steady for five days.

"Wets," who opposed Prohibition, and "Drys," who supported it, fought for decades in Iowa. Iowa was a leading state in the push for Prohibition.

In 1882, Republicans passed strict Prohibition laws, but they were struck down by the Iowa Supreme Court. In 1884, lawmakers passed another Prohibition law that included a local option allowing counties to pick wet or dry.

In 1915, that local option was repealed and a full Prohibition law took effect Jan. 1, 1916. The Iowa Legislature approved the 18th Amendment in January 1919, which took effect 101 years ago today.

The Evening Gazette carried news of the national law taking effect on the front page. Federal enforcement agents were on their way to the Midwest, but the first arrests were in New York.

“Four minutes after the eighteenth amendment became active in New York this morning, a Brooklyn cafe owner was arrested by an internal revenue inspector for selling a glass of brandy,” according to a front-page wire report.

In Marion, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union marked the milestone and expressed high hopes for a dry, peaceful America.

One speaker proclaimed, “With much crime going out and prosperity coming in, there will be a better and wiser class of people with desires for a greater America.”

It was pointed out by another speaker that “in the first four weeks of wartime prohibition many towns and cities began to consider the wisdom of discharging policemen and jail attendants and turning workhouse property into parks because of having no crime to punish.”

It should be cause for celebration.

“Ringing of the bells and firing of the guns was not sufficient, but that airplanes should fly with long white ribbons filling the air,” one member said.

On Jan. 16, 1920, The Gazette editorialized on the occasion.

“Today, the United States of America goes irrevocably and indisputably dry under the rigid enforcement of an amendment to the Constitution. Not since the day when vodka’s funeral was held in Russia has prohibition scored such a victory. Vodka came back in Russia when the government was overthrown. Only a similar political upheaval could bring whisky and its relative back to legalized trade in the United States.”

The editorial quoted a federal official who argued that the great majority of Americans would obey the law. The Gazette agreed.

“The majority favored prohibition, and the majority obeys laws. The majority would obey a law it hadn’t favored — as long as it was a law. That’s Americanism for you?” The Gazette wrote.

Only “a very small fraction of the population” would break the law, we argued, “mostly bootleggers, blind-piggers and moonshiners.”

Blind-piggers run illicit drinking establishments, by the way.

“Gradually, this motley army of prohibition law violators will dwindle,” The Gazette predicted, arguing we could depend on citizens who “place the sanctity of the law ahead of their thirst.”

Not our most prescient editorial moment, to be sure.

Gazette writers and WCTU members had to be dismayed when they realized that for many, many Americans and Iowans, the sanctity of law was no substitute for a good belt. Of course

now we know all of the bootlegging, organized crime, gang violence and illegal speak-easies made Prohibition synonymous with crime, and lots of it. The jails, it turns out, could not be closed.

In 1933, 60 percent of Iowa voters cast ballots for repealing Prohibition. We didn't need a Bolshevik Revolution to get our vodka.

Liquor laws remained tight in Iowa for decades, with no liquor by the drink sales allowed until the 1960s and state-owned liquor stores dispensing all the booze until the 1980s.

Now, more than a century later, we can buy all the Black Velvet and Hawkeye Vodka we want, or maybe something else, to mix our quarantinis.

It's hard to read this stuff about the folly of liquor prohibition and not think of marijuana. Like Americans during the 1920s losing their enthusiasm for banning booze and seeing Prohibition as more harmful than beneficial, we're now rethinking pot. Several states have legalized it for recreational use and many more have robust medical cannabis programs providing access to people suffering from a long list of ailments.

Iowa has done neither. We have a weak medical program, and few politicians are willing to push for legal pot. There's even resistance to decriminalizing marijuana possession, which seems like a smart justice system reform with an eye on ending enduring racial disparities.

According to a CATO Institute study authored by Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron, Iowa spends \$59 million annually enforcing marijuana laws and could bring in more than \$39 million in revenue through legalization.

That's a high price to pay for failed, harmful prohibition policies. Come on lawmakers, treat us like adults.