

# *A View of Prohibition*

Count Felix von Luckner



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## **OVERVIEW**

The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages went into effect in January 1920. What followed was mass evasion of the law by a large number of people. Enforcement of Prohibition was almost impossible. A German visitor to the country in 1927 described the situation.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- How successful did the enforcement of Prohibition seem to be?
  - Why does the author believe the Eighteenth Amendment was adopted?
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I suppose I should set forth my investigations into the subject of prohibition. Here is a new experience, at a club's celebration. Each man appears with an impressive portfolio. Each receives his glass of pure water; above the table the law reigns supreme. The brief cases rest under the chairs. Soon they are drawn out, the merry noise of popping corks is heard, and the guzzling begins.

Or, I come to a banquet in a hotel dining room. On the table are the finest wines. I ask, "how come?" answer: "Well, two of our members lived in the hotel for eight days and every day brought in cargoes of this costly stuff in their suitcases." My informant was madly overjoyed at this cunning.

My first experience with the ways of prohibition came while we were being entertained by friends in New York. It was bitterly cold. My wife and I rode in the rumble seat of the car, while the American and his wife, bundled in furs, sat in front. Having wrapped my companion in pillows and blankets so thoroughly that only her nose showed, I came across another cushion that seemed to hang uselessly on the side. "Well," I thought, "this is a fine pillow; since everybody else is so warm and cozy, I might as well do something for my own comfort. This certainly does no one any good hanging on the wall." Sitting on it, I gradually noticed a dampness in the neighborhood, that soon mounted to a veritable flood. The odor of fine brandy told me I had burst my host's peculiar liquor flask.

In time, I learned that not everything in America was what it seemed to be. I discovered, for instance, that a spare tire could be filled with substances other than air, that one must not look too deeply into certain binoculars, and that the Teddy Bears that suddenly acquired tremendous popularity among the ladies very often had hollow metal stomachs.

"But," it might be asked, "where do all these people get the liquor?" Very simple. Prohibition has created a new, a universally respected, a well-beloved,

and a very profitable occupation, that of the bootlegger who takes care of the importation of the forbidden liquor. Everyone knows this, even the powers of government. But this profession is beloved because it is essential, and it is respected because its pursuit is clothed with an element of danger and with a sporting risk. Now and then one is caught, that must happen *pro forma* and then he must do time or, if he is wealthy enough, get someone to do time for him.

Yet it is undeniable that prohibition has in some respects been signally successful. The filthy saloons, the gin mills which formerly flourished on every corner and in which the laborer once drank off half his wages, have disappeared. Now he can instead buy his own car, and ride off for a weekend or a few days with his wife and children in the country or at the sea. But, on the other hand, a great deal of poison and methyl alcohol has taken the place of the good old pure whiskey. The number of crimes and misdemeanors that originated in drunkenness has declined. But by contrast, a large part of the population has become accustomed to disregard and to violate the law without thinking. The worst is, that precisely as a consequence of the law, the taste for alcohol has spread ever more widely among the youth. The sporting attraction of the forbidden and the dangerous leads to violations. My observations have convinced me that many fewer would drink were it not illegal.

And how, it will be asked, did this law get onto the statute books? Through the war. In America there was long a well-developed temperance movement and many individual states already had prohibition laws. During the war it was not difficult to extend the force of those laws to the whole of the United States. Prohibition was at first introduced only for the period of the war. For the mass of the people it was very surprising when Congress in 1920 adopted the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution which made it a crime to manufacture, transport, or sell intoxicating liquor. The dry states had imposed their will on the whole Union.

**Source:** Count von Luckner, Felix. *Seeteufel erobert Amerika*; in Handlin, Oscar. *This Was America*. Harvard University Press, 1949.