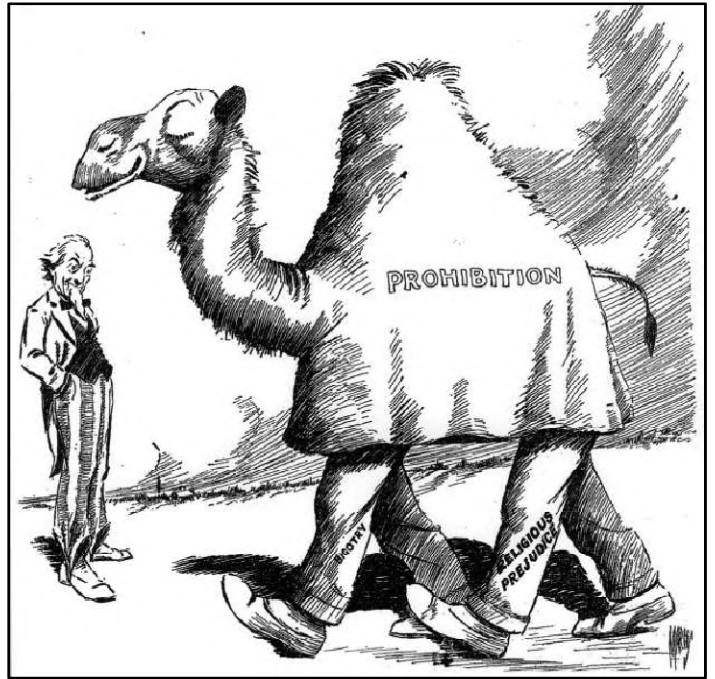


## READING: Prohibition

The United States Constitution does not give Congress the right to tell people what they may eat or drink. If someone wants to drink poison, only a state can make laws to try to keep him from doing so. Many people say that alcohol can be a kind of poison. No one disagrees that drinking too much is harmful.

Drunkenness was a special problem in early America. Most drinking was done in saloons, where women were not admitted. Some men took their paychecks, went to a saloon, got drunk, and then went home drunk, with no money left for their families. Reformers decided to attack the problem. Some of them believed in *temperance*, which means moderation. Other believed in *prohibition*, which means outlawing all drinking.



Some women's groups fought for prohibition. Several religious groups- especially Methodists and Baptists- joined the battle. Many states became *dry*. In a dry state it was against state law to buy or sell liquor. Some people wanted to go further. They wanted the whole nation to be dry. A constitutional amendment was needed.

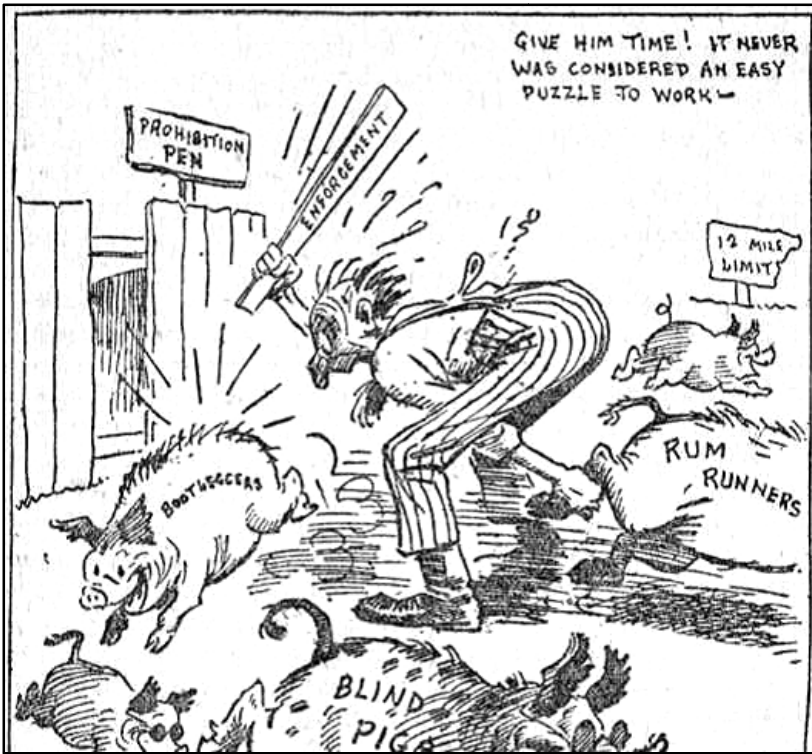
It was the Progressive Era: people thought that laws could help make people perfect- or close to it. It took about 20 years to get the **18<sup>th</sup> Amendment** passed, but finally it was done. The Prohibition Amendment became law in 1920. The amendment made it illegal to sell liquor anywhere in the United States. Most people thought it a very good idea. All but two states passed the Prohibition amendment.

**Per capita** (pur-CAP-it-uh) is Latin, and means "by the head" or per person. In other words, the total amount of liquor consumed in the U.S., divided by the number of people in the U.S., showed there was less alcohol drunk during Prohibition than before. But many new kinds of people began drinking; that was the problem.

It didn't work. Many people who wanted to drink kept drinking (although per capita alcohol consumption did fall during Prohibition years.) But some people, especially some women and young people, who had not drunk before, decided to try it. Prohibition wasn't supposed to do this, but in some crowds it made drinking fashionable. (Maybe it had to do with disillusionment after the war. Writers were calling this a "lost generation." People weren't really lost, but they were confused about right and wrong.)

Since selling liquor was now a crime, gangsters took over that activity. People who sold liquor were called **bootleggers**. (Some of them stuck flasks inside high boots.) Ships running whisky from foreign suppliers to coastal ports were called **rumrunners**. Illegal

bars, where drinks were sold, were called **speakeasies**. (If people spoke loudly, and the police heard them, the bar would be raided. So they spoke "easy.")



people say we should make it illegal to buy drugs; then criminals could not earn big money selling drugs. Others say that would encourage people to use drugs. What do you think?

No one expected it, but Prohibition made crime a big business in the United States. Americans learned that some kinds of prohibition must be done by persuasion and education. Laws and force don't always work.

Another amendment was needed to get rid of the Prohibition amendment. The 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment was passed in December 1933. It ended what was a well-meaning experiment. The experiment had failed. But how do you get people to stop doing something that isn't good for them? Do the lessons of Prohibition apply to drugs? Some

**After the** Prohibition amendment was passed, Congress needed to provide for its enforcement. That was done with a law called the **Volstead Act**. Prohibition didn't make it illegal to drink, or even to buy liquor; it just made it illegal to sell it.



**This reading has three POLITICAL CARTOONS from the era of Prohibition. What do you think is the message of each of these cartoons?**