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| **Prohibition, 1927** | | |
|  | **T**he US soldiers returning from the war in Europe came home to an America much different from the one they left. Two Amendments had been added to the Constitution in their absence. The 18th Amendment, ratified in 1919, introduced the era of Prohibition by outlawing the manufacture, sale or transportation of alcohol. The 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920, enfranchised half of the population by giving women the vote. It was anticipated that the combination of these two legislative acts would transform America for the better: first by eradicating the deleterious effects of "Demon Rum" and secondly by bringing the calming influence of the woman’s perspective to national policy.  Alcohol had been a source of concern since the colonial era. The temperance movement gained strength following the Civil War with the rise of such organizations such as the Anti-Saloon League and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The saloons that dotted America’s neighborhoods were seen as the source of many of the nation’s social problems. Maladies such as crime, poverty, marital abuse and even low worker productivity could be purged by eliminating their source – the consumption of alcohol. The 18th Amendment was to be a "Noble Experiment" that would transform America for the better.  The great hopes that inspired the experiment soon turned to dissolution. Enforcement was next to impossible. Congress allocated a paltry $5 million for this purpose. Illicit "speakeasies" thrived. The nation's borders were a sieve through which foreign booze flowed. Home-grown stills proliferated. The manufacture, distribution and sale of liquor became a growth industry for under-world gangs in America's Al Capone – the head of Chicago's most notorious mob - became a millionaire. By the end of the decade, the nation had had enough of the experiment. This exasperation combined with the realization that taxes on legal alcohol would provide much needed revenue for state and national governments led to the ratification of the 21st Amendment in 1933 that rescinded the 18th Amendment. The "Noble Experiment" was dead.  **"I learned that not everything in America was what it seemed to be."**  *Count Felix von Luckner was a German naval war hero who visited the United States with his wife in 1927. He provides a visitor’s impression of Prohibition:*  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. |  |