



OCTOBER 2011 NEWSLETTER

What did we learn from Prohibition?

Ken Burns' recent documentary on PBS has rekindled discussion about the lessons from Prohibition. Often overlooked in these discussions is how severe the alcohol problem had become before Prohibition. According to Historian W.J. Rorabaugh, "For generations, Americans had been heavy drinkers, and by 1900 saloons were identified with political corruption, prostitution, gambling, crime, poverty and family destruction." Large national alcohol companies aggressively promoted alcohol sales through chains of saloons. Neighborhoods and town centers became saturated with competing saloons. Given the severity of the problem, something had to be done. The failure, it seems, was in selecting the wrong method for quelling the problem. It was too severe, too inflexible, and promised way too much. Here are some considerations for today's issues:

1. Don't count on a big idea to completely cure a major social problem.

Human beings only have so much control over any social problem. We aren't omnipotent and never will be. However, we can make a difference. After Prohibition, we learned that while prohibiting alcohol didn't work, controlling it did. We evolved an alcohol regulatory system that fostered moderate consumption. We did this by limiting alcohol outlets, limiting days and hours of sale, maintaining balanced prices, and by making lower alcohol content products readily available and higher alcohol content products more tightly controlled. Another

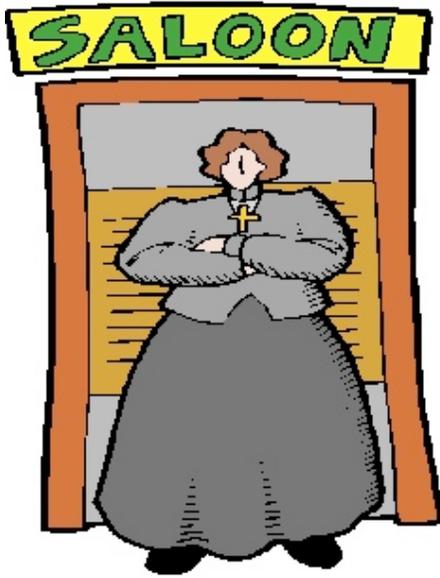
set of regulations separated the alcohol business into three tiers, i.e. manufacturer, distributor, and retailer. This produced a balanced and orderly market for local sales of alcohol.

Right after Prohibition, it was important to get pricing right. If it was too expensive, it would keep the bootleggers in business! If it was too cheap, it would encourage excess consumption. Today, we continue to work to keep our alcohol prices balanced. In fact, one commentator claims this is the key lesson from Prohibition: "...when a substance is legal, powerful business interests have an incentive to encourage use by keeping prices low. Heavier use, in turn, means heavier social costs." (See "Prohibition's real lessons for drug policy," by Kevin A. Sabet, L.A. Times, October 5, 2011)

2. A rigid federal law where "one size fits all" usually doesn't work well.

Once Prohibition started, it quickly became clear that it was a mistake. But, what could be done? It was in the Constitution and no Constitutional Amendment had ever been repealed! There was little flexibility and we were stuck with it for 13 years! A large organized crime element emerged that brought violence and lawlessness to our states. Laws are more effective if they work to engage local communities as partners to curtail local aspects of any problem. Alcohol problems cost communities dearly in terms of law enforcement, health and

treatment costs, lost productivity, etc. Our communities need some control over these issues.



3. The experience of Prohibition does NOT suggest that “prohibiting something never works.”

Quite the contrary. We prohibit murder, rape, robbery, and many other criminal acts. No one suggests these laws “don’t work.” In fact, Prohibition did eliminate many of the problems with the saloon system; and, there is evidence that liver disease and other problems declined. While some claim there was more drinking during Prohibition, no one really knows since it was illegal and there was no way to accurately calculate consumption. What we do know is that the law became highly unpopular and was widely disobeyed. The lesson is that our laws need to have public support to be effective. National surveys of Americans usually show a very high level of support for most alcohol regulations. (See May 2011 newsletter available at www.healthyalcoholmarket.com.)

Remember, Americans are at our best when we are practical and allow flexibility for local differences.

Our alcohol regulatory system is a series of practical concepts that have been fine-tuned over time. Our work is still not finished...nor will it likely ever be finished. We must continue to reduce alcohol related deaths on our highways and waterways. We must seek to lower the rates of addiction, alcohol related diseases, and alcohol poisonings. We must continue to find new ways to reduce underage drinking. And, finally, we must reject radical ideas like selling alcohol without regulation in a “free market” scenario.

For more information, see
www.healthyalcoholmarket.com

or

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