

Drinking alcohol has long been part of American culture, going as far back as the American Revolution and probably before that. There is a famous quote from Ben Franklin in which he states something to the effect that beer is the nectar of the Gods (whether or not it is true is debatable). What is curious is that for a period of time in the 20th century, the United States government outlawed drinking, a period which we call prohibition. As one might imagine, this did not gain the approval of many Americans, and this led to an illegal liquor trade, which, besides being notable for being illegal, was made famous (or infamous) by such high profile Americans as Alphonse Capone and many others involved with the Italian or Irish mafias.

While Al Capone and other mobsters provide the glamorous history of prohibition in America, it is in fact very normal people, citizens with regular and reputable jobs, which constituted much of the illegal liquor trade. This included shop keepers, school teachers, inn keepers, and often times, even the men who were charged with enforcing prohibition. Included in this group are many people either of foreign descent or recent immigrants from countries such as Ireland and Italy. Primary documents show that these people had a large, if not vital impact on the running of alcohol. Many of these are not one time deals, but recurring instances. Without the presence of these immigrants and people of ethnic descent, the illegal liquor trade would not have had the vitality it did.

Prohibition, like most laws passed in this country, did not come on suddenly. Much like the 19th amendment (Women's right to vote) for example, prohibition, which was enabled by the 18th amendment¹, was fought over for many years prior to its

¹ Norman H. Clark, *The Dry Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965): 142.

ratification, on January 16, 1919.² Leading up to the 18th Amendment were various “dry groups,” such as the Anti Saloon League and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.³ (WCTU) Groups such as these mounted propaganda campaigns to push their beliefs on the rest of the country. For example, the WCTU exploited the image of children, saying that they needed protecting.⁴ In effect, what propaganda techniques such as these did was play on the conscience and emotions of Americans, making them believe something that might not necessarily be true.

In 1919, just two years after the United States entered World War One (WW1) and just one year after the war had ended, Congress made it illegal for anyone in the military to serve or consume alcohol. The act was important for prohibitionists because it gave them proof not only that prohibition was viable, but also that if even servicemen could abstain from drinking then there was no question that everyone else could too. Also helping the cause for prohibition was the Food Control Bill of 1918, which “forbade the use of foodstuffs in the production of distilled liquors” so that no amount of grain could be used in food product except those needed for the war effort.⁵ An attempt to pass a general prohibition law was made in late 1918. Aptly nicknamed the bone-dry law, this attempt was met not with resistance but with disinterest, as the nation’s attention turned towards the deadly flu pandemic and war headlines.⁶

² Norman H. Clark, *The Dry Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965): 142.

³ Andrew Sinclair, *Prohibition: The Era Of Excess* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1962) 106.

⁴ Andrew Sinclair, *Prohibition: The Era Of Excess* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1962) 108

⁵ Norman H. Clark, *The Dry Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965) 140

⁶ Norman H. Clark, *The Dry Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965) 141

The debate over prohibition raged on into early 1919 and, when the 18th amendment was finally passed, it was a victory for those who had worked so hard to see it done. The Prohibition Act (as the 18th Amendment was called) turned out to be only a temporary setback for those who looked to profit off the sale of alcohol. It became clear very quickly that prohibition was not as popular with the people as had originally been hoped.

The liquor trade in and around Tacoma, Washington, involved many other citizens of foreign descent. The most prominent of these appeared to be an Italian man, Vito Luppino. In a July 13, 1931 Department of Prohibition memo about an interview with Luppino, various other people of Italian descent are mentioned⁷, which indicates that Italians were heavily involved in the illegal liquor trade in and around Tacoma. Another memo shows the history of Luppino's arrests for violating prohibition. According to the memo, Luppino was arrested five different times between 1922 and 1932 for the production and/or possession of alcohol (usually moonshine).⁸ Curiously, he was never fined more than \$1,500 and was still up for parole even after five different violations. This could possibly be because he cooperated with the authorities, as indicated in the aforementioned memo. Two other men who appeared more than once in these

⁷ National Archives, Arcweb,
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=30&tn=298449&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

⁸ National Archives, Arcweb
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=63&tn=298442&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

documents are Vito Cuttone and Mike Vandetti. Both Cuttone and Vandetti were involved in what was called simply the “Tacoma, WA” case.⁹ In this same document, Cuttone is implicated as the “pay off man.” It is explicitly stated that “he was paying Mayor Tennent \$1,000 per month as a protection for the liquor syndicate.”¹⁰ Another letter states that Cuttone “had been the ‘big shot’ in Tacoma for some time.”¹¹

In fact, the Italians appear to have been in sole control of the Tacoma case. They approached City officials, including Mayor Tennent, on numerous occasions. In one instance, Cuttone was even “directing the police department.”¹² The Italians were clearly very organized when it came to their illegal business. In some cases, it was even a family affair, as brothers and cousins were a part of the same syndicate.¹³

While it is clear that the Italians are the most prominent ethnicity involved in the Tacoma area liquor syndicate, they are by no means the only ethnicity involved. In many

⁹ National Archives, Arcweb
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<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=1&tn=0&nw=y&rn=0&nh=64&st=b&rp=digital>

¹⁰ National Archives, Arcweb “Memorandum for Mr. Avis.” 3
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=44&tn=298434&st=b&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

¹¹ National Archives, Arcweb, “Letter to Special Agent in Portland concerning whereabouts of Vito Cuttone.”
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=5&tn=298445&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

¹² National Archives, Arcweb, “History of the Tacoma Alcohol Seizure Case”
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=n&rn=5&nw=n&nh=40&st=a&rp=details&si=0>

¹³ National Archives, Arcweb, “History of the Tacoma Alcohol Seizure case”
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=n&rn=5&nw=n&nh=40&st=a&rp=details&si=0>

cases, those of English decent were involved.¹⁴ This is interesting because it is mostly Italians and Irish that are associated with the illegal liquor trade, yet most of the names on this list are not Italian and Irish. For example, one couple, by the name of Friedel, was arrested in the Portland area. Judging by the last name and the description of the woman (blond hair, blue eyes), this couple would appear to be of German descent.¹⁵ What is quite interesting is that some names appear multiple times on this list¹⁶, which indicates that many of these people owned more than one business so as to better hide their illegal activities. There are also occurrences of Hispanic, Asians and Jews being involved.

It seems as though most of these other ethnicities were not involved in the big time syndicates, but rather in business for themselves, or at the most involved only in connection with the Italians. The only major connection between any other ethnicity and the Italians, on an organizational level, was between the Jews and the Italians.

There is no evidence, however, of anyone besides the Italians being arrested for violating the 18th Amendment. This indicates that the Italians were followed more closely than other ethnics and had a higher profile. They were the men responsible for organizing the running of alcohol, not the ones responsible for actually running it. There is no indications that anyone other than the Italians and former city officials were indicted.

¹⁴ National Archives, Arcweb
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=1&tn=0&nw=y&rn=0&nh=64&st=b&rp=digital>

¹⁵ National Archives, Arcweb, "Memo Giving the History of the Case"
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=3&tn=298417&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

¹⁶ National Archives, Arcweb <
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=1&tn=0&nw=y&rn=0&nhx=64&st=b&rp=digital> |>

It is clear that the illegal liquor trade in this area was very ethnically hierarchical. The Italians organized the activities or were responsible for approaching authorities for protection. Under them were the English, Irish and Germans, who were responsible for much of the liquor production and then everyone else, who had a relatively small impact. This is important because it indicates that the system in the Northwest was not much different from the system back in the East in cities such as Chicago and New York. It was the Italians who originally organized the illegal liquor trade and it was the Italians who were in control of it in less prominent areas of the country.

The question now becomes, where were these alcohol syndicates, or rings, run from? Since the production, possession and consumption of alcohol was illegal, it is self-evident that a person wishing to do so could not do it out in the open. Therefore, it must have been done in relative secrecy, or at least in places they thought were secret. The same document from footnote 12 on the previous page shows that many chose to run their illegal business out of a hotel.¹⁷ This indicates that for the most part, persons involved in running liquor used legitimate businesses as fronts for their illegal businesses. This made it harder for the authorities to discover the illegal business, since having a legitimate business would raise no concern. Some documents show that raids were done on apartments¹⁸.

It is also important to know where this liquor came from. Was it distilled on site by those responsible for selling it, or did it come to the area from somewhere else? In at

¹⁷ National Archives, Arcweb
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail_summary.jsp?&tn=298436&nw=y&rn=54&nh=64&ni=0&st=b&rp=details&si=0

¹⁸ National Archives, Arcweb, "Memo regarding raid on Seattle Apartment"
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=3&tn=298479&st=b&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

least one instance, in a case that is described as the “largest and most important smuggling case” in the districts history, the liquor was smuggled into Oregon from a company based in British Columbia, Canada named Sterling Traders LTD¹⁹. The case report shows that the liquor was smuggled into Portland, Ore. and subsequently made its way to Tacoma and Seattle, WA. This is important because it means that liquor was produced only in this country. Liquor was also being shipped in from Cleveland, Ohio.²⁰ What these documents indicate is that rumrunners were willing to do whatever it took to obtain liquor, even if that meant smuggling it in from Canada or across state lines. There was a general attitude of dislike towards the 19th Amendment and many people knew they could make money off of the illegal liquor trade, since people are willing to pay more for something that is high in demand but low in supply (in this case because it was illegal).

There are many memos and letters regarding the illegal liquor trade in the Tacoma/Seattle area of both cases and arrests made. So how did this business continue on for such an extended period of time? There are two possible answers to this question.

First, as previously mentioned in the case against Vito Luppino, the punishments for violating the 18th Amendment, or National Prohibition Act (NPA), were not very harsh and, as is the case with Luppino, did not seem to carry much weight. What can be inferred from this evidence? It could be that authorities knew that the less severe the

¹⁹ National Archives, Arcweb, “Report concerning a conspiracy to smuggle whisky into Oregon from ships off the coast”
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=298420&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

²⁰ National Archives, Arcweb, “Letter to Special Agent in Portland concerning whereabouts of Vito Cuttone”
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=5&tn=298445&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

punishment (fines, in most cases) the more likely it would be that those convicted would continue in the liquor trade, only to be caught again, which would in turn continue to bring in money to the city. It also could be that some authorities were involved in the illegal liquor trade themselves. This is the second, and more likely answer.

The same smuggling conspiracy that brought liquor into Oregon from Canada involves a U.S. Attorney Neuner, who strongly advises that part of the reason for the success of the smuggling operation was the involvement of enforcement officials.²¹ The letter also states that liquor was being purchased by a suspended prohibition agent. Government and law enforcement officials would also accept money and bribes from rumrunners in exchange for protection. In some cases, the money paid was a rather large sum, such as the \$1,400 paid to city and county officials in the “Seattle Conspiracy.”²² In fact, Seattle even had a collection system set up, where one man would be responsible for collecting money, and he would in turn send the money on up the hierarchy of command²³

For the most part, it seems that most of the authorities involved were only local policemen and prohibition enforcement officers, although in some cases, officials who were higher up played an integral role. This is the case in Tacoma, where both the

²¹ National Archives, Arcweb, “Report concerning a conspiracy to smuggle whiskey into Oregon from ships of the coast”
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=3&rn=1&tn=298420&st=a&rp=details&nh=64&si=0

²² National Archives, Arcweb, “Report on the activities of the various members of the Seattle conspiracy”
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=n&rn=27&nw=n&nh=64&st=a&rp=details&si=0>

²³ National Archives, Arcweb, “Memo concerning the collection of protection money in King County and Seattle, WA”
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=7&rn=7&tn=298478&st=b&rp=details&nh=64

Commissioner of Public Safety and the Chief of Police were prominently involved in the illegal liquor trade.²⁴ Both these men were being paid for their protection as well as being involved in cover-ups. As mentioned before, even the mayor was involved. It is interesting to note that one man who was not persuaded to join the Tacoma syndicate was a former Assistant U.S. Attorney²⁵, which indicates that the higher up the authority, the less likely it was that he was corrupt.

Why did officials and authorities become involved in something they knew was explicitly illegal? The most reasonable answer is that they themselves were interested in gaining a profit from the business. The end of the prohibition era coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression, and authorities may have figured that they needed to make a dollar however they could. It is also likely, however, that most of these officials and authorities were corrupt and didn't like the NPA anyway.

What can be learned from this information? Firstly, it was clearly the Italians who had most of the control over the illegal liquor trade in the Seattle and Tacoma, Washington area. There were other ethnicities involved, but they were involved on a much smaller level, mostly in conjunction with the Italians or in some cases on their own. It is clear though that people of ethnic decent, not those who would be considered Americans, dominated the liquor trade.

Next, we find that the majority of the liquor came in from a company in Canada that was smuggling into Washington with the help of the Italians. This indicates that this

²⁴ National Archives, Arcweb, "History of the Tacoma Alcohol Seizure Case"
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=n&rn=5&nw=n&nh=40&st=a&rp=details&si=0>

²⁵ National Archives, Arcweb, "History of the Tacoma Alcohol Seizure Case"
<http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/servlet/arc.ControllerServlet?&pg=n&rn=5&nw=n&nh=40&st=a&rp=details&si=0>

was a major smuggling business, not a small time operation. Other than that, most of the liquor was made in private businesses and homes. Other ethnicities, not the Italians, were responsible for this.

Finally we have the impact of the authorities on the illegal liquor trade. As evidence shows, the protection of the authorities, at least on the city level, was crucial to the survival of the business. The Italians were again heavily involved in this area, as they facilitated the protection from authorities. Every level of local official was corruptible, from the lowest street constable to even the mayor of Tacoma. Without this protection, the illegal liquor trade would not have survived for the 13 years it did.

All in all, we can learn that, in the era of prohibition, people of ethnic descent were heavily involved in crime, but just as in popular history, it was the Italians who were most vital to the operation. Unlike today, when there seems to be no one particular ethnicity responsible for organized crime, the era of prohibition brought about the era of the Mafia on the national stage, but it is important to know that everyone was involved in violating the 18th amendment. We also learn that people are easily corrupted, especially when it comes to making a profit, and that people will go to any length to continue their illegal business. In the end, the variables of prohibition in the West were not so much different from those in the East, and the dry era in American history will go down as surprisingly uniform.