

PAGEANT

January, 1959

p. 124

REMEMBER

(HIC)

WHEN?



BY HOWARD COHN

Just 25 years ago the “Noble Experiment” fizzled and the U.S. welcomed back beer and whiskey

■ THE BLACK PACKARD limousine carrying a gray-haired society dowager downtown on Manhattan’s frenzied Seventh Avenue stopped for a red light at the corner of 50th Street. After a second’s hesitation, the front door opened and out stepped a smartly liveried chauffeur. He walked briskly into a restaurant and soon returned to the car holding two glasses filled with foaming amber liquid. Then, while traffic was held to a standstill, he and his matronly passenger calmly drained the glasses.

Not an angry horn was sounded during this strange interlude. There was a policeman standing at the intersection, but he merely smiled benevolently. For the scene occurred on an afternoon when even in temper-quick New York a traffic jam traceable to a pair of unlikely tipplers was not only tolerated—it was enjoyed.

The date was April 7, 1933. The occasion of the toast was the return of legal beer after more than 13 years of Prohibition.

Eight months later, on December 5, legal whiskey also emerged from padlocked vats and national Prohibition was finally dead.

These two joyous days, just 25 years ago, ended what Herbert Hoover once called “a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.”

In January, 1920, when the country became officially and theoretically arid, evangelist Billy Sunday had declared ecstatically: “The reign of tears is over. The slums will soon be only a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses and corncribs. Men

Remember When?

will walk upright now, women will smile, and the children will laugh. Hell will be forever for rent.”

But it didn't turn out that way. As Prohibition lingered, more and more millions drank anything they could get hold of, and they managed to get hold of plenty.



They swigged down cut whiskey and needled beer and flavored anti-freeze. They savored spirits made from re-distilled industrial alcohol and moonshine spiked with embalming fluid “to provide extra kick.” Druggists were flooded with forged prescriptions for medicinal liquor and, in the larger cities, Hebraic-looking men who had not seen the inside of a synagogue in years—some weren't even Jewish—suddenly became rabbis in order to have access to stocks of sacramental wines.

Billy McCoy, one of the leading smugglers of the period and coiner of the phrase, “It's the real McCoy,” even fancied himself a throwback to the persecuted heroes of the American Revolution, suggesting that John Hancock “might stand as the patron saint of rumrunners.”

There were daily deaths caused by poison alcohol and countless gang wars over exclusive rights to distribute illegal liquor, wine and beer in city wards and rural states. America's coastal waters echoed to the sound of dramatic sea chases as an outmanned and outsped Coast Guard lobbed shells at rumrunning flotillas and was shelled in return.

As a result of such violence many Americans began to think that Prohibition was worse than Hell, and the stage was set in 1933 for the epochal fight to make America legally wet again.

Marshaled against the dry forces were such damp armadas as Mrs. Charles H. Sabin's Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform; the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment, the Crusaders, the Moderation League and, most important of all, an incoming Democratic Administration led by Franklin Roosevelt which had campaigned on a platform of repeal.

National Prohibition finally ended in two stages because it legally consisted of two parts. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified by the states in 1919 and effective January 16, 1920, barred the manufacture, sale, import and export of intoxicating liquors. The Volstead Act, passed by Congress in October, 1919, defined an intoxicating beverage as anything containing more than a half of one per cent alcohol.

In mid-February, 1933, Congress voted to submit a repeal amendment to the states for consideration. Thirty-six would have to approve this proposed 21st Amendment be-

Remember When?

fore legal whiskey could come back—still subject to local option—and national Prohibition actually would be null and void. But in March, after much angry wrangling, debate and loud cries from the dries of dishonorable tactics, Congress modified the Volstead Act to permit the manufacture and sale of 3.2 beer.

The new law went into effect on April 7 in an atmosphere as frenzied, joyous and hysterical as if a great war had ended. “Real Beer Is Back,” bannered papers across the country, and the frisky *Washington Daily News* headlined the event in German: “Es Gibt Kein Kopfweh” (it gives no headache).

Just four minutes after midnight, a truck from the Abner Drury Brewery in the nation’s capital pulled up at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Plastered on the side of the truck was a sign that read: “President Roosevelt, the first beer is yours.” A large crowd that had assembled despite a light rain sang “Happy Days Are Here Again” as two cases were carried into the White House.

A Chicago brewery hired an Indianapolis Speedway winner to pilot the truck that would make its first deliveries. In deliriously happy Milwaukee, there were ceremonies with oom-pah-pahing German bands, special editions of the newspapers, endless toasts of gratitude to Mr. Roosevelt, and 15,000 free bottles of beer distributed by Pabst, Schlitz, Miller and other local breweries.

New York featured New Beer’s Eve parties and the Elite Headwaiter’s Association held a funeral for the old non-alcoholic “near” beer, emptying a barrel into a sewer on Broadway.

AS DAWN ROSE on April 7, the Mardi Gras-like excitement and happy delirium that swept the nation reached new bounds. Drug stores and soft drink stands were serving beer and getting more orders for it at breakfast time than for coffee. Huge crowds gathered around the busy breweries embracing kegs and leather-aproned beer-makers indiscriminately.

“I can hardly believe it’s true after all these years,” said Colonel Jacob Ruppert with tears in his eyes as he watched the barrels being filled in his New York brewery. At Baltimore’s Rennert Hotel, famed iconoclast H. L. Mencken sampled a glass of the new brew hesitantly, then drained it dry with a few great gulps. “Pretty good,” he said. “Not bad at all. Fill it again.”

Milk trucks finally had to be recruited by breweries to help with deliveries. By mid-afternoon, the few grocery stores which still had beer left were limiting sales to two bottles per customer. In all, a thirsty, hilarious nation consumed over a million barrels of beer on the first day of legal 3.2, causing a shortage that took months to overcome.

While there were a few gripers who harkened back to the “good old days” as they guzzled, muttering that the new brew “tasted a little young and could use more alcohol,” the only serious grumbling about the

Remember When?

great beer spree came from the defeated dry forces and some strange allies: the speakeasy owners.

Said one glum saloon-keeper: "I'm not going to throw my doors open. I want to keep the decent trade I've had through Prohibition. This riffraff would drive them away."

He was joined in spirit, if not in spirits, by a leading Anti-Saloon League spokesman who proclaimed: "The wets in their mad, hysterical demand for beer have assured the retention of the Prohibition amendment against whiskey and wine."

Actually, public enthusiasm over beer speeded the introduction of legal whiskey and wine. Not only were beer drinkers voters, but a depression-conscious nation—saddled with more than 10,000,000 unemployed—needed the economic boost of reopening the beer, wine and whiskey business.

Within three months, beer was exceeded only by tobacco and the income tax as a producer of Federal tax revenue. And when the breweries alone hired some 50,000 new employees, a gratifying chain reaction hit other industries.

The National Biscuit Company, for example, put two plants on 24-hour schedules to meet the demand for pretzels (and the "Baker's Weekly" was swamped with letters from would-be businessmen asking where pretzel-making machinery could be bought). There was a boom in the lumber business (bar paneling), glass business (beer mugs, glasses and bar mirrors), and clothing business (barkeep uniforms and aprons).

There was a surge in the truck industry as brewers ordered \$12,000,000 worth, and along advertising row as the beer firms scheduled more than \$15,000,000 in ads to promote their respective brews. General Motors' Frigidaire division, which had been on a three-day week, went up to six in order to turn out enough equipment for cooling draught beer and, for the production of larger home refrigerators for storing the bottled variety.

AS A RESULT of this economic bonanza plus increasing pressure from wet groups, state convention after state convention began ratifying the repeal amendment, starting with Michigan on April 10.

At 3:22 in the afternoon, Mountain Time, on December 5, Utah became the 36th state to ratify repeal.

Somewhat to the surprise and chagrin of the dry forces, the festivities immediately following the announcement of total repeal were calm and orderly on the whole compared to the hilarity which had greeted the return of beer. This was partly because Utah's decision was well known in advance, but mostly, perhaps, because the climactic vote came too late for the newly licensed stores and bars over most of the country to get supplies.

Bootleggers and speakeasies rushed to the rescue for the last time, cutting prices from 20 to 60 per cent to get rid of their discredited stock: rot-gut hooch that belonged to the

Remember When?

defunct days of Prohibition.

The legal celebrations that were held on the first night of repeal were mostly in keeping with the wet organizations' desire to show that this was an historic moment far more important for the freedom of choice it restored to the public.

But there was gaiety, nevertheless, in New Orleans, where cannons were shot off, whistles blown and city-wide parades held to greet repeal. Boston bars, permitted by lenient local authorities to stock up with legal booze into the night, were so packed by ten o'clock that a late-comer was lucky to get inside the doors, much less get a drink.

An American Legion Post in Freeport, Long Island, assembled a firing squad and executed a dummy of Old Man Prohibition. And the flashing electric sign above Billy Minsky's burlesque house on New York's 42nd Street spelled out the words: "WE'LL TAKE GIN." Across town at the more fashionable Waldorf-Astoria hotel, the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment held a victory banquet, complete with wine courses, and made plans to disband, its long and memorable mission accomplished.

The next day there were long lines of 100 and more people in front of liquor stores from early morning until closing, and a fleet of ocean liners docked in New York harbor heavily weighted with cargoes of real Scotch and other almost forgotten imports.

While most of the nation celebrated, the defeated dries were joined in their sorrow by thousands of bootleggers and speakeasy owners who suddenly found themselves without customers. Some of the more celebrated speakeasies—like Jack and Charlie's 21 and the Stork Club in New York—were permitted to turn legitimate and quickly displayed spanking new bar licenses, but far more typical was the case of one bootlegger in Annapolis, Md.

For years he had been supplying Maryland's legislators with the best illegal whiskey obtainable. But no sooner did Prohibition die than he was formally notified to discontinue his trade. To make matters worse, the eviction notice was handed him by an old friend—a policeman regularly stationed in the State House.

A full quarter-century has now passed since those strange and hectic days that ended national Prohibition. Only Mississippi and Oklahoma of the few adamant dry states at the close of 1933 have refused to dampen their laws. Everywhere else the long dry era and the great joy which marked its close are just vivid and picturesque memories. But if Prohibition was an arid nightmare to most Americans, it was also a great moral crusade for many others who still can't quite understand how it was rained out so suddenly. ■■