SUMMARY

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BOURBON EMPIRIE

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Summary of Bourbon Empire by Reid Mitenbuler

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Learn about the history and development of whiskey.

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Introduction

Imagine a world where you couldn't drink alcohol. Where bars are nonexistent. Where you cannot walk into a restaurant or a corner job and order so much as a glass of wine or a pint of beer. For many people, this sounds like a dystopian horror story! But during the Prohibition Era, this was a horrifying reality for every citizen of the United States.

Many people are familiar with the Prohibition Era, but you might not know about the important role that whiskey played during this dark time in American history. In fact, you might be surprised to know that whiskey has had a powerful impact on the American mafia, the American family, and the United States' economy. Over the course of this summary, we'll learn why whiskey is loved by some and hated by others, and how these stark contrasts in opinion changed the course of American history.

Whiskey is Quintessentially American

“I love my hometown as much as Motown, I love SoCal. And you know I love Springsteen, faded blue jeans, Tennessee whiskey.”

“Now everything after you is like having wine after whiskey. Once you've tasted a love that strong, you can't go back and you can't settle on anything less, and that's what gets me: it's like having wine after whiskey.”

“Right now, he's probably slow dancin' with a bleached-blond tramp and she's probably getting frisky. Right now, he's probably buying' her some fruity little drink 'cause she can't shoot whiskey.”

Do you know where these quotes are from? If you identified them as popular songs by American country music artists Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood, you’re right! As these lyrics clearly indicate, whiskey is such an integral part of the American cultural experience that it has been immortalized in very popular songs. And these lyrics are only a very small sampling of the songs that celebrate American whiskey! But although these songs are very popular today, the American love affair with whiskey did not start in the 2000s. In fact, the history of whiskey goes all the way back to the seventeenth century! Whiskey first became popular when Americans were attempting to stake their claim on their new home in the colonies. Originally, it was the preferred drink of frontier soldiers: desperate men who were exhausted from a long day of battle and who just wanted to get drunk fast. They didn’t care that it was made from corn and they didn’t care that it tasted like gasoline; they were simply content to guzzle the stuff and drown their sorrows.

And it wasn’t long before soldiers began to develop an emotional connection to whiskey. The foul-tasting stuff that got many men through dark and violent days soon became a popular drink. And as the demand for whiskey grew, people began to experiment with new ways of brewing it. These early experiments are part of the reason why store shelves are stocked with a wide variety of whiskey brands today! But as you’ll see in the following chapters,

the whiskey industry quickly became competitive and there was a big push to drive small, family-owned whiskey stills out of business. In fact, this war on whiskey was waged long before the prohibition era!

The War on Whiskey

Did you know that George Washington had his own whiskey still? Many people who idolize America's founding fathers are non-drinkers and they like to assume that their heroes were teetotalers as well. But the reality is that George Washington had his very own home whiskey still which produced over 11,000 gallons every year! Thomas Jefferson was also a big fan of whiskey and he had a home still of his own too. But if you're surprised to learn that George Washington was a whiskey man, you might be especially shocked to learn that he was a proud supporter of the big whiskey stills that aimed to drive the smaller ones out of business.

Today's Washington historians at the Mount Vernon Library explained the conflict in the following manner, writing that: in January 1791, President George Washington's Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton proposed a seemingly innocuous excise tax "upon spirits distilled within the United States, and for appropriating the same."1 What Congress failed to predict was the vehement rejection of this tax by Americans living on the frontier of Western Pennsylvania. By 1794, the Whiskey Rebellion threatened the stability of the nascent United States and forced President Washington to personally lead the United States militia westward to stop the rebels.

By 1791, the United States suffered from significant debt incurred during the Revolutionary War. Secretary Hamilton, a Federalist supporting increased federal authority, intended to use the excise tax to lessen this financial burden. Despite resistance from Anti-Federalists like Thomas Jefferson, Congress passed the legislation. When news of the tax spread to Western Pennsylvania, individuals immediately voiced their displeasure by refusing to pay the tax. Residents viewed this tax as yet another instance of unfair policies dictated by the eastern elite that negatively affected American citizens on the frontier.

Western farmers felt the tax was an abuse of federal authority wrongly targeting a demographic that relied on crops such as corn, rye, and grain to earn a profit. However, shipping this harvest east was dangerous because of poor storage and dangerous roads. As a result, farmers frequently distilled their grain into liquor which was easier to ship and preserve. While large-scale farmers easily incurred the financial strain of an additional tax, indigent farmers were less able to do so without falling into dire financial straits.

President Washington sought to resolve this dispute peacefully. In 1792, he issued a national proclamation admonishing westerners for their resistance to the "operation of the laws of the United States for raising revenue upon spirits distilled within the same."2 However, by 1794 the protests became violent. In July, nearly 400 whiskey rebels near Pittsburgh set fire to the home of John Neville, the regional tax collection supervisor. Left with little recourse and at the urgings of Secretary Hamilton, Washington organized a militia force of 12,950 men and led them towards Western Pennsylvania, warning locals "not to abet, aid, or comfort the Insurgents aforesaid, as they will answer the contrary at their peril."

The calling of the militia had the desired effect of essentially ending the Whiskey Rebellion. By the time the militia reached Pittsburgh, the rebels had dispersed and could not be found. The militia apprehended approximately 150 men and tried them for treason. A paucity of evidence and the inability to obtain witnesses hampered the trials. Two men, John Mitchell and Philip Weigel, were found guilty of treason, though both were pardoned by President Washington. By 1802, then President Thomas Jefferson repealed the excise tax on whiskey. Under the eye of President Washington, the nascent United States survived the first true challenge to federal authority."

Although this sounds like a victory for Washington, the painful reality is that he was unaffected by the real damage that occurred as a result of this incident. In fact, the Whiskey Rebellion had a devastating impact on small whiskey producers. They tried to recover, but these efforts were also squashed by the newfound power of the bigger distilleries. Big companies

quickly dominated the whiskey industry and the small, family-run distilleries soon saw that they never really had a chance.

The Prohibition Era

Although the big distilleries appeared to be winning, it wasn't long before every member of the whiskey industry experienced devastating losses. No sooner had the big stills gained power than the Prohibition Era hit and shut everything down. Because the Prohibition Era was a dramatic time for the American mafia, the United States' Mob Museum of Nevada has an entire subsection devoted to the Prohibition Era and its culture. The museum explains the evolution of prohibition culture with this article which asserts that:

"The new "temperance movement" galvanized religious denominations from Protestant to Catholic who viewed drinking as sinful. Maine became the first state to ban alcohol in 1851, setting off a national prohibition trend. Oregon, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Vermont went dry the next year and seven other states and one territory had prohibited alcohol by 1855. What was dubbed the "Women's War" against alcohol grew into a near-revolution and served as the country's first peaceful protest movement that would influence generations worldwide. These women, blaming domestic violence and financial problems in the home on drinking, sought to disgrace men and close the many male-only saloons, or "dram-shops," breweries and distilleries through confrontations, picketing and sit-in protests.

In 1873 in Hillsboro, Ohio, Eliza "Mother" Thompson, inspired by Dr. Dioclesian Lewis, who delivered anti-liquor sermons inside saloons, got groups of hymn-singing women to enter stores and saloons, successfully urging many owners to stop selling booze. The campaign quickly caught fire. Temperance advocates halted alcohol sales in parts of the Midwest and West. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), a protest and lobbying organization started in 1874, was headed by Francis Willard, who spoke of a national ban on alcohol. Their efforts would also promote women's suffrage. But their political successes were stunted because of lobbying by the monied liquor companies, which even blocked efforts to extend voting rights for women to prevent them from voting in favor of prohibition.

A larger shift in the path toward Prohibition came in 1893 with the founding of the Anti-Saloon League, a prohibitionist group that involved fewer women and was headed by a man, Wayne Wheeler, who proved to be a shrewd, ruthless political tactician. The league debuted during a period known as the Progressive Era that produced reforms in civil rights, labor, conservation, industry and political corruption. Wheeler seized on the anti-immigrant sentiment of the age, inducing fear among mainly rural white Americans that the drinking cultures of new arrivals from Europe in urban areas were weakening the nation's moral fiber. He first succeeded in getting "dry" legislators elected in Ohio. By 1908, more than 50 counties in Ohio opted to ban alcohol. Wheeler realized national prohibition was within his grasp.

Many city residents in America resented the scores of saloons in their communities that enticed working men to squander their money on booze and other vices. But for the national prohibitionists, the major tipping point in their dry campaign was World War I. After America declared war on Germany in April 1917, Wheeler and his alliance of women's temperance bands such as the WCTU and Protestant church groups set their sights on a constitutional amendment banning most alcohol. Wheeler and crew made for a powerful national political force in the states, exploiting patriotism, resentment against German-American beer makers, and to protect U.S. troops from the temptations of liquor and saloons. Their first big triumph was convincing Congress to approve Wartime Prohibition, a ban on alcohol for the duration of the war. With the momentum on their side, dry activists proposed a prohibition amendment to Congress with plans to lobby the state legislatures to approve its passage.

As American soldiers died on the battlefields of Europe, the U.S. Senate on August 19, 1917, voted 65-20 in favor of the proposed 18th Amendment. The House of Representatives followed with a favorable vote of 282-128 on December 18, 1917. Mississippi's legislature, on January 18, 1918, was the first of the 36 states (two-thirds of the 48 states) required to ratify it for inclusion in the Constitution. America's war dead had climbed toward 100,000 by the time voters went to the polls on November 5, 1918, for a midterm election for local, state and national candidates.

The armistice ending World War I was signed on November 11, 1918. With the war over and nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment in the air, the prohibitionists rode the momentum. Weeks later, on January 16, 1919, the 18th Amendment became law after the 36th state legislature, Utah, ratified it. The amendment was to take effect exactly one year later. But first, Congress had to pass a federal statute to implement the 18th Amendment with a legal process for banning the sales, distribution and transportation of alcohol of no more than 0.5 percent alcohol content and a bureau of federal agents to enforce it. The powerful Wheeler drafted the entire law, the National Prohibition Act. The law would be better known as the Volstead Act, named after Representative Andrew Volstead, a Minnesota Republican and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, who led the effort to pass it. Congress approved the Volstead Act that July. The act withstood President Wilson's opposition when lawmakers overrode his veto in October.

The nation's new law prohibiting alcohol commenced as mandated on January 17, 1920. Violations could mean fines of up to $1,000 and months behind bars. America's calamitous, 13-year Prohibition Era had begun."

What the Prohibition Era Meant for Whiskey

As everybody knows, human nature is inherently rebellious. The moment you tell someone not to walk on the grass, there's a pretty strong chance that walking on the grass is now the only thing they want to do. So, it's unsurprising that the advent of the Prohibition Era created a brand new world of clandestine whiskey stills. The term "bootlegger" originated during this time to describe the brewers who illegally made and distributed the "bootleg whiskey" that became popular during this time. Known as "bathtub gin," the whiskey that was brewed during Prohibition was almost undrinkable. But that didn't stop America's whiskey drinkers! It was also primarily brewed by mobsters who recognized that they could make a lot of money by seizing control of the booming underground whiskey trade.

Secret socials known as "speakeasies" began to pop up everywhere; these underground gatherings were popular because they provided a safe space for people to consume alcohol and socialize with their friends as they had previously enjoyed doing. They became known as "speakeasies" because the gatherings were password protected and you had to whisper the password very softly in order to avoid being heard by the police.

Bartenders who worked at the speakeasies were faced with a very difficult task due to the poor quality of the alcohol. Because the "bathtub gin" tasted so terrible, bartenders would often mix whiskey with soda, fruit juice, and other flavors to make it drinkable! Unfortunately, however, this illegal whiskey didn't just taste bad; it was also dangerous. Because many people lacked the correct supplies to make whiskey, they often ended up distilling a dangerous concoction that led many people to their deaths. By 1925, alcohol-related deaths were at record highs, despite the efforts of Prohibitionists.

Prohibition finally relinquished its grip on the nation in 1933. As the protests against prohibition intensified and the alcohol-related deaths skyrocketed, legislators finally recognized that they were supporting an enforceable policy. The fact that people continued to die from alcohol poisoning clearly indicated that, despite the legislators' best efforts, people could still get their

hands on alcohol. And if people could still drink during the age of temperance, they figured that their efforts weren't doing much good. So, eventually, after thirteen long, dry years, people were finally free to enjoy alcohol again. The whiskey industry had taken a lot of hits during these years and it was a long time before distilleries were able to recover. But even as the (legal) whiskey industry struggled to regain a foothold in America, one thing was clear to everyone: America's passion for whiskey was never going away.

Final Summary

Many people enjoy a nice glass of whiskey, but not everyone is familiar with the long and complex history of their favorite beverage. As the history of whiskey shows, this popular tipple is quintessentially American; it has captured the hearts and imaginations of Americans for centuries. Although the whiskey industry has been beset by many tribulations that threatened to put it out of business, this drink has thrived in secret and in celebration until it evolved to become the beverage that characterized the spirit of a nation.