

HISTORY

FIRST DRAFT

“The overthrow of the open saloon in this country is one of the greatest events in ancient or modern history.”

THE DAILY SENTINEL, JAN. 16, 1920, WHEN PROHIBITION TOOK EFFECT NATIONWIDE

“We know of nothing that has developed such hypocrisy as the Prohibition era.”

THE DAILY SENTINEL, DEC. 6, 1933, THE DAY AFTER PROHIBITION WAS REPEALED

Grand Junction embraced Prohibition, then grudgingly rejected it



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Ninety-eight years ago this month, Colorado was at the forefront of a great social experiment regarding the private activities and transactions of its citizens. In January 1916, Colorado became one of the earliest states to prohibit the sale and transportation of alcohol, four years before the nation as a whole formally adopted Prohibition. Because Colorado is now on the front lines of another significant social experiment — legalizing marijuana — it seems worthwhile to review some of the history of that earlier experiment.

Prohibition was achieved only after decades of activism by groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Prohibition Party. Grand Junction actually went partially dry in 1909, when a new city council refused to approve liquor licenses for saloons.

By the time it was fully enacted, large swaths of the citizenry had bought into the expected benefits of Prohibition. Here's part of an editorial from The Daily Sentinel on Dec. 31, 1915, the day before Colorado's prohibition law took effect. It was headlined, “We Hope It's Goodbye Forever.”

“The passing of the old year witnesses the passing of the saloon in Colorado and also the passing of many undesirable features of club life and social life. The Sentinel has no tears to shed over the passing of the liquor traffic in Colorado.”

Four years later, when Prohibition took effect nationwide on Jan. 16, 1920, the Sentinel was even more enthusiastic.

“The overthrow of the open saloon in this country is one of the greatest events in ancient or modern history.” Additionally, the Sentinel, like many Prohibition supporters across the nation, saw a diminishing crime rate and reduced jail populations as inevitable consequences of the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act that provided the legal framework for Prohibition. Because of those benefits, the Sentinel editorial said, neither the nation nor Colorado was likely to ever overturn Prohibition.

“In Colorado, which until ten years ago, was the wettest of wet states, the change was almost miraculous, but the voters of Colorado would never think of changing front on this question. Every mining camp furnishes an illustration of the benefits of the banishment of



Saloon patrons enjoy one last legal drink just before Prohibition was implemented.

the saloon.”

But, of course, Coloradans and Americans everywhere did change their minds on Prohibition. Colorado ratified the 21st Amendment, repealing Prohibition, on Sept. 26, 1933. Prohibition officially ended on Dec. 5 of that year, when Ohio, Pennsylvania and Utah became the final states to ratify the amendment.

That was nearly 17 years after Colorado banned alcohol. But the seeds of the problems that would lead to the repeal of Prohibition were visible in some of the news stories the Sentinel reported within a few weeks of the statewide alcohol ban.

For example, an article on Jan. 18, 1916, told of multiple arrests in Mesa County of alleged bootleggers, includ-

ing the owner of the Stamford Hotel, Mrs. Mabel Dorsey, who was also accused of running “a house of ill repute.”

That same day, police also raided the operations of another man, Will Miller, who reportedly did business in the alley between Third and Fourth Streets near Pitkin Avenue. Miller fled to Delta with all of his liquor, but authorities telephoned ahead and he was arrested when he arrived there.

There would be many more such incidents in Mesa County and across the Western Slope in coming years.

For instance, in Telluride in 1917, five men were charged and prosecuted for bootlegging by District Attorney William Weiser of Grand Junction, according to a 2006 article in Telluride magazine by Paul

O'Rourke.

“Considerable testimony was submitted to substantiate the charges, but the trial went badly for District Attorney Weiser,” O'Rourke wrote. “A jury made up of Telluride citizens would not convict their own, especially when it was learned that the evidence against the men was supplied by a paid informant from Grand Junction.”

Even here, in long-dry Grand Junction, there developed a winking attitude to those who violated the Volstead Act.

In December 1928, the Sentinel's Al Look wrote, “City jail prisoners are to be put to work on the streets. There is nothing like hard work to make a bootlegger pay his fine and do his time and then get back to his business.” That's according to



Posters such as this one helped drive the effort to enact Prohibition in Colorado and around the country.

the 2012 book, “Wicked Western Slope,” by Grand Junction author D.A. Brockett.

Prohibition would create far worse problems in other parts of the country. Gangsters such as Al Capone would become wealthy and famous for their trade in illegal alcohol, and would have money to buy off cops, judges and elected officials. Transporting illegal liquor from Canada and Mexico became a lucrative business, as was making moonshine.

By the end of the 1920s, most of the nation was thoroughly sick of Prohibition and the unanticipated crime spree it created. Efforts began to repeal Prohibition and were supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected president in 1932. By the end of the following year, Prohibition had been repealed and states were authorized to allow the

sale and consumption of

alcohol once more.

By then, the editors of The Daily Sentinel had grudgingly come to realize the problems with Prohibition.

“We know of nothing that has developed such hypocrisy as the Prohibition era,” the Sentinel wrote the day after the 18th Amendment was repealed. “Now, it will no longer be necessary for some of our prominent citizens to lead double lives, addressing W.C.T.U. meetings by day and ‘partying’ by night. It will no longer be necessary for a politician to vote dry as he drinks wet ... No matter how many laws are written by the state or federal government, the matter of temperance lies wholly in the hands of the individual.”



Federal agents empty illegal barrels of beer after Prohibition was enacted.

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