

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
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“We have a dry nation today,” said the local newspaper 100 years ago. The long-anticipated nationwide prohibition of alcohol had just become law.

Prohibition went into effect in January of 1920. This new law stated that, “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof, for beverage purposes, is hereby prohibited.”

What qualified as “intoxicating liquor”? The Volstead Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in October of 1919, defined it as a beverage with one-half of one percent of alcohol by volume.

By the time Prohibition went into effect nationwide, many cities, villages, and towns in Vernon County had already had years of experience going wet and then dry and then wet again, based on changing local laws. When a village went dry (pre- or post-Prohibition), saloons often went out into the townships, and when those townships went dry, the saloons moved back into the villages, which by then were wet again.

Drinking establishments also moved from one city or village to another, closing down in Viroqua when it went dry only to move to Westby, or Chaseburg, or De Soto, and then back to Viroqua when the city was again declared wet. If a tavern’s owners didn’t want to move, another option was to convert the place into a restaurant – temporarily, of course.

Immigration. Protecting women and children. Legislating morality. Protestants versus Catholics. Helping the poor. Women’s suffrage. These were also current topics a century ago, and they were all part of the debate over the national prohibition of alcohol.

Drinking was an important part of life for some immigrant cultures, including the German, Irish, and Bohemian cultures found in Vernon County. Prohibition was a way to hurt these immigrant communities during the rising anti-immigrant sentiment of the 1920’s in the U.S. Many of the recent immigrants were also Catholic, and the new law was seen as a backlash against Catholics.

Prohibition was a driving force behind the movement for women’s suffrage, as a significant number of women wanted the ban on alcohol, and getting the vote meant they could vote for that ban. Alcoholism was perceived as a problem of male laborers, and the hope was that prohibition would ensure that a poor man’s wages helped support his wife and children rather than being spent on alcohol.

Prohibition in the U.S. lasted throughout the 1920’s and into the 1930’s, although additional laws passed during that time moderated the original ban. We’ll continue to explore this topic and its effect on local life in future columns.