

Chapter Four

Roaring Twenties and Prohibition Era

Before we launch into stories of our parents growing up on the east coast, let's take a look at the social and political environment. During the "Roaring 20s" (1920 to 1929) and during most of the Prohibition Era (1920 to 1933) Herb Lentz and Louise Stenquist were both in their childhood, between the ages of three and twelve. Herb was in Lake Huntington, and Louise was in Worcester. Whatever effects these cultural and political events had on their lives probably would have been manifest mainly through whatever their parents were doing at the time.

For Herb, this era began with his return to Lake Huntington, and to his stepmother Mae Mahoney, when he was about four. We should point out that in one of his letters he explained he did not know that she was not his real mother until he was about ten years old. Herb's father had a successful business in his Drug Store on the shore of the resort lake, and he was quite involved in local civic affairs. This decade for the Lentz family in Lake Huntington saw the birth of two sons, Howard (1922) and Robert (1924), and their oldest son Bernard completing high school and eventually finding his way to Cuba.

The close of that period coincided with a big event in Herb's life when he was only 11 years old. In one of his letters he reminisced "That January [1929] I was all excited over the prospect of graduating from public school [6th grade], which I did, and for the remainder of that term my presence at school was optional." Later that same year he started attending an ungraded secondary school in Narrowsberg, ten miles from Lake Huntington.

For our mother and her brother Bob, this era began (1920) while the Stenquist family was in Worcester. Louise was three; Bob was five. They must have enjoyed good times, because their father was a successful white-collar worker in the steel industry, and their mother was an accomplished musician. That happy childhood would come to an abrupt end in 1928 with their parents' separation and their mother leaving them for a place called Halcyon out west in California. Then at the start of 1929, when Louise was still only eleven and Bob was 13, they travelled across the country from Worcester to Oceano, California to join their mother in Halcyon.

The Roaring Twenties

The Roaring Twenties was a period of economic prosperity during the 1920s in Western societies and cultures.

This period saw the large-scale development and use of automobiles, telephones, movies, radio, and electrical appliances being installed in the lives of thousands of Westerners.

New technologies, especially automobiles, moving pictures, and radio, brought "modernity" to a large part of the population. At the same time, jazz and dancing rose in popularity, in opposition to the mood of World War I. As such, the period often is referred to as the Jazz Age.

Several films depict life during the Roaring 20s, and I encourage readers and family members to watch one or two of these films, to become better acquainted with this era. One might get a glimpse of what life was like for our parents when they were children.

Major Films Set During the Roaring Twenties

The Great Gatsby (2013) with Leonardo DiCaprio

Bugsy Malone (1976) a "tweenage" mobster musical with Jodie Foster

Some Like It Hot (1959) with Marilyn Monroe

The Roaring Twenties (1939) with James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart

Pandora's Box (1929) with Louise Brooks

Speedy (1928) a comedy by Harold Lloyd

Piccadilly (1929) by E.A. Dupont

The Idle Class (1921) with Charlie Chaplin

Prohibition Era

The beginning of the Prohibition Era coincided with the beginning of the Roaring Twenties with ratification of the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution on January 17, 1920. The law finally was repealed by ratification of the 21st Amendment on December 5, 1933.

In December 1917, the 18th Amendment, prohibiting the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors for beverage purposes,” was passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

Congress passed the Volstead Act on October 28, 1919, over President Woodrow Wilson’s veto. The Volstead Act provided for the enforcement of Prohibition, including the creation of a special Prohibition unit of the Treasury Department. In its first six months, the unit destroyed thousands of illicit stills run by bootleggers. However, federal agents and police did little more than slow the flow of booze, and organized crime flourished in America. Large-scale bootleggers like Al Capone of Chicago built criminal empires out of illegal distribution efforts, and federal and state governments lost billions in tax revenue. In most urban areas, the individual consumption of alcohol was largely tolerated and drinkers gathered at “speakeasies,” the Prohibition-era term for saloons.

Source: Wikipedia

Herb lived at Lake Huntington throughout the era of prohibition. He actually told us an interesting story about his father's drug store during this time (in Chapter 5). The end of prohibition coincided roughly with Herb's graduation from high school in 1933 and his move to New York City to live with his stepmother's family.

By the time Prohibition ended Bob and Louise had been living in Halcyon for about five years. Uncle Bob graduated from Arroyo Grande High School the same year that the 21st Amendment was ratified. Louise was a junior in high school. Our Uncle Bernard would have been living in Halcyon for three years by that time.

Why Americans Supported Prohibition

The following is from the article “Why Americans Supported Prohibition 100 Years Ago” by Mark Lawrence Shroud, published online January 17, 2020.

Temperance crusaders weren’t crackpots. They were fighting the business of making money off addiction.

On January 17, 1920 the 18th Amendment came into effect, outlawing the production, importation and sale of alcoholic beverages.

The United States had already been “dry” for the previous half-year thanks to the Wartime Prohibition Act. And even before that, 32 of the 48 states had already enacted their own statewide prohibitions.

The entire idea of prohibition seems so hostile to Americans’ contemporary sensibilities of personal freedom that we struggle to comprehend how our ancestors could have possibly supported it.

For decades now, popular histories have concocted false stories that the majority of the public had never supported prohibition, or that prohibition was conceived by a “radical fringe” of Bible-thumping, rural evangelicals trying to codify their Puritan morality. But this portrayal of prohibition as some reactionary, cultural-religious movement is largely inaccurate.

Temperance was the longest-running, most widely supported social movement in both American and global history. Its foe wasn’t the drink in the bottle or the drunk who drank it, but the drink traffic: powerful business interests — protected by a government reliant on liquor taxes — getting men addicted to booze, and then profiting handsomely by bleeding them and their families dry.

In the 19th century, saloonkeepers across the United States and around the world were seen as parasites on the local community. Since fleecing customers was often illegal, the saloonkeeper’s profits paid kickbacks to the police, judges and mayor.

This is why neither the 18th Amendment nor state-level prohibitions ever outlawed drinking alcohol, but instead focused on its sale. It wasn’t taking a drink every now and then that got reformers’ hackles up; it was the idea of the rich getting richer by making the poor poorer through addiction.

And the fact that Prohibition largely failed at the national level, and was later repealed, doesn't mean that its proponents were crackpots or radicals.

Think instead about a major industry making outlandish profits by getting people hooked on an addictive substance that could kill them. Maybe that industry uses some of those profits to buy corrupt political cover by currying favor with government and oversight bodies. Let's call this substance "opioids," and the industry, "Big Pharma."

This is the same type of predatory capitalism that the temperance-cum-prohibition movement fought 100 years ago.

Major Films Featuring Events of the Prohibition Era

Some of the best major films depicting the Prohibition Era address some of these issues around alcohol in the U.S. at the time. Again, I encourage readers and family members to watch one or two of these films, to become better acquainted with this era, and to understand the political and legal forces at work in society around our parents when they were young teenagers.

Public Enemies (2009) with Johnny Depp as John Dillinger;
Millers Crossing (1990) by Coen brothers;
The Untouchables (1987) by Brian DePalma;
Once Upon A Time In America (1984) by Sergio Leone;
Capone (1975) with Ben Gazarra as Al Capone;
St Valentine's Day Massacre (1967) with Sam Robards as Al Capone;
Scarface The Shame of a Nation (1932) by Howard Hughes;
The Public Enemy (1931) with James Cagney as bootlegging gangster;
Little Caesar (1930) with Edward G Robinson as "Rico" Bandello.

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