

The History of the Temperance Movement

The temperance movement was a widespread effort in the 19th and early 20th centuries to control, limit, or prohibit the use of alcohol. Within the movement there were several disparate groups working for different goals: some wanted society to use alcohol more responsibly, while others wanted to ban hard alcohol, and still others wanted to ban all forms of alcohol.

The first temperance society in the United States was organized in 1808 in Saratoga County, New York under the leadership of Dr. Billy J. Clark. Clark was inspired by the writings of physician Benjamin Rush. His members swore to use no spirits, except under doctor's orders. In 1810 and 1811, Lyman Beecher, similarly influenced by Rush, preached in East Hampton, Long Island and Litchfield, Connecticut against drink and the "rum-selling, tippling folk, infidels and ruff-scruff." In the years that followed, antiliquor societies sprang up throughout New England. In 1826, the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance was formed in Boston. By 1836, chapters existed in every state.



The drive to ban the sale of liquor began in earnest in the East in 1840 and in the West in the early 1870s. Protestant churches and women, who were frequently the victims of family violence, were at the forefront of the movement, which over the years had come to favor government prohibition over mere abstinence. In Maine, Neal Dow became convinced that family violence and crime were the result of drunkenness and persuaded the legislature to pass a regulatory law in 1851. Thirteen of the 31 states that then made up the Union had similar laws by 1855.

Women took charge of the movement in the 1870s when they began their attacks on "demon rum." Temperance took a radical turn when armies of women in the West closed thousands of saloons. Carry Nation, the most famous of those women, marched into saloons with an ax or bricks to smash bars and bottles. The political nature of saloons may help to explain the women's vehemence. Not only were saloons the site of alcohol consumption, they were also the meeting places for local political bosses and thus the heart of the urban political machines, which excluded women.

Educator Frances Willard founded the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874. The first widely supported, national women's organization, it attracted hundreds of thousands of members. Willard was one of the most effective leaders of the WCTU. Under the guise of temperance, she advocated many reforms to help women and children. Those reforms included woman suffrage, the establishment of kindergartens, and restrictions on child labor. Unfortunately, by forming alliances with the WCTU, the woman suffrage movement alienated the liquor interests, which fought against giving women the vote.

In 1895, several reformers organized the Anti-Saloon League, which worked for state laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol. The League began influencing primary elections and identifying candidates who were "dry." By 1916, saloons were illegal in 21 states.

The temperance movement culminated in 1919 with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which enacted a nationwide ban on the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors." The Prohibition era, however, was short-lived; the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed in 1933 by the Twenty-first Amendment.

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