

AirSpace Season 5, Episode 1 - Moonshine

Theme music in and under

Emily: Welcome to a brand new season of AirSpace from the National Air and Space museum, I'm Emily.

Matt: I'm Matt.

Nick: And I'm Nick.

Matt: In 1920s America, flying was beginning to really take off, and with returning World War I pilots and surplus planes, there was a lot of talent and supply for aviators and the aviation industry.

Emily: Also taking off in 1920, the 18th Amendment made it illegal to produce, transport, or sell alcohol, and the Volstead Act provided the enforcement needed for nationwide prohibition.

Nick: The American people wanted alcohol, and aviation needed money. So barnstormers and budding aviators filled their planes with illegal hooch, leveraging the nation's thirst, to fund the beginnings of the commercial aviation industry.

So before we started looking into today's topic, I thought I knew a lot about prohibition. I learned a lot of things recently, you guys.

Emily: Yeah, I'm with you, Nick. I thought I knew what prohibition was all about, but after talking to experts in this history, it turns out I don't know anything about prohibition.

Matt: Well, I have to be the one who says, well, I taught a course, once upon a time, that was about the history of American urbanization, and about all of the changes that were happening in America in the early 20th century, as people were leaving the farms and moving to the cities to work in factories, and the new poor and working class started to overtake cities to the point where they now were the majority of the populations of cities, and people started to get really worried about their moral health. And that's where you start to see these temperance movements that eventually turned into prohibition. So it was really a lot of class anxiety is what I kind of come into this knowing.

Nick: The recurring theme of our show is often finding out that Matt has taught a course in new and different subjects that we had not here to with-

Emily: No, it's finding out that Matt was on an airplane once to another international destination.

Matt: Yeah, usually it's about my exotic travel.

Nick: That's fair. That's fair. That's fair. But I think it might be fair to say that we all kind of learned at least one or many new things about the prohibition era while we were researching this. But the thing that really surprised me was how all of those dots are connected around what turned out to be the birth of the commercial aviation industry, and how central prohibition was to what we know today, which you can buy a ticket on an airline and fly off to another city. Turns out that that had a lot to do with prohibition.

Emily: So while we have Professor Chandelle with us at all times when we're recording, we decided that we wanted to leave the nest and go outside just a little bit to an expert within the Smithsonian to get a little bit more of a crash course on prohibition, to get a little bit more context. So we turned to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History to find out just what possessed the Federal government to outlaw alcohol.

Theresa McCulla: My name is Theresa McCullough, and I am the curator of the American brewing history initiative at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Emily: So Theresa spends a lot of her time talking about researching and collecting artifacts that are related to beer and brewing, but she took some time to talk to us about prohibition.

Theresa McCulla: So prohibition was a time period of 13 years, 1920 to 1933, when it was illegal to make, transport, and sell intoxicating beverages in the United States. And intoxicating beverages were considered to be anything with more than .5% alcohol by volume. I'll point out that it was not illegal to consume alcohol during prohibition, it's a common misconception.

Matt: And it goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, drinking has been a part of some facets of American culture, and society, and life, going back well before the revolution.

Theresa McCulla: Alcohol has always been part of American culture, again since even before the founding of the nation, whether you're thinking about beer or distilled spirits or even wine, imported wine, in the early years of American history. But there also has been a movement for temperance since the founding of the nation as well.

Nick: In addition to the class anxiety Matt referenced, there was also xenophobia. A lot of the working class people moving into cities at the time were immigrants.

Matt: And when we're talking about xenophobia, we should also recognize that it's not just about people who are just arriving. It's also about immigrant groups that had been there for generations already, but that we're now living in higher concentrations because of increased urbanization.

Theresa McCulla: But there were several factors that came to a head in the late 1800s, early 1900s, that tipped the nation into Federal prohibition. And one of these, perhaps even the largest factor, was the enormous tide of immigrants, of European immigrants, who arrived in this country, especially in the mid part of the 1800s. Immigrants came from present day Germany and the Czech Republic, and brought with them a very vibrant professional brewing culture.

Emily: So the professional brewing culture that existed in the United States at the time meant that alcohol, especially beer, was more commercially available to everybody. So some folks in the United States saw this as this sort of contribution to this perception of folks being really drunk all the time, and being really lazy, and having these drunk people be this burden on society. And drunkenness was never a problem exclusive to immigrant communities, but it got wrapped up into this xenophobic fear of this sort of political power of folks who had immigrated to the United States by providing this social structure around gathering and organizing in places like saloons.

Theresa McCulla: For many observers who looked at these places, they saw that they were primarily populated by working class immigrants, and there was anxiety about the ways in which these people were using these spaces as settings where they could really enter American political culture, where they could communicate with other fellow immigrants. And so there was criticism from observers that these places where saloons were becoming sites of purportedly un-American corruption and disorder. And to some extent, the history of political machines is tied to saloon culture, but really, it's a story of anxiety about the other, about people who are not like the people looking in the windows.

Nick: And it's still xenophobic, but the idea that people were going to organize in saloons and beer halls, that wasn't fantasy. People really were politically organizing in these locations.

Matt: Yeah, that's absolutely true, and the saloons served a lot of functions other than just places to drink. They were also places where people could get together and talk, and they were sort of like social centers of a lot of these working class communities. But we should point out, they were also very male dominated, women weren't allowed in a lot of these saloons unless they were working there. So this was a very male space, it's worth pointing out.

Emily: I've always associated women's suffrage with the prohibition of alcohol, as ways in which women could wield power against domestic abuse and poverty that they were facing as really real problems. And there's a lot of ways to attack this problem, but in a moment in time when women still don't have the vote, and are still fighting for the vote, but they're also fighting in these domestic roles, which in many cases lack the power of the roles that men of the household tend to have. One of the tools they had at their disposal, that they tried to wield, was the support of prohibition. And I think that it does get tied up into a lot of the other issues that we've been talking about, but this is the framework for prohibition that I've always been most familiar with. So all of this other stuff

we've talked about with respect to immigration, xenophobia, a lot of the industry of beer brewing that's being brought into the United States, all totally new to me.

Theresa McCulla: But also in 1913, a new amendment enabled the Federal government to collect a Federal income tax for the first time. And so previously, the Federal government had relied very heavily on taxing alcohol, but suddenly there was a new revenue source that made that seemingly less necessary. And then one other important thing to note is that in 1917, the United States entered World War I, and the enormous majority of big breweries in the United States were German owned, and then suddenly now Germany is a political enemy of the United States. And there was also a consideration that things like American grain should be reserved for uses related to the war rather than brewing beer. And so the timing was right, activism that has been largely led by women in the forms of the woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, really also contributed to push it into something that became a nationwide policy starting in 1920.

Nick: So for all of these reasons, clearly everyone supported prohibition, right?

Matt: Oh, it was one of the most unpopular laws in the history of this country.

Roger Connor: Prohibition as not universally loved by any means.

Nick: That's Roger Connor.

Roger Connor: I'm Roger Connor. I'm a curator at the National Air and Space Museum.

Nick: Roger specializes in out of the ordinary modes of flight, but he also has an interest in the history of aerial smuggling.

Roger Connor: While it was the subject of this larger political and ideological debate in the country, for most middle-class and wealthy Americans, it was an inconvenience. They had just gone through World War I, the global pandemic of the Spanish flu, the so-called Spanish flu, was still underway as prohibition was formalized at the national level in 1919. And you can just imagine right now, what would it be like after COVID if you couldn't drink? So, there was a lot of pushback right from the outset on prohibition, and certainly those that were looking to engage with a newly revitalized nation after World War I, after the pandemic, the 20's are known as the Roaring 20's for a reason.

Nick: One of the popular ideas that I think still survives in culture of prohibition is that moonshiners, bootleggers, runners of hooch of every stripe, were extraordinarily creative.

Roger Connor: It's probably fair to say that in the early 1920s, the prohibition and the transport of alcohol was probably the most significant economic driver of innovation.

Nick: So you had people racing cars in back streets trying to smuggle this stuff around, you had people on boats, and it turns out that a lot of them were flying around too. Aviation was becoming more popular, but we don't see pictures of people running booze in airplanes in *The Untouchables*.

Matt: Yeah, and we've done episodes before about barnstormers where we learned about just the availability of all these World War I surplus airplanes, and how they were sort of initiating a new era of flight, where if you had a little bit of money you could buy an airplane and you could start performing in shows and doing other things to make a living. And it turns out one of the better things that you could do once prohibition was passed to make a living was to run booze. It was one of the most lucrative ways of using your airplane in the 1920s.

Roger Connor: It was mostly aircraft that were readily available, but there were specialized built for this purpose. So Benny Howard is a famous aircraft builder of the 20's and he got his start building smuggling planes. So just like NASCAR and the story of how stock car racing kind of developed out of the desire to run moonshine, there is a little bit of that that's also going on with the airplane.

Emily: But if you also think about it, there's a big motivation here. Flying airplanes is expensive. Even if you're a rich person, flying is still really expensive, and if you're not barnstorming, what are you doing? And so, there aren't any Amazon planes flying freight back and forth between states, between countries, this isn't the coal train, there's no reason to be up there flying. Delta Airlines isn't flying people across the Atlantic. None of that infrastructure that we all rely on, on a daily basis, exists right now, which is why we've started talking about this is the moment that commercial aviation is sort of taking flight. I feel like that plan already got made, but if you're not barnstorming, what else are you going to do if you want to fly? And this is a way in which you can at least bank enough money to fund your flying habit, if not make it into a lucrative business opportunity, and prohibition happens at that right moment to let this industry happen.

Roger Connor: Prohibition and the development of airlines go hand-in-hand. The first truly significant airline in the United States is Aeromarine Airways. And they are using essentially converted US Navy flying boats from World War I to fly passengers from areas in the United States to where they can drink. So this means flying people to The Bahamas, to Cuba, to Canada. And they do a pretty good business starting right at the outset of prohibition flying the very wealthy, but they do a pretty good business. They're only in business for five or six years because they really haven't figured out the economics of it yet, even with a very active market, and they fly about 30,000 people during this time. Even still, the maintenance on these planes is just so massive that they really can't afford it in the long run and it goes bust.

But what was interesting about Aeromarine is that not only was the company established to meet this kind of prohibition demand, it was actually implicated in some way in actively smuggling. Their chief pilot was Ed Musick, and Ed

Musick was known to be an active smuggler. And it seems pretty obvious that corporate leadership of Aeromarine was in on this, and that there are accounts of the flying boats of Aeromarine Airways acting suspiciously, there are sightings of cargo being unloaded. The Maritime Museum down in Virginia Beach has got a great photo in their archives of Ed Musick actually loading a case of liquor into one of their seaplanes, so the evidence is pretty strong on that.

Nick: In 1925, not a lot is regulated. You don't need a license to fly an airplane. In this era, you don't necessarily need an airport to operate from, and nobody's going to closely inspect most of your activities, or cargo in this case, like we would expect today.

Emily: Right, and that lack of regulation, that lack of licensing and permitting, and all of that kind of stuff, made the job much easier for smugglers. Just about anybody could fly that airplane as long as they could fly that airplane. But there wasn't anybody checking in on that. And so it was just kind of carte blanche for anybody who wanted to be creative, especially with respect to aviation, because transporting this stuff on the ground was a lot easier to regulate because there were regulations. When it came to the air, that infrastructure just didn't exist yet.

Nick: Yeah. We're less than 20 years since the first flight, and now airplanes are more plentiful and more powerful, and there are more people that can fly them. And prohibition comes along at the same time, so it makes total sense that flying booze from place to place would be a really lucrative enterprise, and I have to say, the fact that a lot of these barnstormers were actually making their money bootlegging, and 100 years after the fact, I can't believe it, we're still falling for their cover story?

Matt: Well, yeah, we know that there were a few people who used these barnstorming shows as kind of cover for moving from one place to another, carrying alcohol. They didn't all do it. Not all barnstormers were bootleggers, but there was some overlap.

Roger Connor: Probably the most notorious in terms of their published legacy was Floyd Rogers down in Texas, he was known as Slat Rogers, and he was prominent because he had been the first person to build and fly their own airplane in Texas. So in the early days, so a true kind of aeronautical pioneer, but he becomes an aviation criminal right, almost from the beginning. So as soon as prohibition takes off, he starts buying planes and he's a prominent ne'er-do-well, constantly in trouble with the law. I mean, he does it all. And he was fairly unapologetic about the extent of his criminal activities. So not only was he running alcohol in violation of prohibition, but he was running guns to Mexican cartels, he was smuggling illegal aliens, a whole kind of laundry list of criminal activities. The one thing that you don't see show up in his memoir that's kind of telling is he doesn't talk about narcotics smuggling.

Nick: And here's a part where I will give myself a little bit of slack on not having known any of this, we're still talking about criminal activities. There are no news reels that depict the smuggling of hooch from Cuba or Canada.

Emily: You mean it's not on YouTube is what you're saying?

Nick: Yeah, or whatever the 1920s version of YouTube was. Nickelodeons I guess?

Matt: Yeah, there's not a lot of documentary evidence, except for the cases where people did get caught, or made the news because there was a fiery crash. For the most part, the stories of the successful smugglers, we only know them because those people decided to tell their stories later in life. It's what historians would call sort of anecdotal as opposed to documentary history, we know it after the fact because people decided that it was a good story to tell.

Emily: Right, and that comes with its own problems, right Matt? Like when you're talking about learning history from somebody's memoir, or their personal papers, or their journals, and that kind of stuff, there can be a spin to that, and so you're not always getting facts.

Matt: Right. They are spinning the version of their history and giving us the version of themselves that they think is good and heroic, and that people will love. They want us to love them, so they tell us the good stories, or they tell the stories in ways that are flattering to them or make them seem like they were adventurous or whatever. These types of stories are not the kind that we generally think are 100% credible because they definitely reflect the viewpoint of the person who's telling the story.

Emily: I think this ties in really well with what we were just talking about, in that the stories that I feel like a lot of us have in our heads about prohibition and the effects of prohibition, are the sensationalized ones. They're the ones that we've gotten pop culture and media out of, speakeasies and all the gangsters that are doing all the nefarious dealings in order to make alcohol available to people. Because I think one of the things most of us forget, because I'm one of them, prohibition outlaws the production and sale, not the consumption of alcohol. And so, folks are still trying to get their hands on alcohol, but we kind of keep thinking about all the glorified versions of what we think prohibition was like, and we forget about how dangerous, and in some cases deadly, prohibition was for a lot of people, and that was almost exclusively based off of your socioeconomic status.

So alcohol was readily available, we had very creative smugglers making alcohol available to us, but depending on how much money you had available to spend on alcohol, depended on how you fared during prohibition, because prohibition was either going to kill you because you couldn't afford the expensive actual drinkable alcohol, or it was going to be a minor inconvenience because it was just a little harder to buy, or it was going to make you a lot of money because

you were going to figure out a way to monetize this moment in history. But if you couldn't afford any of these sort of luxury alcohols, you were ending up with alcohol that wasn't distilled correctly, or was maybe mixed with other kinds of dangerous chemicals, that in some cases caused death. So there's an issue of class here when it comes to prohibition in that the people who really suffered the ill effects of prohibition were those folks who fell into lower socioeconomic statuses. And for the folks that were in the middle and upper classes, this really didn't change a lot of things for a lot of people, in many ways.

So as the 1920s wind down, we start to see regulation when it comes to air travel, and that really starts making it a lot harder for smugglers and starts to really shut down some of these larger operations that makes it harder for this to be a money-making enterprise. And so by 1933, the 21st Amendment repealed prohibition, and when you combine that with regulation of the air, a lot of this aerial smuggling is getting shut down.

Matt: Although we should point out it never really fully stops. There's still aerial smuggling going on today, it's just not quite as easy, and it's mostly related to narcotics.

Emily: So commercial airlines and NASCAR aren't the only unintended consequences of prohibition, and this was maybe one of my favorite parts of talking to Theresa about what these leftover aspects of prohibition are. Because while I live many of these experiences, I never connected the dots at all. So I live in Washington, DC, and once in a while I'm in the grocery store in Maryland, and I'm like, "Gosh, I'll just go pick up a bottle of wine to have with dinner." Nope, there's no bottles of wine in Maryland in the grocery store. You've got to go to a different kind of store for that. And this is different state-by-state, never occurred to me why that was. I just thought that was like different states are different, and so they're a little quirky and they like to have their own rules. No, all of it has to do with the fact that when prohibition was repealed, every state got to make up their own new rules about how they wanted to repeal it.

Nick: And yeah, the blue laws, that was just a feature of when I grew up, you couldn't buy alcohol on Sundays in Georgia until very recently. Some places like Massachusetts, you can't have happy hour. There were places in Utah where your drink still has to be mixed out of sight of the customer, and then there's New Orleans.

Emily: Oh, New Orleans.

Nick: Oh, New Orleans.

Matt: Yeah, you can walk down the street with two drinks in your hand.

Emily: Two drinks, one hand?

Matt: And one of those helmets with two beers in your helmet. You can do whatever in New Orleans. But no, I grew up in Arizona and we couldn't do any of that, but you could buy beer or liquor anytime of day in the grocery store, in Trader Joe's, in whatever. When I moved to the East Coast, I thought this is the most horrible place in the world. Why would you put so many rules on these things? So where I can't just pick up what I want at this grocery store, what? Why?

Emily: I know. I grew up the East Coast where you had to go into a liquor store to buy liquor. I turned 21 in Arizona, where you could buy anything you wanted in the grocery store, that was a shocker.

Nick: So, Arizona and New Orleans, where people like to live free. But if we needed any more proof to tie this back to the modern day, we are talking about cultural differences on social issues. We are talking about elections and voters. We are talking about the prohibition, and then state-by-state regulation of an intoxicating substance. I don't want to put up a smoke screen that'll confuse the conversation, but the 20's feel more and more like the 20's every day, don't they?

Emily: Yeah. I mean, I never drew the parallels when talking to Theresa, but the modern day parallels to what's going on right now are just, I mean, it'll be really curious to take the historical perspective of the moment now that we're living, and look back on that, because I think it's going to look really similar.

So, in addition to us living the shared experience of where and when and how you can get your alcohol state-by-state, we all experience that. Theresa mentioned something when talking to her, that soda shops, the cafe where you go and you get ice cream sundaes, and egg creams, and all those kinds of things. Those, we all sort of associate, I think, with this sort of quintessential Americana in the 1950s, but those were born out of prohibition because you had all these places like saloons that had all this infrastructure to serve people beverages, but they could no longer serve people alcoholic beverages. And so a lot of them pivoted to become these soda fountains and these ice cream shops, which, in addition to becoming part of this cultural picture I think a lot of us have of quintessential America, you also get this shift of American taste buds towards the sweets, and liking sweet treats and sweet beverages, because you have this shift of saloons into soda shops. And that just blew my mind, I had no idea, I just thought that was an invention of the 1950s.

Nick: West Wing moment of the episode, Emily casually dropping egg cream, which is something that I had never even heard of until I was in my twenties, and as we all know, from President Bartlet, was invented in New England.

Emily: No Brooklyn.

President Bartlet: Toby, I'm drinking the most fantastic thing I've ever tasted in my life, chocolate syrup, cold milk, and seltzer. I know it sounds terrible, but trust me, I don't know where this has been all my life.

Toby: It's called an egg cream, Mr. President, we invented it in Brooklyn.

President Bartlet: In Brooklyn?

Toby: Yes, sir.

President Bartlet: Not New England.

Toby: There are some good things in this world not from New England, sir.

President Bartlet: Toby, don't ever let me hear you say that again.

Toby: Yes, sir.

Emily: AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. It's produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mix by Tarek Fouda. Distributed by PRX.

Matt: And should we say, we were talking about weed?

Emily: I was talking about weed, what were you talking about?

Nick: Yeah, no, that's what-

Matt: Yeah, but nobody ever said weed. I mean, our listeners, do they know that we're talking about weed?

Emily: Well, Nick said smoke screen, I thought that was very clear.