

**“LET THE FEDERAL MEN RAID”:
BOOTLEGGING AND PROHIBITION
ENFORCEMENT IN PITTSBURGH**

Julien Comte
University of Pittsburgh

Mr. Ness, everybody knows where the booze is. The problem isn't finding it.

—Jim Malone, *The Untouchables*¹

During his first four years in Pittsburgh, Prohibition Administrator John Pennington amassed an impressive record. A reporter estimated that between July 1926 and April 1930 Commander Pennington conducted more than fifteen thousand raids and arrested over eighteen thousand people. His agents closed down over three thousand distilleries and confiscated almost forty-five hundred individual stills with a total daily capacity in excess of three hundred and fifty thousand gallons. He shuttered sixteen regular breweries and raided more than four hundred wildcat breweries, forty-four alcohol plants, one hundred cutting plants, fifteen beer-shooting plants, and nearly two hundred storage plants. Pennington's men confiscated over eighteen hundred automobiles and seized 3.4 million gallons of mash, over one hundred and eighty thousand gallons of moonshine, one hundred and thirteen thousand gallons of alcohol, more than one hundred and ten thousand gallons

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of wine, about six hundred and fifty thousand gallons of beer, and more than seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds of corn sugar.² While these numbers may seem high at first glance, they only represent the tip of the colossal iceberg that was the Pittsburgh bootlegging scene. Between 1920 and 1933, Pittsburghers openly made, sold, and diverted alcohol in clear violation of the prohibition laws, earning Western Pennsylvania the reputation of "wettest spot in the United States."³ This title reflected not only the attitudes of most Pittsburghers regarding the prohibition issue but also the ineffectiveness of prohibition enforcement in the city.

This paper explores the failure of prohibition enforcement in Pittsburgh over the course of the 1920s and early 1930s. The failure of enforcement, on the one hand, and local indifference and resistance, on the other, were inextricably linked. Enforcement in Pittsburgh failed to stop the manufacture, transportation, sale, and consumption of alcohol in the city. Most Pittsburghers resented prohibition, and some found economic and political opportunities in violating it. Local resistance to prohibition played a crucial part in rendering the enforcement mechanism ineffective. Enforcement depended considerably on local officials; the lack of local support limited cooperation between city policemen and federal prohibition agents, which allowed bootleggers to diversify their sources of alcohol. In turn, the proliferation of sources and the resulting thriving market for illegal alcohol exacerbated the lack of coordination and cooperation between federal, state, and local authorities by creating opportunities for police and political corruption. Prohibition offered machine politicians opportunities to strengthen their organization. Pittsburgh's prohibition mayors welcomed the wet vote and cultivated it by letting ward bosses and police captains profit from prohibition through the allocations of liquor privileges in their community. The city police force was under no pressure from the mayor to enforce prohibition, and Pittsburghers responded to this policy favorably by casting their votes for the machine.

The historiography on prohibition emphasizes the ineffectiveness of federal and state authorities in upholding prohibition. Because the states and the federal government had concurrent power to enforce prohibition, each party attempted to shift the burden of enforcement to the other. When it came to prohibition, Andrew Sinclair writes, Presidents Harding and Coolidge were "masters of inaction" and an "amphibious" Congress followed their lead.⁴ With Washington's lack of interest in prohibition enforcement, federal prohibition agents were chronically underfunded and understaffed. State

legislatures showed a similar lack of commitment to prohibition and did not make its enforcement a priority.

Popular and academic books on prohibition stress the failure to coordinate the state and federal enforcement mechanisms over the failure of enforcement at the local level. In his study of the repeal of prohibition, for instance, David Kyvig deems it “essential” to “examine how national prohibition functioned [and] what was done to enforce the law.”⁵ Yet, his chapter on enforcement deals mostly with the role of the three branches of the federal government in upholding the law. Even though enforcement is not the focus of Kyvig’s study, his treatment of this central aspect of prohibition exemplifies a larger problem in the historiography. Both popular and academic authors too often obscure the role local actors played in resisting a law imposed on them from above. Observing these dynamics requires reducing the scale of analysis in order to place local actors within their social, political, and cultural context. The approach usually favored by historians of prohibition—drawing examples from a variety of local cases—risks de-contextualizing prohibition enforcement. Local studies, however, allow us to examine how enforcement operated on the ground.⁶

Failure at the Federal and State Levels

Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on December 18, 1917. It was then submitted to the states and went into effect on January 16, 1920, one year after its ratification. The Eighteenth Amendment prohibited “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” in the United States, as well as any importation or exportation of alcohol. The amendment did not clarify the expression “intoxicating liquors” and did not mention any guidelines for the enforcement of prohibition, except that federal and state governments would have concurrent power in that regard. Congress therefore passed the National Prohibition Act of 1919 to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment. It also took effect on January 16, 1920, defining the term “intoxicating liquor” as any beverage containing more than 0.5 percent alcohol and regulating the use of industrial, medicinal, and sacramental alcohol. Commonly known as the Volstead Act, after the Minnesota congressman who introduced it in the House of Representatives, the act was in fact the work of Wayne Wheeler, the leader of the Anti-Saloon League (ASL). Pressure groups like the ASL and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which had been lobbying Congress for several years to add prohibition to the Constitution, seemed sure of their victory with the passage of the amendment. Yet America was divided

between the "drys," who favored prohibition, and the "wets," who opposed it. In 1933, after almost fourteen years of what President Hoover once called the "noble experiment," prohibition finally came to an end. First, in April 1933, a modification of the Volstead Act legalized 3.2 percent alcohol beer. Then, later that year, Congress passed the Twenty-First Amendment to repeal prohibition. It went into effect on December 3, 1933, amidst great popular enthusiasm.

The failure of the state and federal levels to coordinate their efforts hindered prohibition enforcement in Pittsburgh. To create a comprehensive enforcement mechanism, the Eighteenth Amendment stipulated that Congress and the states would have concurrent power to enforce prohibition. In practice, however, each governmental entity hoped that the other would take the lead in enforcement, but neither party did much to that effect. With states expected to assume some of the burden of enforcement, Congress was reluctant to appropriate more than the bare minimum to the Prohibition Unit of the Treasury Department.⁷ Chronically underfunded, the federal dry agents faced an impossible task. In 1929, for example, the federal government had only seventy-two agents to police Pittsburgh's prohibition district, which consisted of the western judicial district of Pennsylvania plus the entire state of West Virginia.⁸

The inadequate number of men hindered prohibition enforcement in several ways. Needless to say, dry agents could not be everywhere at the same time, and bootleggers exploited this weak link in the system. In the Pacific Northwest district, for instance, a mere twenty federal agents were in charge of policing the Canadian border.⁹ But besides the obvious limitations, the small number of federal agents also limited the kind of work that they could actually perform. In 1921, U.S. District Attorney D. J. Driscoll wrote the Assistant Attorney General in Washington asking for more men. The pool of agents in Pittsburgh was so small, he observed, that members of the "liquor fraternity" knew them all, making undercover operations impossible.¹⁰

Over time, Congress allotted more money to prohibition enforcement, but the budget of the Prohibition Bureau—which went from \$2 million after the passage of the Volstead Act to \$9 million in 1926—remained well short of its real needs.¹¹ The number of federal agents rose from fifteen hundred to three thousand, but even this larger force could barely oversee the legal traffic in industrial, medicinal, and sacramental alcohol.¹² Aware of the problems facing federal enforcement, the ASL could not lobby for additional funding without acknowledging that prohibition was an unpopular law that an army of federal agents would have to impose on the American people.¹³

Since the appointment of prohibition agents was not subject to civil service laws until 1927, corrupt and incompetent agents formed the backbone of the federal prohibition forces for most of the 1920s. These agents filled the courts with cases that judges had to drop because evidence was seized without a warrant or because the dry agents had failed to establish probable cause. If defendants had been arrested under the so-called "smell" warrant, they could challenge the raid. In these cases, District Judges Gibson and Schoonmaker had no choice but to quash warrants and suppress the evidence.¹⁴ Since denatured alcohol was still legal for industrial purposes, prohibition agents had to recognize the distinctive smell of whiskey or wine to justify a raid. In other cases, the court ruled that suspects might have brought their own liquor into a club, thereby exonerating the owner of the establishment. Moreover, while dry agents insisted that people exiting a building drunk was evidence enough to demand a search warrant, the court countered that these suspects might have been drunk when they entered the building.¹⁵

In addition to poor training, endemic corruption also affected federal enforcement. Between 1920 and 1931, close to nine percent of all federal prohibition agents were discharged for corruption.¹⁶ For many of them, the temptation to supplement their low salary with bribes proved irresistible. While they could expect to earn a meager two thousand dollars in 1920 (roughly twenty thousand in 2007 dollars), field agents still earned only twenty-three hundred dollars by 1930 (about twenty-eight thousand in 2007 dollars).¹⁷ Corruption was also an issue in the upper levels of the enforcement mechanism. In Pennsylvania, some directors of prohibition enforcement quit out of frustration or were pushed out, but some were fired for abusing their position and associating with bootleggers. In early 1922, several former prohibition officers in Pennsylvania were indicted. Between August 1, 1921 and October 14, 1921, Samuel Wolfe, then at the head of prohibition enforcement in Pittsburgh, allegedly approved four applications for the withdrawal of seventy-five hundred gallons of whiskey.¹⁸ William McConnell, state director of prohibition between August 1921 and January 1922, was also indicted on charges of releasing seven hundred thousand gallons of alcohol from government warehouses.¹⁹ Prosecutors dropped all charges against McDonnell in May 1923 when crucial evidence mysteriously disappeared.²⁰

Despite their funding issues, the dry agents succeeded in overwhelming federal courts with minor prohibition cases. The federal government attempted to expand the number of clerks and other court officials to process the additional cases. Nevertheless, judges began accepting plea

bargaining as a way to unclog the courts.²¹ If bootleggers pleaded guilty, they would receive only a small fine. On January 12, 1927, two federal judges heard sixty-nine violation cases in less than an hour. The majority of the fines that day were under \$100, which was less than a day's worth of distilling.²² Bootleggers eagerly accepted this deal since they could make up for the fine in no time. One day, the fines dropped to \$25, which the *Pittsburgh Post* noted was \$100 less than the license paid by saloonkeepers before prohibition.²³ Given the limited inconvenience that fines of this nature caused to bootleggers, judges were in effect creating an informal licensing system.

The problems at the state level mirrored those at the federal level. Pennsylvania was the forty-fifth state to ratify the Eighteenth Amendment, and it did not have a state prohibition law until 1923, when Governor Gifford Pinchot, a staunch dry, battled a wet state legislature to pass the Snyder-Armstrong Act. Invoking the "concurrent power" clause of the Eighteenth Amendment, the Pennsylvania legislature, like Congress, directed little money towards prohibition enforcement.²⁴ Indeed, enforcement was not a priority of state legislatures, which spent a total of seven hundred thousand dollars on prohibition enforcement in 1926, or one-eighth of what they spent on enforcing their fish and game laws.²⁵

While Pennsylvania was a wet state, a handful of volunteer groups supported prohibition. When the legislature rejected Governor Pinchot's bill to allocate two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to prohibition enforcement in the state, prohibition supporters took matters into their own hands. The Pennsylvania WCTU successfully raised over half of what Pinchot had requested. This sum allowed the governor to temporarily assign state troopers to areas that federal dry agents did not police adequately.²⁶ Committed to enforce prohibition, Pinchot moved into action in March 1924. Thanks in part to the money raised by the WCTU, Pinchot sent eighty state troopers to raid Pittsburgh's cafes, saloons, and hotels. By tradition, the Pennsylvania state police did not interfere with a city's affairs except at the request of local authorities, but the governor sent state troopers without a written request from Pittsburgh's mayor.²⁷ As we will see later, no mayor of Pittsburgh during prohibition would have asked Harrisburg for help in enforcing an unpopular law. Therefore, these raids in twenty-one places around the city represented an independent effort by the state. Without the sustained assistance of the federal agents and the city police, the arrests were only a minor setback for Pittsburgh's bootleggers.

Over the course of the 1920s, dry forces gained ground in the Pennsylvania state legislature, but this momentum did not affect Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, where political machines obstructed prohibition enforcement. In 1926, the legislature passed the Alcohol Permit Act to impose stricter regulations on breweries and alcohol plants after the discovery that poisonous industrial alcohol had made its way into Philadelphia's bootleg channels.²⁸ The problem plaguing state enforcement remained the same, however: without additional funding, state laws were toothless. And because the Pennsylvania legislature refused to grant money to enforce the state prohibition laws, the governor could only count on two hundred and fifty state policemen, who, in addition to their regular duties, were expected to assist federal prohibition agents.²⁹

Local Indifference and Resistance

Like other large urban centers with significant working-class, immigrant populations who resented prohibition, Pittsburgh was a wet city. Critics of prohibition became increasingly vocal throughout the 1920s. One "workingman" expressed his concerns in a letter he addressed to the "Booze Dept" in 1925. With "the poor saloonkeeper and the Poor Mens [*sic*] Club raided continually," he was "convinced that the Washington government favor[ed] the Rich." He wanted "to see the Rich Mans Club raided for a change."³⁰ Director of Public Safety James Clark echoed the worker's concern when he "denounced the Federal prohibition enactment as a measure against the poor man while permitting the rich man to get all the liquor he wanted."³¹ Perhaps bordering on demagoguery, Clark nevertheless voiced an opinion that resonated in Pittsburgh's working-class wards. As we will see, some upscale speakeasies did operate in the open. For instance, Prohibition Administrator Frederick Baird confirmed that members of the Duquesne Club consumed alcohol on the premises. Unable to prove that they purchased it there, however, Baird could not raid the club.³²

The comments gathered by Martha Bensley Bruère for her 1927 book, *Does Prohibition Work?*, further reflect how the views of Pittsburghers on the prohibition issue formed a major obstacle to successful enforcement.³³ Bruère compiled reports from social workers throughout the United States. In the case of Pittsburgh, she interviewed four persons working in three different settlements: Soho Community House; the Irene Kaufmann

Settlement, located in the Hill District; and Kingsley House, located in East Liberty. Bruère's section on Pittsburgh reveals the openness of young bootleggers to disclose their occupation, as the Kingsley House worker noticed. For these young men, there was no stigma attached to violating prohibition. As Jeff Hill puts it, "most of the immigrants hailed from parts of Europe where alcohol played a large role in everyday life, and they brought these practices with them."³⁴ It was impossible to police such a large group of people who took alcohol for granted. "What's so bad about sellin' whisky?" said one of the bootleggers. "I'm just doin' it on a small scale," claimed another one.³⁵ Most people differentiated between prostitution, gambling, and the narcotic traffic on the one hand, and violations of the Volstead Act, which they regarded as "cleaner."³⁶

Widespread local disregard for the dry laws affected the verdict of juries in the Pittsburgh district. The work of honest federal agents was wasted, as too many cases failed to result in a conviction. Frequent acquittals frustrated District Judge Thomson, who asked the Department of Justice to launch an investigation into the district's jurors. Thomson claimed in January 1924 that jury panels had been unrepresentative of the city's population and reflected a clear wet bias. While sympathetic to Judge Thomson's problems, Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt remarked that district judges appointed jury commissioners. Judge Thomson took matters into his own hands and asked for background checks on potential jurors. The district kept track of the jurors' views on the enforcement of the Volstead Act and strived to anticipate if someone would not make "a fair and unbiased juror." For instance, C. G. Perkins, reputed to be "[a] bad egg and [a] boozier," was presumably "inclined to help liquor interests."³⁷ Some of the observations were hardly related to prohibition. It seemed important to note that one Elmer Packer had "the appearance of what is commonly known as a 'bum.'" Nevertheless, the background checks must have been effective since, in April 1924, Thomson noted a marked improvement in the number of convictions.³⁸

The understaffed federal dry agents and the state police needed the help of the local police if they were to stand a chance against the hundreds of bootleggers and illegal drinking establishments in Pittsburgh. The city's prohibition mayors, however, welcomed the wet vote and did little to help enforce prohibition. The four mayoral campaigns that took place while national prohibition was in effect reveal the successive city administrations' level of indifference towards prohibition enforcement.

The two 1921 mayoral candidates had different conceptions of prohibition enforcement. The Republican candidate who would go on to win the election, William Magee, announced that he would not make prohibition enforcement a priority of the city police. Enforcement, Magee believed, was the responsibility of the federal government.³⁹ His Democratic opponent, William McNair, took the opposite position. He proclaimed that "there will be no need of Federal enforcement of prohibition if I am mayor. If the police force cannot smash the booze traffic, I can get one that will."⁴⁰ With a Democratic victory already improbable in "one of the very citadels of machine Republicanism," McNair's threatening announcement undoubtedly hurt his candidacy even more.⁴¹

In 1925, the candidate of the Republican machine once again prevailed. Charles Kline beat the Democratic candidate and the candidate of the Non-Partisan Party, a group of independent Republicans trying to challenge the machine. The Non-Partisan candidate built his anti-machine platform around the alleged connections between bootleggers and machine politicians. He accused the Magee administration of being in the liquor business, of protecting bootleggers, and of welcoming their political support.⁴² Backed by the Republican machine, Charles Kline did not dignify the accusations with a response. He simply praised Pittsburgh as "a comparatively clean city morally."⁴³

Kline spent his first term building his own machine.⁴⁴ In 1929, he violated an unwritten rule of Pittsburgh politics by running for a second term without the support of William Larimer Mellon, the chairman of the Republican State Committee. A testimony to the power of his newly-created machine, Kline won the Republican nomination despite having lost Mellon's support. When Republican Allegheny County Commissioner Charles McGovern, who campaigned for the Democratic candidate, Thomas A. Dunn, accused the mayor of awarding liquor privileges to ensure support from the various wards, Kline avoided the question, as he had done in 1925, by naming Pittsburgh "the cleanest and most progressive city of its size in the nation."⁴⁵ After a short campaign that failed to capture the city's interest, Kline easily defeated Dunn by a majority of forty-three thousand votes.

During Kline's tenure, federal agents and state constables rarely conducted dry raids with the help of the police. In 1928, the Director of Public Safety created a controversy when he refused to use the local police to help the federal prohibition agents in their task. "Let the federal men raid," he proclaimed. "It's their business to enforce the prohibition law. It's all they've got to do."⁴⁶

Charles Kline expressed the same feeling in his second inaugural address. "The primary duty of a city police force," he said, "is to throw safeguards around the life, the property, and the liberty of its citizens . . . [O]ur local police must first perform, to a full degree, the duties which, to them, are fundamental and then, do the best they can to master a situation which is regarded as abnormal from Maine to California."⁴⁷

Although the Republicans dominated Pittsburgh politics during the prohibition era, historians have noted that support for the Democratic Party slowly increased throughout the decade.⁴⁸ The balance of power was clearly shifting when in 1932 Franklin Roosevelt became the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry the city since James Buchanan in 1856. FDR's campaign stopped at Forbes Field in late October 1932, and the crowd of thirty thousand erupted when he promised he would modify the National Prohibition Act to legalize beer.⁴⁹ In November 1933, still riding on FDR's momentum, William McNair became the first Democrat elected mayor of Pittsburgh since 1906. During the brief mayoral campaign, McNair scorched the Kline administration for eight years of corruption and graft. His accusations were specific, as he explicitly linked the Republican machine to prostitution and gambling. Yet, curiously, he never mentioned bootlegging in his speeches, despite repeated allegations in the Pittsburgh newspapers of connections between bootleggers and city officials. In a city so blatantly wet it would have been ill-advised for the Democratic candidate to criticize the Republican administration for its lax enforcement of prohibition. Running for the second time, McNair did not repeat the mistake he had made in 1921. As Chicago Democrats had realized in the early 1920s, the prohibition issue was better left alone.⁵⁰

Although the various mayors and the city police did not make enforcement of prohibition their priority, some local officers in the early 1920s were committed to enforcing the law, regardless of its unpopularity. Those who were too successful became the target of local politicians who protected bootleggers. In late 1925, Lieutenant Thomas Cavanaugh of the Pittsburgh Police was transferred out of the Hill District under the pressure of local politicians who disliked his zeal in fighting vice in their district.⁵¹ Cavanaugh resigned in protest, but not before his commitment to prohibition had caught the attention of the federal government. Within a month of his resignation, Cavanaugh was appointed Assistant Prohibition Administrator for the Pittsburgh district, where he resumed his work under Prohibition Administrator Frederick Baird.⁵²

Police corruption reached unprecedented levels during Mayor Kline's two terms in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Certainly not the only one to openly criticize the Kline administration, muckraker Walter Liggett, the editor of the magazine *Plain Talk*, described Pittsburgh under Kline as "politically putrid."⁵³ A decentralized political system ensured that bootlegging would be administered at the local level. With "czar"-like powers, Republican ward chairmen were responsible for allocating liquor privileges in their jurisdiction. "In return for this power," a reporter noted, "they were expected to turn in a satisfactory vote for the administration candidates at all times."⁵⁴ Prohibition provided Kline with an opportunity to build and strengthen his organization.

The 1928 federal grand jury that indicted 167 people all over Pittsburgh for conspiracy to violate the Volstead Act detailed the situation in the South Side's Sixteenth Ward, an older immigrant, working-class neighborhood. Anyone interested in opening a restaurant or soft-drink parlor first needed to discuss the matter with Ward Chairman Francis Kirley or Police Inspector John McArdle, both allegedly involved in the South Side liquor ring. Those already in business often received an impromptu visit from the Meyers brothers, who offered to sell them moonshine. Once the first order had been placed, the Meyers instructed their new client not to buy moonshine from anyone else. Those who chose to ignore this directive were conveniently raided by McArdle's men. The liquor ring assumed its clients had placed a standing order and delivered a few cans of moonshine every week, regardless of the actual needs. Those who asked for a reduced load would instead be given a few extra gallons. The deliveries were made during the day, precisely because, as Mick Meyers recalls, "at night you can't see the prohibition agents."⁵⁵ The Meyerses devised creative ways to avoid the dry agents. Every Monday, they would go down to the prohibition agents' office in downtown Pittsburgh. Cars were lined up in front of the building, and the Meyerses would write down their license plate numbers and a brief description of the vehicles, a stratagem that allowed the Meyerses to spot federal agents from two blocks away. The clients who failed to pay the Meyerses were raided and fined \$100. If a debtor owed the ring \$60, he could go to the police station to collect the remaining \$40. Restaurant owner John Lipchak testified that Inspector McArdle once personally gave him half the fine back.⁵⁶ Police protection was also apparent in the case of the Monaca Club. The establishment, which could welcome two hundred guests, was located at 3802 Forbes Street, directly across the street from the Oakland police station. Even though

customer traffic in and out of the building must have caught their attention, the police did not raid the upscale club until 1933.⁵⁷

Given the amount of money generated by their involvement in the liquor business, police officers and local politicians were willing to slow down, and even interfere with, the work of federal prohibition agents. According to a true bill filed in June 1928, police protection took a whole new meaning on the Northside. Those who purchased moonshine from the Northside liquor ring were warned about the activities of federal agents. When the warning came too late and dry agents did arrest restaurant owners affiliated with the criminal organization, members of the liquor ring would bail them out of jail.⁵⁸ In another case, two federal agents were thrown in jail while serving a writ in the Strip District in January 1926. Federal official Frederick Baird interpreted the arrest as an insult by Alderman P. J. Sullivan. Baird and Cavanaugh subsequently instructed their men on how to proceed should they face mobs or police officers trying to interfere with their work. They authorized federal agents to "shoot their way out." For Baird, the only mistake that the two agents had made was not using their guns.⁵⁹

Muckrakers as well as church and civic leaders denounced police protection, but they faced an uphill battle in Pittsburgh. In July 1926, Ray Sprigle and the *Pittsburgh Post* launched a campaign against vice in the Northside. They published a series of photographs of several Northside streets, adding large white arrows pointing at the places of vice. Sprigle insisted on the proximity of several speakeasies and gambling houses to the Northside police station of Inspector Charles Faulkner. Sprigle and his team then targeted East Liberty, the Hill District, and Downtown, but putting such pressure on the mayor and his administration proved ineffective. In late 1926, the Citizens League of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County was formed to fight vice in the city. In July 1927, the League asked for the dismissal of Superintendent of Police Peter Walsh, which Kline swiftly refused.

While Pittsburgh was a wet city, it is doubtful that working-class resistance to prohibition was universal. Indeed, in recent years historians have uncovered traces of working-class support for prohibition in cities like Chicago and New York.⁶⁰ In particular, some working-class women encouraged prohibition enforcement hoping it would prevent their husbands from drinking away the family wages. For Chicago, Michael Willrich has found evidence in the William E. Dever Papers that poor women regularly wrote Mayor Dever asking him to enforce prohibition in their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the records of Pittsburgh's mayors during prohibition have not

been preserved, making it difficult to apply Willrich's findings to Pittsburgh. There exist several letters from Western Pennsylvania in the records of the Department of Justice, but nothing suggests that they were written by poor men or women.⁶¹ Instead, the evidence overwhelmingly points to widespread local indifference and resistance to prohibition.

Sources of Alcohol

The bootleggers' reliance on several sources to supply Pittsburgh with alcohol hampered prohibition enforcement. Local indifference and resistance to prohibition aggravated the problems of a federal enforcement mechanism that was already far from flawless. Without the support of the local police, federal agents could not target all sources of alcohol at the same time. Home manufacturers who made beer, wine, and moonshine for their personal consumption and for sale to commercial bootleggers were particularly hard to police. In other words, bootleggers were able to exploit the weaknesses of the system by relying on various sources of alcohol to supply Pittsburgh. But prohibition presented bootleggers with more than one economic opportunity, and some made their fortunes in the supply business.

Ironically, the first source of alcohol was the federal government. The Volstead Act stipulated that liquor remained legal for medicinal and industrial use. The federal agents were in charge of granting permits to manufacture and distribute alcohol for such use; therefore, the government maintained a stock of genuine liquor in bonded warehouses throughout the country. Some of these warehouses were attached to distilleries. In his report to Governor Pinchot, Special Counsel William Burnet Wright, Jr. pointed out that "more whiskey was stored in the Pittsburgh Revenue District, according to the official report of the U.S. Internal Revenue Bureau, than was stored in any state of the Union, except Kentucky."⁶² Consequently, at the beginning of prohibition, the easiest way for bootleggers to obtain alcohol was not to make it but rather to steal it from the government, and Pittsburgh bootleggers relied chiefly on this method for the first years of prohibition. In June 1920, prohibition officers acknowledged that thirteen bonded distillery warehouses had been robbed in and around Pittsburgh since January of the same year. The total loot ran in the thousands of gallons and had a street price above one million dollars. The *Pittsburgh Post* remarked that the underpaid and understaffed dry agents had not been able to arrest any of the robbers.⁶³

Unscrupulous bootleggers did not hesitate to cut the alcohol they had stolen from the government, thus multiplying the amount of alcohol they could introduce on the market. In 1926, Pittsburgh's prohibition administrator testified in front of Congress and explained how bootleggers cut genuine whiskey:

Well, they will take one bottle, for instance ... One pint bottle of good rye whisky, and by the addition of so much alcohol, so much water, with caramel, and a few other ingredients, they will convert that 1 pint into 2½ quarts of synthetic whisky. Then it is rebottled, labels can be printed that are just as good as were ever printed, and counterfeit stamps are to be had that are a perfect duplicate of all the best that the Government ever did print. So that 1 pint is converted into 5.⁶⁴

Bootleggers could imitate "any brand of Scotch whisky that was ever known to the trade," remarked the federal agent, but the quality of fake alcohol had declined over the years. In an attempt to increase their profit, bootleggers had begun to use moonshine instead of genuine alcohol as the base for their products.

While agents were securing the warehouses which contained genuine whiskey, bootleggers were switching to a new source: breweries.⁶⁵ Although many brewers went under during prohibition, several breweries survived by making ice, ice-cream, or near-beer, that is beer with an alcoholic content of less than 0.5 percent. To make near-beer, brewers first had to make real beer before artificially lowering its alcoholic content. The overwhelmed prohibition agents could not always check whether breweries abided by the law, and it was easy for bootleggers to associate with corrupt brewers who would sell them "high-powered beer." Another method to produce beer with a pre-prohibition alcohol content was to "shoot" or "needle" near-beer. Brewers or saloonkeepers added a shot of high-proof alcohol to near-beer to raise its alcohol content. Beer-shooting, sometimes carried out by bootleggers in specialized plants, was also a last-resort solution when the stocks of real beer were decreasing.⁶⁶ For instance, in early 1924, when prohibition agents successfully reduced the flow of genuine beer into the city, bartenders were forced to shoot near-beer to satisfy their customers' demands.⁶⁷

Bootleggers further diversified their sources of alcohol to include moonshine. Illegal distilleries added another entry to the dry agents' long list

of problems. In some neighborhoods, this took industrial proportions. In a Hill District garage, for instance, federal agents discovered in July 1922 a distillery capable of producing two hundred and fifty gallons of corn whiskey a day.⁶⁸ A year later, agents shut down a "moonshine trust" in Homestead with a daily production of one thousand gallons of corn whiskey.⁶⁹ At the end of the summer of 1922, prohibition officials told the press that they had seized seventy-five stills in the past three months, ranging in capacity from four to two hundred and fifty gallons.⁷⁰ Figures increased as the years passed. Prohibition Administrator John Pennington proudly reported the seizure of 110 stills in just the month of May 1927.⁷¹ Operating an illegal distillery was a profitable operation. Pittsburghers engaged in commercial bootlegging could buy a fifty to one hundred gallon still for five hundred dollars. While this figure might seem a large initial investment, by producing such a quantity of alcohol a day at the expense of fifty cents a gallon and selling it for four dollars, the still would be paid for in less than four days.⁷²

Prohibition agents were overwhelmed and could not target all sources of alcohol at the same time. One agent voiced his frustration: "These big moonshine plants have presented a serious problem to us. In the first place, we have been forced to center our efforts around the breweries suspected of manufacturing real beer and in preventing illegal withdrawals of whisky from the regular distilleries. Then it has been an extremely difficult task for us to secure the evidence necessary for the obtaining of a Federal warrant for the search of the premises in which these big stills are operated."⁷³ The discouraged federal agent would soon find new reasons to complain.

In addition to breweries that had a permit to make near-beer but actually manufactured real beer, clandestine breweries (known as wildcat breweries) appeared. In March 1925, Pittsburgh's prohibition agents seized their first wildcat brewery along with forty thousand gallons of beer.⁷⁴ Wildcat breweries sprouted in and around Pittsburgh, sometimes in the most unusual buildings. In February 1926, agents raided a former slaughterhouse turned into a brewery. What they found speaks to the quality of some of the alcohol consumed in Pittsburgh at the time:

Scum, like the froth of gutter water, was floating on top of the exposed vats. Filth covered the floor, and the place was filled with a stench of mold and refuse. It was the source, agents said, of much of the 'Canadian' beer that has been selling for 65 cents a bottle in downtown and Northside saloons. . . . More than 50 empty tanks, lying

unused in the building since it had been abandoned by the packing company, were being prepared for use as beer vats. Many of them were soaking in the cellar, filled for the first time since long-dead pigs had been thrown in the scalding water they formerly contained. . . . One man was arrested. He said he had been hired to "take the scum off the beer."⁷⁵

The diversion of industrial alcohol, predominant in Philadelphia, was less developed in Pittsburgh.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the Steel City had its share of poisonous alcohol. At the end of 1923, the coroner of Allegheny County reported that poison booze had claimed seventy-six lives in one year in the county.⁷⁷ Bootleggers redistilled denatured alcohol to remove the poison—or at least intended to. Often, the product of the redistillation remained improper for consumption, which did not stop bootleggers from selling it. In September 1927, prohibition agents seized a three-story redistilling plant in Braddock, Pennsylvania. By redistilling what appeared to be paint thinner, the plant was capable of producing fifteen hundred gallons of alcohol a day.⁷⁸

Importation was another major source of alcohol. The city's newspapers, however, appeared to emphasize local production over importation, because seizures of illegal distilleries and wildcat breweries were so frequent in Pittsburgh. To be fair, reporters occasionally relayed news of a seizure of imported alcohol, but their articles often dealt with beer coming from Eastern Pennsylvania. In the summer of 1923, for instance, the *Pittsburgh Post* reported that the flow of beer from Philadelphia had become an embarrassment for Pittsburgh's prohibition agents, who had started to closely watch the railroads and were seizing large quantities of beer. In October 1925, Prohibition Administrator Frederick Baird went in person to Philadelphia to attempt to diminish the flow of beer to Pittsburgh. He estimated that eighty carloads of beer were coming from Philadelphia every week and that thirty percent of the real beer drunk in Pittsburgh was from the eastern part of the state.⁷⁹ But beer was not only coming from the East. Legal documents reveal that in 1929, for example, federal agents in Pittsburgh seized a box car containing five hundred cases of ale concealed in old rags, which had left Brantford, Ontario, and reached Pittsburgh on the New York Central Railroad.⁸⁰ Liquor could also be imported. For instance, federal agents made a surprising discovery at the Homestead stop on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad in January 1927. Concealed in bales of old rags were more than twelve hundred bottles of French cognac. Working

with U.S. Customs, the prohibition agents discovered that the shipment had originated in Strasbourg, France, and had reached Baltimore aboard the *West Eldara* via Rotterdam and Boston.⁸¹

Pittsburgh was part of a larger interregional and international network of commercial bootleggers. The ineffectiveness of prohibition enforcement allowed some violators of the liquor laws to prosper and develop organizations that mirrored the international and interstate ties of legal companies. The case of the Volpe brothers exemplifies this trend. In July 1932, three of the Volpe brothers were assassinated in front of their headquarters in the Hill District. The *Pittsburgh Press* called the shootings "the most sanguinary flare of Pittsburgh's racket warfare."⁸² Federal agents had been trying to build a case against the Volpes for several years, and legal documents indicate that the Volpe organization's connections extended to South Carolina, New York, and Philadelphia. Indeed, the federal agents who were investigating the Volpes trailed a truck loaded with alcohol from Pittsburgh to South Carolina. Moreover, the government was also tapping the phone line in the produce store the Volpes were using as a front for their criminal activities. Although the phone conversations were never incriminating enough to bring down the Volpes, they reveal that the family had business associates in New York. In July 1931, federal officers seized a truck in Turtle Creek containing one thousand gallons of alcohol. One of the two men aboard the vehicle escaped and about an hour later, the federal agents intercepted a call on the Volpes' line originating from New York and informing Arthur Volpe that one of their men was in the custody of the government. Upon hearing this conversation, the dry agents concluded that the fugitive had called New York to relay news of the seizure.⁸³

The final, but by no means insignificant, source of illegal alcohol was home manufacturing for personal consumption and for sale to commercial bootleggers.⁸⁴ Those who could not afford to purchase illegal alcohol from commercial sources often resorted to making their own wine, beer, or moonshine. It did not take long after the advent of prohibition for dry agents to start arresting people for illegally manufacturing liquor, beer, or wine in their homes. In February 1920, the *Pittsburgh Post* reported the confiscation of twenty-eight gallons of whiskey and two stills from a house on the Northside. The police had received a tip from the garbage company that reported hauling a large amount of used mash from the house.⁸⁵ Operating a still required a basic knowledge of the distilling process. Beginners could pay a professional teacher fifty dollars for a two-week crash course in distilling. And it was for

the best, as a poorly-maintained still could easily explode. Detective Thomas Gross realized this when the twenty-gallon still he was hiding in his house set fire to the building and alerted the neighbors.⁸⁶

Home-manufacturing was widespread, and Ray Sprigle, investigative reporter for the *Pittsburgh Post* and later *Post-Gazette*, saw it as the principal source of alcohol:

Chief source of the ocean of moonshine that went down millions of copper-plated gullets everyday was the vast army of "cookers" who operated stills in million of kitchens and cellars and stables all over Pittsburgh.

Sure, there were thousands of big elaborate stills with capacities up to a couple of thousands of gallons a day. Federal agents were knocking them off regularly. But their production literally wasn't a drop in the bucket of drunks.

Backbone of the bootleg industry was the little cooker with his five, 10 or 20-gallon still. His aggregate daily production would have floated the navy. . . .

Fumes of boiling mash filled the air over the Hill district, the Northside. Almost nightly tenement basements and attics blew up with resounding blasts.⁸⁷

Without a significant increase of the budget allocated to prohibition enforcement, home-manufacturing was impossible to police.

Beer and wine could also be made at home. Section 29 of the Volstead Act authorized the making of cider and fruit juice in one's home. This section created a loophole since wine could, of course, easily be made by letting grape juice ferment. California and Pennsylvania, as two of the five leading grape states, supplied Pittsburgh's immigrants with grapes throughout prohibition. This loophole in the law was a windfall for grape growers, who feared that prohibition would be their ruin. They went as far as marketing their products by adding a warning on the box: "Caution: will ferment and turn into wine."⁸⁸ In addition to making wine, Pittsburghers also brewed beer in their homes. Small neighborhood grocery stores sold all

that was needed to brew beer or make wine: grapes, malt, yeast, caps, etc. Angelo Cammarata, whose father owned a grocery store on the Northside, recalls:

In our grocery store, my dad sold, or we had sold, quite a bit of Blue Ribbon malt. And with Blue Ribbon malt also came along Fleischmann's yeast, and of course bottle caps. What was the purpose? Well, because every family made their own beer for personal consumption. . . . Also we sold our quota of Hires root beer extract, because you know, you had to make liquid refreshments for the children too. So we had our beer and that was a good percentage of our business. I wouldn't say the greatest amount, maybe a fifteen to twenty percent. And everyone made their own beer. Of course during the fall years when the grapes of course would peak and ripe, grapes would come in into the produce yards from the West coast, from everywhere, and a dollar a box, you could buy a box of grapes. You need maybe twenty boxes to make a good barrel of wine, and of course all the Italians made wine, and most, many, many families, German families, got after their beer and they made their wine, but the Italians families all made wine.⁸⁹

Businesses capitalized on home-manufacturing. In 1928, Puritan Malt placed a large billboard at the corner of Centre and Penn Avenue in East Liberty. Their malt extract was conveniently marketed as "Bohemian hop-flavored."

While neighborhood grocery stores provided yeast, sugar, and malt to home manufacturers, commercial bootleggers received their supplies from specialized gangsters, a point that historians too often overlook. As Mark Haller points out, "leading bootleggers and their partners . . . tended to specialize either in importation, in various forms of manufacture, or in wholesaling."⁹⁰ The activities of the Volpe family exemplify the level of specialization of large commercial bootleggers. Legal documents reveal that the Volpe brothers had indeed specialized in one aspect of commercial bootlegging, in their case wholesaling. But one area of specialization that Haller does not mention is the supply of materials needed to produce and bottle alcohol. Although they were not bootleggers per se (usually defined as someone who makes, transports, or sells alcohol illegally), suppliers were an essential component of metropolitan bootlegging markets.

The supply business was a profitable niche. In 1927, the prohibition agents estimated that twenty-five firms in Pittsburgh were involved in the sale of "labels, caps, wrappers and whisky bottles for use in connection with whisky cutting plants."⁹¹ When in 1932 the *Pittsburgh Press* ran a series of articles on Pittsburgh's five most sensational racket murders, only one case, the Volpes', dealt with wholesaling; the first four had to do with the supply business. The first major assassination occurred in mid-1929. On August 6, Steve Monastero was "put on the spot" in front of St. John's Hospital, Northside, "in true gangster fashion to the music of roaring sawed-off shot guns and the rataplan of crackling automatics."⁹² The Monastero brothers "were known as 'corn and sugar barons' dealing in boot-leg equipment from their big warehouse in the Woods Run neighborhood. Neither of them ever was connected with the actual operation of a still or distribution of liquor."⁹³

Morris Curran was the first in the Hill District to realize the profit that could be made from supplying bootleggers with stills, yeast, and sugar. Exploiting the limited success of the enforcement mechanism, Curran acquired a small fortune by giving the address of his clients to the police. Once they had been raided and their equipment confiscated, he offered to sell them a new still. Curran's growing success made him a threat in the eyes of other criminal organizations, and after having escaped several assassination attempts, he was shot in front of his house by a rival syndicate.⁹⁴

When Sicilian baker Joseph Siragusa heard of Curran's death, he took over his business. Siragusa then provided yeast and sugar to most of the East End. Problems arose when he attempted to extend his territory to the Northside. The Northside barons suggested an arrangement, but Siragusa refused it. In September 1931, when Mrs. Siragusa came home from church, she found her husband dead in the basement; three killers had surprised him while he was shaving.⁹⁵ Unfortunately for the authorities, the only witness to the crime, Siragusa's parrot, refused to cooperate.⁹⁶

The king is dead, long live the king; another gangster quickly filled the void left at the head of the Hill District's supply racket. Jack Palmere, the man who rose to power after Siragusa's death, died like his predecessors. In October 1931, after a death threat had forced him into hiding for a few days, Palmere resumed his business. A few hours later, he was shot.⁹⁷ His partners were targets too. The day after Palmere's murder, the *Post-Gazette* ran the following story on its front page: "Pittsburgh racket killers 'got' Sam Amarosa, mysterious figure of the city's booze traffic, yesterday, and left his

naked body blazing in a gasoline-soaked blanket in a Patton township ravine, 12 hours after they had murdered his partner, Jack Palmere, 'big shot' of the liquor supply racket."⁹⁸

Ambitious suppliers naturally sought clients outside of the local scene. In September 1931, the Glenshaw Glass Company, located in suburban Glenshaw, was caught manufacturing lettered liquor bottles and shipping them to various cities in New England, the Midwest, the Middle Atlantic states and as far as Houston, Texas. The owners of the Glenshaw Glass Company, which the dry agents admitted enjoyed an excellent reputation, defended themselves by arguing that their traffic in contraband bottles had amounted to less than five percent of their gross business. In fact, most of the shipments had been billed out to another Pittsburgh firm, the Samuel Mallinger Company. Listed as a bootleg supply house, it was rumored to be handling "nearly every possible article required in the bootleg industry."⁹⁹

Conclusion

Between 1920 and 1933, Pittsburgh was "wet enough for rubber boots," as the *Literary Digest* described it.¹⁰⁰ A year after the advent of wartime prohibition and six months after national prohibition went into effect, J. W. Conners, the first prohibition administrator in Pittsburgh, claimed he had the situation under control. "We feel assured," he said, "that before another anniversary of the prohibition laws is observed, Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania will take on the semblance of a Sahara."¹⁰¹ All of his successors made a similar declaration at some point in their career. All failed to dry up Pittsburgh.

Prohibition was part of a larger set of tensions, as some critics used the language of prohibition to articulate concerns about immigration and foreign radicalism. Shortly after the First Red Scare, Federal Prohibition Commissioner Roy A. Haynes visited Pittsburgh to reorganize prohibition enforcement in Western Pennsylvania. In his speech, he recognized the recent formation of "a bootleggers' aristocracy in great metropolitan centers." Calling upon the citizens of Allegheny County to help him "avert this danger," Haynes linked violations of the Volstead Act with radicalism: "There must be no Bolshevism in America."¹⁰² In October 1920, the *Pittsburgh Post* reported a series of raids on the Northside. At one scene, the

prohibition agents faced "a group of foreigners, perhaps unacquainted with 'Volstead procedure,' [that] formed a human barricade on the steps, refusing to allow the officer to the ground floor."¹⁰³ In some circles, these condescending descriptions of "ignorant foreigners" endured.¹⁰⁴ In 1929, the seventy-three-year-old Methodist bishop Joseph F. Berry, a staunch prohibitionist, spoke in Pittsburgh and argued that "a foreigner who violates the liquor laws of this country is not worthy of staying here ... [I]t is just as sensible to say that America will return to human slavery as it is to say that legalized liquor traffic will come back."¹⁰⁵

The passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in itself represented a success for progressive reformers. Middle-class progressives had designed prohibition to reform the drinking habits of working-class, urban-immigrant populations and to eradicate corrupt political machines, since they associated saloons with the worst of urban politics.¹⁰⁶ Ironically, prohibition in Pittsburgh strengthened the Republican machine and provided new avenues for corruption. Moreover, prohibition raised the price of alcohol way beyond the means of most working-class citizens. Therefore, those who suffered the most from the price increase were middle-class drinkers, not workers.¹⁰⁷

Bootleggers exploited the weaknesses of the enforcement mechanism to profit from prohibition. They broke the law, but we must recognize that the market for illegal alcohol was demand-driven. As Al Capone himself put it, "I make my money by supplying a public demand."¹⁰⁸ In Pittsburgh, ethnic, working-class communities resisted what they saw as an attempt to curtail their liberties. The demand, however, did not come only from that segment of the population. Pittsburgh's illegal drinking establishments ranged from working-class speakeasies on the South Side to the Duquesne Club downtown.

Despite unique variables, Pittsburgh offers a window onto prohibition at large. The federal law was the same in every city, and some of the problems that plagued enforcement in Pittsburgh were not unique to the Steel City. Strong parallels existed between prohibition enforcement in Pittsburgh and in cities like Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York. Pittsburgh, however, is not simply another Chicago. A characteristic that deserves emphasis is the dominance of the local Republican machine throughout the prohibition era. But until we know more about Pittsburgh in the interwar period, other differences will inevitably remain obscure. More work needs to be done on Pittsburgh in the 1920s, and this specialized study hopes to provide a foundation on which to build more comprehensive research.

NOTES

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2. Walter W. Liggett, "Pittsburgh - Metropolis of Corruption," *Plain Talk*, August 1930, 136.
3. "Dry Agents Here Are Satisfied with Work in Spite of Kramer's Remark," *Pittsburgh Post*, 30 July 1920.
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5. David E. Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition*, 2nd ed. (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2000), xvi.
6. Two recent studies have examined prohibition enforcement in New York City and Philadelphia: Paul Frazier, "Prohibition Philadelphia: Bootleg Liquor and the Failure of Enforcement" (Ph.D. diss., SUNY-Albany, 2001); and Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). The only work that deals with prohibition in Pittsburgh is a Ph.D. dissertation by Benjamin Hayllar on the link between politics and racketeering in Pittsburgh between 1800 and 1974. Hayllar dedicates two chapters to the prohibition era but does not systematically study enforcement. Benjamin Lancaster Hayllar, Jr., "The Accommodation: The History and Rhetoric of the Rackets-Political Alliance in Pittsburgh" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1977).
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11. Sinclair, *Prohibition*, 276.
12. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 157.

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14. Louis E. Graham, United States Attorney, to G.A. Youngquist, 17 October 1930; Folder 175; Class 23; Correspondence 1910–45; RG 60; NACP.
15. Opinion, Judge Schoonmaker, Criminal Case 6513, filed 19 June 1930; Folder 175; Class 23; Correspondence 1910–45; RG 60; NACP.
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30. Letter to Booze Dept., 10 November 1925; Folder 2; Class 23; Correspondence 1910–45; RG 60; NACP.
31. “Dry Statute Favors Rich, Clark Claims,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 May 1928.
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35. Bruère, *Does Prohibition Work?*, 182.
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