The Temperance Movement

The temperance movement was an organized effort to force people to abstain—partially or completely—from alcoholic beverages. Such movements occurred in ancient times, but stopped until the wide use of distilled liquors in the modern period resulted in increasing drunkenness. The stirrings of temperance activity began in the 19th century in the United States, Great Britain, and the countries of Northern Europe, where drinking had greatly increased. Relying on personal appeal, such individuals as Father Theobald Mathew in Ireland and Great Britain and John Bartholomew Gough in the United States secured temperance pledges by preaching that moral wrongness, ill health, poverty, and crime were caused by alcoholism.

In 1808 a temperance group was formed in Saratoga, New York, and in the next few decades societies sprang up in other states and in the British Isles, Norway, and Sweden. International cooperation was begun in the latter half of the 19th century, one of the most effective groups being the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in 1874 in the United States. The WCTU and the strong Anti-Saloon League (founded in 1895 and now known as the American Council on Alcohol Problems) gained significant political power in the United States and, turning from moral appeals for moderation and abstinence, demanded government control of liquor.

Backed by church groups and some industrialists, they influenced the passage of many liquor laws and eventually succeeded in securing federal prohibition (1919–33). Among the outstanding women temperance workers of the period were Frances Elizabeth Willard, Susan B. Anthony, and Carry Nation. Among the effects of temperance work were the inspiration of interest in the scientific study of alcoholism, general instruction in the schools on the effects of alcohol, and government regulation. Unlike later temperance movements, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, these earlier movements did not view alcoholism as a disease and relied on government regulation and suppression of the liquor business to control the problem.

1. What was the purpose of the Temperance movement?
2. Why did people think drinking liquor was wrong?
3. What did groups like the WCTU and Anti-Saloon League demand?
4. Name 3 women involved in the temperance movement in America.
5. Do you think alcohol should be illegal today? Explain.
6. What do you think the United States would be like if alcohol was illegal today?

Answer these questions in complete sentences.
Prohibition Becomes the Law

For decades many temperance groups, led mainly by women and various religious organizations, had tried to make alcohol illegal in the United States. Some blamed alcohol for the rising rate in divorces, family problems, crimes, violence, and poverty. Others felt the grain used to make alcohol could be better used for food.

By 1916, 23 of the 48 states had passed anti-saloon laws that closed taverns and prohibited the manufacture of intoxicating beverages. In 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution made the manufacture, sale, import, or export of liquor illegal anywhere in the United States.

The Eighteenth Amendment did not make it illegal to possess liquor or to drink it. Exceptions were also made for liquor sold for medicinal, sacramental, and industrial purposes. It also excluded fruit and grape beverages prepared for personal use at home.

Congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce Prohibition, but the government had too little money and too few people to be effective.

Even though all taverns and saloons were officially closed, illegal taverns and nightclubs—called speakeasies—sprang up everywhere. People smuggled liquor across the border from Canada, imported it illegally from Europe and the Caribbean Islands, and produced it in illegal factories. Prohibition gave criminals a wonderful opportunity to grow rich by providing "bootleg" alcohol.

1. What is your opinion of the use of alcoholic beverages? Does it cause problems?

2. Why do you think some exceptions were made to the Prohibition law?

3. Why do you think Prohibition was called "the Noble Experiment"?

4. Do you think the government has the right to ban alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or any other product? Why or why not?