

INDEPENDENT

Speaker draws parallels to prohibition with today's issues

MARSHALL — Prohibition was a colorful chapter in American history, one that's full of insight into politics and culture.

Historian David Jones of Minneapolis spoke about the prohibition era Tuesday at the Adult Community Center in Marshall. He said issues of the time period resemble some of what's seen today with topics such as the proposed legalization of marijuana.

“There are some definite parallels to today’s issues over alcohol and controlled substances,” Jones said. *“Prohibition centered around how far lic behavior.”*

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He explained prohibition had roots in the temperance movement of the 19th century, which took shape as a result of the conversion from small cottage industries to large scale factory-based manufacturing.

People seeking financial wealth saw strong potential in locating saloons close to factories. Workers began to gather at the saloons after work, and often consumed excessive amounts of alcohol before going home.

“It caused domestic violence, family problems, and job problems,” Jones said. “It was very disruptive for women. They formed temperance chapters to encourage more moderate consumption.”

Even though per capita consumption of alcohol declined in the late 19th century, it continued to be seen by many leaders in society as socially destructive.

The temperance movement was superseded in the 1890s by the Anti-Saloon League, a nationwide group headed by men that sought to ban alcohol altogether. Jones noted that it was a very effective single issue lobbying group, one that within a generation managed to amend the Constitution to ban the manufacture, sale and transport of alcoholic beverages.

“It started with the best of intentions to cure ills of society,” he said. “In the 1920s it instead had the worst possible results. Never before had a law been so widely disobeyed.”

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He explained the constitutional amendment came with a one-year waiting period, and that it did not ban alcohol ownership or consumption. It made Prohibition a class issue since the wealthy had ample opportunity to stock up ahead of time.

He outlined the terms of the Volstead Act named for Congressman Andrew Volstead of Granite Falls, which put forth ways to enforce prohibition.

The Volstead Act created a federal agency, one that was vastly understaffed and that could not handle the widespread illegal liquor industry.

Individual states, upon seeing how it would cost vast sums of money for enforcement, for the most part left it up to federal officials.

Three prohibition exceptions were created; which involved fruit preservation, medicinal prescriptions and religious observances. They led to products that could be used to make homemade wine, along with many different reasons for medical needs that even included old age.

Jones said increased crime and corruption in the 1920s caused many people to rethink prohibition and to eventually begin efforts for a repeal.

“Leaders who publicly favored it at first came forward and said they made a mistake,” he said. *“That had a powerful impact on people who were undecided.”*

The Great Depression caused increased demand for repeal, as leaders pointed to the potential economic benefits of making alcohol legal again. The 21st Amendment, which repealed prohibition, was quickly approved by three-fourths of all states in 1933.

Tuesday's talk was titled *“Prohibition: A Grand Misadventure”* to highlight how a complicated effort to ban alcohol had to be followed by another complicated process to repeal an amendment.

“It's not easy to amend the Constitution,” Jones said. *“It needs support from two-thirds of Congress, the President, and then three-fourths of all states. The only way to repeal an amendment is to create another*

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amendment. With Prohibition, America had to go through the process twice.”

Jones delivers about 20 history programs a month in the Upper Midwest. He has 10 different topics, some of which have been previously featured at the Adult Community Center.

ACC Coordinator Katie Brusven said Jones is a popular speaker among ACC members, as well as anyone with an interest in American history.

“It’s always good to have him back,” Brusven said. “Prohibition is an interesting topic. Audiences like hearing about all the shenanigans, the liquor runs and the craziness.”

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