

Way We Were

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The Last Drink...Or Not?: The Beginning of a New Era

As seen in our bar series, Park City's tumultuous past can be linked in many ways to the local watering holes. However, it is our belief that these saloons and bars not only created a sturdy economic structure for the city, but also allowed the early residents of our town an escape from the harsh realities of daily life in a mining community. At the end of their shifts, miners could amble to Main Street and visit their favorite saloons, where they might find a release from their work day and a sense of community among their peers.

Prohibition, the time in Park City when saloons operated under the ruse of soft drink parlors, started with good intentions, but ended up being a failure. Not only did it *not* prevent the consumption of alcohol, in some cases, it brought out the worst in people. Extreme scenarios included burglary, arrest, and loss of businesses and jobs.

By the early 1930s, Utah and the rest of the nation were in a depression. People were desperate for change, and the government was desperate for income. There was hope: a federal tax on alcohol. However, this could only happen with the end of Prohibition. Congress passed the 21st Amendment, which would repeal the 18th Amendment as long as thirty-six states ratified it. In 1933, Utah became the 36th state to ratify the 21st amendment, ending Prohibition in the United States.

The Park Record failed to elaborate on the end of Prohibition with the same flair they did for its beginning, perhaps because Parkites had continued to make and consume alcohol all along. In fact, from 1933–1934, only three articles discussed the end of Prohibition, and most simply reported the numbers from the vote for repeal with little to no commentary. The only article to offer more than numbers, titled “A Big Wet Victory;” did not mention Prohibition directly, but reported that it would be over soon.¹

After the repeal, Utah created strict alcohol laws and only allowed bars to serve 3.2% beer. According to an oral history interview with Bea Kummer, the end of Prohibition brought its own challenges for saloon owners. Rather than produce their own liquor as

¹ Park Record, 21 July 1933, “A Big Wet Victory”

they had during Prohibition, proprietors struggled with how to operate within the confines of the law (abiding by the 3.2% rule) rather than around it. Even so, saloons managed to thrive for approximately twenty more years, until the failing mining economy and the sin raids of the 1950s put many of the bars (and most of the town) out of business. It wasn't until Park City became a ski resort that its nightlife was revived.

Although 80 years have passed since Prohibition ended, Parkites today share some similarities with their previous counterparts. Many of us still work long hours for little pay while dealing with life's struggles and hardships, just like the miners, prospectors, and cowboys of our not so distant past. Perhaps even we find ourselves ambling along Main Street for a drink amongst our peers and fellow nomads.

If you're interested in learning more about saloons in Park City, stop by the Museum to pick up Gary Kimball's book *Saloons of Old Park City*.



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Caption: Group of men openly partaking in the consumption of alcohol.

Credit: Park City Historical Society & Museum, Emmett Wright Digital Collection