

## **Prohibition and the Speakeasies**

Many things happened in the 1920's. Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly, the invention of bubble gum occurred, and many other exciting events and happenings made headlines. However, after a certain law was set into place, a rebellion began, one that was dark and devious. What was used to bring crime rates DOWN resulted, ironically, in the sky rocketing of gang activity and other criminal offences. This was the prohibition of alcohol in the United States and Canada, commonly referred to as Prohibition. People were not willing to accept these terms, and so the birth of the "speakeasy" came forth.



Speakeasies were hidden sections of an establishment that were used to illegally sell alcoholic beverages during Prohibition. Some speakeasies were similar to today's clubs, as there was singing and jazz performances. To enter a speakeasy, one would need to say a password to the doorman so that the doorman would know whether or not they were really secret agents. It has been said that for every legal saloon before Prohibition, at LEAST half a dozen speakeasies were put up AFTER Prohibition. This was most likely because being the manager of a speakeasy was easy money. The word "speakeasy"

came from a bartender's term: people were supposed to "speak easy" when at a bar, meaning not to draw any suspicion towards buying alcoholic beverages by looking nervous or talking quickly. Slang words used for alcohol included, among others:

- coffin varnish
- white mule
- horse liniment
- monkey rum
- panther sweat
- rot gut
- tarantula juice

These code words were used so that people could fool law officials and the government from finding out about the speakeasies.

The people involved with speakeasies mainly revolved around gangs, who supplied the liquor, in particular Al

Capone and his gang. People went to these speakeasies, or “blind pigs”, as a means to get alcohol after Prohibition came into effect. Speakeasies often featured jazz bands playing within their walls, and the flappers would dance the night away to the tunes of the twenties. The bartenders were often in cahoots with gangs, as well as the owners of the establishment, in concealing these hidden saloons. The owners often acted as doormen to the speakeasies, accepting the passwords to enter within the walls of the hidden bar, and got paid a fine profit for their efforts.



Speakeasies were found everywhere in the United States of America and Canada. Whether they were established underground, or hidden within stores and other businesses, in every urban establishment you entered, you were most likely not far off from an illegal party. These “secret gin joints” were most common in New York, especially in between 45th and 52nd street on 5th and 6th avenues, where almost every single building contained illegal liquor. Manhattans “21” club was probably the most secure club, with four safety switches that could be used during a raid to short circuit and cut the access to all of the doors that contained alcohol.

These establishments came into distinction in the United States during the period known as Prohibition, which was from 1920 to 1933. This lasted even longer in some states. Speakeasies became much more numerous as the Prohibition years progressed. The Volstead Act, which was passed on October 3, 1919, was the act stating that beverages over a 0.5 alcohol volume were illegal. After that day, more and more speakeasies started popping up all over the United States.

Speakeasies were established because of the Volstead Act. The Volstead Act was the act in which the prohibition of alcohol was enforced. Not long after the Act was put in place, people started hustling alcohol into illegal and concealed saloons. The provider of the alcohol would become very wealthy, as many people felt the need to indulge in alcoholic beverages. Therefore many gangsters and criminals or even just regular people found hustling illegal beverages a very profitable act.

To transport liquor to the speakeasies, they used hip flasks, false books, coconut shells, hot water bottles, and garden hoses. People stored the illegal liquor in carriages with babies perched on top and in carpenter’s aprons. There were even men caught hustling liquor over the border in boxes of eggs. They had drained the eggs of the original contents and refilled them with liquor.

In between all of the wild parties going on behind closed doors, the illegal transportation of liquor, and the skyrocketing of gang activities, Prohibition and the Speakeasies that resulted were definitely some of the most secretive and rebellious things to happen in the 1920s.