Project Report: Business Support for Prohibition and Its Repeal

(In connection with summer 2004 Faculty Enhancement Grant)

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Working on this Prohibition project was my primary activity this summer, and the work was most fruitful. Previously the project had been in the exploratory stages, which had mainly involved reading widely, taking notes and writing a very short preliminary working paper, and surveying (via the Internet) archives and manuscript libraries that might be good to visit. This summer I began first-hand research, spending four weeks in the Library of Congress’s Manuscript Division (as funded by this grant) and a week at the Rockefeller Archive Center near Tarrytown, New York (as funded by a separate grant). The summer ends with me having a much stronger grip on my original research questions, a better sense of how and where to continue with the archival research when my spring 2005 sabbatical begins, and about a foot and a half of photocopies to reexamine and incorporate into my work over the course of this semester.

I first visited the Library of Congress for two weeks in June-July and then returned for two weeks in August. (I did not make it to the National Archives, as originally planned, because my exploration of a particular manuscript collection at the Library of Congress was too exciting and productive to abandon.) After looking for information about various Prohibition-relevant manuscript collections at the Library that I had seen cited by researchers, I decided to start with the Papers of Richmond P. Hobson, the Congressional sponsor of the original Prohibition amendment. I spent much of the first two weeks looking through the Hobson papers, which constitute a massive collection. The correspondence and clippings in those papers were an excellent window into the thinking and arguments of the Prohibition movement, including the numerous economic arguments made on behalf of alcohol prohibition. Economic arguments (more productive workers, fewer dollars needed for alcohol-related public safety and public health problems), while never the whole argument, were always part of the case. I also got the sense that many businessmen supported Prohibition not so much from bottom-line considerations as because of the puritanical brand of Protestantism that many followed and which many believed went hand in hand with their business activities. I brought my notebook computer with me to work and took copious notes about what I saw.

My second visit to the Library of Congress was made after I had visited the Rockefeller archives in New York, where I had been struck by the fact that John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and some other prominent businessmen who had originally supported Prohibition later changed course and publicly called for its repeal. I was eager to go through the Library of Congress’s Papers of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment, an advocacy group that had been described as very effective and also heavily business-dominated (some called it “the du Pont group”). The AAPA’s papers are contained in fifteen boxes, and finding and photocopying all I wanted from them consumed my final two weeks at the Library of Congress. The Association’s annual reports were most informative, and their various publications (e.g., “A Business-Man’s View of Prohibition”) laid out the economic arguments against Prohibition. The most common argument seems to be that the government was forgoing a lot of excise tax revenue by keeping alcohol
illegal, and additionally was spending much more on law enforcement because Prohibition had (contrary to earlier claims) led to a massive increase in crime. Much of the AAPA’s papers were clippings, and these were of great value as well. For example, contemporary surveys strongly indicated that businessmen soured on Prohibition not long after the Crash of 1929. The clippings also heavily featured the AAPA’s (apparent) sister organization, the Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform, who seem to get little attention from scholars today but were seen back then as an extremely effective lobby, just as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union had been fifteen years earlier.

I had envisioned this summer project as a springboard into my sabbatical research on the same subject, and it performed that task admirably. I now have a far more detailed knowledge of the nature of business support for Prohibition and its repeal, and am confident that I will eventually be able to produce at least a couple solid articles on the subject and (I hope) a book. For now, processing the reams of photocopies I brought back with me will help keep me fresh and will allow me to expand my preliminary working paper on business support for Prohibition into something more substantial. When I return to Washington, DC for my sabbatical, I will do so with first-hand knowledge of the vast collections of the Library of Congress’s Manuscript Division, where I will surely be spending much time. When I leave DC to visit other archives such as the Anti-Saloon League’s, I will be looking for specific, pertinent information (e.g., the League’s influential businessmen’s council formed by chain store magnate S.S. Kresge) that I read about during my project work this summer. All told, this was one of my most productive summers as a professor, and this Faculty Enhancement Grant helped get me going and keep me going.