

Prohibition, Bootlegging, & the Origins of NASCAR

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about NASCAR’s origins in the Prohibition era, exploring how the ban on the production and sale of alcohol led producers of illegal alcohol (“moonshiners”) to employ drivers with fast cars (“bootleggers”) to distribute their product. When Prohibition ended, many of those drivers began racing one another, often as cheering observers looked on, leading to the earliest NASCAR races. After gaining a foundational understanding of NASCAR’s history, students will independently explore primary sources and current events articles to learn more about NASCAR’s past and present, including learning about women and African Americans who have driven/are driving for NASCAR, and their “Drive for Diversity” initiative.

Grades

8-12

Essential Questions

- How did temperance connect to other Progressive ideals?
- Why did the US enact the 18th amendment?
- What were the benefits and consequences of Prohibition?
- How is NASCAR’s history entwined with the illegal alcohol trade?
- In what ways has NASCAR evolved and/or not evolved since its start?
- What is NASCAR’s “Drive for Diversity” program?

Materials

- Optional pre-readings or teacher reference on the temperance movement in NC:
 - <https://www.ncpedia.org/temperance-movement>
 - <https://docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/temperance.html>
- Warm Up Image, attached
- Prohibition Timeline, handout attached
- [Deep in the Woods](#), 4-minute clip from “Tales of the American South”
- Access to tablets or computers to access online articles and oral history clips (If one device is not available per group, teachers can print the materials and play the oral history clips for the entire class at once.)

Duration

60+ minutes (varies depending on the amount of time provided for discussion and group work)

Preparation

- Prior to this lesson, students should have at least begun their study of [Progressive Era](#) reform so that they can situate bootlegging during Prohibition in the context of the temperance movement and the passage of the 18th amendment.
- This lesson involves mention of NASCAR’s connection to and subsequent banning (June, 2020) of the Confederate flag. Teachers should determine how deeply they want to get into this particular discussion with students and should set very clear parameters before doing so. Without a structure in place, and/or a classroom culture prepared for such potentially controversial conversations, the discussion can prove counterproductive. See Carolina K-12’s [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#) for suggestions.

Warm Up & Review of the Progressive Era

1. As a warm up, project the attached image (NC, 1840) and pose questions such as:

- What do you see/first notice?
 - What aspects of this image are important for figuring out its meaning and when it was created?
 - What is the comparison being set up in this image?
 - What message is the artist trying to convey and what evidence/techniques make you think this?
 - During what period of history do you think this is from and why?
2. As students discuss, layer in questions that review what they already know about Progressive Era reform. Ask them to name as many examples of Progressive reform as they can and write the terms that students come up with up front. (Students may mention reforming corrupt government, direct election of senators, income tax, women’s suffrage, education, child labor, food safety, public health, fair working conditions, moral entertainment, and more.) Ensure students are clear that this image is from the [temperance movement](#) (specifically from 1840 NC) and review how campaigns against alcohol were important to the Progressive movement, often tying their complaints about alcohol to concerns about family welfare (i.e., a husband who was a drunk would be unlikely to hold down a good job or take care of his family.)

Prohibition and “Bootlegging”

3. Hand out the attached timeline of Prohibition to students. Have them follow along as you deliver a mini-lecture that covers some of the highlights and sketch visuals of what they learn throughout the discussion in the left column. (Teachers should edit the timeline as you see fit.)
4. Explain to students that just because alcohol wasn’t legal, that doesn’t mean that Americans stopped drinking. Some started up illegal side businesses manufacturing and distributing alcohol, and organized crime groups sprang up in some big cities to coordinate and protect shipments. The same corruption that the Progressives fought against caused some law enforcement officials to accept bribes to “look the other way” as speak-easies and other illegal saloons sprang up to fill the demand. During *Prohibition*, the term *bootlegging* was popularized when thousands of city dwellers sold liquor from flasks they kept in their boot legs all across major cities and rural areas. (Although, it is believed that the term *bootlegging* originated during the American Civil War, when soldiers would sneak liquor into army camps by concealing pint bottles within their boots or beneath their trouser legs.) The term *rum-running* also most likely originated at the start of Prohibition, when ships from the Bahamas transported cheap Caribbean rum to Florida speakeasies. But rum’s cheapness made it a low-profit item for the rum-runners, and they soon moved on to smuggling Canadian whisky, French champagne, and English gin to major cities like New York City, Boston, and Chicago, where prices ran high.

Formation of NASCAR

5. Explain to students that Progressive reformers certainly didn’t *intend* to create a fertile environment for underground vice and organized crime, but that was exactly what happened. Tell them that perhaps the most surprising unintended consequence of the Prohibition movement was the establishment of a sport that earns more than \$660 million in television revenues every year. Let students guess which sport you’re talking about, and then reveal that it is NASCAR.
6. Explain that while organized crime dominated the liquor trade in northern and midwestern cities, in the South, mountain bootleggers relied on drivers with fast cars to distribute their product to an eager market. Even after Prohibition ended nationwide, many Southern states, counties, and towns remained “dry” and prohibited alcohol, meaning there was still a demand for moonshine and for drivers to distribute it. Over time, as alcohol became legal in more and more places, these drivers began to compete against one another in informal races and eventually NASCAR was born. Let students know that for the rest of the period, they will be delving into NASCAR’s complicated history with Prohibition.
7. Play the 4 minute clip from “Tales of the American South,” [Deep in the Woods](#), which provides an overview of this history. (Note that because this film was developed for a full dome screen, it will appear slightly curved on a traditional flat screen.)

Exploration in Groups

8. Divide students into small groups and with access to the following materials:
 - Source 1: Digital access or printed copies of temperance cartoons from the 1890s from PBS: <https://www-tc.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/static/media/downloads/2013-01-22/bootleggers-slideshow.pdf>
 - Source 2: Digital access to audio clips of oral history interviews with [Junior Johnson](#): <https://soundcloud.com/user-104769270/sets/nascar-lesson-plan-playlist/s-7rmRPgvaBLa>
 - This playlist contains clips from a 1984 & 1988 interview with Junior Johnson. Teachers should determine which clips to have students focus on. Top recommendations include Clip 6 from 1984 (5 min., 30 sec.) and Clip 7 from 1984 (9 min., 20 sec.)
 - Source 3: Digital access to or a print out of Women in NASCAR: <https://www.nascar.com/gallery/women-in-nascar/>
 - Digital access to or a print out of History of African Americans in NASCAR: <https://www.liveabout.com/history-of-african-americans-in-nascar-2471794>
 - Digital access to or a print out of Bubba Wallace Helps Change the Face Of NASCAR, But Racist Images Of The Past Still Linger <https://www.vibe.com/2019/03/bubba-wallace-helps-change-the-face-of-nascar-but-racist-images-of-the-past-still-linger>
 - **Teacher Note:** Students should be prepared that a curse word is referenced in this article (though not spelled out). They should also be prepped for the fact that this article discusses display of the Confederate flag at NASCAR events, and the article was written prior to June of 2020, when NASCAR officially banned the Confederate flag.
9. Ask students to work through the materials while seeking answers to the following guiding questions:
 - What were the benefits and consequences of Prohibition?
 - How is NASCAR's history entwined with the illegal alcohol trade?
 - In what ways has NASCAR evolved and/or not evolved since its beginning?
 - In what ways can sports, in general, be a place to come together and celebrate diversity? Has NASCAR been such a place in the past and in what ways is NASCAR trying to improve the diversity of its participants and fan base? What else might NASCAR do to move this effort forward in authentic and respectful ways?
10. Afterwards, have students report back on their thoughts and findings regarding these questions, and close with a culminating discussion:
 - How would you characterize the history of NASCAR?
 - NASCAR has had a fascinating past, starting with Prohibition-flaunting bootleggers to become a multi-million-dollar national sport with deep roots in the South. In what ways are they responding to calls for diversity and racial justice, and in your opinion, are their actions adequate? Explain.
 - (This final question can be posed for discussion, or as a written reflection.) Imagine you have been invited to pitch a new series on Netflix that will share the history of NASCAR to present. You have exactly 1-2 minutes with the producer. What would you say that the series should feature? What are the most interesting aspects of this history to highlight in the show?

Warm Up Image, NC 1840



Name: _____

PROHIBITION TIMELINE

What was prohibition?

1826

The [Reverend Lyman Beech](#) preached about the evils of alcohol during the Second Great Awakening.

Notes/Illustrations

1840

The Washingtonian Total Abstinence Society was formed. Also called a "Society of Reformed Drunkards," the group promoted temperance and is widely considered to be the precursor to modern Alcoholics Anonymous.

1851-1856

Sale of alcohol was banned in Maine for five years.

December 24, 1873

Eliza Jane Thompson, after hearing a temperance lecture in her hometown in Ohio, led a group of women wearing all black into the streets to sing hymns in support of temperance.

1874

The Women's Christian Temperance Union was founded.

1880

With the death of Eberhard Anheuser, Adolphus Busch became president of Anheuser-Busch. He instituted many innovations at the brewery, including advances in refrigerated rail cars, better pasteurization, and incorporating vertical integration to make the company more efficient.

1893

The Anti-Saloon League was founded.

1900

Anheuser-Busch passed the benchmark of selling a million barrels of beer in a single year.

June 7, 1900

Carrie Nation and a group of temperance protestors smashed up a bar with rocks. Nation would later become well-known for smashing bars and bottles of alcohol with a hatchet.

May 26, 1908

North Carolina held a statewide referendum to prohibit the sale of alcohol. It passed vote of 113,612 to 69,416

December 10, 1913

The Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League enacted a march on Washington to demand nationwide prohibition.

October 28, 1919

The Volstead Act (the National Prohibition Act) is passed.

January 29, 1919

The 18th amendment is passed, banning the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol in the United States.

January 1920

Prohibition took effect.

December 5, 1933

The 20th amendment is passed and Prohibition is lifted.

December 14, 1948

The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing is formed.

June 19, 1949

The first NASCAR race is held in Charlotte, NC.