

Crushing Prohibition

Northern California's Wine, Women, and the Fight For Repeal



Winery wives helped pick grapes.
Photo Courtesy Beringer Vineyards



A woman sells California wine bricks in New York.
Photo Courtesy of the San Francisco Examiner

Research Question

How did the women of Northern California's wine country shape the fight for the nullification or repeal of National Prohibition?

Methodology

This work integrates the history of Northern California's wine country women within the national story of the Repeal of Prohibition, focusing on Napa, Sonoma, and San Francisco Counties, as well as the San Francisco Bay Area. The largest challenge in researching women who were challenging norms and mores and breaking boundaries and laws is a lack of documentation. However, information can be gleaned from existing archival sources. This study relies heavily upon:

- Oral History Interviews in the Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Collection and Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series, Bancroft Library, University of California, and Wine Library Associates of Sonoma County Oral History Series, Sonoma County Wine Library
- Local Newspapers, circa 1915-1935
- Local Archives, including the Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society, Napa Valley Historical Society, Petaluma History Room, Sonoma County Wine Library, Sonoma State University's Gaye LeBaron Collection, and winery files.

Related Literature

While not a full bibliography, the following sources are the most influential in the field: Cinotto, Simone. *Soft Soil, Black Grapes: The Birth of Italian Winemaking in California*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. Heintz, William. *California's Napa Valley: One Hundred Sixty Years of Wine Making*. San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1999. Kyvig, David E. *Repealing National Prohibition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. McGirr, Lisa. *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016. Meers, John R. "The California Wine and Grape Industry and Prohibition," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 46 No. 1 (March 1967): 19-32. Murdock, Catherine Gilbert. *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Neumann, Caryn E. "The End of Gender Solidarity: The History of the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform in the United States, 1929-1933." *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 31-51. Okrent, Daniel. *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. New York: Scribner, 2010. Ostrander, Gilman M. *The Prohibition Movement in California, 1848-1933*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957. Pinney, Thomas. *A History of Wine in America, Volumes I & II*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 2005. Root, Grace C. *Women and Repeal: The Story of the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform*. New York: Harper, 1934. Rorabaugh, W. J. *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. Rose, Kenneth D. *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Rose, Kenneth D. "Wettest in the West: San Francisco & Prohibition in 1924," *California History* 65 No. 4 (Dec 1986): 284-295. Sosnowski, Vivienne. *When the Rivers Ran Red: An Amazing Story of Courage and Triumph in America's Wine Country*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Weber, Lin. *Prohibition in the Napa Valley: Castles Under Siege*. Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2013.

Thesis

In California's San Francisco Bay Area, the unique economic and social importance of wine shaped the women's campaign for the repeal of Prohibition, forcing a different path from the rest of the nation. Immigrant women, several of whom wintered in San Francisco but summered in Napa or Sonoma Counties, outnumbered native-born American women, giving them a distinctive role in elite society and politics. The result was a unique and more positive connection between rural and urban communities surrounding the San Francisco Bay. While the national leadership of the repeal movement demanded respectability by distancing themselves from women connected to alcohol, in Northern California, the women of wine country who fought for the cultural and economic significance of wine were joined by women who shared their rejection of the increased crime, hypocrisy, and violence associated with insufficient enforcement of the Volstead Act. Together, they led a non-partisan, multi-pronged assault to nullify or repeal the Eighteenth Amendment.

Analysis

While far from being the only women involved in opposing Prohibition, the stories of a few women illustrate the avenues that women found to opposed Prohibition. While wine histories focus on the efforts of men and national Repeal histories focus on New York women, the women of Northern California played a significant role in the Repeal campaign.



At the death of her father, Bertha Beringer took over management of Beringer Vineyards. She applied for a license to make sacramental wine, sustaining legal production. Moreover, her decision to dehydrate and sell dried grape bricks harnessed the home wine making market. She was also alleged to have hosted a "whisper sister," or small speakeasy.
Image courtesy of Beringer Vineyards.



Isabelle Simi Haige inherited Simi Winery from her father. She aged wine in her cellar and sold grapes for sacramental wine. At the end of Prohibition, she turned spoiled wine into brandy and opened one of Sonoma County's first tasting rooms.
Image courtesy of Simi Winery.



At the death of her husband, Mathilda Foppiano ran the vineyards and winery. She continued planting grapes and prunes, allegedly bootlegging some of the wine on the side. She gained local fame when Federal Agents disposed of spoiled wine, creating an intoxicating river through the streets of Healdsburg.
Image courtesy of Sonoma County Library Digital Collections.



Emelia Saini Cuneo not only worked in the family vineyard, she took control of bootlegging operations. Cuneo took advantage of gendered stereotypes to avoid detection, driving the family's brandy from Dry Creek to ready markets in San Francisco.
Image courtesy of Healdsburg Museum & Historical Society.



Letizia Tonneti Rafanelli planted vineyards during Prohibition and taught her family to tend the vines. She taught her husband how to make wine, brandy, sherry, and port, which she then sold out the back door.
Image courtesy of A. Rafanelli Winery.



Caterina Corda Nichelini sold wine drawn from the kitchen faucet, even to Prohibition agents. When the agents arrested and jailed her husband, she continued to run the vineyard and winery.
Image courtesy of Napa Valley Register.



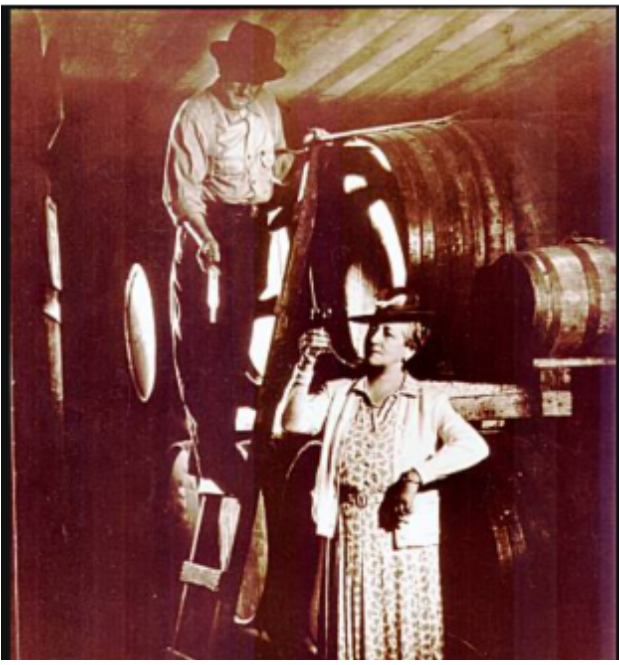
Mrs. William B. Hamilton, former head of the San Francisco WCTU, stunned dry leaders when she shifted her support to Repeal in 1933, disgusted by the rising crime and violence ushered in by Prohibition enforcement.
Image courtesy of the Pomona Progress Bulletin.



Cecilia Casserly headed the California chapter of the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR). As the public face of the WONPR, she fought to increase membership and publicity for the cause.
Image courtesy of the Santa Cruz Evening News.



The Women of the Ku Klux Klan fervently supported Prohibition enforcement. Their active support of the violent activities of the KKK, complicity with the openly nativist and racist rhetoric, and intimate role in planning raids and attacks disgusted many women, driving them away from Prohibition and towards the Repeal campaign. The WKKK were accidental allies for Repeal.
Image courtesy of the Oakland Tribune.



Fernande de Latour bridged winery and society women. Active in business at Beaulieu Vineyards, she managed staff, threw wine-filled dinner parties, and courted customers. Most importantly, she served on California's WONPR delegation to Washington, DC, defying national norms against inclusion of women associated with the production of alcohol.
Image courtesy of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Conclusion

The different dynamic of California's wine families, most of whom were Italian, French, German, or Spanish immigrants, and their integration into the social elite of the San Francisco Bay Area, meant that nation-wide characterizations of the WONPR as a group of Conservative, former Prohibitionists who never touched alcohol, did not adequately account for the place of the wineries within the Repeal movement. The study of wine, women, and Prohibition in the greater San Francisco Bay Area therefore illuminates the degree to which Anti-Prohibitionists and the "home protection" enthusiasts worked together to end a law that was socially and economically discriminatory and unenforceable.



Beringer Employees celebrate the end of Prohibition.
Photo Courtesy of Beringer Vineyards



Young women from Cloverdale celebrate Repeal.
Photo Courtesy of Beringer Archives.



Korbel sends FDR a case of California champagne to celebrate the end of Prohibition.
Photo Courtesy of Sonoma State University's Gaye LeBaron Collection