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Prohibition and Social Reform



The temperance movement was one of the few respectable outlets for women's activity outside the home, and thus gave many women their first taste of political power. Pictured here in 1921 are members of the Wood County Chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Gift of Eva and John Shinew.

Americans like to think of their nation as a utopia, free from the social and economic ills of the rest of the world. When they recognize problems in crime and poverty, they organize to combat the causes. The nineteenth century was full of reform movements aimed at bettering the conditions of the disadvantaged or improving life for everyone. Abolition, women's suffrage, welfare and prison reform were just some of the goals of these reformers. But no reform movement is as infamous today as prohibition.

The temperance movement began before the Civil War as part of religious revivalism. Men and women were urged to "take the pledge" and to lead others to abstinence. They saw temperance as a means of keeping minds and bodies "undefiled." It was very much an individual choice. Gradually, however, organizations unaffiliated with particular churches began to grow, drawing support from those who saw alcohol as the root cause of poverty and misery. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union had chapters all over the nation, and while men were also active in the movement, it was women who led the way, believing that temperance would protect their families. The records of the WCTU chapters in Amsden ([MS 187](#)), Bettsville ([MS 216](#)), and Hicksville (MMS 397), Ohio as well as Defiance (MMS 395), and Wood (MMS 396) Counties along with the early records of the Ohio Anti-Saloon League (MMS 425 mf) can be studied at the Center for Archival Collections.

As urban populations grew, slum conditions worsened and reformers blamed alcohol. Alarmed, WCTU chapters in small towns began to push for local legislation to protect the communities' way of life. In Findlay, Ohio, for instance, a "liquor blacklist" was kept by the police department. Sale of alcohol to persons named to the list by their wives, husbands, brothers, children, or parents was punishable by a stiff fine. Other communities outlawed saloons, and drinking age laws were introduced. The personal pledge was no longer enough.

Not everyone saw alcohol as an evil. The northern Ohio climate was excellent for raising the fruits and grains used in the production of wine and beer that were a part of everyday life for German, Irish, Italian, and other European immigrants. Wineries, distilleries, and taverns also served this lucrative trade and poured vast resources into fighting the temperance cause.

The defense of the family was an unassailable goal that protected the movement from its own most radical tactics. The same belief that had kept women in their homes as the vessels of family virtue was the very one which gave them the added moral clout they needed to push for a variety of reforms. It was no coincidence that enactment of Prohibition and woman suffrage occurred at nearly the same time.

The Toledo police arrest records for the 1920s reflect the raids on speak-easies and rum-runners, and the growth of organized crime. Businesses like the Lonz Winery (MS 150) sometimes continued selling unfermented fruit juices, but many others closed. Ironically, it was Prohibition which made it fashionable for women to drink. The Great Depression showed that alcohol was not the only thing responsible for poverty and misery, and at last, the Great Experiment was ended.

--Lee N. McLaird

Law Enforcement Records

Wood County Deputy Sheriff Ellsworth Beaverson displays a truckload of "moonshine" confiscated after the apprehension of two bootlegging suspects in 1923. Donated by the Wood County Historical Society.

The history of law enforcement in northwest Ohio is documented in the records of several agencies. A wealth of information about social and economic conditions as well as crime can be gleaned from the records of justices of the peace, constables, municipal marshals, police departments, and county sheriffs.

From its creation in 1802, the township justice of the peace helped protect individual rights at the local level. The justice's tasks included dealing with the forms of indenture or apprenticeship, bastardy cases, assault and battery, larceny, ownership of strays, trespassing, debt, destruction of property, settlement of estates, and performing marriages. The jurisdiction of the justice was limited to small legal suits and crimes, generally between individuals, that normally would not come before the higher courts.



Civil and criminal dockets, which are still in existence at many townships or at the Center for Archival Collections, include a summary of actions brought before the justice showing the case number, plaintiff in civil actions, defendant, charges or reason for hearing, final disposition, and costs. *Indenture and apprenticeship records*, *marriage records*, and *records of estrays* were also kept by the justice of the peace. After 1900, traffic violations began to take up more of the caseload, and are usually of less interest to researchers. The office of justice of the peace was abolished in 1958 with the establishment of the county court system.

The township constable worked closely with the justice of the peace, serving as the law enforcement officer for the justice's court. The constable's duties were to preserve the peace, serve the civil process, and serve and execute writs, orders, and warrants. Today, township trustees may employ a constable or police officer for law enforcement duties within the township in the same way that cities employ municipal police officers.

Constable records or complaint reports show the name and address of the complainant, nature of complaint, results of investigation, and name of investigating constable. *Constable case files* contain statements of facts by arresting officers, accident reports, and driving records.

The marshal or police chief is the principal officer of the municipality, with similar duties to that of the township constable. The *police blotter*, or *register of arrests* contain the prisoner's name, residence, occupation, place of birth, sex, race, age, charge or complaint, property removed from person, bail, turnkey, cell number, date and how disposed of, and cost of meals.

The duties of the sheriff have changed very little since the office was created in the Northwest Territory. The sheriff is required to attend court proceedings and maintain order, serve all county warrants and execute court orders, preserve the peace, and apprehend and incarcerate criminals. The sheriff's jurisdiction includes all municipalities and townships within the given county.

Researchers may find several sheriff's records invaluable. When the court renders a judgment against a county resident, the record of the execution and attachments in that case is kept in the *Home (or Domestic) Execution Docket*. This record may include the judgment, date execution ordered and received by sheriff, description of property levied, and fees. It also may contain a record of sheriff's sales showing date, amount of sale, and purchaser. The *foreign execution docket* is similar, except that it records executions and attachments ordered by courts outside the county on local residents.

The **jail registers** contain a record of the county's prisoners, showing for each: name, number, place of birth, offense, commitment date, by what authority committed, term of confinement, and date of discharge. *Criminal history files* contain case histories of persons arrested showing name and number of prisoner, date of arrest, offense, previous criminal record, fingerprints, arrest report, disposition, and photograph of the prisoner.

Other records dealing with crime and the law may be found in the offices of mayor, municipal and county courts, the county coroner, and the prosecuting attorney. The CAC has a variety of such records.

Law enforcement records provide a look at the "darker" side of society, showing how, day by day, people have tried to control the security of their property and their way of life.

--Victor Wagher