1920’s- The Decade That Roared

Social Issues, 1920-1929

The 1920s era went by such names as the Jazz Age, the Age of Intolerance, and the Age of Wonderful Nonsense. Under any moniker, the era embodied the beginning of modern America. Numerous Americans felt buoyed up following World War I (1914-1918). America had survived a deadly worldwide influenza epidemic (1918). The new decade would be a time of change for everyone — not all of it good.
(http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1564.html)

Many people believe that the 1920s marked a new era in American history. The decade often is referred to as the "Roaring Twenties." Following World War I, many returning veterans and men and women who had moved from to cities to seek wartime jobs had no desire to return to working in factories or on the farms. They hoped to live a more comfortable life, like the ones that they could see on the movie screens or read about in magazines and newspapers. New social activities promoted a more carefree lifestyle. Couples could enjoy playing miniature golf, participating in dance contests, listening to the radio or the phonograph, and participating in any number of other events. The flappers -- women who dressed provocatively, had bobbed hairstyles, went to clubs, smoked, and drank bootleg alcohol -- represented this supposedly new and less-inhibited lifestyle.

At first glance, it does appear that lives for all Americans, including women, became more open during the 1920s. Some historians disagree with this conclusion. Many of the same activities attributed to Americans during the 1920s actually predated the decade. Dancehalls existed well before the 1920s. Women drinking and smoking also occurred earlier. Women dressing in a provocative manner happened before the Roaring Twenties. What seems to have made the 1920s so different was that middle-class white men and women were engaging in these activities.

The increasing number of Americans participating in supposedly immoral acts like drinking and smoking caused many people to believe that their fellow citizens had forgotten the importance of religion and morality in everyday life. People seeking a return to a quieter past implemented Prohibition, which ended the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States and its territories. Religious fundamentalists believed that Americans must take the Bible literally and attempted to ban the teaching of evolution in schools.

(http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org)
The 1920s saw the culmination of fifty years of rapid American industrialization. New products seemed to burst from American production lines with the potential of revolutionizing American life. Other products that had previously been toys for the rich were now available to a majority of Americans. The standard of living increased as the economy grew stronger and stronger. The results were spectacular. The America of 1929 was vastly different from the America of 1919.

The automobile was first and foremost among these products. The practices of Henry Ford made these horseless carriages affordable to the American masses. Widespread use of the automobile ushered in changes in work patterns and leisure plans. A host of support industries were launched. Dating and education were changed by the automobile. Radio usage brought further changes. For the first time, a national popular culture was supplanting regional folkways. Americans across the continent were sharing the same jokes, participating in the same fads, and worshipping the same heroes. Housework was minimized with the introduction of labor saving devices. As a result, leisure time was increased.

The bleak outlook and large sacrifices of the wartime era were now a part of the past. Young Americans were looking to cut loose and have a good time. Prohibition did not end alcohol usage. The romantic subculture of the speakeasy kept the firewater flowing. Organized crime flourished as gangland violence related to bootlegged liquor plagued America's cities. Flapper women strove to eliminate double standard values. Young females engaged in behaviors previously reserved for men including smoking and drinking. The Harlem Renaissance brought a new form of entertainment. The sounds of jazz bands had appeal that transcended African American audiences, as thousands flocked to hear the new sounds.

The 1920s ushered in more lasting changes to the American social scene than any previous decade. Escapism loomed large as many coped with change by living in the present and enjoying themselves. The economic boom that unleashed the transformation and its consequences made the Roaring Twenties an era to remember.
The Age of the Automobile

Cruising in automobiles such as the Duesenberg pictured above was popular in America, but this typically Sunday afternoon family past time was largely discontinued during the depression.

Perhaps no invention affected American everyday life in the 20th century more than the automobile.

Although the technology for the automobile existed in the 19th century, it took Henry Ford to make the useful gadget accessible to the American public. Ford used the idea of the assembly line for automobile manufacturing. He paid his workers an unprecedented $5 a day when most laborers were bringing home two, hoping that it would increase their productivity. Furthermore, they might use their higher earnings to purchase a new car.

Ford reduced options, even stating that the public could choose whatever color car they wanted — so long as it was black. The Model T sold for $490 in 1914, about one quarter the cost of the previous decade. By 1920, there were over 8 million registrations. The 1920s saw tremendous growth in automobile ownership, with the number of registered drivers almost tripling to 23 million by the end of the decade.

Economic Spin-offs

The growth of the automobile industry caused an economic revolution across the United States. Dozens of spin-off industries blossomed. Of course the demand for vulcanized rubber skyrocketed. Road construction created thousands of new jobs, as state and local governments began funding highway design.

Even the federal government became involved with the Federal Highway Act of 1921. Gas stations began to dot the land, and mechanics began to earn a living fixing the inevitable problems. Oil and steel were two well-established industries that received a serious boost by the demand for automobiles. Travelers on the road needed shelter on long trips, so motels began to line the major long-distance routes.

Effects of the Automobile

The social effects of the automobile were as great. Freedom of choice encouraged many family vacations to places previously impossible. Urban dwellers had the opportunity to rediscover pristine landscapes, just as rural dwellers were able to shop in towns and cities. Teenagers gained more and more independence with driving freedom.
Americans experienced traffic jams for the first time, as well as traffic accidents and fatalities. Soon demands were made for licensure and safety regulation on the state level. Despite the drawbacks, Americans loved their cars. As more and more were purchased, drivers saw their worlds grow much larger.

**Impact of the Automobile**

Automobile technology led directly to the other major factor that fostered a teenage culture: the consolidated high school. Buses could now transport students farther from their homes, leading to the decline of the one-room schoolhouse. Furthermore, **Americans were realizing the potential of a longer education**, and states were adding more years to their compulsory schooling laws. As a result, a larger number of teenagers were thrown into a common space than ever before. It was only natural that discussions about commonalties would occur. Before long, schools developed their own cultural patterns, completely unlike the childhood or adult experience. School athletics and extracurricular activities only enhanced this nascent culture. The American teenager was born.

**The Fight Against "Demon Rum"**

Amendment 18 to the Constitution (1919) had prohibited the manufacture, transport and sale of intoxicating liquor. Prohibitionists anticipated that Prohibition would alleviate social problems and bolster the economy. However, many people disliked the law and imbibed in unlawful nightclubs called speakeasies. Gangsters took control of bootlegging (illegal distribution of liquor) and violent lawlessness erupted. Lacking public support, the federal government was virtually unable to enforce Prohibition.

Saloons were closed, bottles were smashed, and kegs were split wide open. When the states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages was outlawed. Protestant ministers and progressive politicians rejoiced and proclaimed a holier and safer America. It was predicted that worker productivity would increase, families would grow closer, and urban slums would disappear. Yet for all its promise, prohibition was repealed fourteen years later, after being deemed a dismal failure.

**Advantages to Prohibition**

In fairness, there were advantages to prohibition. Social scientists are certain that actual consumption of alcohol actually decreased during the decade. Estimates indicate that during the first few years of prohibition,
alcohol consumption declined to a mere third of its prewar level. Although no polls or surveys would be accurate, health records indicate a decrease in alcoholism and alcohol-related diseases such as cirrhosis of the liver. Family savings did increase during the decade, but it was difficult to determine whether the increase was due to decreased alcohol consumption or a robust economy.

Disadvantages to Prohibition

The minuses seemed to outweigh the pluses. First, federal allocation of funds to enforce prohibition were woefully inadequate. Gaping loopholes in the Volstead Act, the law implemented to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment, encouraged abuse. Alcohol possession was permitted for medical purposes, and production of small amounts was permitted for home use. The manufacturing of near beer — regular beer without the alcohol — was also permitted. The problem was that to make near beer, it was first necessary to brew the real variety, so illegal breweries could insist their product was scheduled to have the alcohol removed. Soon a climate of lawlessness swept the nation, as Americans everywhere began to partake in illegal drink. Every city had countless speakeasies, which were not-so-secret bars hidden from public view.

While the number of drinkers may have decreased, the strength of the beverages increased. People drank as much as they could as fast as they could to avoid detection. Because alcoholic production was illegal, there could be no regulation. Desperate individuals and heartless profiteers distilled anything imaginable, often with disastrous results. Some alcohol sold on the black market caused nerve damage, blindness, and even death. While women of the previous generation campaigned to ban alcohol, the young women of the twenties consumed it with a passion.

The jury took nine hours to find Capone guilty on five counts of income tax evasion. Organized Crime

The group that profited most from the illegal market was organized crime. City crime bosses such as Al Capone of Chicago sold their products to willing buyers and even intimidated unwilling customers to purchase their illicit wares. Crime involving turf wars among mobsters was epidemic. Soon the mobs forced legitimate businessmen to buy protection, tainting those who tried to make an honest living. Even city police took booze
and cash from the likes of Al Capone. After several years of trying to connect Capone to bootlegging, federal prosecutors were able to convict him for income tax evasion.

The Eighteenth Amendment was different from all previous changes to the Constitution. It was the first experiment at social engineering. Critics pointed out that it was the only amendment to date that restricted rather than increased individual rights. Civil liberties advocates considered prohibition an abomination. In the end, economics doomed prohibition. The costs of ineffectively policing the nation were simply too high. At the deepest point of the Great Depression, government officials finally ratified the Twenty-First Amendment, repealing the practice once and for all.

**Flappers**

The battle for suffrage was finally over. After a 72-year struggle, women had won the precious right to vote. The generations of suffragists that had fought for so long proudly entered the political world. Carrie Chapman Catt carried the struggle into voting awareness with the founding of the League of Women Voters. Alice Paul vowed to fight until an Equal Rights Amendment was added to the Constitution. As the 1920s roared along, many young women of the age wanted to have fun.

**Life of the Flappers**

Flappers were northern, urban, single, young, middle-class women. Many held steady jobs in the changing American economy. The clerking jobs that blossomed in the Gilded Age were more numerous than ever. Increasing phone usage required more and more operators. The consumer-oriented economy of the 1920s saw a burgeoning number of department stores. Women were needed on the sales floor to relate to the most precious customers — other women. But the flapper was not all work and no play.

By night, flappers engaged in the active city nightlife. They frequented jazz clubs and vaudeville shows. Speakeasies were a common destination, as the new woman of the twenties adopted the same carefree attitude toward prohibition as her male counterpart. Ironically, more young women consumed alcohol in the decade it was illegal than ever before. Smoking, another activity previously reserved for men, became popular among flappers. With the political field leveled by the Nineteenth Amendment, women sought to eliminate social double standards.
The Flapper Look

The flapper had an unmistakable look. The long locks of Victorian women lay on the floors of beauty parlors as young women cut their hair to shoulder length. Hemlines of dresses rose dramatically to the knee. The cosmetics industry flowered as women used make-up in large numbers. Flappers bound their chests and wore high heels. Clara Bow, Hollywood's "It" Girl, captured the flapper image for the nation to see.

Many women celebrated the age of the flapper as a female declaration of independence. Experimentation with new looks, jobs, and lifestyles seemed liberating compared with the socially silenced woman in the Victorian Age. The flappers chose activities to please themselves, not a father or husband. But critics were quick to elucidate the shortcomings of flapperism. The political agenda embraced by the previous generation was largely ignored until the feminist revival of the 1960s. Many wondered if flappers were expressing themselves or acting like men. Smoking, drinking, and sexual experimentation were characteristic of the modern young woman. Short hair and bound chests added to the effect. One thing was certain: Despite the potential political and social gains or losses, the flappers of the 1920s sure managed to have a good time.

The economy, technology and science

At the beginning of the 1920s, the United States was converting from a wartime to peacetime economy. When weapons for World War I were no longer needed, there was a temporary stall in the economy. After a few years, the country prospered. In this decade, America became the richest nation on Earth and a culture of consumerism was born.

It was the time of the $5 workday, good worker pay for those days. People spent money for better roads, tourism, and holiday resorts. Real estate booms, most notably in Florida, sent land prices soaring.

Invention

Technology played a vital part in delivering the economic and cultural good times that most of America enjoyed during the 1920s.

1920s Cars

Henry Ford blazed the way with his Model T; he sold more 15 million of them by 1927. Ford's assembly line means of production was the key. The automobile's popularity, and construction of roads and highways — pouring fresh public funds into the economy — brought tremendous economic prosperity.
The radio found its way into virtually every home in America. Following the first public station, KDKA, in Pittsburgh, thousands more went on the air across the country. Radio became a national pastime; many listeners would gather in their living rooms to tune in sports, concerts, sermons, and "Red Menace" news.

The year 1922 introduced the first movie made with sound, The Jazz Singer, starring Al Jolson. And in 1926, the advent of Technicolor made movies more entertaining and memorable. Consequently, the movie industry became a major part of American industry in general.

Charles A. Lindbergh's pioneering flight across the Atlantic Ocean in the Spirit of St. Louis in 1927 did much to stimulate the young aviation industry.

Canned foods, ready-made clothing and household appliances liberated women from much household drudgery. The influence of Ford's methods of mass production and efficiency enabled other industries to produce a huge variety of consumer appliances.

However, not everyone benefited from technology.

The number of people living and working on farms reached its peak at 32,530,000 back in 1916. The majority of the farms were relatively small operations. New technology in the 1920s introduced a number of impacts on the American farm.

The year 1920 was a historic watershed. For the first time in the United States, more people were living in cities than on farms.

Science and the public health

Science, medicine and health advanced remarkably during the same period. Albert Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics in 1921. Diphtheria became better controlled in 1923 by newly introduced immunization. An interest developed in nutrition, caloric consumption and physical vitality. With the Flapper's focus on dieting and her popular look came a significant change in the dietary habits of Americans as a whole — less fat and meat, and more fruits and vegetables. The discovery of vitamins and their effects also occurred around the same time.

The stock market

It seemed as though Dow Jones Industrial Stock Index would never quit increasing. Stock speculation went sky high in the bull market of 1928-1929. No one suspected that a signal of the end would occur on October 24, 1929, with the infamous stock market crash, and that more than a decade of depression and despair would follow such an era of happiness and prosperity. Until that time, American life seemed fundamentally sound. The typical American was still hardworking and sensible. The coming storms lay unseen beyond the horizon.