

THE 1920S

The changes wrought in the United States in the 1920s were far-reaching and enduring. By the time it ended, the work week had dropped from 60 to 48 hours. For the first time, the masses considered play as important as work--the weekend family outing and vacation had become things workers expected as a matter of course.

From 1920 to 1925, dress hemlines raced upward from the ankles to the knees--heights that only a few years before were seen only in houses of prostitution. Girls and young women caked makeup on themselves a fashion previously seen only on women of ill repute. Dresses were loose and skimpy; swimsuits were tight and skimpy--the result of both changing morality and an explosion in new industrially fabricated synthetic materials such as rayon.



Social barriers were falling--thanks partly to Prohibition--where the rich and the commoner rubbed elbows in the common pursuit of drink. Gangsters and captains of industry consorted freely. Mingling among the classes went on at venues such as boxing matches--a sport that not too long before was disreputable but was now pulling in its first multi-million-dollar gate receipts. College and professional sports too were booming, and sports stars--Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Lou Gehrig, Red Grange, Rogers Hornsby, Bobby Jones, Man o' War, Knute Rockne, Bill Tilden, and Helen Wills--were as highly regarded as presidents.

The business of America had become business. Paper wealth in the stock market was booming. One of the decade's best-selling books referred to Jesus as the first businessman, and people believed. Sophisticated advertising and public relations were convincing people to buy things they didn't really need.

People by the millions were buying cars, radios and other accouterments at a pace that outraced their incomes, thanks to the availability of easy credit, or "the installment plan."



Bad breath and underarm odor were anathema, so the magazine ads said. Gizmos and gadgets would make the housewife's job easier--again, so the ads said. Better living through chemistry meant more junk and canned food to increase leisure time. Pesticides were being used widely for the first time to increase production and make prettier apples.

The little wooden church wasn't good enough anymore either. Big religion, Twenties-style (and 1990s style, for that matter), meant the massive gatherings of Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple Macpherson.

People were swamped by media products, thanks to giant conglomerates of radio stations, magazines, newspapers being built by William Randolph Hearst and others. In 1920, practically nobody owned a radio. By decade's end, practically everyone owned one--and participated in a mass, communal form of entertainment never before experienced. Not only was big news big, but sometimes little news was bigger. Tabloids printed millions of column inches about insignificant murders and adultery affairs, and relegated disarmament conferences and the like below the fold.

The pace of modern life led to excessive, irrational pursuits, and short-lived fads. Speed and daring captivated everyone. Aviators were treated like royalty by heads of state every time they flew across continents or large bodies of water or set new altitude records. Aficionados of souped-up cars were obsessed with breaking the land speed record every week. People were fascinated with the death-defying adventures of North Pole explorer Richard E. Byrd, flyer Charles Lindbergh, and desert traveler T.E. Lawrence.

On the less epic scale, parties were getting crazier and dances such as the Charleston were getting goofier. Mah jongg, crossword puzzles, and the inexplicable song "Yes, We Have No Bananas" became national obsessions.

Breaking the law was the rule, not the exception, and speakeasies padlocked were not speakeasies closed--arising as they did like a phoenix in the basement two doors down.

With war no longer a preoccupation--at least in the Western world--the arts and invention flourished. Never before, and not since, has there been a decade populated by as many giants in the arts, sciences and commerce.

In the creative realm, the 1920s were a convergence point in history, where many of the great artists and thinkers of the late 19th century were still alive and working, but passing the torch on to a generation that would lay the foundation of thought for the rest of the 20th century.

- In the world of the stage, there was a similarly staggering slew: Josephine Baker, George Ballanchine, John Barrymore, Irving Berlin, Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Diaghilev, Isadora Duncan, Oscar Hammerstein, Al Jolson, George S. Kaufman, Jerome Kern, the Marx Brothers, Eugene O'Neill, Anna Pavlova, Will Rogers, Florenz Ziegfeld, among many more.
- In the sciences, visionaries such as Robert Goddard, Hermann Oberth, and Edwin Hubble were daring to reach for the stars. The very building blocks of matter, atoms and nuclear forces, were being described by Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein, and Enrico Fermi. Putting discoveries about electrons to practical use in electronics such as radio and television was the goal of such inventors as Lee DeForest, Philo Farnsworth, and Vladimir Zworykin. Harvey Cushing was advancing brain surgery while Thomas Hunt Morgan was characterizing the very genetics that made up the human body.

While artists, inventors and thinkers were changing the world in their way, brazen free-thinking social reformers were causing status-quo old-timers bewilderment. Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois were advocating black protest. Labor leader John L. Lewis was battling business. Margaret Sanger and Mary Ware Dennett were shocking sensibilities with their open talk about birth-control clinics and contraceptives. Mahatma Gandhi was working to bring the sun down on the British Empire. Aldo Leopold was raising consciousness about nature.

From the battle over teaching evolution (the Scopes trial of 1925) and the freedom of speech issues considered in the Supreme Court case of immigrant Rosika Schwimmer in 1929, to the balancing of the rights of society against the right of hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan to hold unpopular opinions, Americans in the 1920s confronted serious fundamental constitutional issues that American society has yet to resolve.

I. Postwar American Attitudes

A. Disillusionment following World War I, particularly among veterans, artists, and intellectuals (the Lost Generation)

1. Society was lacking in idealism and vision
2. Sense of personal alienation
3. Americans were obsessed with materialism and outmoded moral values

B. Fear of Bolshevism

1. Success of Russian Revolution combined with epidemic of strikes frightened Americans into "Red Scare" mentality of 1919-1920
2. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer arrested 6000 suspected radicals and deported many following several bombings

C. Fear of foreigners

1. Over 800,000 immigrants came to America in 1920-21, with 2/3 coming from southern and eastern Europe
2. To preserve the northern European racial composition of America, quotas were set up to restrict new immigration in a series of acts, including the National Origins Act of 1924 which cut immigration to 2% of each nationality from the 1890 census.
3. Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian anarchists, were executed in 1927 for murder despite protests from within and outside the U.S. that anti-immigrant attitudes prejudiced their trial.

D. Rise of the nativist Ku Klux Klan

1. Reconstituted partly after the success of the movie *Birth of a Nation*, the new KKK was more anti-foreign than anti-black. Its strength was in the midwest and South.
 - a) Targets: foreigners, Jews, Catholics, pacifists, communists, and evolutionists
 - b) By 1925, 5 million members had joined to march in parades, burn crosses, and hold secret meetings
 2. Movement lost strength, particularly after it was exposed as a money-making scheme by organizers

- 21: Baseball's World Series is reported by radio.
- 21: With Bessie Smith's first record, this decade will see the flowering of the blues.
- 21: Quartz crystals keep radio signals from wandering.
- 21: The word "robot" enters the language via Karel Capek's play *R.U.R.*
- 21: Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
- 21: Cleveland Playhouse becomes first U.S. resident professional theater.
- 21: D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* examines sexual, psychological relationships.
- 21: Western Union begins wirephoto service.
- 21: Nobel Prize in Literature to French novelist Anatole France.
- 21: Eugene O'Neill's play *Anna Christie* opens; will win Pulitzer for drama.
- 21: Skywriting.

- 922: Movie tickets sold weekly in the U.S.: 40 million.
- 922: Emily Post publishes *Etiquette*.
- 922: *The Reader's Digest* begins its monthly run.
- 922: Germany's UFA produces a film with an optical sound track.
- 922: Singers desert phonograph horn mouths for acoustic studios.
- 922: Orphan Annie enters the comic pages.
- 922: The first portable radio. Experimental car radio.

4. Name a song from the 20s.
3. When was the World Series first reported by radio?
5. Who advanced brain surgery in the 20s?

6. Who was Drew Barrymore's Grandfather?

7. Why did the K.K.K. lose strength?

8. When did the first portable radio come out?

9. List one disillusionment following World War 1.