

A Dash of Ballyhoo

The 1920's have been given many nicknames: the Jazz Age, Roaring Twenties, Turbulent Twenties, Teeming Twenties, Whoopee Era, Fabulous Decade, Lawless Decade. But maybe the best ... of all is *the Era of Wonderful Nonsense*.

The peak of the nonsense - wonderful or not - came after 1925. The second half of the glorious decade produced such wacky characters as Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly, the flagpole sitter. Calling himself the Luckiest Fool Alive, this ex-sailor first perched atop a pole on a St. Louis building for seven days. Over succeeding months, he more than doubled that time to become, despite considerable competition, the nation's No. 1 flagpole sitter. Most of the flagpoles Shipwreck adorned were at least fifty feet high....

How did the fellow do it? Shipwreck's chair was a rubber-covered wooden seat strapped tightly to the round flagpole ball. He took only fluids-milk, coffee, broth-hoisted up to him in a bucket. He slept with thumbs anchored into two holes bored into the wooden seat. During one sleet storm he used a hatchet to chip ice from his body.

The flagpoles were usually atop hotels, for Shipwreck's endurance feats brought much business. People peered up at him from the street, and any who paid fifty cents could ride to the roof for a closer view. One who did this was a redheaded flapper, aged eighteen. As she stood there, the man next to her said, "He's nothing but a damn fool" "He is not," she replied angrily. "He knows just what he's doing." She then slapped the man's face.

Informed of this episode by a note in his food bucket, thirty-two year-old Shipwreck expressed a natural desire to meet the girl. She was hoisted up to him by a rope around her midriff, and the two pitched woo [talked lovingly] in mid-air. When Shipwreck climbed down they got married.

More madness came from the high-powered activities of promoter C. C. Pyle, whose many stunts included a transcontinental foot race, starting on the West Coast. ... In New York, another promoter hired Madison Square Garden for a multi-event marathon. In one corner was a group of nonstop talkers In another, a rocking-chair derby. And so on. These assorted marathons were open twenty-four hours a day and in the early hours of the morning revelers [merrymakers] from New York's five thousand speakeasy night clubs dropped in to gape at the fun.

Not all was nonsense in the Nonsense Era. For unabashed sadism [unashamed cruelty] there were the dance marathons in which young couples danced around and around, with only a few minutes of each hour for sleep. Often dancers passed out from sheer exhaustion in partners' arms. By the rules, they had to be awakened and they usually came up screaming and clawing. "This," one reporter stated, "is known as 'going squirrely,' and it gives everyone lots of laughs." ...

Mass hysteria swept to a morbid crest [all-time sadness] in 1926, with the death of movie actor Rudolph Valentino, the Sheik of Sheiks Thirty thousand people, their emotions

churned higher by skillful press-agentry, descended on Frank E. Campbell's Memorial Chapel, where the actor [was laid out in] ... evening dress. Plate-glass windows were smashed and women trampled. With order restored, one hundred and fifty persons a minute began filing past the [coffin] The line of mourners never seemed to slacken.

Nonsense songs, fads, silly sayings reflected the atmosphere. On the vaudeville stage, comedians got laughs with the brand new She Was-Only jokes: "She was only a farmer's daughter, but she sure did know her oats"; "She was only a doctor's daughter, but my how she operated"; "She was only a bootlegger's daughter, but I love her still"; "She was only a cab-driver's daughter, but oh, you auto meet her."

College boys in raccoon coats raced the roads in Model T flivvers [cars], the sides covered with slogans like Rattle of the Century, Girls Wanted, Plus-Four Brakes, Ain't She Sweet? ... [Young people] bought bright yellow slickers [raincoats], spent hours stenciling [marking] them with ... catch phrases: Thanks for the Buggy Ride ... Show Me the Way to Go Home. Flappers and boy friends brought the ukelele into prominence [popularity], as fingers whipped the elementary instrument through a frenzied "Sheik of Araby" or "Who Stole My Heart Away?"

New slang popped up. A cute flapper was "a beaut," or "the eat's meow," "eat's whiskers," or "eat's pajamas." Her boy friend was a "cakeater," "jazzbo," "jellybean," or "lounge lizard." Anything a flapper or jellybean liked was "nifty" Rapture was expressed by "hot diggity dog," or "hot diggity." A tough guy was a "hard-boiled egg"; a stupid girl a "dumbbell," or "Dumb Dora." ...

At the close of a happy date, a flip flapper would say to her [boyfriend] ... "Thanks for the buggy ride." To tell him off, she'd snap, "Go fly a kite." If the cakeater made her laugh, she'd giggle, "000, you slaughter me!" A pet expression of disbelief was, "It's the bunk." Or, "Banana oil" ...

Liquor, bathtub gin, or bootleg hooch, was "booze," "giggle water," "giggle soup." Speakeasies were "whoopee parlors." Anything strange was "goofy," anyone strange a "goof." To add emphasis a [girl said] ... "I should hope to tell you!" or "And *how!*" The girl never said yes or no. Sometimes she'd give a long-drawn-out "Ab-so-lute-ly," or "Pos-i-tive-ly." Other times it was a scramble of both "*Abso-tive-ly,*" or "*Pos-a-loot-ly.*"