

The Roaring Twenties

Doughboys returning home to the United States from their victory in World War I found that the country was different. Life was not as simple as it had been before the war. Things seemed to be moving faster.

There were plenty of new, well-paying jobs. More money was available, and there were plenty of new products to spend it on.

People were able to buy such things as new automobiles and record players. Housewives could buy **appliances** (machines) to help with their housework. They could buy canned food and ready-made clothes. For entertainment there were movies, radio and jazz music.

For a person without enough money, there was a new way to buy. People could now buy "on time", simply by putting a little money down and making a payment each month.

People began investing a great deal of money into the **stock market**. They bought shares of the growing companies of America. They felt the future of America was in the growing businesses.

Leaders of businesses were also spending more money. They wanted to expand and make their businesses even bigger than before.

America was entering a special time. Many believed it was a golden age. Some called that time the *Roaring Twenties*. Others called it the *Golden Twenties*, the *Jazz Age*, or the *Dollar Decade*.

The 20's turned out to be a special time, but not for the reasons many people thought. It was not a golden time when people had everything they wanted.

America changed in the 20's, and was never the same again. In many ways America grew up. Many believe the 20's to be one of the most

interesting and exciting times in the history of America.

Politics of the Twenties

In 1920 Americans elected Warren G. Harding as President. His campaign saying was to "return to normalcy" after the war. Americans wanted to forget the war years.

They also wanted to stay out of foreign affairs. The Congress had voted against joining the League of Nations. The highest **tariff** (tax on imports) ever passed by Congress on goods from foreign countries was passed in 1922.

When President Harding died in 1923, Calvin Coolidge became President. "Silent Cal", as his opponents called him, believed in leaving business alone.

He would do nothing to control how money was being spent by business and investors in large amounts. He said, "The business of America is business." That is, Americans made their living from business. For this reason, he thought the government should not control business.

There are two threads that run through the 20's, tying it together like a neat package. One was the **prosperity** of America. That is, almost everybody had money to spend. The other was **lawlessness**, the fact that many Americans chose not to obey the law of the land.

Prohibition

The 20's were only 16 days old when one of the most unpopular laws ever passed took effect.

On January 16, 1920, the **Eighteenth Amendment** became law, making it unlawful to make or sell any alcoholic drink. Except for medical, industrial, or religious reasons, the "cork was on the bottle" for good, or so people thought. '

What really happened after the **Prohibition** amendment was passed was that the production and sale of alcohol went into the hands of **gangsters** (criminals). They made fortunes and then used the money to pay for other criminal activities.

Illegal alcohol was brought to the country by people called **rumrunners**. It was sold by **bootleggers**. "Bathtub gin" was made all across America and sold as the "real stuff".

Illegal bars, called **speakeasies**, sprang up. Anyone who wanted a drink could find one. The use of alcohol in America actually went up rather than down.

Some people died from drinking homemade alcohol. Others died in the gang wars fought for control of the alcohol trade.

Gangsters such as Al Capone of Chicago became known across the country. So did the prohibition agents who were able to catch some of the dealers. There were 1,500 of these agents who were hired to enforce the laws.

Two of the most famous of the agents were Izzy Einstein and Moe Smith. They used outlandish disguises and bad jokes to capture bootleggers. Moe would often dress as a woman and Izzy as her husband. Together they took in five million bottles of alcohol.

Almost everybody lost because of the Prohibition amendment. Many companies dealing in alcohol went out of business. People openly broke the law to get a drink. Some judges and police became corrupt because they took **bribes** (money given to cover something up) from bootleggers.

The only ones who gained from Prohibition were the bootleggers and corrupt officials. It was an experiment that would end in 1933 with the repeal of the Prohibition amendment.

Prohibition was not the only cause of lawlessness in the 20's. The **Ku Klux Klan**

came back.

The Ku Klux Klan was an organization that had begun after the Civil War to frighten and even kill black freemen and Carpetbaggers.

After many years, the Klan had faded into history - or so many people thought.

William Simmons had heard about the Klan from his black nurse when he was a child. In 1915 Simmons and a group of men in Atlanta, Georgia, decided it was time for the Klan to come back to life. They wanted to fight blacks, and also Jews, Italians, all immigrants, and anyone else they did not understand.

The Klan grew quickly. By 1921 the membership had climbed to over one million. By 1924 there were over four million members. They used the same methods of hurting and frightening people that the earlier Klansmen had used.

Most of the members were in the south and southwest. There were also Klan groups as far north as New York and as far west as California.

The Klan became a political force in some states, such as Texas, Ohio, Oklahoma and Oregon. In those states Klan members controlled the state governments. The Klan lost much of its power as the years went by, but it is still alive today.

The Good Life

Most Americans did not have to deal with this unhappy side of America. They were busy making money, spending it and having a good time. Wages were high and there were plenty of jobs.

Americans wanted to go to the movies at least once a week. They wanted to have nice cars and new refrigerators and washing machines in their kitchens.

Companies began to **advertise** (tell about their products) in the new magazines that were

flooding the market. The number of **chain stores** (stores owned by one company in many locations) grew. In 1920 the A&P Company had 4,000 stores. By 1929 it had almost 16,000.

Many other companies grew as much or more. Because more automobiles were being sold, many service industries grew up around the automobile industry. New tires and gasoline were produced and sold. In 1920 Standard Oil had only 12 gas stations around the nation. By 1929 it had more than 1,500.

The 20's were an exciting time. With more money, people had more time for fun and entertainment.

The **movies** became a big business. Stars such as Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford became millionaires. Rudolph Valentino was loved by millions of women.

Women, called **flappers**, began wearing short dresses and smoking cigarettes in public. Many even began wearing makeup.

The 20's were also an exciting time for the arts in America. This time has been called a "golden age" for writers such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis.

It was also a time when great steps forward were made in education. People were changing their ideas about what education should be. Many wanted education to be freer and more fun for children.

Sports events also became popular. There were many sports heroes and heroines. Jack Dempsey won the world heavyweight boxing championship. Babe Ruth became the hero of millions when he hit home runs for the New York Yankees more often than any other man in history.

A woman named Gertrude Ederle swam across the English Channel from France to England. This took over 14 hours - the best time ever for the channel crossing.

Some of the entertainment that the people of the 20's enjoyed seems rather silly today. 44. For example, a man named "Shipwreck" Kelley sat on top of a fifty-foot high flagpole for two weeks.

People danced for days in what were called **marathon dances**. The last couple still on their feet after the others had fainted was the winners.

College students ate goldfish and stuffed themselves into closets and other small places.

The winners of those contests were often billed in the newspapers as champions or heroes. Newspapers of the day became more and more sensational. They used large pictures and started contests to gain people's attention.

The real hero of the 20's was a young flyer named **Charles Lindbergh**.

The airplane was a new and exciting invention. Airplanes had been used in World War I, and were used in peacetime to fly the mail around the country. Some people did not trust them or the people who flew them, because they were too new.

Lindbergh was a mail pilot and a *barnstormer*, a person who flew planes at air shows and county fairs. He believed the airplane was a part of the nation's future.

In 1927 a company offered a prize to anyone who could fly non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean. Other pilots had tried in planes with two engines and had failed. Lindbergh decided to do it in a single-engine plane, all alone.

He raised the money in his hometown, St. Louis, Missouri. He designed the plane and found a company to build it. He called it *The Spirit of St. Louis*.

Most airplane experts said that he was crazy. They said no pilot could stay awake long enough to make such a flight. They said that no single engine could run long enough for the flight.

Lindbergh proved them all wrong. He made his flight from New York to Paris in just over 33 hours. When he landed, he was met by cheering, screaming crowds. He became one of the heroes of the 20's for his flight.

Lindbergh was called the Lone *Eagle* and *Lucky Lindy*. He went on to become one of the pioneers in building and testing passenger planes.

Business Fails!

In 1929 an even higher tariff on goods from other countries was passed in Congress. This made it almost impossible for countries in Europe to trade with us. We did not have enough market for our products.

The high tariffs that had been passed hurt farmers. They were not able to sell their goods overseas. Farm income began to go down.

By 1929 things were also looking bad for many companies. They could not sell all of their products. Many of them were going out of business.

People lost the money they had invested in the companies. When businesses closed, workers lost their jobs. They could not afford to pay for the things they had bought "on time".

The United States was facing one of the worst periods in its history, the stock market crash and the **Great Depression**. So did the Roaring Twenties end.

Spotlight on Henry Ford's Auto

Henry Ford had a dream.

"I will build a motor car that will be used by millions of people. It will be large enough for a family to use, yet small enough for one person to run and take care of. It will be built by the best men of the best materials at the lowest price possible."

Ford had always been interested in engines. He had worked on farm machinery as a

youngster. At 16 he went to work in a watch factory. He soon turned to tinkering with engines.

In the late 1890's many people were trying to build a "horseless carriage". Ford put together a car in a small workshop behind his home. In 1896 he tried out his invention. It worked.

Many thought that he was too young to have developed such a car. It took him more than ten years to raise the money to start a factory for building cars.

In 1917 he realized his dream with the coming of the **Model T** automobile, the car that was to change the way the world lived.

Ford's Model T's were all alike. It was a popular joke that "you could buy any color you wanted so long as it was black."

The car was strong and easy to care for. More and more people wanted to buy Ford cars.

To build cars faster, Ford developed the **assembly line**. On an assembly line a car would be completed as it moved down a line of workers. Each man would work on the same part of every car, as the partly completed cars passed by him.

Ford could make his cars more cheaply by using the assembly line method. The cost of a new Ford Model T went down to \$290. Soon he opened new factories to make more cars.

Other companies got into the auto business, copying Ford's assembly line methods. More and more automobiles were sold to the American public.

Those cars changed America. People could go far from home in search of jobs and friends, or even entertainment. The cities spread into the suburbs. New roads were built. New industries sprang up to care for the autos on the nation's roads.

Ford's invention had indeed changed the face of America.