

The Roaring 20's Reading

The “Roaring Twenties” was a decade in which nothing big happened—there were no major catastrophes or large events—at least until the stock market crash of 1929—yet it is one of the most significant decades in U.S. history because of the great changes that came about in American society. The Twenties were known by various images and names: the Jazz Age, the age of the Lost Generation, flaming youth, flappers, radio and movies, bathtub gin, the speakeasy, organized crime, confession magazines, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Charles Lindbergh, Babe Ruth, Bobby Jones, the Great Crash, Sacco and Vanzetti, Al Smith, cosmetics, Freud, the “new” woman, the Harlem Renaissance, consumerism—all these images and more are part of the fabulous Twenties!

The 1920s provided something of a roller coaster ride for the American people. The euphoria surrounding the end of World War I was clouded by the great flu epidemic of 1919, the Red Scare of that year, and the frustration and bitterness left over from the fight over the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. The progress made toward reform under progressive Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson slowed to a crawl, as many Americans began to feel the need for a break from the moral intensity of the Progressive Era.

The 1920 election resulted in a Republican landslide. Harding/Coolidge received 16,152,200 popular votes and 404 electoral votes compared with Cox/Roosevelt totals of 9,147,353 popular votes and 127 electoral votes. Most memorable about the election of 1920 is that for the first time women had the right to vote.

Though the Twenties was a decade of enormous social change, myths about the era sometimes exaggerate the reality of that strange and often troubling time. While consumerism boomed and many new inventions—radios and telephones, for example—became everyday items for many Americans, it was also a time of much bitterness, conflict, and disappointment. The economic boom left many in the dust, America's traditional openness to immigration was severely cut back, and racial tensions rose. Prohibition, the “noble experiment,” caused ordinary citizens to resort to criminal behavior, even as government often winked and looked the other way.

Following the Great War, as the only major Western nation not devastated by that conflict, Americans felt pretty good about themselves. The continued economic growth, political conservatism, and general absence of concerns over foreign affairs led Americans to think of themselves as “having it made.” Proof of America's spirit and achievements seemed to be personified by Charles Lindbergh as he made his historic flight from New York to Paris in 1927. But the 1920s also saw deep divisions in the country despite the “roaring” atmosphere brought about by bathtub gin, speakeasies, flappers, women voting, jazz, sports, and all the rest. Then at the end of that self-satisfied, raucous, and somewhat grumpy decade, when the expectations of many Americans knew no bounds, the stock market crashed and the Great Depression hit.




During the 1920s everybody seemed to be buying everything, and businesses set out to meet the demands of consumers, producing new products in record-breaking quantities. Cars, radios, appliances, ready-made clothes, gadgets, and other consumer products found their way into more and more American homes and garages. Americans also started buying stocks in greater numbers, providing capital to already booming companies. All the signs pointed upward, and starry-eyed men and women began to believe that it was going to be a one-way trip, possibly forever.

Henry Ford’s assembly line not only revolutionized production, it democratized the ownership of the automobile. Ford showed that handsome profits could be made on small margin and high volume. By 1925 his famous Model T sold for less than \$300, a modest price by the standards of the 1920s. Americans had never had it so good. (Many, of course, would not have it so good again for a long time

The Twenties were also known as a time of revolution in manners and morals, when young men, and especially young women, threw off many of the social restrictions of the Victorian era and began conducting themselves in ways that scandalized the older generations. Young women liberated themselves in everything from hairstyles and clothing to deportment and public behavior, smoking cigarettes and drinking from flasks of illegal bootleg whiskey and bathtub gin. The ’20s were known as the jazz age and saw the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, divisions between town and country that went beyond mere style, the Harlem Renaissance, an enormous growth in production of items such as automobiles once seen as luxuries, and a general feeling of near euphoria, as if for the middle and wealthy classes, at least, things would just keep going up.

The Twenties were in another sense a reactionary decade—a reaction against Victorian ideas of morality that saw young men and women openly defy what their parents still viewed as proper behavior for relationships between the sexes. Young people went wild, in the eyes of some, though studies have suggested that there was more talk than action. It was also a rebellious age, in which women continued the process of breaking out of older social patterns as they had begun to do during World War I. They changed their dress styles, cut their hair short, smoked in public, and were not above taking a nip from a flask of Prohibition whiskey.

Based on the Reading: Fill in how the following changed during the 1920’s. LIST as many examples as you can find from the reading...

<p style="text-align: center;">Automobile</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Women</p> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Appliances</p> 

		What's <i>installment buying</i>?
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Directions: Define each of the key terms below.

1. Return (Back) to Normalcy
2. Prohibition
3. 18th amendment
4. 21st amendment
5. Anarchist
6. Communist
7. Red Scare
8. Nativism
9. Quota Act
10. Harlem Renaissance