

America

In The 1920's

In 1920's America - known as the Jazz Age, the Golden Twenties or the Roaring Twenties - everybody seemed to have money. The nightmare that was the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 was inconceivable right up until it happened. The 1920's saw a break with the traditional set-up in America. The Great War had destroyed old perceived social conventions and new ones developed.

The young set themselves free especially, the young women. They shocked the older generation with their new hair style (a short bob) and the clothes that they wore were often much shorter than had been seen and tended to expose their legs and knees. The wearing of what were considered skimpy beach wear in public could get the Flappers, as they were known, arrested for indecent exposure. They wore silk stockings rolled just above the knee and they got their hair cut at male barbers. The President of Florida University said the low cut gowns and short skirts "are born of the devil they are carrying the present generation to destruction".

Sport: This was also the era of great sports champions such as Babe Ruth the baseball player and Bobby Jones "the greatest amateur golfer of all time."

Jazz Music: Linked to the growth of an alternate generation, was the growth in jazz. This led to new dances being created which further angered the older generation. The Charleston, One Step and Black Bottom were only for the young and the last one angered the establishment by name alone. The most famous jazzmen were Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and Benny Goodman.

The combination of the new music, new dances and new fashions outraged many:

"The music is sensuous, the female is only half dressed and the motions may not be described in a family newspaper. Suffice it to say that there are certain houses appropriate for such dances but these houses have been closed by law.

"The Catholic Telegraph".

Hollywood: The 1920's made Hollywood. 100 million people a week went to the movies. In the 1910's the stars of movies were never named (especially true for women) but by the 1920's stars were world famous. For many films, the star was more important than the film itself and they could earn a fortune. Slapstick comedy was dominated by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy and Fatty Arbuckle. The leading women were Clara Bow and Mary Pickford and the leading male star was Rudolf Valentino. When he died in 1926 aged just 31 people queued for miles to see his embalmed body and riots broke out.

The decade saw the first "talkie" - "The Jazz Singer" starring Al Jolson. Many silent screen stars lost their jobs as their voices sounded too strange or their accents were difficult to understand.

The stars lived lavish lifestyles - Beverley Hills was the place to live and they cultivated in people's minds the belief that you could succeed in America regardless of who you were.

Crazies: Along with jazz went the 'crazies' when people would do crazy things for fun such as sitting on top of a flag pole for as long as possible; marathon dances that went on until everybody had dropped and wing flying when you stood strapped onto the wing of a flying plane until it landed.

The Flappers also went out without a man to look after them, went to all -night parties, drove motor cars, smoked in public and held men's hands without wearing gloves. Mothers formed the Anti-Flirt League to protest against the acts of their daughters. But after the horror of the First World War, the

younger generation mistrusted the older generation and 'did their own thing' which flew in the face of the establishment.

The person who the Flappers most looked up to was Clara Bow - the vamp in the film "It".

Prohibition and other topics: Even murderous gang bosses achieved stardom. The most famous of all was Al Capone - the gangster boss who all but controlled Chicago. His fame rivaled that of Hollywood's superstars.

In 1918, Prohibition had been introduced into America. This law banned the sale, transportation and manufacture of alcohol. However, there was a ready market for alcohol throughout the 1920's and the gangsters provided it. Capone's earnings at their peak stood at \$60 million a year from alcohol sales alone with \$45 million from other illegal ventures. Notorious in Chicago, Capone achieved national celebrity status when he appeared on the front of the celebrated "Time" magazine.