

The 1920s: A New Era in American History

“Girls dancing the Charleston. Gangsters carrying machine guns. Charlie Chaplin playing comical tricks. These are some of the pictures that come into people's minds when they think of the United States in the 1920s. The roaring twenties. Good times. Wild times” (Callaghan, 2000, p. 92). The images of the 1920s - jazz, bootleggers, flappers, talkies, the Model T Ford, Babe Ruth, Charles Lindbergh's history-making flight over the Atlantic have remarkably marked the US history. Hard-won vote for women, racial injustice, censorship, widespread social conflict, and the birth of organized crime, on the other hand, were the bitter memories of the roaring twenties In the Twenties, the American people soared higher and fell lower than they ever had before. The controversial era also evidenced an unprecedented economic prosperity, sweeping social change and the emergence of many institutions, ideas, and preoccupations (Miller, 2003).

The US Economy in the 20s

The Jazz Age takes its name from jazz music, which saw a tremendous surge in popularity among many segments of society. Among the prominent concerns and trends of the period include the public embrace of technological developments (typically seen as progress)—cars, air travel and the telephone—as well as new trends in social behavior, the arts, and culture (Wikipedia, 2006, Jazz Age). The decade following World War I was also one day called as “the Roaring Twenties,” and it was a time of unprecedented prosperity. Between 1920 and 1929, the nation's total wealth nearly doubled, manufactures rose by 60 percent, for the first time most people lived in urban areas — and in homes lit by electricity; “they made more money than they ever had before and, spurred on by the giant new advertising industry, spent it faster, too — on washing machines and refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, 12 million radios, 30 million automobiles” (Ward, Burns, n.d.)

The Gross National Product of the nation rose from \$74 billion at the beginning of the decade to more than \$104 billion in 1929. Wages were up. Workers had more money to spend, and they spent it on automobiles, home appliances, radios, phonographs, and popular entertainment, especially movies. Millions of ordinary Americans invested in the stock

market for the first time as stock prices soared upwards. (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000, Economic Prosperity)

Because of the First World War, other countries owed the United States a lot of money, and therefore with the surplus of raw materials and plenty of factories the country was rather well-off in the 20s. The US national income superseded those of Britain, France, Germany and Japan put together in total indicators. More goods were produced by American factories every year with booming automobile production. Mass production of automobiles and the urbanization of America also led to a new culture and a whole new way of organizing cities, towns, and markets as cars made it possible for millions to live in suburbs, some with their own shopping centers.

There was no national highway system in the 1920s. Roads were still better suited to horses and buggies than to automobiles. Motorists faced frequent mechanical breakdowns, flat tires, and getting stuck in mud holes. When traveling long distances, they often found it difficult to find lodging or rest rooms, stopping at campsites and then small tourist cabins, since motels as we know them today did not exist. Automobile congestion in cities contributed to a mass exodus to a new place to live -- the suburb. The growth of suburbs eventually caused the decline of inner-city business districts as suburban shopping centers began to replace older concentrated business districts ((WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000, Effects of the Automobile). Callaghan (2000) points out that “between 1922 and 1927, the number of cars on the roads rose from under eleven million to over twenty million” (p. 92). As Pavilion (2005) puts it:

One of the reasons for this was the introduction of hire-purchase whereby you put a deposit on an item that you wanted and paid installments on that item, with interest, so that you paid back more than the price for the item but did not have to make one payment in one go. Hire-purchase was easy to get and people got into debt without any real planning for the future. In the 1920's it just seemed to be the case that if you wanted something then you got it. (p. 1)

Many Americans became rich owing to the industrial growth, while businessmen were highly respected by the 1920s US society. The growing wealth of companies benefited everybody as

businessmen took on more workers and paid more wages (Callaghan, 2000). According to the then president, Hoover, by 1928 America had got rid itself of poverty.

On the other hand, farm commodity prices fell dramatically following World War I. By 1925 there was a serious downturn in the building industry, which was in a state of depression four years before the stock market crash of 1929. Black sharecroppers in the South were barely surviving economically on an average wage of about \$350 a year. When the stock market crashed in 1929, millions of people were thrown out of work, fortunes were lost and businesses were ruined ((WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000, Economic Prosperity). In the southern states the African Americans were forced to do menial labour for very poor wages, living miserable lives in poverty. Unfortunately, in the 1920's the black population did not reap any benefit from the economic boom as “their only real outlet was jazz and dancing though this was done to entertain the richer white population, and sport, especially boxing” (Pavilion, 2005). A survey in 1929 showed that half the American people had hardly enough money to buy sufficient food and clothing. In the industrial cities of the North, such as Chicago and Pittsburgh, immigrant workers still labored long hours for low wages in steel mills, factories and slaughter houses. More than that, American farmers found themselves growing products they could not sell, and therefore by 1924, around 600,000 of them were bankrupt.

In 1928 the American people elected a new President, Herbert Hoover. Hoover was sure that American prosperity would go on growing and that the poverty in which some Americans still lived would be remembered as something in the past. He said that there would soon be a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage. (Callaghan, 2000, p. 93)

Major Conflicts

America's history in the 1920's is unimaginable without ‘prohibition’ and the gangsters. In particular, the 18th Amendment prohibited the making or selling of alcoholic drinks in the United States. The supporters of ‘prohibition’ claimed that “it would stop alcoholism and drunkenness and make the United States a healthier, happier country” (Callaghan, 2000, p. 95). But it was clear to

some, that millions neither wanted this law nor would respect it. There was obviously a huge market for what in the 1920's was an illegal commodity. It was the gangsters who dominated various cities who provided this commodity. Each major city had its gangster element but the most famous was Chicago with Al Capone. (Davis, n.d.). 'Speakeasies', illegal drinking places, opened in basements and backrooms all over the country: the city of Chicago had 10,000 of them whereas New York had 32,000. Criminals called 'bootleggers' provided speakeasies with alcoholic drinks. Bootlegging was a dangerous business since competition between rival mobs sometimes caused bloody street wars, fought out with armored cars and machine guns. With an annual income over 100 million dollars, Al Capone became the real ruler of Chicago with private army of nearly a thousand thugs equipped with machine guns (Callaghan, 2000). Therefore, prohibition was one of the central disputable areas over the 20s between those who favored and those who wished to repeal it, when reformers succeeded in passing a constitutional amendment that forbade the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages.

The supporters of prohibition believed that alcohol consumption limited one's ability to participate productively in the new industrial society. Conversely, the opponents believed that an outdated moralism was responsible for Prohibition and argued that the changes of the past several decades, which they deemed to be progressive and objective, had rendered the morality of preindustrial America obsolete. (Davis, n.d.)

By the end of the 1920s prohibition was regarded by most Americans as half scandal, half joke. The growing dishonesty and corruption made them lose respect both for the law and for the people who were supposed to enforce it. Prohibition was finally given up in 1933, though it had done the United States lasting harm, "it made law-breaking a habit for many otherwise respectable Americans. And gangsters remained powerful. Many used the money they had made as bootleggers to set up other criminal businesses" (Callaghan, 2000, p. 95).

A high degree of racial and ethnic conflicts was also an integral part of the 1920s, the golden age of the Ku Klux Klan, which was basically based in the south of America. Here they targeted

those set free after the American Civil War - the African Americans, which they have never considered as being free and terrorised African American families based in the South. According to Pavilion (2005), the Ku Klux Klan was a violent organisation, since "white hooded KKK burnt churches of the black population, murdered, raped, castrated etc and they were rarely caught as most senior law officers in the South were high ranking KKK men or sympathetic with their aims - which was a white protestant south. On top of that, contrary to a popular belief, KKK did not target only the Blacks as "also hated were the Jews, Catholics, liberals etc but most hatred was directed against the poor black families in the south who were very vulnerable to attack" (Pavilion, 2005, The Ku Klux Klan).

Jazz and the Movies

The 1920s witnessed the rapid development of the motion picture industry, especially in Hollywood. For most of the decade, the films were silent. Nonetheless, the public loved them and flocked to movie theaters on a regular basis. In 1927, the first "talkie," *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, ushered in an even more exciting era of mass entertainment. Sales of radios at the beginning of the decade amounted to just \$2 million, but by the end of the decade soared to \$600 million. Radio networks like CBS and NBC became a major industry, changing the way the country received news, music, sports, entertainment, and national advertising. NBC's radio coverage of the 1927 Rose Bowl was the first coast-to-coast network broadcast (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000, *The Impact of Popular Culture*) "The third decade of the new century, a time of technological marvels, flappers, flashy automobiles, organized crime, bootleg whiskey, and bathtub gin, would come to be known as the Jazz Age" (Wikipedia, 2006, *Jazz in the 1920s*). Roaring 20s marked the golden age of jazz, marathon dances, great sports champions and Hollywood - film-making capital of the world. In the 1920s the world cinema screens were filled with bright and clear American movies, showing people that a world was more exciting, more free, more equal, than their own. To most people this world of the movies remained a dream world, separate from real life. But to some

it became more. It made them realize, however dimly, that perhaps their own conditions of life could be improved. As Callaghan (2000) concludes:

The movies of the 1920s were silent. They spoke in pictures, not words, and so their language was international. All over the world, from Berlin to Tokyo, from London to Buenos Aires, tens of millions of people lined up every night of the week to see their favorite Hollywood stars-and, without realizing it, to be Americanized. (p. 94)

This time period brought about the radio and the talking motion picture. KDKA - Pittsburgh was the first radio station. Radio brought about changes in new and family entertainment. The first Transatlantic, solo flight was made by Charles Lindbergh on May 20, 1927. He made a non-stop flight from New York to Paris in the Spirit of St. Louis. During this time period, the talkie was introduced. A talkie is a movie with sound. The first talkie was "The Jazz Singer." Also Jazz was introduced on the South side of Chicago and then moved to Harlem where Duke Ellington set up his band at the Cotton Club during the peak of the Harlem Renaissance (Chemistruck, 1999, Other Innovations).

The presence of dance venues and the subsequent increased demand for accomplished musicians meant more artists were able to support themselves by playing professionally. As a result, the numbers of professional musicians increased, and jazz—like all the popular music of the 1920s—adopted the 4/4 beat of dance music (Wikipedia, 2006, Jazz in the 1920s). By the mid-1920s, jazz was being played in dance halls and roadhouses and speakeasies all over the country, including 'all-girl' orchestras on the road with Babe Egan's Hollywood Red Heads, a band billed as the Twelve Vampires, and the Parisian Red Heads. Americans bought more than 100 million of radio and phonograph records in 1927 that were bringing jazz to locations so remote that no band could reach them. And the music itself was beginning to change — an exuberant, collective music was coming to place more and more emphasis on the innovations of supremely gifted individuals. Improvising soloists, struggling to find their own voices and to tell their own stories, were about to take center stage (Ward, Burns, n.d.).

October 1929 Crash

In October 1929, the strength of America's economy in the 1920's came to a sudden end with the Wall Street Crash. Suddenly, it appeared that the huge wealth in America in the 1920's was an illusion and America was faced with a major crisis: 12 million people out of work, 12,000 people being made unemployed every day, 20,000 companies had gone bankrupt, 1616 banks had gone bankrupt, 1 farmer in 20 evicted, 23,000 people committed suicide in one year - the highest ever.

The very rich lost money on Wall Street but they could just about afford it. But the vast bulk could not afford any loss of money. This had a very important economic impact as these people could no longer afford to spend money and therefore did not buy consumer products. Therefore as there was no buying, shops went bust and factories had no reason to employ people who were making products that were not being sold. Therefore unemployment became a major issue. The depression took a while to get going but by the winter of 1932 it was at its worse. (Pavilion, 2005)

It started on October 24 ('Black Thursday') and continued through October 29, 1929 ('Black Tuesday'), when share prices on the New York Stock Exchange collapsed. However, the days leading up to the 29th had also seen enormous stock-market upheaval, with panic selling and vast levels of trading interspersed with brief periods of recovery (Wikipedia, 2006, Wall Street Crash of 1929). As Richard M. Salsman (2004) put it “anyone who bought stocks in mid-1929 and held on to them saw most of his adult life pass by before getting back to even” (p. 16).

The stock market crash of 1929 would have lasting effects on the economy for many years beyond 1929 (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2000).

Overall, the “Roaring Twenties” was an image not to forget, as it dramatically changed and impacted American history with mass consumption, automobile manufacturing, transition from economic prosperity to the period of great depression, gangsters and prohibition, emergence of KKK, Hollywood worldwide boom, and of course Jazz Age. Finally, I would like to sum up the

analysis of this, without exaggeration, controversial and exciting period in the US history with selected statistical figures that definitely feature the specificity of the foregoing era:

- Population - 122 million
- Average annual income - \$1,574
- Popular books - Ernest Hemingway Farewell to Arms, F. Scott Fitzgerald The Great Gatsby
- Best movies - Treasure Island, Ben Hur (1926)
- Favorite actors: Rudolph Valentino as the Sheik, Clara Bow as the "it" girl, Mary Pickford an actress that married Fairbanks Douglas, Fairbanks an actor, Al Jolson starred in the Jazz Singer, Charles Chaplin an actor that was famous for his comedies,
- Styles - women cut hair short or bob, short hem lines, shirts, cloche, knickers, leather jackets, raccoon coats
- Tennis, Golf, Baseball, Football (college)
- Sports heroes: Babe Ruth - a professional ball player that hit 60 homeruns in one season, Jack Dempsey - a boxer defeated by Gene Tunney, Gene Tunney - the boxer that defeated former champion Jack Dempsey, Johnny Weissmuller - an American Olympic swimmer that won 5 gold medals and was an actor, Bobby Jones - was the greatest amateur golfer of modern times, Big Bill Tilden - first American to win men's singles at Wimbledon, England;
- Famous politicians: Bryan - ran for president three times and lost, Al Smith - first catholic to run for president, he lost;
- Famous women: Amelia Earhart - first woman to fly across the Atlantic solo, Gertrude Ederle - first woman to swim the English Channel, Annie Oakley - was very proficient at firearms, Famous outlaws -
- Al Capone - best known ganaster of all time, head of many illegal businesses.
- Favorite songs: Five foot two, Eyes of Blue, Yes sir that's my Baby, Ain't we got fun
- New foods: Welch's Grape Jelly, Wrigley's chewing gum, Eskimo pie; and finally

- Other innovations: Model A, Band-Aids, Kleenex, Zippers, Movies with sound – talkies.
(Chemistruck, 1999, Statistics about the 20s)

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