

# **Life in the 1920s**

# Rural and Urban Differences

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## The New Urban Scene

- 1920 census: 51.2% of Americans in communities of 2,500 or more
- 1922–1929, nearly 2 million people leave farms, towns each year
- Largest cities are New York, Chicago, Philadelphia
  - 65 other cities with 100,000 people or more
- In 1920s, people caught between rural, urban cultures
  - close ties, hard work, strict morals of small towns
  - anonymous crowds, moneymaking, pleasure seeking of cities
  - city dwellers enjoyed drinking, gambling, and casual dating
  - but cities were also impersonal and frightening

# Prohibition

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## The Prohibition Experiment

- 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment launches Prohibition era
  - supported by religious groups, rural South, West
  - Americans believed that drinking led to crime, wife and child abuse, and accidents at the job
- **Prohibition**—production, sale, transportation of alcohol illegal
- Government does not budget enough money to enforce the law which was meant to be done through the **Volstead Act (1919)**
- 1,500 poorly trained officers could not patrol 18,700 miles of land

## Speakeasies and Bootleggers

- **Speakeasies** (hidden saloons, nightclubs) become fashionable
- People distill liquor, buy prescription alcohol, sacramental wine
- **Bootleggers** smuggle alcohol from surrounding countries

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## Organized Crime

- Prohibition contributes to organized crime in major cities
- Al Capone
  1. controls Chicago liquor business by killing competitors
  2. makes about \$60 million dollars a year.
  3. had 10,000 speakeasies
  4. is responsible for about 522 killings in Chicago
  5. goes to jail for tax evasion in 1931. It was the only crime the government had enough evidence to convict him of.
- By mid-1920s, only 19% support Prohibition
- 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment in force until 1933; repealed by 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment



# Prohibition

## Causes

- Religious groups thought that drinking was sinful.
- Reformers believed that the government should protect the public's health.
- Reformers believed that alcohol led to crime, wife and child abuse, and accidents at the job.
- During WWI, native born Americans developed a hostility to German-American brewers and towards other immigrant groups that used alcohol.

## Effects

- Consumption of alcohol decreased.
- Disrespect for the law developed.
- An increase in lawlessness, such as smuggling and bootlegging, was evident.
- Criminals found a new source of income.
- Organized crime grew.

# Young Women Change the Rules

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## The Flapper

- **Flapper**—emancipated young woman, adopts new fashions (short hair and hems), attitudes (smoking, drinking alcohol, and talking about sex)
- Many young women want equal status with men, become assertive
- Middle-class men, women begin to see marriage as equal partnership
  - housework, child-rearing still woman's job

## The Double Standard

- Elders disapprove new behavior and its promotion by periodicals, ads
- Casual dating begins to replace formal courtship
- Women subject to **double standard** (a set of principles granting men more sexual freedom than women)
  - must observe stricter standards of behavior

# Women Shed Old Roles at Home and at Work

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## **New Work Opportunities**

- After war, employers replace female workers with men
- Female college graduates become teachers, nurses, librarians
- Many women become clerical workers as demand rises
- Some become sales clerks, factory workers
- Few become managers; always paid less than men (in 2012 women were paid 77 cents to every dollar men earn)

## **The Changing Family**

- Birthrate drops partly due to more birth-control information
- Margaret Sanger opened the first birth-control clinic in 1916
- Manufactured products (ready-made clothes, canned food, and sliced bread) allowed women to be free from some of their traditional responsibilities.
- Housewives can focus more on families, pastimes, not housework
- Marriages increasingly based on romantic love, companionship
- Children spend most of day at school, organized activities
  - adolescents resist parental control
- Working-class, college-educated women juggle family, work

# Schools and the Mass Media Shape Culture

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## School Enrollments

- High school population increases dramatically in 1920s due to:
  - prosperity
  - higher standards for industry jobs (4 million students by 1926)
- Pre-1920s, high school for college-bound students
- In 1920s, high schools also offer vocational training
- Public schools prepare immigrant children who speak no English
- School taxes increase as school costs rise sharply (total cost in mid-1920s was \$2.7 billion a year)

## Expanding News Coverage

- Mass media shapes mass culture; takes advantage of greater literacy
- By 1914, hundreds of local newspapers replaced by national chains
- 1920s, mass-market magazines thrive; *Reader's Digest*, *Time* founded

## Radio Comes of Age

- Radio is most powerful communications medium of 1920s
- Networks provide shared national experience - can hear news as it happens

# America Chases New Heroes and Old Dreams

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## **New-Found Leisure Time**

- In 1920s, many people have extra money, leisure time to enjoy it
- In 1929, Americans spent \$4.5 billion on leisure activities
- Crowds attend sports events; athletes glorified by mass media

## **Lindbergh's Flight**

- **Charles A. Lindbergh** makes first solo nonstop flight across Atlantic in 1927
- Small-town Minnesotan symbolizes honesty, bravery in age of excess
- Flight takes 33 hours and 29 minutes. For the last 1,000 miles, the flight was less than 100 feet.
- Lindbergh paves the way for other pilots

## **Entertainment and the Arts**

- Silent movies already a national pastime. First movie with sound is the *Jazz Singer* in 1927.
- Introduction of sound leads millions to attend every week
- Playwrights, composers break away from European traditions
- **George Gershwin** uses jazz to create American music
- Painters portray American realities, dreams
- **Georgia O'Keeffe** paints intensely colored canvases of New York



*Radiator  
Building –  
Night, New  
York (1927)  
by Georgia  
O’Keeffe*

## Writers of the 1920s

- **Sinclair Lewis** is first American to win Nobel Prize for literature
  - criticizes conformity, materialism
- **F. Scott Fitzgerald** reveals negative side of era's gaiety, freedom
- **Edna St. Vincent Millay** celebrates youth, independence in her poems
- Writers soured by American culture, war settle in Europe
  - called Lost Generation
- Expatriate **Ernest Hemingway** introduces simple, tough, American style and criticizes the glorification of war

