

Life in the 1920s

Rural and Urban Differences

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

The Prohibition Experiment

- 18th 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 **Volsstead 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

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
- 18th Amendment in force until 1933; repealed by 21st Amendment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

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

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

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

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

