

The Roaring 20s: A New Generation

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

During the 1920s, prosperity took a variety of forms. Advances in transportation contributed to new patterns of business organization and travel. Consumerism, which first emerged during the Gilded Age, bloomed in the “Roaring 20s” as advertisers used print and radio to convince Americans to buy a variety of goods. A new economy and a new generation had arrived.

This tutorial examines the 1920s from the perspective of a new generation in five parts:

1. A “New Generation”

The 1920s were a time of dramatic changes in the United States, but these changes did not occur evenly throughout the nation. Many young Americans, especially those who lived in urban areas, embraced a new morality and participated in fads and opportunities that were not available to rural Americans.



Josephine Baker dances the Charleston, one of the most popular dances of the 1920s (as well as the title of a popular song of the era), in Paris. Born in the United States, Baker moved to France to perform during the 1920s.

The “new generation” (a title applied by historians) embraced new hairstyles and clothing. Women bobbed

their hair and wore short skirts. Young men and women alike listened and danced to jazz, which featured quick rhythms and improvisational melodies, unlike older forms of popular music. They purchased consumer goods produced by the postwar economy, often on credit, and attended sporting events and films.

Some observers concluded that the new generation signaled the emergence of a new society in the United States, one based on consumerism and material indulgence instead of hard work and responsibility. However, the “new generation” was primarily an urban phenomenon. Additionally, many of the attempts to determine what its appearance meant for American society centered on the role of women.

2. New Forms of Production, Organization, and Transportation

One reason the 1920s provided new opportunities for a “new generation” was the appearance of new forms of transportation and production. **Henry Ford’s Model T**, for example, made automobile ownership available to average Americans and created new opportunities for mobility.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Henry Ford

Automotive industrialist who innovated mass production techniques and whose Model T made automobile ownership available to the average American.



TERM TO KNOW

Model T

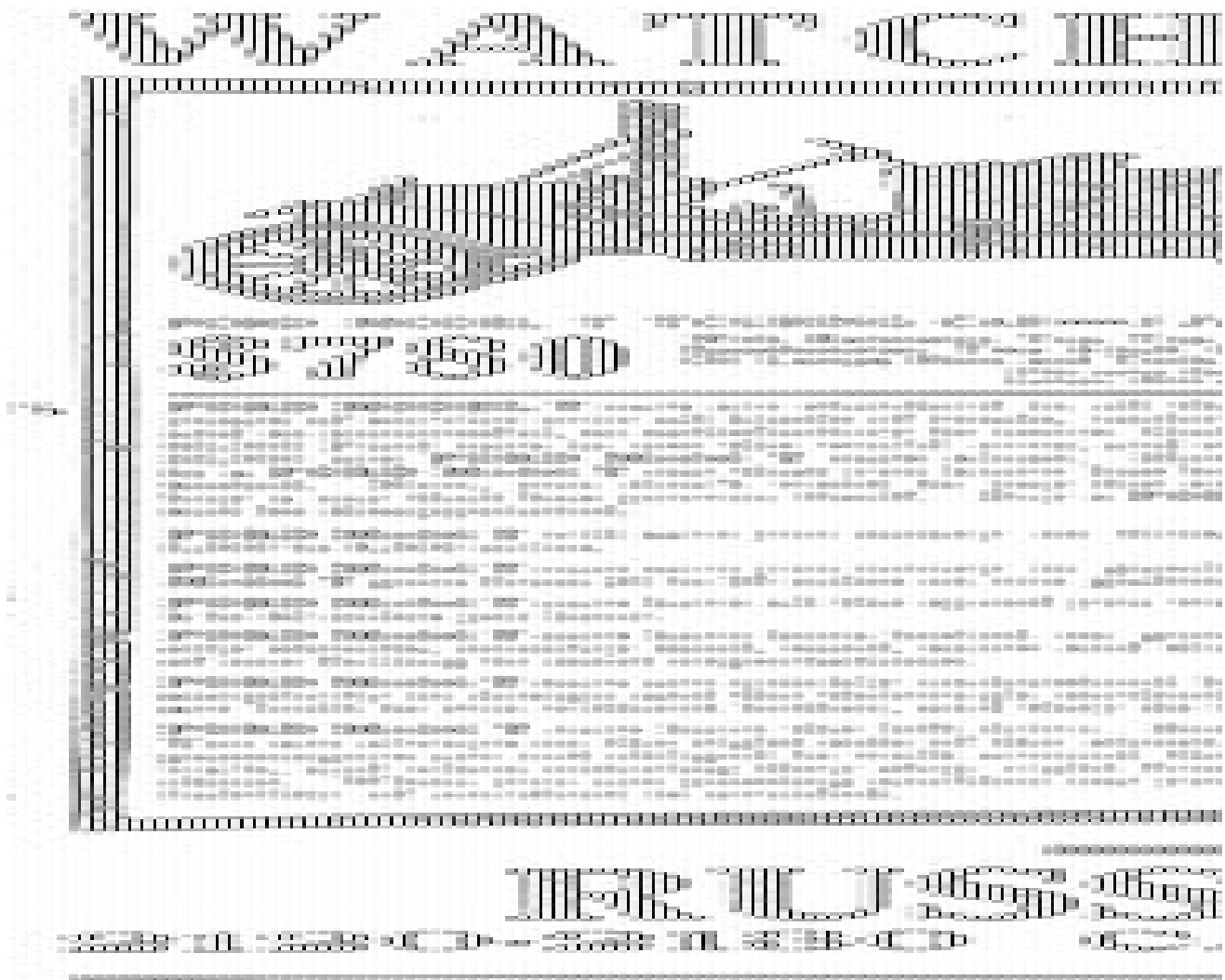
The first car to be mass-produced by the Ford Motor Company that was affordable to a large segment of the American population.

Ford did not invent the automobile. Hundreds of auto manufacturers were in business in Europe and the United States in the early 20th century. However, their cars were too expensive for most consumers.



DID YOU KNOW

Henry Ford’s first Model T (1908) cost \$850.



This advertisement for Ford's Model T ran in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* in 1911. Note that its price in 1911 ranged between \$725 and \$780, a slight decrease from the initial price of \$850.

Ford's innovation was to use mass production to manufacture automobiles. He revolutionized automobile manufacturing (and industrial production in general) with the **assembly line**.



TERM TO KNOW

Assembly Line

A manufacturing process that enabled workers to stay in one place as the work came to them. The assembly line valued efficiency above craftsmanship. During the manufacturing process, a product moved along the line from one team of workers to the next. Each worker or team had a specific job to complete; most of them were so simple and repetitive that workers could be, in Ford's words, "no smarter than an ox." To maximize production, Ford applied the principles of **scientific management**, including time-motion studies, which evaluated workers' movements to ensure no effort was wasted.



TERM TO KNOW

Scientific Management

A management style that divides manufacturing tasks into short, repetitive segments to maximize efficiency and profitability.



In this image from a 1928 *Literary Digest* interview with Henry Ford, workers on an assembly line produce new Ford automobiles.

Ford's assembly line was a boon for American consumers, because it increased the availability of automobiles and decreased prices.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Ford implemented the assembly line in his Detroit factories in 1921. By the end of the year, his company had produced 1 million Model Ts. By 1924, the price of a Model T dropped to \$300, putting car ownership within reach for many Americans, including those who worked in Ford's factories.

The assembly line had some disadvantages for American workers. Assembly-line work reduced interaction between workers and employers. The repetitive (boring) nature of assembly-line work led to a high worker turnover rate in Ford's factories and in other workplaces that adopted the strategy. Also, Henry Ford was anti-union: He forbade his laborers to unionize.

To dissuade workers from leaving or from unionizing, Ford and other business leaders in the 1920s developed ways to compensate and retain workers through a benefits program that historians refer to as **welfare capitalism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Welfare Capitalism

The practice in which private businesses provide for the welfare of their employees through private incentive programs.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Ford became famous for paying his workers \$5 a day (almost double the wage paid by other companies) and limiting the workday at his factories to 8 hr (which was less than the average). He

also paid White and Black workers equally. This led many African Americans from the South to move to Detroit.

Ford's Model T, along with his business and manufacturing practices, enabled the automobile to change America during the 20th century, much like the railroads had done during the 19th century:

- Associated industries such as glass, steel, and rubber processing expanded to keep up with auto production.
- The need for gasoline and oil led to an expansion of the oil industry in California, Oklahoma, and Texas, initiating the transition to a petroleum-based economy.
- The need for improved public roads required local and state governments to fund construction, much of which was paid for by taxes on automobile fuel.
- The development of infrastructure encouraged the growth of a variety of service industries, such as motels and gas stations, and new commuting patterns (i.e., the replacement of mass transit on trains or trolleys by private automobile traffic).



DID YOU KNOW

By 1929, there were over 23 million automobiles on American roads.

3. A New Consumer Culture

Innovations in the automobile industry influenced more than transportation and labor. As access to coal-powered electricity in cities increased and the electric motor was made more efficient, inventors created a variety of new household appliances.

➞ **EXAMPLE** New innovations, including radios, phonographs, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and refrigerators, appeared on the market during the 1920s.

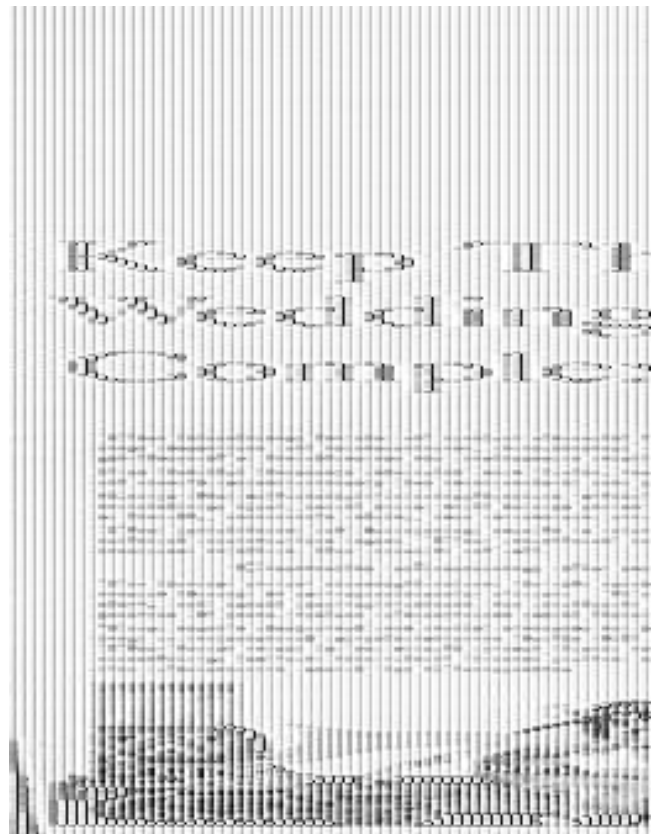
Credit and installment plans made the new goods available to more people, especially those who lived in urban areas.

The mass consumption of cars, household appliances, ready-to-wear clothing, and processed foods depended on the work of advertisers. Magazines, including *Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, connected advertisers with consumers. Colorful (and sometimes provocative) print ads decorated the pages of these publications and became a staple of American popular culture.

Manufacturers and advertisers also reached out to consumers through radio, which emerged as a popular medium during the 1920s. Hundreds of radio stations appeared during the decade. Many of them broadcast the news, serial stories, and political speeches. Like the print media, radio entertainment was interspersed with advertisements.

Advertisements during the 1920s promoted a wide range of products. They transformed luxury items and mundane goods into everyday necessities. The advertisement above, for Palmolive soap, appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1922. It claimed that the

soap's "moderate price is due to popularity, to the enormous demand which keeps Palmolive factories working day and night," so "the old-time luxury of the few may now be enjoyed the world over."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Who is the target audience for this advertisement?
2. What does this advertisement mean by "Keep That Wedding Day Complexion"?

Many advertisements were directed at women. Advertisers and manufacturers often promised that new domestic labor-saving devices like vacuum cleaners and washing machines would enable women to expand their horizons. Ironically, these labor-saving devices led to more work for women by raising expectations regarding domestic labor. Using these tools, women cleaned more frequently, washed more often, and cooked more elaborate meals, rather than gaining spare time.

4. A New Morality

The emergence of automobiles, advertising, and radio led some individuals, including many young people who lived in cities, to live according to a **new morality**. Some young women challenged traditional expectations regarding their relationship to home life—a challenge implied by many advertisements of the period. This new morality was more permissive and challenged traditional gender stereotypes. For example, many young women adopted the dress and mannerisms of the **flapper**.



TERMS TO KNOW

New Morality

The more permissive behaviors adopted by Americans in the 1920s.

Flapper

A young, modern woman who embraced the new morality and fashions of the 1920s.

Flappers wore shorter skirts, shorter hair, and more makeup. They drank and smoked with men in public. Their dresses fell in straight lines from shoulders to knees, de-emphasizing breasts and hips while highlighting legs and ankles.

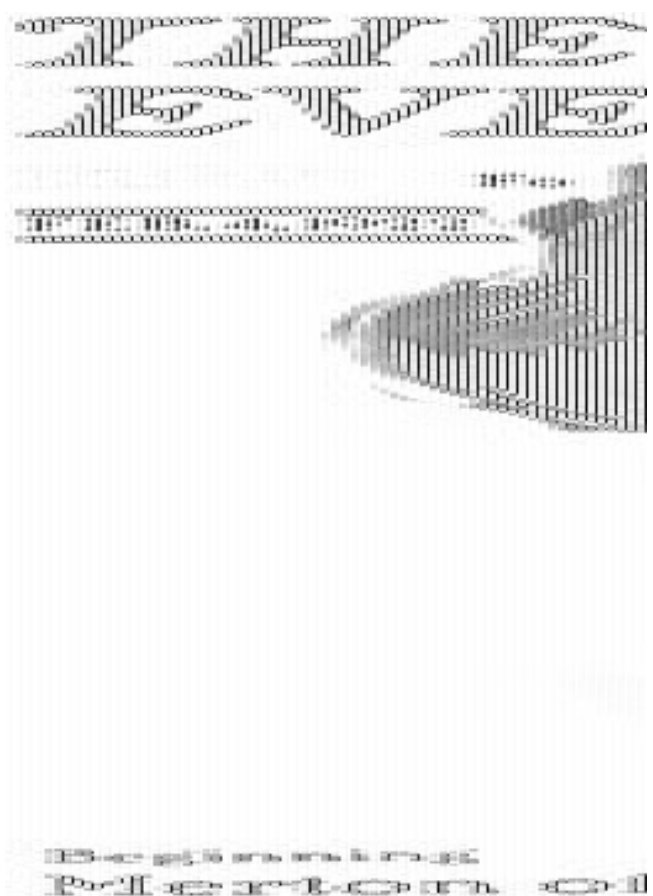
As women and men pushed social and cultural boundaries during the 1920s, sexual behavior changed and social customs grew more permissive.

➔ **EXAMPLE** “Petting parties” or “necking parties” became the rage on college campuses during the 1920s. Darkened movie theaters and private automobiles also provided unsupervised spaces for young, urban men and women to interact. This could be liberating for women, but it also required them to negotiate sexual exchanges in new and unfamiliar ways.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

New technologies like smartphones and the Internet have created spaces in which people can develop relationships and negotiate sexual exchanges. How have you used technology to meet new people? In what ways are your strategies different from—and similar to—the “new generation” of the 1920s?



The flapper look, as portrayed in “Flapper” by Ellen Pyle on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* in February 1922, was a national craze in American cities during the 1920s.

5. A New Woman

The rise of the new morality (and its embodiment as flappers) should not be seen only as an outcome of prosperity. This trend was part of the larger women’s rights movement.

Following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed full voting rights for women, some women attempted to match their gains in civil rights with social advances. They announced the arrival of an independent **new woman** who was not dependent on a father or husband.



TERM TO KNOW

New Woman

A label used to describe women who explored new work, educational, and social opportunities outside the home in the early 20th century.

One of the most important supporters of the new woman was **Margaret Sanger**, a proponent of birth control. Sanger, who founded Planned Parenthood, advocated for women’s access to information about reproduction

and birth-control devices. She challenged state laws that forbade the dissemination of information and devices, which were deemed “obscene.”



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Margaret Sanger

National birth-control activist and nurse who opened the first birth-control clinic in the United States; founder of Planned Parenthood.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1916, Sanger was jailed for 1 month after opening a clinic in Brooklyn that distributed pamphlets and contraceptive devices to working-class immigrants.



DID YOU KNOW

Sanger’s interest in legalizing birth control developed after witnessing her mother’s death (at age 50) after bearing 11 children and suffering seven miscarriages.

The struggle for women’s rights was also fought in Congress, where an important division within the movement—between those who viewed women as, fundamentally, wives and mothers and those who sought individual rights and autonomy equal to men—was revealed.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1921, Congress passed the Promotion of the Welfare and Hygiene of Maternity and Infancy Act, also known as the Sheppard-Towner Act, which earmarked \$1.25 million for well-baby clinics, educational programs, and nursing.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1923, suffragist Alice Paul drafted and promoted an Equal Rights Amendment to end sexual discrimination by guaranteeing that “Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.”

Many women, and many members of Congress, supported the Sheppard-Towner Act because it provided much-needed federal assistance to mothers and children. Funding provided through the act dramatically reduced infant mortality in the United States during the 1920s. There was much less support for equal rights, however. The women’s rights movement was divided over the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Many believed they had achieved their goal with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Fearing that the ratification of the ERA would lead Congress to retract its support for Sheppard-Towner, as well as for laws that limited women’s working hours, and provisions that recognized their status as mothers, many women’s organizations opposed the ERA.



DID YOU KNOW

The ERA was passed by Congress in 1972 but failed to receive the state support necessary for ratification. Debates over the “new woman” and motherhood occurred in part because, during the 1920s, the number of women in the workforce continued to increase—not only in domestic service but also in retail, health care, education, business offices, and manufacturing. Women were paid less than men (for the same type of work) based on the assumption that they did not have to support families. The employment of single, unmarried women was, for the most part, accepted. However, married women were encouraged by employers and other men to stay home instead of working. Women who continued to work after marriage were often stigmatized. It was claimed that they worked only to earn money that they could spend frivolously.



SUMMARY

For many, the 1920s were a time of prosperity during which a “new generation” emerged, especially

in American cities. In addition to creating an affordable automobile, Henry Ford's advances in assembly-line production led to new forms of business organization and the rise of new industries related to car manufacturing. The popularity of print media and radio programs promoted the growth of the advertising industry, which touted a variety of manufactured goods. Many Americans used new forms of credit to increase their consumption in an attempt to raise their standard of living. For some American women, the new economy of the 1920s promised liberation, while, for others, it reinforced traditional expectations of home life and child-rearing.

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