The 1920s - How They Roared
By Toni Lee Robinson

The 1920s have been called the Roaring Twenties, the Age of Intolerance, the Jazz Age, and the Age of Wonderful Nonsense. The people of the 20s were known as the Lost Generation. The fact that one ten-year span generated so many colorful labels is a clue to the spirit of the era. By any name, the decade was a curious episode in American history.

A bird's eye view of the period reveals a writhing, restless jumble of intense movements, conflicts, and events. The 20s were awash with crazes, from wacky fads and fashions to movements fueled by dark fears and suspicions. Trends ranged from fun-loving antics like flagpole sitting to the paranoia expressed in the "Red Scare" and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.

The mood of the 20s was heavily influenced by the trauma of what was then known as the Great War. The horrors of World War I made a deep impression on the collective psyche of America. One young journalist said: "The war tore away our spiritual foundations and challenged our faith. We are struggling to regain our equilibrium." (Ellen Welles Page, A Flapper's Appeal to Parents)

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When the war was over and the soldiers returned, the nation "blew off steam" in a headlong rush into materialism and frivolity. Higher wages for average Americans meant more spending power. Prosperity burst upon the nation in a way that few had ever experienced. At the same time, automation was taking over factories. Mass production brought ready availability and cheaper costs. In 1908, a person could expect to pay over $800 for a car. By 1925, the average car could be had for under $300.

Credit was another factor in the 20s cult of consumerism. Big ticket items like cars and household appliances had been, up to this point, a family's reward for patiently saving and doing without. With the blossoming of the installment plan, people signed on the dotted line and took their purchases home immediately. They were then tied to weekly or monthly payments which included interest charged on the debt. Of course, the total cost of the item was far more in the end than if it had been purchased for cash. By the end of the decade, runaway consumer credit was part of the overload that tipped the nation over the edge of a deep economic chasm.

The 20s produced many advances in technology. Television got its start in this lively era, although it would be a couple of decades before TVs became a household item. Listening to radio became the new national pastime. Silent movies made way for the "talkies." In the medical field, the 20s brought important innovations. Penicillin was discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming, and Sigmund Freud developed psychotherapy. Charles Lindbergh made the first solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic, paving the way for modern aviation.

In the political arena, a major effect of the gruesome realities of World War I was isolationism. The war had exacted a terrible cost in money and lives. Americans weren't at all sure the sacrifice had been worth it. They wanted badly to avoid any more entanglements in the affairs of other nations. Their refusal to join the League of Nations reflected this determination. Other signs of the national desire to play it safe included a tightening of immigration rules and quotas. There was also a concerted effort to pursue and unmask spies, usually communists or "Reds." The "us and them" mentality was carried to extremes in some areas of the country with the KKK and other forms of racism.

One sign of the times was the changing status of women. During the war, women left their homes to provide labor in factories and other venues. In 1919, the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. New economic and political power and a culture-wide crisis in faith and morality conspired to put pressure on long-accepted gender roles. The new woman of the 20s was exemplified by the flapper with her short skirts and party attitude. Her bobbed hair and open use of makeup were considered scandalous departures from accepted standards.

Another phenomenon of the 20s was Prohibition. For some fifty years, the Temperance Movement had been pointing out the pitfalls of alcohol consumption. As the group gained strength, they crusaded for the complete banning of the sale of liquor in the U.S. With the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1918, America embarked on the "Noble Experiment," hoping to create a nation free from the destructive effects of alcohol.
What happened instead was the explosion of organized crime. Black market entrepreneurs like Al Capone built underworld kingdoms and grew rich meeting the tremendous demand for contraband liquor. The necessity of pursuing "bootleggers," as Capone and his cronies were called, spawned new practices and national heroes in the field of law enforcement. Eventually, the government gave up the fight to control alcohol consumption. In 1933, the 21st Amendment was passed to nullify the 18th, ending prohibition.

The 1920s roared through America like a barely controlled freight train. This decade of volatile contradictions and social turmoil left its mark on the nation. It has been said that the upheaval of the 20s birthed the America that we know today. One thing that seems certain is that life in the Roaring Twenties was far from boring.

**Questions**

1. What influence did World War I have on the atmosphere of the 1920s?

2. Define "paranoia." How was the paranoia of the 20s expressed? How was it related to isolationism?

3. Describe the economic climate of the 1920s. What part did credit play?

4. Sir Alexander Fleming was responsible for:
   A. The invention of the radio
   B. The discovery of penicillin
   C. The development of psychotherapy
   D. The invention of talking movies

5. What factors came together in the 20s to bring about changes in the status of women?

6. The 19th Amendment dealt with:
   A. Women's right to vote
   B. Immigration quotas
   C. Racial equality
   D. The banning of the making and selling of alcohol
7. Explain the "Noble Experiment."

8. The 20s are characterized as a time of "volatile contradictions." Choose one contradiction of the era and explain it.

Give an example of how a specific era or event in American history brought social change to the nation. In your opinion, was the change a good or a bad thing? Why?
Many eras in American history were given nicknames like the Roaring Twenties. Give an example of another era and its nickname. Explain why that time in history was given its name.