

The Jazz Age: The Roaring Twenties

By D.H. Coop

In American social history, the 1920s period is often overshadowed by the Great War, Prohibition and the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Yet, it was a period of sudden change in the home, on the road, in the economy, in attitudes, and in behavior. These changes seem so second nature to us today that we think they have always been around.

Starting in the home we can see changes in workload, entertainment, and travel spread across the social environment. Prior to the '20s, the housewife scheduled her work according to the days of the week. Washing was done by hand and took all day, along with preparing the meals and caring for the children. Her workload was lightened with new time-saving devices, such as the electric vacuum cleaner, the electric refrigerator and stove, and the electric iron.

Also, the radio changed home entertainment. Before the radio, communities were informed of the local news by the newspaper or gossip at the market or pub. Now it was broadcast (a word from farming for scattering seeds by hand) right in their front rooms, along with other programs. Family entertainment then shifted from board games and singing to sitting and listening to the radio. As the price of the radio dropped, the children moved off to their own rooms with their very own radios. During the day, the programs were centered on housewives and sponsored by soap companies, thus the birth of the “soap opera.”



Availability of the automobile changed all aspects of life. It provided the housewife with more independence and a more convenient way to do her shopping. Automobiles required better roads and better roads cost money, which caused a shift from railroads to automobiles being the force driving the economy. Restaurants became roadside cafes, hotels became motels, and crime became more mobile. To get the car into everyone's hands, Henry Ford produced the Model T from 1914 to 1927 with the sales pitch of “in any color (black).” Ford outsold all other carmakers until 1927. General Motors allowed credit and sold cars in multiple colors, finally overtaking the Model T in sales.

Credit shifted the sales pitch. Advertising became more scientific, with research and studies. Slogans and sayings were rooted in the '20s, such as “Say it with flowers” and “Don't light three cigarettes with one match.” Advertising was given a boost with the Silver Screen and the images it portrayed in dress and style.

Finally, the '20s saw the development of sports and entertainment on a mass scale. Baseball became a national spectator sport. The local bar became a speakeasy that respectable couples could go to and have a drink. The new drink to appeal to women was called the “cocktail”—drinks with decorations. The drinks required illegal alcohol, which was provided by bootleggers in fast cars, which gave birth to the modern race called National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR).

All in all, the 1920s changed the modern home, transportation, the economy, and social life.