

A 10-YEAR SPREE



The Great War was over. People wanted to forget it and have fun. They were sick of politics and wanted to move on. During the 1920's, they went on a spree. They called it "making whoopee." One writer called it "the time of wonderful nonsense." For most people, this fast-paced decade became known as the "Roaring Twenties."

What was it like back in the 1920's? There was a law against making and selling liquor. It was called Prohibition. But people still found ways to drink. Some people made liquor at home. Sometimes they made gin by mixing flavoring and alcohol in their bathtubs. Or they went to illegal bars called "speakeasies" for a drink. They would knock on the speakeasy door and say, "Joe sent me." Then they would be let in. As the decade went on, underground night clubs that sold illegal liquor flourished. It became more and more fashionable to break the law. Police looked the other way or went to the bars themselves on their nights off.

Men got liquor from dealers called "bootleggers." They sold liquor that was made in illegal stills or was smuggled into the country from Cuba or Canada. Smugglers who brought illegal liquor by sea or over land into the United States were called "rum-runners." Often it was very bad liquor. Sometimes it was poison. Bad liquor killed some people and made others blind. Women drank, too. They could vote now-it was the first time in American history, and drinking made them feel "free."



Grownups weren't the only ones who wanted fun. Young people wanted to have fun too. Girls were called "flappers" and the boys who wore the latest fashions were "cake-eaters." Many of them were "wild," or so their parents said. They danced to the fast "Charleston" and the "Black Bottom." Flappers wore short skirts and skimpy tops and rolled their stockings down below the knees. They bobbed their hair (cut it short), wore lots of perfume, and painted their lips into a bright red Cupid's bow.

Boys wore long sideburns. They slicked their hair down and parted it in the middle. Heavy raccoon coats and bell-bottom trousers were "in" fashions. Outrageous colors and pin stripes were the rage. So were "nickers"-wide, baggy pants that tucked in at the knees. Both boys and girls had to have a yellow oilskin slicker (raincoat) painted with funny sayings.

The 1920's was also a time of fast cars and wild rides. Cars, which had been high and square-shaped, became lower and racier. The real sporty car was the Stutz Bearcat. Others were the racy Marmon and the Mercer with bucket seats. All teenagers wanted a little "roadster" with a rumble seat in the rear. The rumble seat was *outside* the car, where the trunk usually is today. It was great fun-except when it rained. High school kids bought second-hand Model T Fords. They painted them bright colors and wrote on them "Oh you kid!", "23 Skidoo!", and "Joe sent me."

The automobile changed American life forever. If they had money for gas, which was cheap, people could go anywhere, anytime. They did not have to stand around and wait for a train. Another big change was that boys and girls could get out of the house and go on dates in their cars. Parents spent a lot of time wondering what the younger generation was up to.



The 1920's was a time of many crazes. One of them was a contest to see which couple could dance the longest without stopping. Couples danced for days, hanging on to each other, half asleep. People everywhere also did the "Charleston." Other new dance crazes of the decade were the "Black Bottom," the "Racoon," and the "Varsity Drag." There were also "Bunion Derbies"-foot races across the U.S. for prizes. And some men tried to see how long they could sit on top of a flagpole. Alvin(Shipwreck) Kelly set the record. He sat on top of a flagpole in Baltimore for 23 days and seven hours.

The 1920's was a time of great heroes, too. There were aviators like Charles A. Lindbergh and explorers like Admiral Richard E. Byrd. In sports, there were baseball stars like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, swimmer Johnny Weissmuller, tennis champ "Big Bill" Tilden, boxer Jack Dempsey, and football star "Red" Grange. And people "flipped" over movie stars like Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, Greta Garbo, and Clara Bow. Valentino died in 1926 at the age of 31. Thousands of women screamed, fainted, and cried at his funeral. He was the first Hollywood "heartthrob."



The 1920's was also a great time for "big business." Companies introduced thousands of new products and took in record profits. Many people gambled and made money on the stock market. Barbers, taxi drivers, and shoeshine boys put their money in stocks. A lot of them got rich. But not everyone did well. Wages doubled during the decade but not everyone had a job. And low food prices made things very hard on farmers.

In some ways, the 1920's was a good time for black Americans. Although many still suffered the injustices of segregation, places like Harlem in New York City and the South Side of Chicago experienced an intellectual and cultural revival as many black writers, artists, singers, and poets led an explosion of African American culture in what became known as the Harlem Renaissance. Jazz music, made popular by African American bands and musicians, took the country by storm.

The end of the "Roaring Twenties" came in October 1929. That month the stock market crashed and thousands and thousands of people were "wiped out." Hard times and the Great Depression set in. Many people began to look back on the 1920's as a childish and stupid time. But just as many other people said, "It was a great time to be alive."