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**1920s Background Analysis**

**The Roaring 20s**

The 1920s have been called “The Roaring Twenties”, “The Jazz Age”, “The Fabulous Decade”, and “The Era of Wonderful Nonsense”. It was all of these and more.

After the Great War ended in 1918 and the suffering of the depression in 1919 was coming to an end, Americans were determined to begin enjoying themselves as much as possible. The United States turned its back on the rest of the world (isolationism) and began two decades of drifting. They hoped to find meaning in making fortunes, having fun, and living out fantasies. President Calvin Coolidge said in 1925, “*The business of America is business*.”…..and American businesses boomed during the twenties. It was a decade devoted to the making and spending of money. The only goal was to make a profit and business leaders became national heroes.

Read each of the 1920s categories below. Answer the questions in the box to the right of the passage.

**Read each question thoroughly and pay close attention to what the question is asking.**

In 1925 the Model T cost about $300, which allowed the working man to own a car. Identify three changes/impacts the automobile had on America.

**AUTOMOBILES**

Henry Ford put America on wheels in 1908. To produce the automobile, he organized a mass production system using a moving assembly line. Each worker performed the same task all day long. An entire car could now be built in two hours. The auto industry also gave birth to new industries – service stations, garages, rubber, plate glass, and tourism. Automobiles, called “tin lizzies”, became the symbol of the 20s. Additionally, cars gave people a sense of freedom and independence. They could go places they never had before. In 1925, the ford Model T cost about $300 and came in any color – *as long as it was black.*

**CONSUMER GOODS / CREDIT**

Explain how buying on credit created an economic boom in the 1920s.

Many new household appliances were introduced during the 20s. The vacuum cleaner, gas oven, electric refrigerator, and washing machine became common in American homes. These items made routine chores faster and easier to do for American housewives. It also increased the amount of leisure time available to enjoy recreational activites. Buying on credit was first introduced in the 1920s making it possible to “buy now, pay later”. Luxury items like automobiles, phonographs and radios gradually became necessities. Americans enjoyed a period of prosperity it had not experienced before.

**RADIO**

Explain how the radio helped ***unify*** our nation.

The nation’s first radio stations, KDKA in Pittsburgh and WWI in Detroit, began broadcasting in 1920. By 1925, 30 million listeners were tuned in and there were 700 radio stations across the country by 1927. Almost every family could afford a “wireless”. They could enjoy music, sports, plays, news, and speeches in the privacy of their homes. The largest broadcasts of the decade were the three presidential elections and the parade for Charles Lindbergh upon his return from the first transatlantic flight. Two favorite comedies were *Amos ‘n Andy* and *Fibber McGee and Molly*. By mid-decade, advertisers were sponsoring these programs to promote their products (new consumer goods).

**MOTION PICTURES**

Films were silent through much of the 20s with a piano player providing the background music while subtitles explained the plot. “Newsreels” were shown before the main feature. Most every large city had a large, fancy theater called “dream palaces”. Hollywood, California became the movie capital due to its sunny weather. The most famous stars were comedian Charlie Chaplin in the “Little Tramp”, Lon Chaney, Sr. for his leading roles in “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” and “The Phantom of the Opera”, and Rudolph Valentino was the male heartthrob in romantic pictures. The “talkies” began in 1927 with the release of The Jazz Singer, starring Al Jolson. One year later, Mickey Mouse made his first film called “Steamboat Willie”.

Why do you think theaters were called “dream palaces”?

**AGE OF HEROES (Sports and Other)**

In what way is Charles Lindbergh’s accomplishment **symbolic** of the 1920s era?

(Don’t just tell me what he did)

Sports stars became heroes in the twenties. Babe Ruth hit a record 60 home runs for the New York Yankees in 1927. Red Grange, “The Galloping Ghost” scored five touchdowns in one game for the University of Illinois (college football was the big draw). In 1926 Gene Tunney shocked America when he beat their heavyweight idol and champion of seven years, Jack Dempsey. Tunney beat Dempsey again in 1927 because of the famously controversial “long count”. Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen became sports legends in golf. But the greatest hero of the age was Charles Lindbergh. In 1927 he became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. He flew his plane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, from New York to Paris in 33 ½ hours.

**WOMEN IN THE 20s**

Based on new attitudes of the 1920s, identify the **prior** expectations of women in American society.

Many young people rebelled in the 1920s. They were determined to dress and behave differently than their parents. Older, more conservative adults called them a “lost generation”. Having won the right to vote in 1920 with the 19th Amendment, women started to strut their independence. Attitudes toward marriage changed considerably. Many went back to school to earn college degrees and the number of women in the work force continued to increase. Some young women, called “flappers”, wore short “bobbed” hair, short skirts, flesh-colored stockings, loose-fitting blouses, and bright make-up. They smoked cigarettes, drank prohibited liquor and went on dates without chaperones. They listened to “jazz” music and danced the “Charleston”.

Pre 1920s

1920s

Educated/Working

Bobbed Hair

Short Skirts/

Loose-fitting blouses

Drinking Liquor

Jazz/Charleston

**PROHIBITION and ORGANIZED CRIME**

Describe the attitudes that Americans held during the 1920s based upon their actions towards the 18th Amendment.

The 18th Amendment took effect on January 16, 1920 Prohibition outlawed alcoholic drinks in the United States with the purpose of reducing crime and fixing ills in society. Ironically, gangsters like Al Capone made fortunes in “bootlegging” – supplying illegal alcohol. Some people made homemade alcohol called “bathtub gin”. But thousands of otherwise honest citizens broke the law by visiting illegal taverns called “speakeasies”. Chicago alone had 10,000 of these “hidden” bars worth $100 million a year. Competition between rival gangs over bootlegging often turned violent. The most famous incident, the St. Valentines Day Massacre, was planned by Al Capone to wipe out his rival, Bus Moran. Prohibition ended in 1933 when the 21st Amendment was ratified.

**NATIVISM RESURGES**

How does the Sacco-Venzetti case and the KKK reflect the views of many Americans in the

post WWI -1920s era?

The depression of 1919 helped fuel the resurgence of nativism and racial tensions as many returning soldiers found it hard to obtain employment. At the forefront of the movement to restrict immigration was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan targeted Catholics, Jews, immigrants, blacks, and other groups said to be “un-American”. One of the famous cases that reflected the prejudices and fears of the era against immigrants was the Sacco-Vanzetti Case. Police arrested two immigrants for robbery and murder of two employees of a shoe factory. The evidence against them was questionable, but the fact that the accused men were anarchists and foreigners led many to assume they were guilty. They were sentenced to death and executed in 1927.

**FUNDAMENTALISM**

While many people embraced the relaxed ethics of the 20s, others feared that the country was losing its traditional values. They responded by joining a religious movement known as “fundamentalism”. They believed that the Bible was literally true and without error, including the idea of creationism – the belief that God created the world. Therefore they rejected Charles Darwin’s new theory of evolution, which said that human beings developed from lower forms of life over the course of millions of years. They tried to outlaw any lessons in school that taught evolution and denied creationism. A teacher, John Scopes, was put on trial and found guilty for teaching evolution. The Scopes “Monkey” Trial was broadcast over the radio and public opinion slowly started to move away from fundamentalism.

How are the teachings of creationism & fundamentalism different in schools today vs schools in the 1920s?

(Hint: Reference Scopes “Monkey” Trial)

The term **renaissance** has come to mean “rebirth, or revival”. Explain how it relates to African Americans in the 1920s.

**HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

During WWI and the 1920s, hundreds of thousands of blacks joined in the Great Migration from the rural south to the industrial cities in the north. As populations swelled in the cities, nightclubs began to immerge, none more prominently than New York’s Harlem neighborhood. It was there that black artists expressed themselves through writing, art, and music. When New Orleans native Louis Armstrong moved to Chicago in 1922, he introduced an early form of Jazz that would spur the growth of many new musical talents. Duke Ellington led a small band that would play at a famous nightclub called “the Cotton Club”. The jazz movement would continue its growth seeing many black artists play the Cotton Club, like Bessie Smith and Benny Goodman, ironically to all white audiences.

Every era has its fads and follies. Identify at least three fads and follies that would be representative of our current society.

**FADS AND FOLLY**

Americans took part in many crazy contests and stunts during the 20s. Kissing contests, crossword puzzles, marathon dancing, goldfish swallowing, and flagpole sitting were some of the fads sweeping across the country. The aim in marathon dancing was to keep dancing longer than other couples. One contest lasted for over 100 days. “Shipwreck” Kelly set a record for sitting atop a flagpole, 50 feet off the ground for 49 days and 1 hour. A trans-continental footrace was run between Los Angeles to New York. It took 84 days for the winner to cross the finish line. Nonsense songs, silly sayings and raccoon coats were part of the folly. She was the “cat’s pajamas” with her “jazzbo” boyfriend riding in his Model T. “Hot diggety dog!”