

# The 1920s

## Post World War One America

World War One changed America forever. When the young soldiers returned to America after being on the battlefields, they had to adjust to their new lives after war. These soldiers had seen and done things which would change their lives forever. They would live every day to its fullest. The motto of "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you may die" became common among Americans.

Since WWI ended, this meant a decrease in the amount of work available. It was no longer necessary to build weapons, supplies and ammunition for the war effort. Upon returning home from the war, *soldiers were surprised to find that their old jobs in the factories had been taken over by women and African Americans.* This meant that WWI veterans had a difficult time finding work.

To make matters worse, in the early 1900s Americans began to demand better working conditions (8 hour days, better wages and benefits, safer working conditions, etc.). Sometimes in order to achieve better working conditions, *strikes* (an employee's refusal to work) became necessary. Some Americans thought these strikes were supported by communists and *anarchists*. (An anarchist is someone who believes that there should be NO government). Many people felt this way because in 1917, they witnessed the new communist government overthrow Czar Nicholas II of Russia. Many Americans believed that communism (which many believed was a bad thing) might somehow take over the USA. This fear became known as the *Red Scare*, since red is the color associated with communism. Americans were so concerned over a possible communist takeover of the USA that the U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer led *Palmer Raids*. Palmer Raids were searches of suspected communists.

Post WWI America also saw a revival of the Ku Klux Klan. KKK members across America terrorized people they thought were bad for America – people they considered to be non-Americans. Those people tormented the KKK included Jews, Roman Catholics, African Americans as well as immigrants. By 1923, KKK membership soared to several million members. Before 1920, membership was approximately 5,000.

On top of all this, millions of Americans took on a fear of anything foreign to America. In fact, *xenophobia*, or the fear of foreigners became common. To reduce the amount of immigrants entering the USA, the Emergency Quota Act was passed in 1921. The Emergency Quota Act restricted immigrants entering the USA according to nationalities.

All in all, post WWI America was a time of many changes. Americans took on a new attitude – a new look even. The 1920s was also a time of new inventions, adventure and thrill-seeking, daring stunts, and new roles for women.

## Why the 20s Roared

The 1920s is often called the **Roaring 20s** because of all the excitement and adventure going on during the decade. There was Prohibition and the opportunity to attend speakeasies, go to the movies, listen to shows on the radio (a first, by the way), or go and see any number of famous athletes, like Babe Ruth, play a game or two.

### The Golden Age of Sports

The twenties is often called the **Golden Age of Sports** because sporting events were becoming increasingly popular as were the athletes.

BOXING was very popular thanks to **Jack Dempsey** who was even more famous in the twenties than Oscar de la Hoya or Evander Holyfield are today.

FOOTBALL also became very popular. Players of the day could boast of a leather helmet as well as knee and shoulder pads, but these were nothing like the padding the NFL has today. Actually, football was mostly a college sport then and not a professional game and young men played their best on the field.

One of the most famous football players of the time was the Galloping Ghost, better known as **Harold "Red" Grange** to his friends. He played for the University of Illinois and in one game rushed 402 yards and made a 95-yard kick-off. Another well-known football player was **George Gipp** from Notre Dame's "Fighting Irish." When Gipp had to sit out a game because he was suffering from pneumonia the rest of the team was urged to "Win one for the Gipper." **Knute Rockne**, although famous, wasn't a player but the coach for Notre Dame.

BASKETBALL was another popular sport. **Abe Saperstein** formed the **Harlem Globetrotters**, an all African American team in 1927. The Harlem Globetrotters still play games and delight crowds with their tricks on the court. This team was one of the most famous barnstorming (traveling) teams of the day.

BASEBALL was quickly becoming the USA's national game. Of all the men in baseball no one was more famous or well liked than **Babe Ruth** who his fans called the Sultan of Swat. Babe Ruth was a pitcher and a hitter, but the Boston Red Sox realized they had a great player and put him in the outfield so he could play everyday.

In 1927, Babe Ruth held the record for the most homeruns (60) in a season and this record wasn't broken until 1961 by Roger Maris. Today, Barry Bonds holds the record with 73 homeruns in one season. Ruth was traded to the New York Yankees early in his career and hit 714 homeruns during his career. (Hank Aaron broke this record with a lifetime record of 755 homeruns).

TENNIS also had a lot of fans and athletes such as **William "Big Bill" Tilden** and **Helen Wills** had people filling the seats at courtside.

SWIMMING received a lot of attention in the twenties. **Johnny Weismuller** was an Olympic champion and later played the role of Tarzan. **Gertrude Ederle** made history by swimming the English Channel in 14 hours and 31 minutes – one of the fastest times ever for this 30-mile swim.

## Movies

Movies, like today, were very popular in the twenties. Movies had been around since the 1890s, but were in great demand in the 1920s. They had a major impact on everyday life – including the way people dressed, talked, and even behaved. All of these were copied from movies. Magazines featured movie stars in their articles and included lots and lots of pictures.

There were many popular actors from the twenties. **Greta Garbo** was one of the most famous. **Mary Pickford** helped sell war bonds during WWI but lost her job when talking pictures took over Hollywood (she had a terrible lisp). **Douglas Fairbanks** also helped to sell war bonds during the Great War and was best known as an action star appearing in The Three Musketeers. **Rudolph Valentino** was a major heartthrob (even more popular than Orlando Bloom or Ashton Kutcher). Valentino's most famous movie was The Sheik. Comedians like **Charlie Chaplin** and **Laurel and Hardy** also made movies that audiences loved.

In 1927, Warner Bros. made the first **talkie** (movie with sound) called the Jazz Singer starring Al Jolson. Once talkies became popular many actors lost their jobs because they had speech problems, terrible sounding voices, or heavy accents. (Before talkies movie theaters hired people to play the piano during the movie to go with the scenes while words flashed on the screen for dialogue). In 1928, Walt Disney gave the world **Mickey Mouse** in his first short cartoon called Steamboat Willie.

## Music and Radio

Sometimes the twenties is called the **Jazz Age**. Jazz started with African American musicians in New Orleans as a way to express their feelings. Some of the best-known jazz performers of the twenties were **W.C. Handy** (also called the "Father of the Blues"). **Bessie Smith**, a great singer, and **Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong**, a fantastic trumpet player. As jazz became more popular people could hear their favorite artist perform on the radio.

The first radio station was **KDKA** operated by Westinghouse Electric Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1926, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) began and the Columbian Broadcasting Company (CBS) made its first appearance in 1927. Radio shows featured stories, symphonies, comedy acts, political speeches, and sports. In the beginning all shows were aired live. Soap companies paid to put certain drama series on the air so these shows became known as **soap operas**.

The twenties brought about several new inventions and gave people a lot of choices on how to spend their free time. Most of the things we take for granted today – radio, movies, sports, etc. were new experiences for the people living in the twenties. Because of all these new possibilities, the decade earned the name the **Roaring Twenties**.

Prohibition “The Noble Experiment”

The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment established Prohibition

The 21<sup>st</sup> amendment repealed Prohibition

PROHIBITION = law stating that it is illegal to sell, manufacture, or transport alcohol in the USA

VOLSTEAD ACT = allowed for the enforcement of Prohibition

The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment was passed in 1919 but Prohibition did not go into effect until *January 20, 1920* and lasted until *December 1933*.

Prohibition was a complete failure!!

How could the government enforce such a law?

BOOTLEGGERS = people who sold and manufactured alcohol illegally – were usually rich and powerful. Also called smugglers. (example: Al Capone)

SPEAKEASIES = secret bars or clubs where alcohol could be bought; usually in a cellar with stone walls.

Alcohol was legal as medicine or for religious purposes.

Alcohol was called Demon Rum and Bathtub Gin.

# The Roaring 20s

## Storybook Assignment

You are going to create a storybook depicting the significant events and issues during the 1920s. Movies, music and sports are major news during the 1920s. It's a pretty exciting time as far as history goes. ***Your storybook will have 6 pages – this includes the front cover.***

**Read the handout on the Roaring 20s.** It will give you background on the decade and the major issues / people involved. Feel free to look up additional information online to add extra details to your storybook.

- Create a **front page**.
  - Catchy title
  - Image that represents the 1920s
  
- **Page 1 – The Red Scare**
  - Define the Red Scare
  - Mitchell Palmer & Palmer Raids
  - Xenophobia
  
- **Page 2 – Sports**
  - Name the major sports of the day. This includes football, basketball, baseball, tennis and swimming.
  - Select 4 major athletes & include what sport they played & major achievement (most home runs of the decade, most yards rushed...)
  
- **Page 3 – Movies**
  - Select 3 major movie stars of the 1920s & include their greatest film
  
- **Page 4 – Music**
  - Select 3 major musicians of the 1920s & include what type of music they performed (jazz, blues, rap...)
  
- **Page 5 – Prohibition**
  - Include the 18<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> amendments & the Volstead Act
  - Bootleggers & Al Capone
  - Speakeasies
  
- **Pages 1-5 should have a title and at least one school appropriate image that best represents the topic.**