

IV. Popular Culture & Consumerism in the 1920s

1) Read the materials that follow. Then use these materials to answer the questions.

New products and technologies

Advertisement for a typical Model T Ford from the 1920s, the most popular car of the decade until the introduction of the Model A Ford in 1928.



During the 1920s, mass production developed which allowed for cheaper prices of technology products. Most of the devices that became commonplace in this decade had been developed before the war, but had been unaffordable to the majority. The automobile, movie, radio, and chemical industries skyrocketed during the 1920s. One of the most important of these was the automobile industry. Before the War, cars were a rare luxury. In the 1920s, cheap mass-produced vehicles became common throughout the US and Canada. By 1927, Henry Ford had sold 15 million Model Ts. The automobile had wide effects on the economy and society. The automobile industry rapidly became one of the largest industries; peripheral companies running gas stations, motels, and providing oil also became important.

- By the late 1920s, there was one automobile for every five Americans, allowing, theoretically, for every person in the United States to be on the road at the same time.

Two factors led to the rising popularity of cars:

- **Cost**-- The price of automobiles declined steadily until the mid-1920s so that many well-paid working families could now afford to purchase a car. The Model T Ford, for example, cost just \$290 in 1926.
- **Credit**-- In 1925, Americans made 75% of all automobile purchases on the installment plan.

During the Roaring Twenties, radio became the medium of the masses, the first mass, broadcasting medium. Radios were affordable and the programs entertaining. Radio was the grandstand for mass marketing with a massive listening audience. Its economic importance led to the mass culture that has dominated society since its introduction near the turn of the century. During the "golden age of radio", programming was as varied as TV programming in modern day. Editors were free to entertain an audience in any and every way, setting the stage for the entrance of violent crime into film and popular culture. This relative freedom came to an end in 1927 with the establishment of the Federal Radio Commission and a new era of regulation.

Advertisement reels, shown before early films, augmented the already booming mass market. The "golden age of film", during the 1930s and 1940s, was to evolve from its humble 1900s beginnings of short, silent films. Like radio, film was a medium for the masses. Watching a film was cheap compared to other forms of entertainment, and accessible to factory and other blue-collar workers.

- **Radio:** By 1922, 3 million American households had radios, and purchases of receivers had increased by 2,500%, giving the industry annual sales of \$850 million by 1929.
- **Motion pictures**
A fledgling industry before World War I, motion picture production became one of the ten largest industries in the United States during the 1920s. In 1922, theaters sold 40 million tickets a week. By 1929, that number had grown to 100 million a week.

- **New electric appliances** –A floodtide of new electric appliances lightened the load of the middle-class American housewife: vacuum cleaners, toasters, washing machines, refrigerators. Women became America's greatest consumers, purchasing appliances and other items that would have been considered a luxury just a generation before.
- **Dance:** Starting in the 1920s, ballrooms across the U.S. sponsored dance contests, where dancers invented, tried, and competed with new moves. Professionals began to hone their skills in tap dance and other dances of the era throughout the Vaudeville hall circuit across the U.S. Electric lighting and air conditioning made evening social entertainment available to much wider audiences, giving rise to an era of dance halls and live music. Throughout the decade the most popular dances were the fox-trot, waltz and tango. Harlem played a key role in the development of dance styles. With a number of entertainment venues, people from all walks of life, all races, and all classes came together. From the early 1920s, a variety of eccentric dances were developed. The first of these were the Breakaway and Charleston. Both were based upon African-American musical styles and beats, including the all popular blues.
- **Sports:** The Roaring Twenties are seen as the breakout decade for sports in America. Citizens from all parts of the country flocked to see the top athletes of the day compete in arenas and stadia. Undoubtedly, the most popular American athlete of the Twenties was baseball player Babe Ruth. His characteristic home run hitting for the New York Yankees, heralded a new epoch in the history of the sport and his high style of living fascinated the nation. Other sports, too, created heroes during the Roaring Twenties. A former bar room brawler named Jack Dempsey won the World heavyweight boxing title and became the most celebrated boxer of his time. College football also captivated fans, as did the new professional football league, the NFL. Bill Tilden thoroughly dominated his competition in tennis, cementing his reputation as one of the greatest tennis players of all time. And Bobby Jones popularized golf with his spectacular successes on the golf course.
- **“Lucky Lindy”:** Charles Lindbergh gained sudden great international fame as the first pilot to fly solo and non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean, flying from New York to Paris in 1927 in 33.5 hours in his plane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*.



Colgate ad: typical early 1900s ad; Barbasol face ad, later 1920s ad.

Literature of the 1920s

The Roaring Twenties was also a period of literary creativity, and works of several authors, including, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carl Sandburg and Ernest Hemingway, appeared during the period. D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was a scandal at the time because of its explicit descriptions of sex.

- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald has often been described as the epitome of the "Jazz Age" in American literature.
- *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque details the horrors of WWI and also the deep detachment from German civilian life felt by many men returning from the front.
- *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald examines the lives and morality of post-World War I youth.
- *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway follows a group of expatriate Americans in Europe during the 1920s.