

Chapter 16

Throwing Caution to the Wind: The Roaring '20s

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding America's problems after World War I
- ▶ Brushing up on the presidencies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover
- ▶ Cruising through the prosperity of the decade

Brace yourself for a wild ride through the Roaring '20s. In this chapter, you find out about the birth of modern culture and all its subsequent growing pains. While you try to race through the important facts of this era, we advise you to slow down and absorb the material. The writers of the SAT II U.S. History exam seem to like something about this decade, and you'll undoubtedly find several questions pertaining to this era on the test. In this chapter, we cover America's transition back to normal life after World War I; the Republican presidents of the decade; and the events that shaped modern American culture.

Pride and Prejudice: Transitioning after World War I

Before the 1920s could get roaring, cultural forces collided during a short period of time following World War I. Postwar America was a scary place for Americans who resisted change. The mainstream availability of advanced technology, like the automobile; the spread of previously unfamiliar ideologies, like Communism; and increased access to communications, like movies, shaped a new, modernized American culture that pushed traditional values to the background. Small-town America resisted change, but the nation was quickly becoming an urban society. Many of the changes taking place in cities across the country filtered into the surrounding communities. The turmoil sparked clashes of ideas, and violence often resulted. But out of the chaos, a new American society emerged.

Problems with demobilization

About four million Americans participated in World War I, and almost half of them served in Europe. The horror they had seen and the terror they had experienced combined with their eye-opening travels through Europe left many Americans permanently altered. Many came home confused about their place in society, no longer desiring a life on the family farm or a return to the drudgery of factory work. Women also felt the effects. Women who had filled the workplace during the war lost their jobs to returning soldiers. Men had a hard time adjusting

to the idea of women working outside the home, and women were reluctant to give up some of their newfound freedom. As a result, divorce rates skyrocketed following the war. (For more about the war, see Chapter 15.)

Another unfortunate consequence of the soldiers' return was the spread of a deadly Spanish flu epidemic. American troops had suffered almost as many deaths from the flu as they did in battle, and soldiers unknowingly brought this deadly flu home with them. From 1918 to 1919, more than 668,000 Americans died from the Spanish flu.

A lot of work: Labor issues

Without the booming war industry, the American economy was in decline, which meant hard times for American laborers. The prospect of unemployment loomed like a storm cloud. In 1919, unemployment was at 2 percent, but by 1921, it had rapidly grown to 12 percent. The war and its aftermath also drove up inflation, which sent the cost of living for Joe Factory Worker through the roof. On average, inflation rose by more than 15 percent a year in 1919 and 1920 and continued to rise at high levels through 1922. During the recession of 1920 to 1921, more than five million Americans lost their jobs, nearly 500,000 farmers lost their farms, 100,000 businesses went bankrupt, and the Gross National Product (GNP) of the U.S. dropped nearly 10 percent. The country rebounded, though, and prosperity reigned for most of the 1920s. (See "Living the good life: Postwar prosperity" later in this chapter.)

American laborers began striking all over the place. In 1919 alone, four million people participated in 3,300 strikes. Strikers walked out for all the normal reasons — better pay, shorter working days, and better working conditions. But Americans grew tired of the constant disruption, and laborers lost the support of the federal government, which they once had. The government used troops and court orders to break up strikes, and corporations began to undermine the power of unions, stealing away their members by offering pensions, profit sharing, and corporate-sponsored social and sporting events in a phenomenon later called "welfare capitalism" or "corporate welfare." Automobile tycoon Henry Ford was the industrialist who pioneered a corporate welfare program. He instituted a shorter workweek, higher wages, and paid vacations for employees of his Ford Motor Company. Because of these changes, union membership declined sharply throughout the 1920s.

No beer here: Prohibition

Consuming alcohol was always an American pastime. Founding father Benjamin Franklin once said that beer was proof that God loved people and wanted them to be happy. But by 1919, pressure from reformers of the **Temperance Movement**, greatly aided by the growth of religious fundamentalism (which we cover in "A fear of change: Protestant fundamentalism" later in this chapter), finally tipped the balance in favor of a ban on alcohol. The **18th Amendment**, which prevented the manufacture, sale, or distribution of "intoxicating liquors," took effect in 1920.

Prohibition was dubbed "the noble experiment" — but many Americans, especially those who lived in cities and urban areas — refused to take part in it. The ban on alcohol had an unintentional and unfortunate effect: It spawned a vast underground market for alcohol, which mobsters with funny names like Al "Scarface" Capone, "Machine Gun" Jack McGurn, and George "Bugs" Moran exploited. These wise guys built criminal empires on selling **bootleg liquor**, that is, alcohol they illegally imported from foreign countries or made in bathtub distilleries. Homemade liquor was often dangerous to drink and sometimes even poisonous. Prohibition also made lawbreakers out of millions of Americans, including politicians and police officers, who frequented thousands of illegal saloons called **speakeasies** across the country.

Ultimately, the noble experiment was a big fat flop. Gangsters became celebrities for their flagrant disregard for the law, and the average citizen was more tempted to drink simply because alcohol was forbidden. Congress repealed the 18th Amendment in December 1933.

Dealing with racial and ethnic unrest

The *Ku Klux Klan*, a racist group dominant in the South, reorganized in 1915 after the release of the motion picture *The Birth of a Nation*, which celebrated the early Klan in the days of Reconstruction (see Chapter 10). The Klan made a big comeback in the years following World War I. The group, which had discriminated mostly against African Americans in its previous incarnation, was concerned about Jews, Catholics, and immigrants in the 1920s. Klan members felt these groups' languages, customs, religions, habits, and values threatened their way of life.

Another reason the Klan reappeared was due to the increase in racial tensions throughout America between whites and African Americans. The *Great Migration* that began in the years before World War I and continued throughout the 1950s caused dramatic shifts in racial demographics. During the Great Migration, many African Americans left the South and settled in northern cities like Chicago and New York (see Chapter 14 for more about the Great Migration) where the standard of living was higher, wages were better, good jobs were more plentiful, and racism was less prevalent than it was in the South. But resentment arose in these cities when whites had to compete with African Americans, who were often willing to work for less pay, for factory jobs. Also, a growing movement among African Americans, especially returning war veterans, called for civil rights and respect that whites weren't willing to give them.

In what became known as the *Red Summer* in 1919 (not to be confused with the Red Scare — see the next section), race riots rocked 24 cities and towns across America. In the worst example, 38 people (both black and white) died, and more than 500 were injured when fighting between blacks and whites erupted in the streets of Chicago after a group of whites stoned a black man to death who they felt had crossed into their swimming area.

By 1924, the Ku Klux Klan had four million members, and its influence had spread well beyond the South. In 1926, the Klan published "The Klan's Fight for Americanism," a booklet that outlined the organization's credo. The new Klan was an equal-opportunity hate-monger. Gone were the days of hating blacks alone; the new Klan targeted Jews, Asians, Mexicans, Catholics, and anyone they considered "foreign."

Handling the Red Scare

When the Russian government fell to the Bolsheviks during the revolution in 1917, an irrational fear of *Communism* spread across America. This fear, tangled with American patriotism, created an atmosphere of conformity. Anyone who marched to the beat of a different drummer, such as anarchists, Socialists, pacifists, Communists, and union leaders, were suspected to be members of the Communist Party. The term "red," meaning "Communist," generally applied to all these groups, although, in truth, very few Communists were in America.

The *Red Scare* (the worry that many Americans had about a Communist plot to take over the U.S. government) started after the Russian Revolution in 1917 and reached full strength between 1919 and 1920. All told, the two Communist parties that existed in America in 1920 had a combined membership of 70,000 — not exactly revolution material.

Nevertheless, the continuous strikes and a series of attempted bombings at the homes of prominent Americans added to the general paranoia brought on by the Communist revolution. Congress passed the *Espionage Act of 1917*, which declared that making false statements that would interfere with wartime operations was illegal. The *Sedition Act of 1918* made expressing an opinion that went against the U.S. government a crime. Under the Espionage Act, the government arrested *Eugene Debs*, a labor leader and five-time presidential candidate for the Socialist Party, for an anti-war speech he made in 1918 and sentenced him to ten years in prison. After the war, more than 30 states enacted peacetime sedition (or treason) laws, and radicals became targets across the nation.

President Woodrow Wilson gave Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer the task of rooting out the pesky Communists in America. Palmer was convinced that the flame of revolt was burning its way into the homes of American workers. To combat the blaze, Palmer set up the *Federal Bureau of Investigation* (FBI), headed by J. Edgar Hoover, to keep an eye on radicals. The FBI arrested suspected Communists and sometimes even deported them. One of the most famous incidents that occurred during the Red Scare was the case of *Sacco and Vanzetti*, two Italian immigrants who were charged with the murder of a paymaster in Massachusetts. Even though there was little evidence against them, they were convicted and sentenced to death because they were confessed anarchists. They maintained their innocence, and public support continued to grow in their favor over the years, but both were executed in 1927.

The Red Scare reached its peak in 1920 when federal agents in 33 cities arrested more than 4,000 people in what became known as the *Palmer Raids*. The FBI threw the suspected “Reds” in jail and denied their rights to representation. Most of them weren’t convicted, but the government deported about 600 foreign immigrants. After the Palmer Raids, the anti-Communist madness began to die down. In 1921, President Warren Harding revoked the Espionage Act and Sedition Act and released Debs from prison. The Red Scare emerged again in full force, though, after World War II (see Chapter 19).

Locking the doors: Anti-immigration measures

The fear of foreign ideologies (like Communism) infiltrating the U.S. caused many Americans to be none too fond of foreign immigrants in the post-World War I period. Prior to 1890, most immigrants were from northern Europe, but during the early 1900s (largely to escape the ravages of World War I), a large number of immigrants came from southern Europe, which were Slavic and Asian nations. In 1924, to curtail the entry of these immigrants who seemed so different from the rest of Americans in appearance, religious beliefs, ideologies, and customs, the federal government strengthened a 1921 act of Congress that had established an immigration quota system in the U.S. (see “The policies of Harding’s administration” later in this chapter). This act, known as the *National Origins Act of 1924*, banned immigration from east Asia and cut the quota on European immigrants. In 1929, Congress revised the act and allowed a maximum of 150,000 immigrants per year into the U.S.



Whenever you hear the word *Bolshevik*, equate it with Communist; the SAT II History exam may use these terms interchangeably.

A fear of change: Protestant fundamentalism

Many Americans didn’t feel comfortable with the fast-paced, consumer-driven, morally loosened American culture that emerged in the postwar era. Modernist Protestants, who lived mostly in urban areas and were largely part of the middle class, adapted readily to the wonders of modern science and technological and social advances in the modern, secular society.

On the other hand, millions of provincial, mostly rural-dwelling Americans fought against the changing tides by embracing *Protestant fundamentalism*, which endorsed a rigid interpretation of the Bible, encouraged the continuation of traditional beliefs, and sought to preserve traditional faith in religion in America.



For the SAT II History exam, think of the rise of fundamentalism as a battle against modernization — the old versus the new, the secular versus the religious, the rural versus the urban. America was truly having a culture war. Case in point: the *Scopes Monkey trial*.

In the summer of 1925, a teacher by the name of John Thomas Scopes was arrested for teaching evolution in the classroom, which violated a Tennessee law. (The law said that the Bible's explanation of creation was what children should learn.) The trial attracted national attention and was the first trial ever broadcasted over the radio. Clarence Darrow, who represented Scopes, faced off against prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, the three-time presidential candidate and former secretary of state (see Chapter 12 for more about him). The jury convicted Scopes, but by all accounts, secularism won. Bryan expressed his heartfelt belief in the Bible throughout the trial and used it to back his case. Although this strategy may have convinced the jury in Dayton, Tennessee, newspapers throughout the country publicly ridiculed Bryan, making the views of fundamentalists seem outdated and foolish. Scopes was eventually fined \$100, and the case was later dismissed in a higher court due to a technicality. The trial did little to resolve the conflict between fundamentalists and modernists.

The Ku Klux Klan also supported fundamentalist beliefs with their anti-immigrant and anti-urban feelings. The Klan carried out vigilante justice to anyone who didn't conform to traditional views. Klan members served as the moral police in small towns across America, using their old standby combination of intimidation and violence. But ultimately, the Klan couldn't stop the changes that were sweeping through America.

Tying it all together: A sample question looks at America after World War I

Before you move on to the next section, try the following question, which asks you to sum up what was happening in America after the end of World War I. The SAT II often asks you to draw general conclusions about a specific period in U.S. history.



All the following describe America in the aftermath of World War I EXCEPT:

- (A) Increased racial tensions
- (B) Government restrictions of civil liberties
- (C) Inflation and unemployment
- (D) Growth of religious fundamentalism
- (E) Migration of people away from cities



With this type of question, you should be thinking “Which answer doesn't belong with the others?” Remembering that the postwar years were turbulent times in America is helpful. With that in mind, (A), (B), and (C), seem to fit that description. When you think of restriction of civil liberties, think Prohibition, sedition laws, or the Palmer Raids during the Red Scare. If you remember that religious fundamentalism was a response to the changing culture in America and the fact that the Ku Klux Klan figured largely in the movement, then you can't help but conclude that (D) also fits the description. You're left with (E), which is correct. Migration occurred after the war, but it was primarily to the cities, not away from them.

The Rise of the Republicans: Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover

The presidencies of three Republicans — Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover — spanned the decade of the 1920s. With the rise of Republican power came a number of changes.



For the SAT II, what you need to understand about these Republican presidents is that they firmly believed that all levels of society benefited when big business thrived, and big business thrived (so they believed) when the government kept its intervening hands out. Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover set policies that lessened the constraints of regulation and encouraged the growth of business throughout the '20s.

“A return to normalcy”: Warren G. Harding

The American public, disillusioned by the chaos of the postwar years, was looking for change by the time the election of 1920 rolled around. Woodrow Wilson wanted to run for a third term, but his poor health and declining public appeal led Democrats to choose Ohio Governor James Cox as their presidential candidate. To give the Democratic ticket a little spice, they tossed in an up-and-coming Democratic star, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as the party's vice-presidential nominee. Despite the personnel change, the Democratic campaign focused on many of Wilson's domestic and foreign policies. The topic of joining the League of Nations was a hot one, and Democrats campaigned in favor of it. But the election ultimately revealed that Americans didn't share Wilson's views on making America part of a worldwide community (see Chapter 15 for more about the League of Nations).

Instead, American citizens elected Republican Warren G. Harding, an Ohio senator and newspaper editor whose position on the League of Nations was ambiguous, as was his position on most issues. Harding won in a landslide, collecting 16.1 million popular votes to Cox's 9.1 million and winning 404 electoral votes. Cox finished a distant second with 127.

Harding's promise of “a return to normalcy” (in other words, a lack of significant conflicts abroad and a return to pre-Progressive Era domestic policies) was largely responsible for his election, and it translated into policies that removed restrictions from businesses and encouraged the accumulation of wealth — especially among the wealthy! Harding also stayed true to his word and kept America away from foreign entanglements.

The policies of Harding's administration

Many historians label Harding the worst president in American history. The reason is because of all the scandals that occurred during his three short years as president (see the next section). Despite the scandals and the fact that he died before he could finish his term, Harding's policies set a political course for the rest of the decade.

Here's a rundown of what Harding's administration did:

- ✓ It cut taxes, especially for the rich.
- ✓ It stripped the federal budget of its wartime girth.
- ✓ It raised tariffs on foreign imports to protect American businesses with the Emergency Tariff Act in 1921 and the Fordney-McCumber Tariff in 1922.
- ✓ It set higher restrictions on immigration with the Emergency Quota Act in 1921, which limited the annual number of immigrants that America would allow from any country.

Harding also supported anti-lynching legislation, approved bills that gave aid to struggling farmers, freed wartime political prisoners, and loosened many of the restrictions on civil liberties that former President Woodrow Wilson had implemented. Most importantly, he ushered in a policy of governmental cooperation with American businesses.

What a shocker: Scandals in Harding's administration

Harding himself was virtually scandal-free except for some business about gambling, alcohol, and some extra-marital relationships that became public after his death. But scandal infested his presidency because he made some very poor choices in government appointments. Take, for example, Charles Forbes, who Harding appointed to head the newly created Veteran's Bureau. A Senate investigation revealed that Forbes had looted more than \$200 million from the U.S. government. In 1925, he was convicted of bribery and fraud, and he spent two years in prison.

Harry M. Daugherty was a big-time political patron of Harding's (in other words, he gave Harding money for his campaign for president) and was Harding's attorney general. Daugherty was involved with several other men in a scandal that involved a rigged sale of some government property and, in return, received some nice financial kickbacks. One of the men involved went to jail and another committed suicide, but Daugherty eventually walked free due to undecided juries in two trials.

And then there was Thomas W. Miller, who Harding appointed to the position of Alien Property Custodian (never mind what this name means — it's not important). Miller practiced fraud and spent some time in prison for it. This sort of thing happened often enough to make the American public wonder what the heck Harding was thinking.

But the mother of scandals — the *Teapot Dome Scandal* — came to light shortly after Harding's death in 1923. A congressional inquiry in 1923–1924 revealed that Albert Fall, the secretary of the interior, had accepted bribes to lease government property to private oil companies. For his role in the affair, Fall had to pay a \$100,000 fine and spend a year in jail. Whether or not Harding knew about the Teapot Dome business prior to his death isn't clear, but with all these scandals, it's no wonder Harding had two major heart attacks in July 1923!

Keeping cool with Coolidge: Calvin Coolidge

Calvin Coolidge, Harding's vice president, stepped into the role of president after Harding died in 1923. Coolidge, true to his name, took a cool, businesslike approach to the presidency. If Harding was business-friendly, Coolidge was even more so. He maintained that a factory resembled a temple: It was a place of worship for the man who worked there. Coolidge said that "the business of America is business." While Coolidge reigned, business was king, and that pretty much sums up what you need to know about Coolidge for the SAT II. But here are a few more items, just in case the testmakers get fancy:

- ✓ **Coolidge was efficient.** Coolidge balanced the federal budget, reduced government debt, decreased income tax rates — especially for corporate businesses and the rich — and began the construction of a national highway system. (See "If you build it: Expanded construction" later in this chapter.)
- ✓ **Coolidge wasn't particularly farmer-friendly.** He vetoed bills designed to stabilize falling staple crop prices. This contributed to the problems during the Great Depression that you'll find out more about in Chapter 17. (Check out "An exception to the rule: Problems with income distribution and agriculture" later in this chapter.)
- ✓ **He was popular because of his hands-off attitude.** In his 1924 reelection bid, he beat Democrat John W. Davis by a mile (okay, he won 54 percent of the popular vote and 382 of 531 electoral votes).

“A chicken in every pot”: Herbert Hoover

In 1928, Coolidge chose not to seek reelection, so the Republican Party nominated Herbert Hoover, who had served as secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge. Hoover was a well-known politician, a supporter of Prohibition and a respected multi-millionaire. Democrats ran New York Governor Alfred Smith, who was a Catholic with links to *Tammany Hall* (a notoriously corrupt political machine; see Chapter 12). Smith supported Progressive reform, civil rights, and was an anti-Prohibitionist, but Republicans branded him a city-slicker and a servant of the pope, successfully exploiting the biases of the American electorate.

Americans overwhelmingly voted Hoover into office at a time when the country was comfortable with the general prosperity of the 1920s and optimistic about its future. Hoover told Americans that they were closer than ever to a final triumph over poverty and vowed that each American household would be able to afford a chicken in every pot. Hoover, himself a successful businessman, entered his presidency continuing the hands-off Republican business policies that made America prosperous in the 1920s. (We discuss more about Herbert Hoover in Chapter 17.)

Tying it all together: A sample question looks at the presidents of the 1920s



Most likely, the SAT II U.S. History test won't ask you for anything specific about Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. In the scheme of history, their administrations are fairly small fish. However, you may have to answer a general question about presidencies of the 1920s.



What best describes the approach that the presidential administrations of the 1920s took toward business?

- (A) Progressive reform
- (B) Increased government regulation
- (C) Favor of labor over business
- (D) A policy of non-interference with business
- (E) Dismantling of oligopolies

Right off the bat, you can dismiss answers (A), (B), and (C) because, after reading this section, you should know that 1920s government was pro-business, and all these answers imply a less-friendly arrangement. Answer (E) may be tricky if you don't know what oligopoly means. An **oligopoly** is a few businesses that have cornered the market on a particular industry. Examples of oligopolies in the 1920s were General Electric and U.S. Steel. If you know that Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover gave business reign, you know (E) couldn't be the answer. Answer (D) is the only pro-business choice, and you should recognize the policy of non-interference as a governmental hands-off approach.

The Era of Prosperity: The Jazz Age

The 1920s were years of prosperity. What does that mean, you ask? Well, the Roaring '20s were good times for most Americans. Middle- and upper-class Americans earned decent money and even had some left over to spend on new gadgets like refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, radios, and automobiles. In fact, Americans were spend-crazy. This

era marked the first time in U.S. history that middle-class Americans could buy things because they wanted them, not just because they needed them. Thus, the '20s ushered in the beginning of modern consumerism, promoted by a new boom in advertising. Unfortunately, the rural poor were left behind during this rise of consumerism. While middle- and upper-class incomes continued to rise in the mid- and late 1920s, the incomes of the rural poor and farmers continued to fall.)

The 1920s is the decade in which modern American culture was born. For the first time, disposable incomes allowed the average American to afford entertainment. Americans listened to jazz and went to the movies, the theater, and baseball (Babe Ruth hit his record-setting 60 homeruns in 1927) and football games in unprecedented numbers. Movie stars, sports heroes, beauty salons, and shorter skirts for women became norms.

The '20s were also an era of innovation and technology. The radio, which allowed for national communication, came of age during the 1920s. In 1920, the first commercial radio station began broadcasting and, by 1929, 12 million American households owned radio sets. Two powerhouse radio networks, CBS and NBC, arose. Americans also built millions of miles of roads and highways. Cities were booming, and the suburbs were expanding.

Living the good life: Postwar prosperity

In the 1920s, Americans had more money in their pockets and more time to spend it, thanks to modern conveniences and shorter hours at work. Average Americans spent their money on products advertisers shamelessly persuaded them that they needed, whereas corporations and wealthy people invested their money in the stock market. Throughout the decade, stock prices soared, making investors even wealthier and creating a false sense of security in the future prosperity of America. The consumer demand made making money seem easy, and completely new industries arose from that demand. For most Americans, the '20s was an era of good feeling, and no one considered that the fun would end. (That ending is an interesting story — see Chapter 17 for more.)

Cool cash: A greater real income for everyone

The economic boom of the 1920s depended on Americans' ability to spend money, and spend they did. Many Americans had more money because they earned higher wages due to increased efficiency in industry and the benefits of welfare capitalism. (for more on welfare capitalism, see "A lot of work: Labor issues" earlier in this chapter.) Additionally, products cost less because of mass production and the overall success of American industry. Much of that success came from the federal government's accommodation of big business. Republicans' policy of deregulation and bolstering business growth translated into big profits for business tycoons, but the average American also benefited by receiving an increased wage. (For more about presidents' policies regarding business, check out "The Rise of the Republicans: Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover" earlier in this chapter.)

A new ride: Automobiles and increased industrial productivity

The refinement of *mass-production* techniques (like assembly-line construction, where each worker is responsible for the completion of one small part of the entire product-assembly process) revolutionized American manufacturing and made consumer goods much more abundant and affordable. Nowhere was the refinement of mass-production techniques more apparent than in the automobile industry. In 1908, cars were a luxury plaything for the rich. In 1914, Henry Ford's Model T cost \$950, but because of the efficiency of the assembly line, by 1917, the price of the Model T had dropped to \$350, making it affordable for many more Americans. By 1929, a Model T cost only \$290, completely defying inflation and normal price increases — since when do cars get drastically cheaper as 15 years pass? By 1923, Americans

had bought more than 3.5 million automobiles, and more than 80 percent of customers bought them on credit. By 1929, one in five Americans owned a car, and the automobile industry employed one out of every 12 workers. Automobile manufacturing made up more than 12 percent of America's total output and it stimulated the growth of other industries as well, including steel, glass, rubber, and oil.



Now, you just had a lot of numbers thrown at you, but don't worry. All you need to remember for the test is that new and improved production techniques made the proliferation of cars possible, and the automobile industry was largely responsible for the boom of industry in the '20s.

What else can we buy? New industries

The growth of the average American's purchasing power ushered in a whole new batch of industries to suck money from their pockets. The rise of the automobile industry brought with it a host of new businesses that catered to the automobile enthusiast. Think of all the businesses today that revolve around owning a car: gas stations, repair shops, restaurants, and motels (called "motor inns" in the '20s). Here are several other industries that started in the '20s:

- ✓ **Advertising:** With all the new products that people were buying and companies were selling, advertising became a big business. Before the 1920s, advertisements were dull; they had no pictures, catch phrases, or sometimes not even a brand name. Advertising companies became savvier in the 1920s. They built name-brand recognition by creating memorable slogans and bombarding the public with product campaigns that prominent psychologists had designed. In addition to using print media, advertisers also used radio to promote their products. With the growth of the automobile industry and the subsequent expansion of the road system, advertisers began to use roadside billboards to advertise their goods as well.
- ✓ **Electrical appliances:** By 1930, $\frac{2}{3}$ of American households had electricity and half had telephones. The demand for consumer products that ran on electricity led to an expansion of the electricity and telephone industries during the 1920s. New household appliances like refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and toasters became all the rage.
- ✓ **Movies:** Americans grew insatiable appetites for entertainment in the 1920s, and whole industries sprang up to fill that need. By 1922, movie theaters attracted 40 million viewers a week and, by 1930, that number ballooned to 100 million, which is amazing because America's population in 1930 was just over 120 million. The concept of celebrity was born on the silver screen. Americans indulged themselves in the lives of movie stars like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, and Gloria Swanson. People also looked to movies to find out how to act, talk, and think.

If you build it: Expanded construction

The unbelievable rate at which Americans purchased vehicles in the '20s created a huge demand for roads. During this decade, America doubled the size of its system of roads and highways, spending more than \$2 billion a year to build and maintain roads. While building the roads, Americans also needed to build bridges, tunnels, parking garages, and the first shopping centers.

Automobiles also contributed to the creation of modern suburbia. People no longer had to live in the city in order to work in the city. Automobiles made commuting to work from quiet neighborhoods surrounding the big cities possible, which fueled a boom in housing construction.

***An exception to the rule: Problems with income distribution and agriculture***

But the Roaring '20s weren't all wine and roses. Although many Americans experienced prosperity, the gap between the wealthy and the poor widened, and the SAT II U.S. History exam expects you to know that fact.

The government helped the rich get richer by lowering taxes on personal incomes, corporate profits, and inheritances by more than 50 percent during the 1920s, but it did little to solve the problems of the poor. In 1929, before the Great Depression hit and despite the prosperity of the 1920s, 50 percent of the American population lived at or below the poverty level. For example, Secretary of Treasury Andrew Mellon, an oil tycoon considered to be the third richest man in America, received more money back from federal tax cuts than all taxpayers in the state of Nebraska.

Farmers suffered the most because of increased overproduction, a decline in food prices, and a subsequent decline in farmers' incomes during the 1920s. During World War I, the government had encouraged farmers to beef up their crop production to feed American troops and their Allies. Gross farm income increased from \$7.6 billion in 1914 to \$17.7 billion in 1919. But after the war, the demand for crops substantially decreased, and the price of crops plummeted. Farm income dropped 50 percent during the '20s. In 1920, farm income represented 15 percent of the national total but, by 1929, farm income represented only 9 percent. This decrease in income caused many to give up their farms and move to cities, where they hoped to find employment. More than 3 million Americans left farming and agriculture during the 1920s.

The Lost Generation and American literature

The decade of the 1920s was also an important era for literature. Many American writers who saw through the shallowness of the postwar prosperity were disillusioned with America and settled in Paris. Writer, poet, and feminist **Gertrude Stein** called these ex-patriates (Americans who decided to live outside of the U.S.) the **Lost Generation**. One of the members, **T.S. Eliot**, portrayed the disillusionment of the Lost Generation in his lengthy poem, "The Wasteland" (1922). **Ernest Hemingway's** breakout novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) also recorded the post-war angst of the generation. The novels of **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, especially the American classic, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), commented on the excesses of American society in the Jazz Age. **Sinclair Lewis** offered social criticism, portrayals of strong working women, and commentary about racial concerns in novels such as *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Arrowsmith* (1925). Another literary notable of the age was **Thornton Wilder**, who wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), though he is better known for his later works, including the play *Our Town*, produced in 1938.

Jazz: A sign of the times

Jazz was the soundtrack of the 1920s, which is why people refer to the decade as the "**Jazz Age**." Jazz was a distinctive American art form played in bars and dancehalls throughout the '20s. It made unlikely stars out of African American musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong at a time when racism was still deeply rooted in American society. The popularity of jazz helped the records of African American musicians find their ways into the homes and onto the phonographs of millions of Americans. Jazz was the first distinctly African American art form to make its way into mainstream America.

In the early 1920s, African Americans who migrated from the South during the Great Migration brought jazz with them to the North. As the population of African Americans began to swell in cities like New York and Chicago, jazz began to filter into mainstream American culture. Jazz

became popular with many people — whites included — because it struck a nerve. It was urban, improvisational, and played in smoky speakeasies. It especially appealed to young, urban dwellers.

During this era, jazz greatly influenced many aspects of American culture. It inspired poetry, new writing styles, and new dances, such as the Charleston. Historians even credit jazz with influencing American painters like Georgia O'Keeffe and John Marin, composers like George Gershwin, and architects like Frank Lloyd Wright.

The popularity of jazz and the dances that went with it, like the Charleston, literally influenced 1920s women to kick up their heels. During the Jazz Age, middle-class women rejected rigid Victorian social mores and donned short *flapper* dresses and bobbed haircuts. In secular circles, women could now dance, drink, smoke, reveal their legs, use makeup, and attend raucous parties. Young, single women, especially those of the middle and working classes, embraced this liberated flapper lifestyle.

Conservative Americans with traditional and sometimes racist views found jazz to be a summation of everything wrong about the changing American culture. They attributed the corruption of American youth — the snatching away of their virginity and their ability to decipher right from wrong — to jazz.



Now, you may have a hard time believing that jazz had such an effect. For crying out loud, it's something your grandparents listen to! But, for the test, think of jazz as the rock-n-roll of the '20s. It was music for the hip, the coming-of-age, and the kids who wanted to rebel against their parents. It was also a bridge that crossed the cultural divide between blacks and whites, which was part of the reason many Americans resented it.

Jazz also inspired a remarkable growth spurt of African American intellectual culture in New York City known as the *Harlem Renaissance*. The Harlem Renaissance broadened the understanding of the black experience in America through the writings of talented African American poets, historians, essayists, playwrights, and musicians. A new attitude among African Americans emerged that rejected the idea of assimilation into white culture; instead, it exalted African Americans who were proud of their African heritage and wanted to prove to whites that their culture was worthy of respect.

A host of new African American writers emerged from the Harlem Renaissance, including *Langston Hughes*, who's well-known for his 1926 poem "I, Too," one of many poems in which he renounced racism and celebrated African American culture. Other prominent writers included Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Alain Locke, who the publishing industry sought because of America's growing fascination with African American culture in Harlem (an area in New York City). In the literary movement, African American writers focused on realistically portraying African American culture. The Harlem Renaissance influenced generations of African American writers, but the white literary establishment overlooked it until very recently.