

History
UNFOLDING

THE ROARING TWENTIES



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Introduction

The Decade of the Twenties

The 1920s are often thought of as “the Jazz Age,” or sometimes as “the Roaring Twenties.” (That last phrase, of course, is also the name of this booklet.) And the decade did seem to be one of high spirits and carefree confidence. A more contented America turned away from the problems of the world and enjoyed its new automobile-driven prosperity. A consumer culture emerged, along with what appeared to be a more relaxed view of life and its pleasures.

Yet beneath the surface, a troubled and tense mood can also be detected. Traditional values regarding religion and personal morality clashed, at times in dramatic ways, with a more cosmopolitan outlook. At the same time, many older groups of Americans seemed to become less welcoming toward the new immigrants who had entered the nation by the millions before World War I. Racial tensions were high as well. And the prosperity of the 1920s affected many groups unevenly. It helped to create a huge new middle class; but it also left many behind in deep poverty.

The twelve illustrations in this booklet do not neglect the optimism of the 1920s. But they also highlight many of the tensions of the decade. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story of “the Roaring Twenties.” Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Jazz Age

The illustrations in this lesson touch on several aspects of life in the 1920s that helped the decade earn its reputation as a time of new ideas, cultural change and adventurous individualism.

An Uneven Prosperity

The mass production of automobiles was at the heart of the prosperity that helped fuel the dynamic consumer capitalism of the 1920s. The images in this lesson suggest the breadth of this prosperity, along with its limits.

Cultural Conflict in a Time of Change

The cultural clashes of the age are summed up in the illustrations in this lesson, which focus attention on the social, religious, ethnic, and racial conflicts of the decade.

Politics in a Satisfied Age

The deepest conflicts of the day were not often dealt with openly in the political arena. For the most part, citizens were content. They had their doubts about how much political leaders could accomplish. And they seemed to prefer to keep government limited. These are the themes touched on by the illustrations in this lesson.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Roaring Twenties***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand the cultural and social changes in the 1920s that most helped to get the decade labeled as “the Jazz Age.”

The Jazz Age

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**Illustration 1**

This cartoon celebrates the final achievement of voting rights for women in 1920, when the 19th Amendment was ratified. This was mainly a victory of the pre-war reform era. Few of the women who helped win that victory were as “modern” or stylish as the woman in this cartoon. This female figure seems to fit in more with the social changes of the 1920s. That decade’s growing consumer economy began to offer women much more social and personal freedom. In this sense, the cartoon portrays the start of a new cultural era, as well as a triumph for women’s rights.

Illustration 2

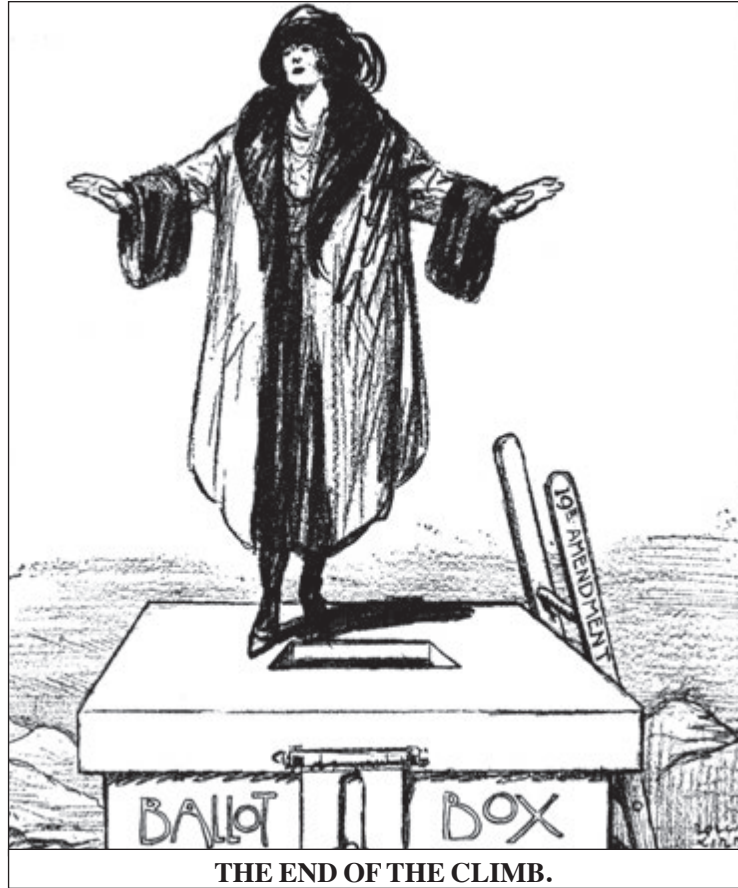
The 1920s are often called “the Jazz age.” This Life magazine cover is one small example of what that phrase meant. The cover shows a carefree and stylish couple dancing the Charleston. Economic good times, jazz, cars, illegal liquor and speakeasies, less strict attitudes about relations between men and women—all these and more helped make the 1920s seem a more relaxed, more fun-loving time. Whether it actually was or not is a debatable issue. But in those prosperous years, ads, movies, music and other media did seem to appeal more to people’s wants and desires, and less to tradition or to a sense of self-restraint.

Illustration 3

In the 1920s, newspapers, mass-circulation magazines, and radio brought news and ideas about the world into people’s living rooms to a far greater degree than ever before. Fads, changing styles, and all sorts of popular celebrities could catch the nation’s attention rapidly. Among the popular figures of the age, a number seem to have become heroes almost overnight. Some were larger-than-life sports heroes, such as Babe Ruth. Others were movie stars, such as Rudolph Valentino. Or they were lone adventurers, such as Charles Lindbergh. Perhaps such heroes filled a need that people felt in an age when factories and offices were actually becoming larger and more tightly organized than ever before. In any case, Lindbergh and these other figures captured the spirit of personal independence that was so strong in those years.

Lesson 1 – The Jazz Age

Illustration 1



Rollin Kirby/The World

Discussing the Illustration

1. This cartoon shows a woman on top of a large box. She has just climbed up onto this box using a ladder labeled “19th Amendment.” The 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920. What is meant here by the word “Amendment,” and what does it mean to say that an Amendment has been ratified?
2. How did the 19th Amendment change the U.S. Constitution? Does this cartoon appear to be in favor of that change or against it? Explain your answer. What is the meaning of the cartoon’s caption?
3. This cartoon is from 1920. What about the cartoon helps to show that it is from the 1920s? Aside from showing the right to vote, does the cartoon suggest any other changes in the way women lived or in the way society viewed them in the 1920s?
4. Do you think those changes in the lives of most women were mainly for the good? Why or why not?

Follow-up Activities

1. Look through your U.S. history textbook or some other general U.S. history text. Find references to several women who were in the news or were important historical figures in the 1920s. Read more about one of these women. Then pretend you are this woman, and write a letter to the editor of the newspaper that printed the cartoon. In your letter, explain what you do and/or do not like about the cartoon. Also try to explain how you think the issue dealt with in the cartoon has and will affect your own life.
2. Use your library to find old news magazines from the first few decades of the 20th century. Or look for books on the history of these years, especially the history of fashions and advertising. Choose some ads from 1900 to 1920 that include pictures of women. Then choose some ads from the 1920s that also include pictures of women. In class, share these ads and use them in a discussion about this cartoon.