

*If you walked into a store in the 1920s, you might think you had stumbled into the future. This is a partial list of the items that appeared in that decade: refrigerators, electric stoves, vacuum cleaners, wristwatches, foam rubber, disposable tissues, canned grape juice, and frozen foods.*

*Throughout the war years, people had sacrificed. Now, like a person coming off a bland diet, Americans began a decade-long buying binge.*

## **Technology Changes American Life**

The economy was booming in the 1920s. Both Harding and Coolidge kept government regulation to a minimum, and business flourished. Part of the "roar" in the Roaring Twenties was the growth in the nation's wealth. The average annual income per person rose more than 35 percent during the period— from \$522 to \$716. This increase in income gave Americans more money to buy goods and to spend on leisure activities.

Automobiles had the greatest impact on life during the 1920s. Henry Ford, who built his first successful automobile in 1896, was determined to make a car that most people could afford. At the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, his dream came true with a car called the Model T. In 1920, Ford produced more than a million automobiles, at a rate of one per minute. Each car cost the consumer \$335.

To speed up production and lower costs and prices, Ford used an **assembly line**. In an assembly line, the product moves along a conveyor belt across the factory. Workers at various stations add parts as the belt moves past them. By the mid-1920s, a Model T came off a Ford assembly line every ten seconds.

## **Consumer Buying**

Part of the "roar" in the "Roaring Twenties" was the growth in the nation's wealth. From 1921 to 1929, the average income per person rose from \$522 to \$716 a year. There was more money to spend and more to spend it on.

New technologies began making once-costly items available to the middle class. For instance, people who could not afford expensive fabrics could now buy artificial, or synthetic, fabrics such as rayon. Synthetic materials replaced costly wood or metal in many products. This drove prices down. New machines turned out products faster and cheaper, and more industries began to use the assembly line to manufacture their products. This too caused prices to tumble. The cost of a tire and an inner tube, for example, dropped from \$30 in 1914 to \$15 in 1929.

Even those who did not see a rise in their incomes could join the buying spree. They were able to do this through a new option for consumers: installment buying. A family could now buy its first radio and pay for it over time in small monthly payments rather than all at once. One advertisement for tires told people that they could "Ride Now, Pay Later." As you will read in the next chapter, many people did pay dearly later on.

## **Powering the Nation**

Cheap power fueled the new prosperity. During the 1920s, petroleum and electricity became widely available. They powered machines in the factories and tractors on the farms. They made possible new inventions that made daily life easier. These included vacuum cleaners, washers, sewing machines, toasters, and fans.

You have already read about advances in the use of electricity in the late 1800s. By 1920 electricity flowed into the homes of most Americans.

### “What is the world coming to?”

Many writers have said that the 1900s "began" in 1920. What they mean is that much of today's modern culture was born at that time. The pace of life became much quicker. Cars changed the look and size of cities. Suburbs grew. In 1927 the nation's first commercial airline, Pan American Airways, was founded. Passengers on airplanes could now fly to distant cities in hours.

Other changes brought the nation together as well. Small general stores were replaced by giant, nationwide department store chains. Consumers from coast to coast could now buy the same products. The big business of national advertising got its start during this time. New types of **mass media** - *communication that reaches a large public* - began to take hold. The first commercial broadcasting station came on the air in 1920, and by 1922 listening to the radio had become a popular craze. New media, such as radio, movies and magazines, spread the latest ideas and fashions.

To see how these changes affected one American family in the 1920's, read the following story.



### **Evanston, Illinois, 1924**

Sid grabbed a biscuit and passed the platter to Joanna. "Hey, Dad," he said, "did you hear about Babe Ruth's home run this afternoon? That makes 39."

"Yeah, he's going great guns, isn't he?" answered George. "Maybe the Yankees will win a fourth straight pennant. Say, Millie, this is great soup."

"You think so?" Millie asked. "It's out of a can, and I was afraid it wouldn't turn out just right."

"Oh, Mom, it's swell," put in Joanna. "Say, Dad, Sarah's family just got an automobile. It's an open touring car with balloon tires. Why can't we get a car, too?"

"Honey, we will, one of these days. Right now all my money is tied up in the stock market. When the price of my stock goes up just a bit more, I'll sell out and buy a car. I have my eye on a sassy little roadster."

"Oh, wow, Dad, that's great," Joanna said. "I hope it has a rumble seat. It'd be just the thing to go to a party in."

"You've been going to a good many parties lately, Joanna," her mother said. "I wish you'd spend more time studying."

Sid snickered. "Study? Joanna? She hasn't cracked a book in weeks. She spends all her time with her beau, Eddy."

"What beau?" sputtered George, looking up from his roast beef.

"I thought we told you to quit seeing that young rake."

"Yes, Joanna," her mother said. "Eddy smokes and drinks and I don't know what all. He's too wild-not

the kind of boy I want you to associate with."

"Oh, you're such old fogies," Joanna blurted out. "He's not what you think. Besides, he's not my beau—he's my best friend's brother. How can I *help* seeing him?"

"How can I *help* seeing him?" Sid mimicked. "I notice you put on lots of lipstick to go over to Sarah and Eddy's house."

"Sid," said his mother sternly, "don't tease your sister." Then she turned to Joanna. "But it *is* disturbing to see you wearing that bright lipstick, dear. When I was a girl, I would never have thought of painting my face up like you do."

Joanna reacted with a pout. "Oh, in your day you probably wore leopard skins. Why don't you ask Sid where he was until 2 A.M. Saturday night?" She shot a challenging glance at her brother.

George looked concerned. He chewed his meat vigorously and said nothing. Millie busied herself clearing the table for dessert. She opened the refrigerator—it was so new she still called it an "icebox." "I've got a surprise for dessert," she said. "Huckleberry Roly Poly. I got the recipe from *The Ladies' Home Journal*."

"This is delicious," said Joanna and Sid and George as they cleaned their plates.

"What say we all go to the movies tonight?" said George, pushing back his chair.

"Can't, Dad," said Joanna as she skipped toward the door. "Gotta go see Sarah about our plans for Friday night."

"Not tonight, Dad," said Sid. "I promised my buddies I'd let them listen to dance music on our radio tonight." Sid put his dish on the sink and went out.

George looked at Millie. She smiled. "I'll go with you, George," she said. "Since you bought me that new vacuum cleaner, I don't have to finish up my housework after supper. And I can take care of the dishes when we come home."

## The Task:

1. Individually answer each of the questions below.
2. Then, as a group,
  - a. compare your answers to each question.
  - b. synthesize, revise, and edit to create one set of "best" answers for the group.
3. Each person needs a copy of the "best" answers in their stations folder.

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1. How did the development of the assembly line help consumers?
  2. What "modern" household conveniences first appeared in the 1920s? How could people afford those conveniences?
  3. What changes in transportation and communication occurred during the 1920s?