

# Life during the 1920s

## What You Will Learn...

### Main Ideas

1. In the 1920s many young people found new independence in a changing society.
2. Postwar tensions occasionally led to fear and violence.
3. Competing ideals caused conflict between Americans with traditional beliefs and those with modern views.
4. Following the war, minority groups organized to demand their civil rights.

### The Big Idea

Americans faced new opportunities, challenges, and fears as major changes swept the country in the 1920s.

### Key Terms and People

flappers, p. 759

Red Scare, p. 760

Twenty-first Amendment, p. 761

fundamentalism, p. 762

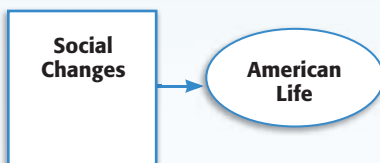
Scopes trial, p. 762

Great Migration, p. 763

Marcus Garvey, p. 763

### TAKING NOTES

As you read, look for changes that affected American life in the 1920s. Record your notes in a diagram like this one.



## If YOU were there...

The year is 1925. You have just finished school and you are visiting a big city for the first time. You and your friends go to a club and watch young people dancing energetically to popular music. The women have short hair and wear make up, trying to copy the glamorous style of movie stars. Some of your friends start talking about finding an apartment and looking for jobs in the city.

## Would you want to move to a big city in 1925? Why?

**BUILDING BACKGROUND** The United States enjoyed nearly a decade of economic expansion during the 1920s. American society changed rapidly during this period. Although many people welcomed the new opportunities, others felt their traditional beliefs were being challenged. Conflicts between competing ideals and different groups of people ruffled the surface of America's peace and prosperity.

## A Changing Society

The experience of living through World War I changed the way many young people saw the world around them. Young men returning from Europe had visited far-off countries and learned about other cultures. Many of them came home with a desire to continue expanding their horizons. The title of one popular song in 1919 asked, "How 'Ya Gonna Keep 'em Down on the Farm after They've Seen Patee [Paris]?"

Many young people moved away from farms and small towns to cities. By 1920, for the first time in American history, more than half of the country's population lived in urban areas. Young people took advantage of the economic opportunities of the 1920s to gain independence. In the past most young people had lived and worked at home until they got married. Now more young adults were experiencing a time of freedom before settling down. A new youth culture developed, which included going to parties and dance clubs, listening to popular music, and driving fast cars.

For many young Americans, access to education was an important part of this new independence. High school attendance doubled during the decade. The percentage of students going on to college was higher in the United States than in any other country. This included women, who were attending college in higher numbers than ever before.

The number of women in the workforce continued to grow as well. Women with college degrees worked as nurses, teachers, librarians, and social workers. Women were also finding new opportunities in politics. In 1925 Nellie Tayloe Ross (Wyoming) and Miriam “Ma” Ferguson (Texas) became the first women to serve as governors in the United States. Three years later, there were 145 women serving in state legislatures. Five women had won terms in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Women were still discouraged from pursuing fields such as medicine, law, and architecture, however. By the end of the 1920s, less than 5 percent of the country’s doctors, lawyers, and architects were women. The percentage was small—but it was beginning to rise.

Some young women found other ways to express their freedom. **Young women known as flappers cut their hair short and wore makeup and short dresses, openly challenging traditional ideas of how women were supposed to behave.** Many older Americans considered this behavior scandalous. One 1920s writer expressed her admiration for flappers, saying:

“I want my girl to do what she pleases, be what she pleases ... I want [my daughter] to be a flapper, because flappers are brave.”

—Zelda Fitzgerald, quoted in *Zelda*, by Nancy Milford

Fashion magazines, Hollywood movies, and advertising helped promote these new images and ideas of youthful freedom.

**READING CHECK** **Generalizing** How did women in the 1920s express their independence?

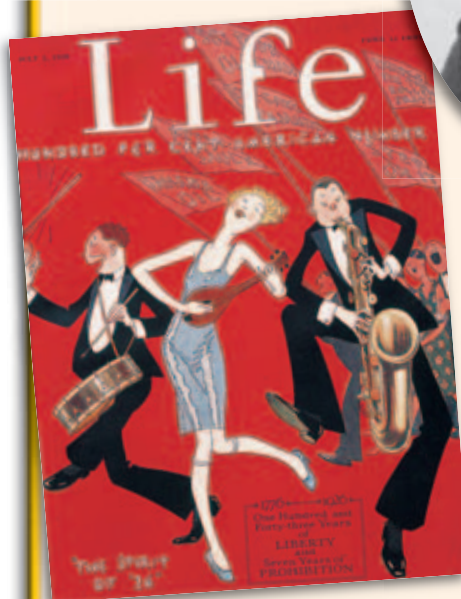
## Focus on Women

*In 1923 suffrage leader Alice Paul introduced the Equal Rights Amendment to Congress, calling for equality of rights regardless of a person’s gender. The U.S. Senate passed the amendment 49 years later, but it was never ratified by the states.*



**Bryn Mawr and other colleges provided education to women in new fields.**

**Bessie Coleman became the first African American woman to obtain her international pilot’s license. She traveled the United States, performing stunts under the name “Brave Bessie.”**



**Flappers challenged many of society’s ideas about womanhood. They established new rules of speech, dress, and behavior.**

**ANALYSIS SKILL**

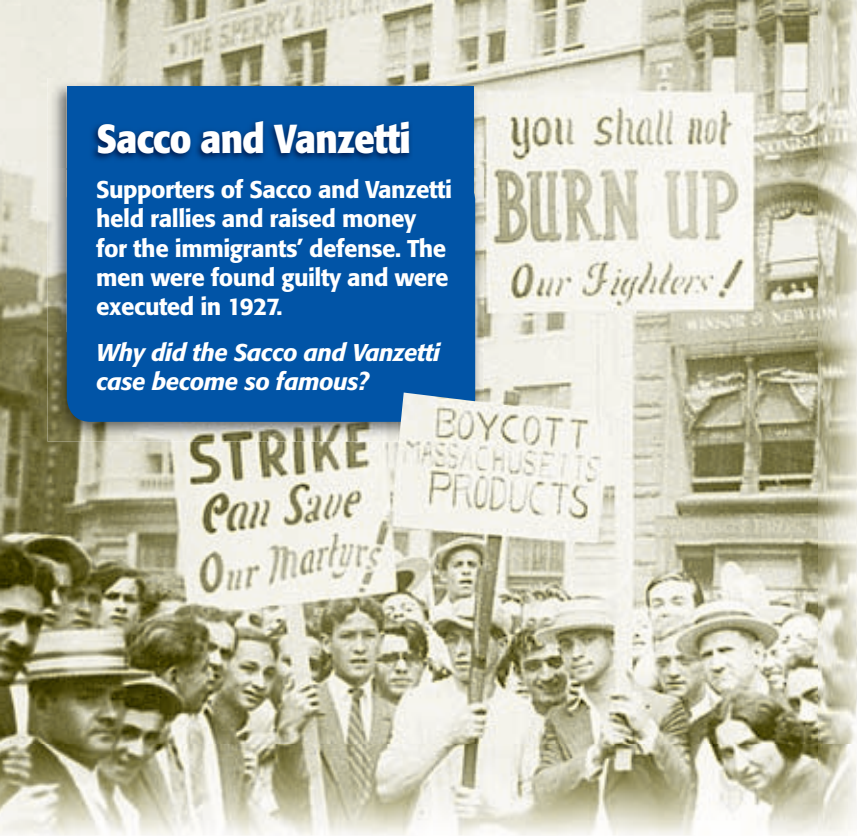
**ANALYZING VISUALS**

How do these images reflect new roles for women during the 1920s?

## Sacco and Vanzetti

Supporters of Sacco and Vanzetti held rallies and raised money for the immigrants' defense. The men were found guilty and were executed in 1927.

*Why did the Sacco and Vanzetti case become so famous?*



## Fear and Violence

Not all social changes during the 1920s were peaceful. You have read about the hard times that hit the U.S. economy after World War I—unemployment, inflation, and labor disputes that resulted in large strikes. These troubles worried many Americans. In this atmosphere, suspicion of foreigners and radicals, or people who believe in an extreme change in government, sometimes led to violence.

## The Red Scare

After the Communists took power in Russia in 1917, many Americans began to fear Communist ideas. They worried that Communists would soon try to gain power in the United States. This fear increased when millions of American workers went on strike in 1919. Many Americans blamed Communists and radicals for the upheaval.

These attitudes led to a **Red Scare**, a time of fear of Communists, or Reds. The Red Scare began in April 1919, when U.S. postal workers found bombs hidden in several packages addressed to famous Americans. Officials never found out who sent the bombs, but they suspected members of the Communist Party.

In June a bomb exploded outside the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Palmer responded by organizing police raids to break up Communist and other groups. In what became known as the Palmer raids, government agents arrested thousands of suspected radicals, often without evidence. Palmer frightened the public by warning that radicals were planning a revolution.

The Red Scare led to one of the best-known criminal cases in American history. In 1920 police arrested Italian-born anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for the robbery and murder of a factory paymaster and his guard. (Anarchists are people opposed to organized government.) Though both men declared themselves innocent of the crime, Sacco and Vanzetti were found guilty. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), founded in 1920 to defend people's civil rights, tried unsuccessfully to get the verdict overturned. Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted. They were executed in 1927.

## Restricting Immigration

Some people thought the Sacco and Vanzetti case was influenced by a general fear of foreigners. Many recent immigrants were poor and did not speak English. Some Americans saw them as a threat to their jobs and culture. Immigrants “fill places that belong to the loyal wage-earning citizens of America,” said Alabama senator James Thomas Heflin.

The government responded to these concerns with new laws. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 limited the total number of immigrants allowed into the country. It also favored immigrants from western Europe. The National Origins Act of 1924 banned immigration from East Asia entirely and further reduced the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country. These laws caused a dramatic drop in immigration to the United States.

**READING CHECK** **Drawing Conclusions** Why were new immigration laws passed in the 1920s?

## Competing Ideals

Fear of radical ideas and foreigners was part of a larger clash over ideals and values in America. Differences were growing between older, rural traditions and the beliefs and practices of modern urban society. Americans had very different ideas about what was best for the country's future.

### Prohibition

An issue that highlighted this conflict was prohibition. The Eighteenth Amendment—which outlawed the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages—went into effect in 1920. Support for prohibition was strongest in rural areas, while opposition was strongest in cities.

Government officials found it nearly impossible to enforce prohibition. Congress passed the Volstead Act, which set fines and punishments for disobeying prohibition. Even respectable citizens, however, broke the law. Many people found ways to make alcohol at home using household products. Others bought alcohol at speakeasies, or illegal bars.

Organized criminals called bootleggers quickly seized control of the illegal alcohol business. They made their own alcohol or smuggled it in from Canada or Mexico. Gangsters were able to avoid arrest by bribing local police and politicians. Competition between gangs often led to violent fighting. In Chicago gangster Al “Scarface” Capone gained control of the alcohol trade by murdering his rivals. By 1927 Capone was earning more than \$60 million a year from his illegal businesses.

By the end of the decade, the nation was weary of the effects of prohibition. The law had reduced alcohol consumption but had not stopped Americans from drinking. Prohibition had also created new ways for criminals to grow rich. Without government supervision of alcohol production, much of the alcohol consumed in speakeasies was more dangerous than what had been produced before prohibition. Many people came to believe that it would be better to have a legal alcohol trade that could be monitored by the government. **In 1933 state and federal governments responded with the Twenty-first Amendment, which ended prohibition.**

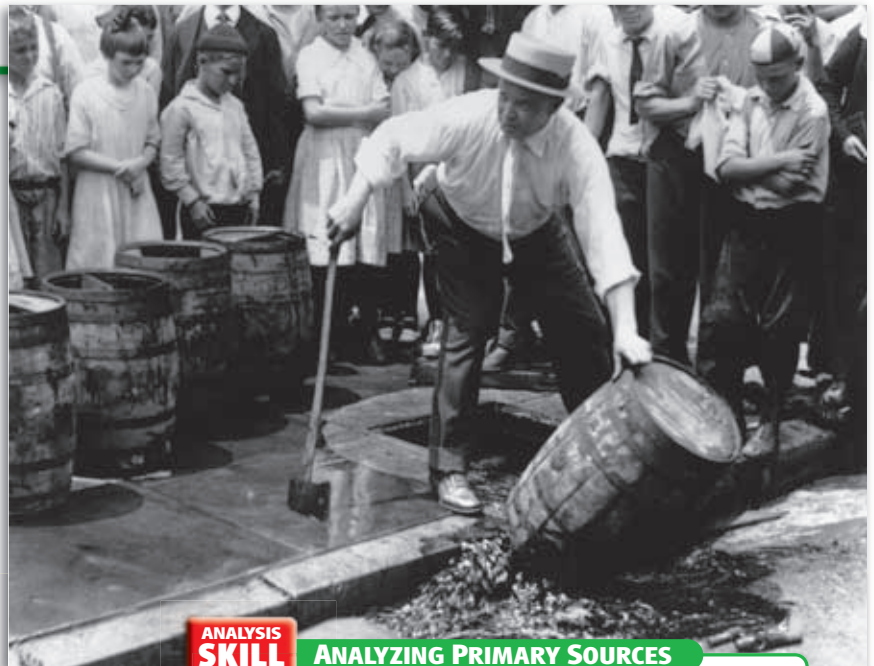
#### THE IMPACT TODAY

The Twenty-first Amendment made the manufacture and sale of alcohol legal again, but laws today still regulate drinking. The National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 raised the minimum drinking age from 18 to 21 in every state.

### Primary Source

#### PHOTOGRAPH Prohibition

*Agents of federal and state governments tried to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment against great odds. They usually destroyed any liquor that they found. This photograph shows an illegal barrel of beer being broken with an axe. More illegal beer and liquor would soon turn up, however. Faced with a lack of public support and an impossible task of enforcing the ban on alcohol, prohibition was repealed with the Twenty-first Amendment in 1933.*



#### ANALYSIS SKILL

#### ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Why was enforcing prohibition such a hard task?

## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

### traditional

customary, time-honored

## Religious Ideals

Youth culture of the 1920s and prohibition's failure concerned many religious leaders. They saw these changes as movements away from **traditional** values. This led to a Protestant religious movement known as **fundamentalism**—characterized by the belief in a literal, or word-for-word, interpretation of the Bible. Popular preachers like Aimee Semple McPherson used the radio and modern marketing tools to draw followers. Fundamentalism was especially strong in rural areas and small towns, where people often blamed society's problems on the culture of urban areas.

Many fundamentalists believed that modern scientific theories, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, conflicted with the teachings of the Bible. Darwin's theory states that species evolve over time by adapting to their environment. To fundamentalists, this contradicted the biblical account of how the world was made. They opposed the teaching

of evolution in public schools. Many cities and states passed laws to prevent the teaching of evolution.

In May 1925 a Dayton, Tennessee, high school science teacher named John T. Scopes was put on trial for teaching evolution in what became known as the **Scopes trial**. National interest in the event was heightened by the fact that famous Americans represented each side. Criminal attorney Clarence Darrow led the ACLU defense team. Three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan assisted the prosecution.

Over live radio, Darrow and Bryan attacked each other's ideas. After more than a week on trial, Scopes was convicted and fined \$100 for breaking the law. The state supreme court later overturned his conviction, but the debate over evolution continued.

**READING CHECK** **Evaluating** What cultural conflict did the Scopes trial represent?

## Primary Source

### POINTS OF VIEW

## The Scopes Trial

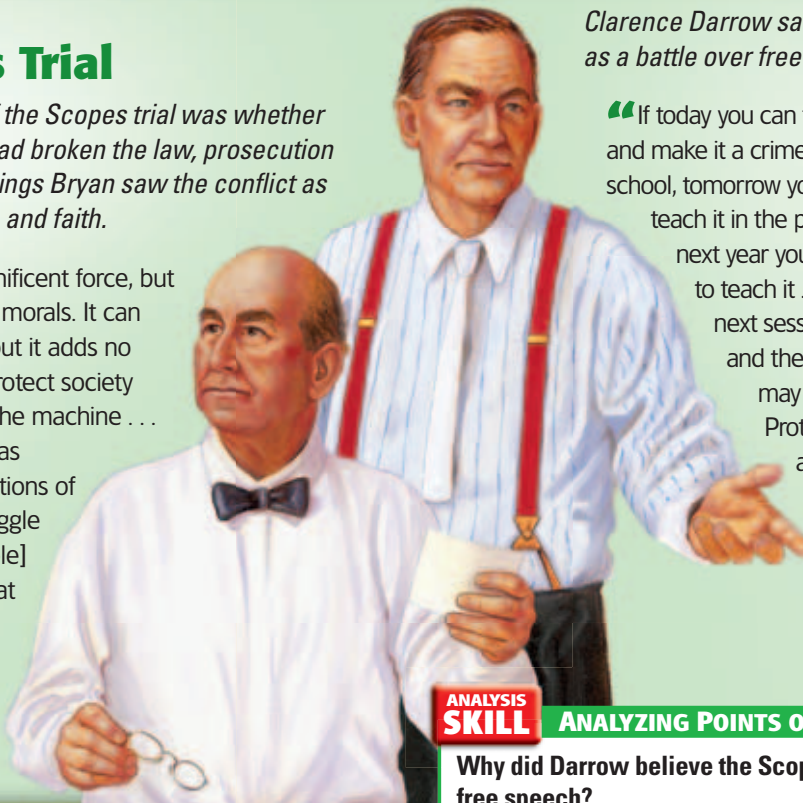
*Although the focus of the Scopes trial was whether or not John Scopes had broken the law, prosecution witness William Jennings Bryan saw the conflict as one between science and faith.*

“Science is a magnificent force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but it adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine . . .

The [Scopes] case has assumed the proportions of a battle-royal [a struggle involving many people] between unbelief that attempts to speak through so-called science and the defenders of the Christian faith.”

*Clarence Darrow saw the conflict as a battle over free speech.*

“If today you can take a thing like evolution and make it a crime to teach it in the public school, tomorrow you can make it a crime to teach it in the private schools, and the next year you can make it a crime to teach it . . . in the church. At the next session you may ban books and the newspapers. Soon you may set Catholic against Protestant and Protestant against Protestant, and try to foist [force] your own religion upon the minds of men.”



**ANALYSIS SKILL**

### ANALYZING POINTS OF VIEW

**Why did Darrow believe the Scopes trial was about free speech?**

## The Great Migration

### CONNECT TO THE ARTS

From 1940 to 1941 artist Jacob Lawrence created a series of paintings that told the story of African Americans moving from the South to northern cities in search of jobs and equality. This is one of 60 paintings in the Migration Series. It shows African Americans about to begin their journey.

*Where are the people in the painting going?*



## Minority Rights

During World War I large numbers of African Americans began leaving the South to take jobs in northern factories. This movement, called the **Great Migration**, continued during the economic boom of the 1920s. While African Americans found jobs in the North, they did not escape racism.

### Racial Tensions

The economic recession that followed the war led to increased racial tensions. Many white laborers feared the competition for jobs. Several race riots broke out in 1919, including one in Chicago that left 38 dead.

Racial tensions and fear of foreigners helped give rise to a new form of the Ku Klux Klan, the racist group that had terrorized African Americans during Reconstruction. The new Klan harassed Catholics, Jews, and immigrants, as well as African Americans. It also worked against urbanization, women's rights, and modern technology. By the mid-1920s the Klan had become an influential force in American politics, with more than 5 million members. Its influence then began to decline as news of financial corruption became public.

### Protecting Rights

People who were the targets of the Klan's hatred found new ways to protect their rights. In 1922, for example, the NAACP began placing advertisements in newspapers that presented the harsh facts about the large number of lynchings taking place across the South.

Another way minorities attempted to protect their rights was to strengthen their culture. During the 1910s and 1920s, **Marcus Garvey** encouraged black people around the world to express pride in their culture. Garvey argued that black people should establish economic independence by building their own businesses and communities. These ideas were the basis of a movement known as black nationalism. The New York *Amsterdam News* praised Garvey's work, saying he "made black people proud of their race."

Hispanic Americans also organized to fight prejudice and promote civil rights. In 1929 Mexican American leaders met in Corpus Christi, Texas, to form the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). This group worked to end unfair treatment such as segregation in schools and voting restrictions.

## BIOGRAPHY

### Marcus Garvey

1887–1940

Marcus Garvey grew up in Jamaica and moved to the United States in 1916. A talented speaker, he quickly became one of the country's most famous and controversial black leaders. His newspaper *Negro World* promoted the idea of building an independent black economy. To encourage world-wide trade among black people, he created the Black Star Steamship Line. Some black leaders, including W. E.

B. Du Bois, considered Garvey's ideas dangerous and extremist. After a series of legal problems related to his steamship company, Garvey was arrested in 1922 and was later deported.

**Drawing Inferences** How did Marcus Garvey try to help African Americans?



Most Native Americans lacked the legal protections of citizenship and the right to vote because they were not citizens of the United States. The fact that thousands of Native Americans had performed military service in World War I helped bring about change. In 1924 Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, granting citizenship to all Native Americans. However, the federal government also attempted to buy or take back some of the reservation lands. Native Americans successfully organized to stop these attempts, which were part of a larger effort to encourage American Indians to adopt the culture of white Americans.

**READING CHECK** **Finding Main Ideas** How did minorities react to discrimination in the 1920s?

**SUMMARY AND PREVIEW** Americans saw many conflicts as their culture changed. In the next section you will learn about entertainment and the arts in the 1920s.

## Section 2 Assessment

### Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Recall** How did **flappers** express their freedom?

**b. Elaborate** How were young people of the 1920s more independent than their parents?
- a. Identify** What caused the **Red Scare**, and what was its result?

**b. Explain** Describe the results of the immigration laws of the 1920s.
- a. Recall** What kinds of social conflicts developed during the 1920s?

**b. Describe** What did the **Twenty-first Amendment** accomplish?

**c. Analyze** How did **fundamentalism** influence the **Scopes trial**?
- a. Identify** How did minorities fight for their rights in the 1920s?

**b. Define** What was the **Great Migration**?

**c. Draw Conclusions** Why did **Marcus Garvey** call for black people to build their own businesses?