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Chapter 31 - American Life in the Roaring '20s

I. Seeing Red

1. After World War I, America turned inward, away from the world, and started a policy of "isolationism." Americans denounced "radical" foreign ideas and "un-American" lifestyles.
2. The "Red Scare" of 1919-20 resulted in Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer ("Fighting Quaker") using a series of raids to round up and arrest about 6,000 suspected Communists.
3. In December of 1919, 249 alleged alien radicals were deported on the Buford.
4. The Red Scare severely cut back free speech for a period, since the hysteria caused many people to want to eliminate any Communists and their ideas.
 - Some states made it illegal to merely advocate the violent overthrow of government for social change.
 - In 1921, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were convicted of murdering a Massachusetts paymaster and his guard. The two accused were Italians, atheists, anarchists, and draft dodgers, and the courts may have been prejudiced against them.
5. In this time period, anti-foreignism (or "nativism") was high.
6. Liberals and radicals rallied around the two men, but they were executed.

II. Hooded Hoodlums of the KKK

1. The new Ku Klux Klan was anti-foreign, anti-Catholic, anti-black, anti-Jewish, anti-pacifist, anti-Communist, anti-internationalist, anti-revolutionist, anti-bootlegger, anti-gambling, anti-adultery, and anti-birth control.
2. More simply, it was pro-White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) and anti-everything else.
3. At its peak in the 1920s, it claimed 5 million members, mostly from the South, but it also featured a reign of hooded horror.
 - The KKK employed the same tactics of fear, lynchings, and intimidation.
 - It was stopped not by the exposure of its horrible racism, but by its money fraud.

III. Stemming the Foreign Flood

1. In 1920-21, some 800,000 European "New Immigrants" (mostly from the southeastern Europe regions) came to the U.S. and Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, in which newcomers from Europe were restricted at any year to a quota, which was set at 3% of the people of their nationality who lived in the U.S. in 1910.

*This policy still really favored the Slavs and the southeastern

Europeans in comparison to other groups. So, a new policy was sought...

* A replacement law was found in the Immigration Act of 1924, which cut the quota down to 2% and the origins base was shifted to that of 1890, when few southeastern Europeans lived in America.

* This change clearly had racial undertones beneath it (New Immigrants out, Old Immigrants in).

* This act also slammed the door against Japanese immigrants.

* By 1931, for the first time in history, more people left America than came here.

1. The immigrant tide was now cut off, but those that were in America struggled to adapt.
 - Labor unions in particular had difficulty in organizing because of the differences in race, culture, and nationality.

IV. The Prohibition “Experiment”

1. The 18th Amendment (and later, the Volstead Act) prohibited the sale of alcohol, but this law never was effectively enforced because so many people violated it.
2. Actually, most people thought that Prohibition was here to stay, and this was especially popular in the Midwest and the South.
3. Prohibition was particularly supported by women and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, but it also posed problems from countries that produced alcohol and tried to ship it to the U.S. (illegally, of course).
4. In actuality, bank savings did increase, and absenteeism in industry did go down.

V. The Golden Age of Gangsterism

1. Prohibition led to the rise of gangs that competed to distribute liquor.
2. In the gang wars of Chicago in the 1920s, about 500 people were murdered, but captured criminals were rare, and convictions even rarer, since gangsters often provided false alibis for each other.
 - The most infamous of these gangsters was “Scarface” Al Capone, and his St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. Capone was finally caught for tax evasion.
 - Gangs moved into other activities as well: prostitution, gambling, and narcotics, and by 1930, their annual profit was a whopping \$12 – 18 billion.
 - In 1932, gangsters kidnapped the baby son of Charles Lindbergh, shocking the nation, and this event led Congress to the so-called Lindbergh Law, which allowed the death penalty to certain cases of interstate abduction.

VI. Monkey Business in Tennessee

1. Education made strides behind the progressive ideas of John Dewey, a professor at Columbia University who set forth principles of “learning by doing” and believed that “education for life” should be the primary goal of school.
 - Now, schools were no longer prisons.
 - States also were increasingly placing minimum ages for teens to stay in school.
2. A massive health care program launched by the Rockefeller Foundation practically eliminated hookworm in the South.
3. Evolutionists were also clashing against creationists, and the prime example of this was the Scopes “Monkey Trial,” where John T. Scopes, a high school teacher of Dayton, Tennessee, was charged with teaching evolution.

- William Jennings Bryan was among those who were against him, but the one-time “boy orator” was made to sound foolish and childish by expert attorney Clarence Darrow, and five days after the end of the trial, Bryan died.
 - The trial proved to be inconclusive but illustrated the rift between the new and old.
4. Increasing numbers of Christians were starting to reconcile their differences between religion and the findings of modern science, as evidenced in the new Churches of Christ (est. 1906).

VII. The Mass-Consumption Economy

1. Prosperity took off in the “Roaring 20s,” despite the recession of 1920-21, and it was helped by the tax policies of Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellons, which favored the rapid expansion of capital investment.
2. Henry Ford perfected the assembly-line production to where his famous Rouge River Plant was producing a finished automobile every ten seconds.
3. The automobile now provided more freedom, more luxury, and more privacy.
4. A new medium arose as well: advertising, which used persuasion, ploy, seduction, and sex appeal to sell merchandise.
 - In 1925, Bruce Barton’s bestseller *The Man Nobody Knows* claimed that Jesus Christ was the perfect salesman and that all advertisers should study his techniques.
5. Folks followed new (and dangerous) buying techniques...they bought (1) on the installment plan and (2) on credit. Both ways were capable of plunging an unexpected consumer into debt.
6. Sports were buoyed by people like home-run hero Babe Ruth and boxers Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier.

VIII. Putting America on Rubber Tires

1. Americans adapted, rather than invented, the gasoline engine.
2. People like Henry Ford and Ransom E. Olds (famous for Oldsmobile) developed the infant auto industry.
3. Early cars stalled and weren’t too reliable, but eventually, cars like the Ford Model T became cheap and easy to own.
 - In 1929, when the bull market collapsed, 26 million motor vehicles were registered in the United States, or 1 car per 4.9 Americans.

IX. The Advent of the Gasoline Age

1. The automobile spurred 6 million people to new jobs and took over the railroad as king of transportation.
 - New roads were constructed, the gasoline industry boomed, and America’s standard of living rose greatly.
 - Cars were luxuries at first, but they rapidly became necessities.
 - The less-attractive states lost population at an alarming rate.
 - However, accidents killed lots of people, and by 1951, 1,000,000 people had died by the car—more than the total of Americans lost to all its previous wars combined.
 - Cars brought adventure, excitement, and pleasure.

X. Humans Develop Wings

1. On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright flew the first airplane for 12 seconds over a distance of 120 feet at Kitty Hawk, N.C.

2. Aviation slowly got off the ground, and they were used a bit in World War I, but afterwards, it really took off when they became used for mail and other functions.
 - The first transcontinental airmail route was established from New York to San Francisco in 1920.
 - At first, there were many accidents and crashes, but later, safety improved.
3. Charles Lindbergh became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean when he did it in his Spirit of St. Louis, going from New York to Paris.

XI. The Radio Revolution

1. In the 1890s, Guglielmo Marconi had already invented wireless telegraphy and his invention was used for long distance communication in the Great War.
2. Then, in November of 1920, the first voice-carrying radio station began broadcasting when KDKA (in Pittsburgh) told of presidential candidate Warren G. Harding's landslide victory.
3. While the automobile lured Americans away from home, the radio lured them back, as millions tuned in to hear favorites like Amos 'n' Andy and listen to the Eveready Hour.
4. Sports were further stimulated while politicians had to adjust their speaking techniques to support the new medium, and music could finally be heard electronically.

XII. Hollywood's Filmland Fantasies

1. Thomas Edison was one of those who invented the movie, but in 1903, the real birth of the movie came with The Great Train Robbery.
 - A first full-length feature was D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation, which stunned viewers visually, but seemed to glorify the KKK in the Reconstruction era.
 - The first "talkie" or movie with sound was The Jazz Singer with Al Jolson.
 - Hollywood, California, quickly became a hot spot for movie production, due to its favorable climate and landscape.
2. The first movies featured nudity and female vampires called "vamps" until shocked public forced codes of censorship to be placed on them.
3. Propaganda movies of World War I boosted the popularity of movies.
4. Critics, though, did bemoan the vulgarization of popular tastes wrought by radio and movies.
 - These new mediums led to the loss of old family and oral traditions. Radio shows and movies seemed to lessen interaction and heighten passivity.

XIII. The Dynamic Decade

1. For the first time, more Americans lived in urban areas, not the rural countryside.
2. The birth-control movement was led by fiery Margaret Sanger, and the National Women's Party began in 1923 to campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution.
3. The Fundamentalists of old-time religion even lost ground to the new Modernists, who liked to think that God was a "good guy" and the universe was a nice place, as opposed to the traditional view that man was a born sinner and in need of forgiveness through Christ.
4. A brash new group shocked many conservative older folk (who labeled the new style as full of erotic suggestions and inappropriate). The

“flaming youth” who lived this modern life were called “flappers.”

- They danced new dances like the risqué “Charleston” and dressed more provocatively.
- Sigmund Freud said that sexual repression was responsible for most of society’s ills, and that pleasure and health demanded sexual gratification and liberation.
- Jazz was the music of flappers, and Blacks like W.C. Handy, “Jelly Roll” Morton, and Joseph King Oliver gave birth to its bee-bopping sounds.
- Black pride spawned such leaders as Langston Hughes of the Harlem Renaissance and famous for *The Weary Blues*, which appeared in 1926, and Marcus Garvey (founder of the United Negro Improvement Association and inspiration for the Nation of Islam).

XIV. Cultural Liberation

1. By the dawn of the 1920s, many of the old writers (Henry James, Henry Adams, and William Dean Howells) had died, and those that survived, like Edith Wharton and Willa Cather were popular.
2. Many of the new writers, though, hailed from different backgrounds (not Protestant New Englanders).
 - H.L. Mencken, the “Bad Boy of Baltimore,” found fault in much of America.
 - He wrote the monthly *American Mercury*.
 - F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby*, both of which captured the society of the “Jazz Age,” including odd mix of glamour and the cruelty.
 - Theodore Dreiser wrote as a Realist (not Romantic) in *An American Tragedy* about the murder of a pregnant working girl by her socially-conscious lover.
 - Ernest Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell to Arms*, and became a voice for the “Lost Generation”—the young folks who’d been ruined by the disillusionment of WWI.
 - Sherwood Anderson wrote *Winesburg, Ohio* describing small-town life in America.
 - Sinclair Lewis disparaged small-town America in his *Main Street* and *Babbitt*.
 - William Faulkner’s *Soldier’s Pay*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *As I Lay Dying* all were famous and stunning with his use of the new, choppy “stream of consciousness” technique.
3. Poetry also was innovative, and Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were two great poets.
4. Eugene O’Neill’s plays like *Strange Interlude* laid bare human emotions.
5. Other famous writers included Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston.
6. Architecture also made its marks with the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, Wright was an understudy of Louis Sullivan (of Chicago skyscraper fame) and amazed people with his use of concrete, glass, and steel and his unconventional theory that “form follows function.”
 - Champion of skyscrapers, the Empire State Building debuted in 1931.

XV. Wall Street’s Big Bull Market

1. There was much over-speculation in the 1920s, especially on Florida home properties (until a hurricane took care of that), and even during times of prosperity, many, many banks failed each year.
 - The whole system was built on fragile credit.
 - The stock market’s stellar rise made headline news (and enticed investors to drop their savings into the market’s volatility).
2. Secretary of the Treasury Mellon reduced the amount of taxes that rich people had to pay, thus conceivably thrusting the burden onto the middle class.

- He reduced the national debt, though, but has since been accused of indirectly encouraging the Bull Market.
3. Whatever the case, the prosperities of the 1920s was setting up the crash that would lead to the poverty and suffering of the 1930s.

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