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June 7, 2020

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           Charles Dickens once referred to the 1920s as “the best of times and the worst of times.” The roaring twenties had a lot of ups and downs. New technology and consumerism were rampant. However, there were a lot of downsides to the 1920s as well. The roaring twenties got its name because it began with a roar and ended with a crash. What started as a cultural revolution ended with a myriad of problems including racism, prohibition, and economic downfalls.

           The roaring twenties was a decade of economic prosperity with mass consumerism and the Harlem Renaissance that changed art and culture forever. (1) The 1920s brought about a change in “mass culture”. Perhaps the most iconic mark of the 1920s was the “flapper”, a woman with shortened hair and short fancy dresses. (6) They drank, smoked, and in general, were more “sexually free” compared to their ancestors. Characterized by their “rebellious” attitudes, they went against the social norms for women and showed newfound independence and revolution of the female race. Women reached equality in their relationships with men. Due to the 19th amendment women finally had the right to vote. Many women were even able to work in white-collar jobs and contribute to the economic surge.

Many Americans had technologies that were once scarce such as cars, radios, telephones, and televisions to watch sports. People were able to travel due to new machinery and stay connected to friends, families, and the world around them. One invention that still impacts today is the Model T. While it was introduced in the 1800s, it became popular during the 1900s due to the creation of the assembly line. The productivity of automobiles increased by over sixty percent. Women even had more free time due to the introduction of machines such as the washing machine and vacuum cleaner. (2) Tobacco, furniture, and textile industries were booming, leading to economic surges in other businesses such as hotels. An increase in demand for these cars led to an increase in material industries such as steel and glass. New businesses such as repair shops and gas stations opened up. More travel led to an expansion of the suburbs. Factory wages increased, becoming more appealing to rural farmers.

Even music changed during the 1920s. In the 1922s, Louis Armstrong started improving and modifying the popular music of the time and created jazz. Various dances crazes emerged such as the Charleston, the black bottom, the cakewalk, and many more. Well- known dance halls around America were filled with Jazz bands and over 100 million phonograph records were sold in 1927 alone. A cultural movement was taking place in America centered in New York, where literature, music and art flourished. African American culture became more and more noteworthy to the masses, giving birth to the sense of self-pride in their heritage in the black community.

          However, the “roaring twenties” came to an abrupt crash, giving birth to some of the worst times in American History. Racism was a huge part of the 1920s. The early 1920s gave birth to the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group famous for their hatred of Catholics, blacks, and Jews. Over four million members were part of this group and death threats, riots, and lynchings became increasingly common. In the name of “Americanism and “purification” of the nation, countless blacks were murdered in cold blood. Racism didn’t end with the terrorism of African Americans. Americans were going through the Red Scare, a period of hysteria over the threat of Communists in the U.S during the Cold War. This paranoia took hold of the nation. Federal government employees were questioned and interrogated. Loyalties were questioned and fingers were pointed. The government was convinced immigrants were out to overthrow them. The National Origins Act of 1924 was passed, a discriminatory immigration law that prohibited the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans. Nonwhites, especially Asians were not allowed to enter the government. Only two percent of each immigrant group was allowed into the states. (3)

During the end of the 1920s, the economic boom ended and stock prices plunged. October 28th is known as “Black Monday” because the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped almost thirteen percent. The next day is known as Black Tuesday because the DOW dropped by twelve percent. Anxious investors sold their stocks and due to mob mentality, millions of people flooded the market causing prices to drop steeply. Over 16 billion stocks were dumped into the market, with even the largest companies in financial ruin. Banks were forced to shut down due to the loss of customers and money. Mass consumerism finally came to an end and poorly run businesses led to less trade with countries overseas.

One top of all these issues, the 1920s was the decade with the where the Spanish flu outbreak occurred. One of the worst pandemics to occur, the Spanish flu infected almost one third of the world’s population killing over 675,000 Americans. (9) The flu was so dangerous that the life expectancy in the U.S dropped to 47.5 years. Known as the influenza pandemic, it killed more people in a single year compared to the four years by the infamous Bubonic plague. During the late 1910s and early 1920s, the flu spread aggressively through soldiers fighting in the Great War and resulting in hundreds of thousands of tragic deaths and heartbreak.

As the U.S starts slowly recovering from the flu, it gets faced with another issue: Prohibition. Prohibition is a controversial topic tied in with the election of 1928. The 18th amendment banned the manufacture and sale of alcohol. (5) This led to an increase in illegal production and “bootlegging” or the sale of illegal alcohol. This also led to an increase in speakeasies (illegal bars). Gang activity and violence increased due to gangs distributing and selling alcohol. Banning the consumption of alcohol led to more problems. Prohibition was a huge factor in the winner of the 1928 election. (7) The two candidates of the election were Al Smith and Herbert Hoover. Hoover called for enforcement of the Prohibition Act, while Al Smith believed that this was an over-extension of the government’s power. He believed it couldn’t be enforced. Many Americans were convinced that if Smith won it would lead to Roman Catholic domination of the United States. Anti-Catholicism was particularly strong in the South. Hebert Hoover ended up winning and in 1929 promised that he would guide America through years of prosperity and freedom. He wasn’t able to deliver on this promise and eventually the nation stooped in financial hardships.

Another controversial topic during the roaring twenties was the Scopes Monkey Trial. A Tennessee high school science teacher was accused of teaching evolution. According to state law, it was illegal to “teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” (10) This was one of the most famous trials in the U.S because it challenged the constitutionality of the Butler Act, the law that forbade teaching evolution. It also brought attention to the legitimacy of Darwin’s theory.

           The 1920s was a decade of growth and innovation. Business was booming, technology was advancing, cultures were being accepted. However, for every benefit to the “roaring twenties, there was a downside. With all the good, there were also the bad such as racism, immigration laws, and finally prohibition. There is no denying that the 1920s was one of the most influential decades in American history, but perhaps it is called the “roaring twenties” because it started as a roar and came to a screeching halt.

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