

1920s: A Decade of Change ^[1]

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1920s: A Decade of Change

by Barrett A. Silverstein

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Have you ever heard the phrase “the roaring twenties?” Also known as the [Jazz Age](#)^[3], the decade of the 1920s featured economic prosperity and carefree living for many. The decade began with a roar and ended with a crash.

To paraphrase [Charles Dickens](#)^[4] in *A Tale of Two Cities*^[5], “It was the best of times, and sometimes it was the worst of times.”

The 1920s was a decade of change, when many Americans owned cars, radios, and telephones for the first time. The cars brought the need for good roads. The radio brought the world closer to home. The telephone connected families and friends. Prosperity was on the rise in cities and towns, and social change flavored the air. A substantial growth of industry occurred in North Carolina, especially in the areas of tobacco, textiles, and furniture. Some rural farmers were leaving their farms in order to receive a regular paycheck in the factories. Unions were on the rise. Women shortened, or “bobbed,” their hair, flappers danced and wore short fancy dresses, and men shaved off their beards.

In 1920 the average life span in the United States was about fifty-four years, whereas today it’s about seventy-seven years. In 1920 the average time a student spent in school each year was 75 days, and today it’s about 180 days.

In 1920 the [Eighteenth Amendment](#)^[6] to the U.S. Constitution was passed, creating the era of Prohibition. The amendment forbade the manufacture, sale, or transportation of alcoholic beverages. Many people ignored the ban, however. In 1933 the amendment was abolished, and it became the only Constitutional amendment to be repealed.

The 1920s began with the last American troops returning from Europe after [World War I](#)^[7]. They were coming back to their families, friends, and jobs. Most of the soldiers had never been far from home before the war, and their experiences had changed their perspective of life around them. After seeing Europe, they wanted some of the finer things in life for themselves and their families.

Two events in 1920 kicked off the era of change that Americans experienced. On August 18 the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, giving women the right to vote. And on November 2 the first commercially licensed radio broadcast was heard, from [KDKA](#)^[8] in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In North Carolina, women voted for better roads and better education for their children. And radio became a family experience. Everyone would gather around the radio and listen to the news, the comedy shows, and the music. The first North Carolina radio station, [WBT](#)^[9], started broadcasting in Charlotte in 1922.

Musical styles were also changing in the 1920s. In 1922 Louis Armstrong ^[10] started improvising and adding personal musical variations with his trumpet, playing in a style known as jazz ^[11]. In 1925 the flappers found a new dance craze, called the Charleston. In 1927 The Jazz Singer ^[12] became the first successful “talking picture.” Before that time, motion pictures had been silent. In 1928 Mickey Mouse ^[13] first appeared in the cartoon *Steamboat Willie*, and in 1929 Popeye first appeared in the comic strip Thimble Theater.

Aviation ^[14] represented another area in which things were changing quite rapidly, helped by advances and improvements in aircraft during World War I. Up to this time only a few daredevils and barnstormers had flown. In 1924 the United States Air Service ^[15] circumnavigated the world in airplanes, just twenty-one years after Orville Wright ^[16] flew the first powered plane for only forty yards here in North Carolina. On

May 20–21, 1927, Charles Lindbergh ^[17] flew solo from New York to Paris, and on June 17, 1928, Amelia Earhart ^[18] became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Before the decade was over, commercial passenger air travel had begun.

In 1924 Congress passed a law that made all American Indians citizens of the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment ^[19] had already given African Americans citizenship in 1866. Yet segregation ^[20], or separation of the races, continued to be practiced in North Carolina and in the South. Modern civil rights laws ^[21] for minorities were still many years away.

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, the decade also represented the worst of times. In 1921 a revival of the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan ^[22] (KKK) took place. The KKK was targeting Catholics, blacks, and Jews with its terrorism.

Here in North Carolina, Thomas W. Bickett ^[23] was the governor until 1921. He was followed by Cameron Morrison ^[24], the “Good Roads governor,” whose efforts in transportation had a lasting impact on the state.

In the mid-1920s, citizens debated Charles Darwin’s ^[25] controversial evolution theory, as did most people throughout the nation. The Scopes “monkey trial” ^[26] in Tennessee gained national attention in 1925.

That same year, Edna Ferber ^[27] was living in Bath ^[28] when she wrote her Pulitzer Prizewinning book, *So Big*. The following year, she wrote *Show Boat*, a story about people she met at the John Adams Floating Theater on the Pamlico River. *Show Boat* became the basis for the popular musical of the same name. North Carolina native Paul Green ^[29] won a Pulitzer Prize in 1927 for his play *In Abraham’s Bosom*. And Asheville’s ^[30] Thomas Wolfe ^[31] published his book *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1929.

Toward the end of the decade in October 1929, the stock market crashed, and America’s invested wealth suddenly lost \$26 billion in value. Prosperity had ended. The economic boom and the Jazz Age were over, and America began the period called the Great Depression ^[32].

The 1920s represented an era of change and growth. The decade was one of learning and exploration. America had become a world power and was no longer considered just another former British colony. American culture, such as books, movies, and Broadway theater, was now being exported to the rest of the world. World War I had left Europe on the decline and America on the rise. The decade of the 1920s helped to establish America’s position in respect to the rest of the world, through its industry, its inventions, and its creativity.

Barrett A. Silverstein, a retiree of IBM Corporation, volunteers for both the North Carolina Museum of History and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences ^[33]. He is also a volunteer instructor for classes in popular music and radio at North Carolina State University ^[34]’s *Encore Center*.

Additional Resources:

Learn NC: WBT Charlotte in the Golden Age of Radio. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newcentury/5198> ^[9]

UNC. The Evolution Controversy in North Carolina in the 1920’s. <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/evolution/> ^[35]

Forsyth County Public Library. Winston-Salem in the Jazz Age. <http://northcarolinaroom.wordpress.com/2010/09/28/winston-salem-in-the-j...> ^[36]

North Carolina Museum of History. A New Woman Emerges. <http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/collateral/articles/s04.new.woman.emerg...> ^[37]

Learn NC: The Roaring Twenties. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newcentury/6.0> ^[38]

Learn NC: The Booming Twenties. <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newcentury/5761> ^[39]

Video Credits:

October 19, 2009. "The 1920's Charleston." Located at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRvella4uAs> ^[41]. Accessed February 28, 2012.

October 29, 2007. "Crazy 1920's Inventions." Located at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAGAEtC9flo> ^[42]. Accessed February 28, 2012.

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