The Roaring Twenties

In the 1920s, a mood of frenzy gripped the U.S. Fueled by the West’s victory in World War I, the “War to End All Wars,” the frenzy was both positive and destructive.

On the plus side, optimism prevailed among many. There were staggering advances and achievements in engineering, medicine, entertainment, sports, and transportation. Henry Ford’s mass-produced automobiles made car travel easier and more accessible to Americans. Feats such as Charles Lindbergh’s solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean and other advancements in airplane development changed forever the way Americans and others viewed travel. Athletes, both men and women, in all sports were excelling and breaking new records, and mass entertainment, such as films, were gaining in popularity.

Many accumulated great wealth, symbolized by expensive clothing and other luxuries, architectural skyscrapers and other edifices, and wild partying. The image of the flappers, sporting short skirts and short haircuts and dancing to jazzy new tunes, was symptomatic of the times.

The moralists of the era forced enactment of prohibition legislation, banning the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. This was promptly followed by the springing up of illicit new businesses such as rum running and speakeasies (establishments that served bootlegged alcohol). Organized crime was a major social problem, with Al Capone among its most notorious henchmen. And, perhaps most heinous of all, racism was rampant, with the Ku Klux Klan’s marauding going virtually unchecked in many parts of the country. By 1925, the Klan’s membership reached five million, despite the efforts of concerned citizens such as the newly established American Civil Liberties Union.

This was an age when people took to the streets to demand social justice: suffragettes agitated for women’s rights; overcharged tenants in cities demanded rent control; outraged citizens protested the arrest, trial, and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for a crime some believed they did not commit.

At the beginning of the decade, the U.S. population was swelled by the influx of immigrants from other parts of the world—primarily from Italy, England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Ireland, Romania, Russia, and Sweden. Immigration was slowed by the passage of the National Origins Act in 1924, which limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe and stopped immigration from Asia entirely.

The giddy financial expectations of the era came to an abrupt halt in 1929 with the crash of the New York Stock Market. A decade of the nation’s worst economic depression followed, ending only with another, even more devastation, world war.