



Was the USA a good place to live in 1920s?

A *very* brief set of notes...

Was the USA a good place to live in the 1920s?

This presentation will look at 3 main areas:

- [Life for Black people](#)
- [The urban/rural divide](#)
- [Prohibition](#)

To return to the start click the logo.



Introduction

- The answer to this question depends on who you were.

The booming American economy in the 1920s led President Hoover to say:

"we in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land"



For the rich and middle classes these were the '**roaring 20s**'; a dynamic and exciting period of social change. Jazz music was increasingly popular, and black musicians such as Louis Armstrong enjoyed success.

Changing attitudes

When men returned from the First World War they often wanted to enjoy life more, and had less respect for the older generation.

People were more open about sex. Attitudes to women also started to change.



Some young rich urban [city] women were referred to as '**flappers**'. They smoked and drank in public, showed more flesh with shorter skirts, wore strong perfumes and make up, and partied to the modern dances like the Charleston.

Most people went to the **cinema** as a cheap new form of entertainment. This was the golden age of the silent pictures, before the 'talkies'. Men like Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin became superstars, while women like Clara Bow became risqué sex symbols.



Automobiles also provide more freedom.

Racism



There was considerable racism towards immigrants.

The **Sacco and Vanzetti** trial (1920) is a key example of this racism as well as showing the fear of communism [the red scare].

These two Italian anarchists were arrested for murder in a bank robbery. Judge Thayer described them as 'anarchist bastards'. Despite protests that they had not received a fair trial, they were executed in 1927. People argue that they were executed because of racism and the red scare.

In 1924 Congress placed **quotas (limits) on the numbers of immigrants** allowed into the country. This was done by ethnic group, with more people allowed in from groups who already had large communities in the USA. In this way, Western Europeans were favoured above others. Asians were banned from entering entirely.

Ku Klux Klan

By 1924 4 ½ million members



Beliefs

Thought that America should be ruled by WASPS [white anglo saxon Protestants]

Hated Jewish and Black people

Mainly in Southern states, northern cities were better

Inherited many of the racist views of slavery [only ended 1865]

Some areas dominated by KKK, with the police and judges all members

Actions

Use violence and intimidation to stop mixed marriages, schools and to stop Black people voting.

Other examples



In the southern states, **Jim Crow laws** still existed. These separated out facilities for blacks and whites. Benches, toilets, buses were all separated.

Black schools were under funded so most Black people had a poor education. This meant that most had poorly paid jobs, often working in farms. As a result they did not really benefit from the boom.

Lynchings were also carried out, as described in Billie Holiday's song 'Strange Fruit'. An example of this is Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith who were lynched in Marion, Indiana 1930.

Urban/rural divide

Farming was not booming in the 1920s. Isolated rural areas also did not have electricity for the new consumer goods. Attitudes were much slower to change and many rural Americans were shocked by the 'Jazz age'. This was particularly true of attitudes to women in the 'bible belt' areas such as Tennessee.



1925 'Monkey trial'

Law passed banning the teaching of evolution.

Former presidential candidate and secretary of state **William Jennings Bryan** led the prosecution. He was a fundamentalist who believed that man was created by God.

John Scopes, deliberately taught evolution to challenge the law. Although found guilty, he made the fundamentalists look stupid and outdated. Nevertheless, rural attitudes remained different to urban ones.

Prohibition

Banning of selling or making of alcohol

1920 Volstead Act and 18th Amendment set up prohibition

Lasted until 1932

Reasons for introduction

1) Pressure from the **temperance movement**, particularly strong in rural areas. They argued that alcohol led to sin, violence, domestic abuse, poverty (as the money was spent on beer), promiscuity (sleeping around) and even infant death (they claimed 3000 infants a year were smothered by drunken parents). Examples were the Anti-Saloon league and Womens Christian Temperance Union.

2) Drinking beer was seen as **anti-American**. As most brewers were descended from German immigrants (eg Budweiser).

3) American **industrialists** thought it would make workers more productive.



Problems with Prohibition

Law was largely ignored, making criminals of millions of ordinary Americans.

Attempts at enforcement were weak. **Izzy and Moe** were famous federal agents, but there were too few.

Illegal bars called **speakeasies** were started.

Sometimes there were more speakeasies in the 1920s than there had been legal saloons before prohibition.

Home made alcohol called **moonshine** was often a health hazard

Gangsters made fortunes out of supplying alcohol, for example **Al Capone** in Chicago.

Gangsters bribed police and judges. There was largescale **corruption**.

Gang **violence** span out of control, for example 7 killed in the St Valentines Day massacre in Chicago 1929.

Failure shown by the decision to repeal [get rid of] prohibition laws in 1932.



Was the USA a good place to live in the 1920s?

Depended on who you were:

- ✓ Young
- ✓ rich
- ✓ urbanite [lived in a city].

ROARING TWENTIES

- ✓ Best example being the flappers who made the most of the Jazz age.



BUT

Life was hard for:

- ☒ Black people, especially in the south
- ☒ Farmers and those in rural areas
- ☒ People with old values
- ☒ Urban poor also missed out as too poor to benefit from boom.