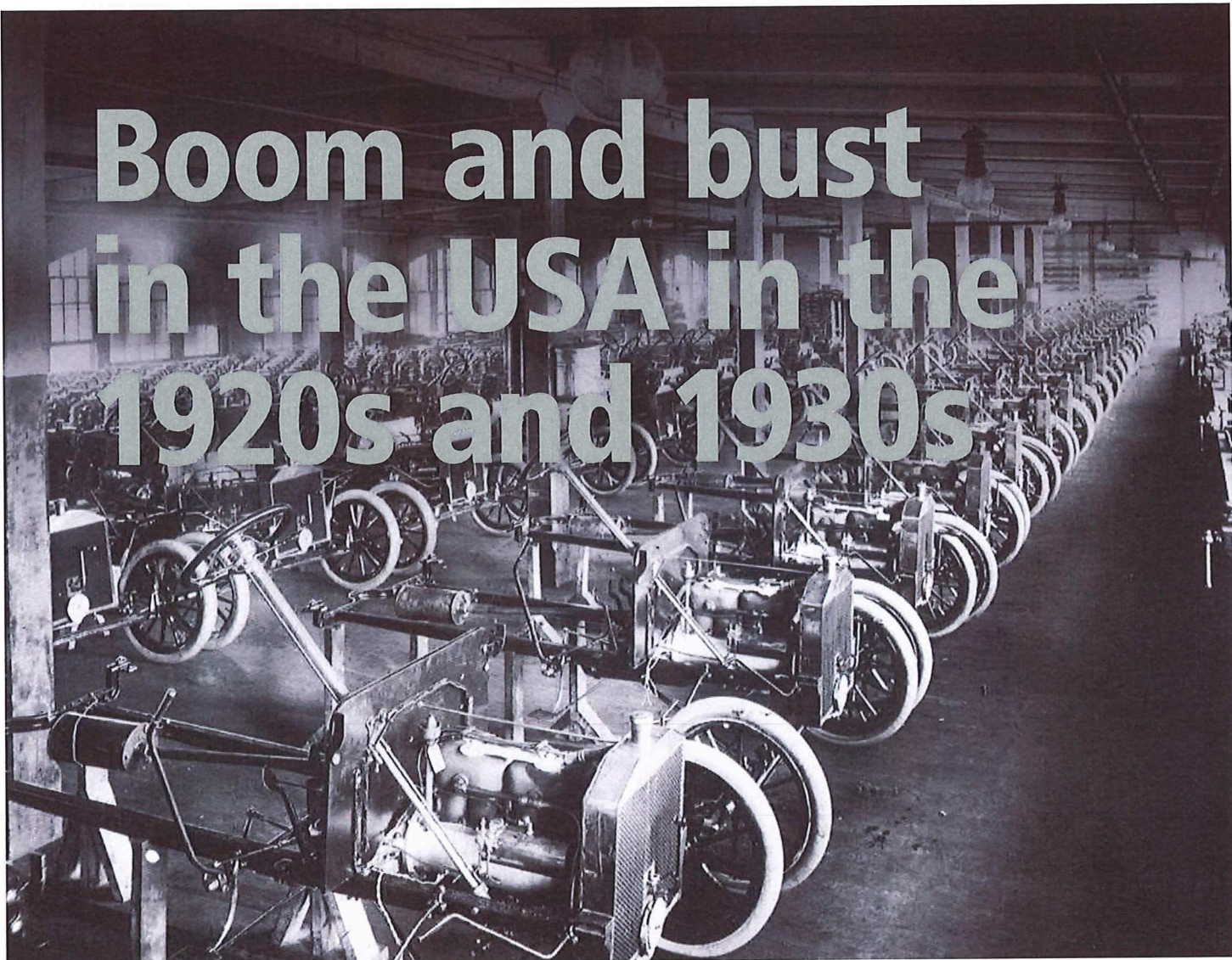


Boom and bust in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s



Andrew Flint explores the impact of the Roaring Twenties and the subsequent Great Depression on US society

Source A

A production line at the Ford Car factory

1 What does Source B tell us about the impact of the rise of the motor industry on US society?

America enjoyed an economic boom in the 1920s. While European countries struggled to recover from the First World War, the USA took advantage. It used modern production methods and new technology to become the most powerful economy in the world. In doing so, US society was fundamentally altered. What was the impact on US society of the so-called Roaring Twenties? Was it as successful as it at first appeared? What happened when the Wall Street Crash brought the era of prosperity to an abrupt end?

Exam links

AQA America, 1920–1973: opportunity and inequality

Eduqas The USA: a nation of contrasts, 1910–1929

OCR (A) USA 1919–1948 The people and the state

America hits the road

If one technological advance symbolised the rapidly changing nature of the age, it was the motor car. Increased mechanisation meant that cars could be produced in huge numbers on production lines. Car maker Henry Ford could now build a car every 10 seconds. As a result, cars became cheaper and more affordable. Many Americans could now save

Source B

Historian Donald McCoy:

The rise of motor vehicle manufacturing contributed to the expansion of the petroleum industry. Add to this the development of tourism, roadside advertising and merchandising, garages, automobile dealerships...catering to motor traffic, and it is plain that within a decade the automobile industry and related businesses had become the most important and attractive element in the American economy.

Cited in *United States 1917–2008* by Derrick Murphy and Kathryn Cooper, 2008

up for a car. President Hoover confidently claimed that America was 'nearer to the financial triumph over poverty than ever before'.

The car opened up the possibility of travel as Americans took vacations, many for the first time, driving to new parts of the country. The very landscape of America itself changed. Motels, restaurants and petrol stations sprang up to cater for this newly mobile generation who travelled along roads lined with new, huge advertising hoardings. No longer needing to live in the centre of town, or near the railway station for work, Americans moved out of the city centre to the new suburbs. This created whole new communities.

Changing gender attitudes

Prior to the 1920s most Americans accepted the subordinate nature of women as the norm. Men and women were separated into 'spheres':

- the sphere of politics, work and business for men
- a domestic life of cooking, cleaning and raising children for women

As the economy expanded, demand for women as telephonists, clerks and secretaries grew. Two million women joined the workforce. The women who took these roles earned an independent income for the first time. For the first time, industry could produce cheap labour-saving devices such as refrigerators and vacuum cleaners that liberated women from their domestic chores and gave them more independent time.

Young wealthy women, called 'flappers,' challenged the boundaries of accepted behaviour and rebelled against the traditional expectations of women. They wore revealing skirts, cut their hair short, drank, smoked and went to nightclubs. Birth control became more readily available. Previously, wearing make-up was associated with prostitution, but now the cosmetic industry boomed — increasing from \$17 million dollars at the start of the decade to \$200 million by the end.

Changes in leisure

The way that Americans spent their leisure time changed greatly in the 1920s. Hollywood became a by-word for an exciting new industry: the movie cinema. Film stars became global icons and cinema too was influenced by the more open attitudes. Hollywood film stars like Clara Bow were the stereotypical 'flapper': confident, beautiful and dressed in the latest risqué fashions. Films were silent at first, but in 1927 *The Jazz Singer* became the first film to include sound.

The 1920s are sometimes referred to as the Jazz Age. This was a period when jazz, a type of music created by African-Americans, became accepted by mainstream white society. As African Americans moved from South to North in search of economic

Source C

Clerical workers in the USA, 1870–1920

Job category	1870	1900	1920
Bookkeepers, cashiers and accountants			
Total	38,776	254,880	734,688
Male	37,892	180,727	375,564
Female	884	74,153	359,124
Female (%)	2.0	29.1	48.4
Office clerks			
Total	29,801	248,323	1,487,905
Male	28,878	229,991	1,015,742
Female	923	18,332	472,163
Female (%)	3.1	7.4	31.7
Stenographers and typists			
Total	154	112,364	615,154
Male	147	26,246	50,410
Female	7	86,118	564,744
Female (%)	4.5	76.6	91.8

From *Thinking Through the Past: A Critical Thinking Approach to U.S. History* by John Hollitz, 2001

opportunity they brought their music with them. The Cotton Club in Harlem, New York City, became a popular nightclub where young Americans could express themselves with the new dance crazes like the 'Charleston' and the 'Turkey Trot'.

Did the 1920s really 'roar?'

The 1920s are sometimes referred to as 'the golden years', but the glossy image was only a thin veneer. Behind the glamorous façade some people did not benefit from the boom.

The introduction of machines and factory production had helped make new products affordable to city dwellers, but machines had made the production of large amounts of food much easier which meant that fewer labourers were needed on the farms. As supply rose, the prices for farm produce plummeted and farmers suffered throughout the 1920s from an economic crisis. This led to poverty and despair. Even the new car industry created new problems: by the middle of the 1920s, 25,000 people had been killed in car accidents.

Un-American ideas?

The boom had led to many immigrants coming to the USA in search of economic opportunity. They fuelled the economic success by working in dangerous factories and cramped sweatshops. During the 1920s there was a backlash against these immigrants from places like Italy or Eastern Europe. They were damned as 'un-American' because they were

- 2 What can we learn from Source C about the changing employment of women during the economic boom of the 1920s?

3 What can we learn from Sources D, E and F about the impact of the Great Depression?

Source D

Story from *The Nation*, a news magazine, describing the situation in rural areas in 1932:

Throughout the Middle West the tension between farmers and authorities has been growing...as a result of tax and foreclosure sales. In many cases evictions have been prevented only by mass action on the part of the farmers...the Cichon homestead near Elkhorn, Wisconsin, was besieged on December 6 by a host of deputy sheriffs armed with machine-guns, rifles, shotguns and tear-gas bombs. Max Cichon's property was auctioned off at a foreclosure sale last August, but...he held off unwelcome visitors with a shotgun. The sheriff called upon Cichon to submit peacefully. When he refused to do so, the sheriff ordered deputies to lay down a barrage of machine-gun fire.

Cited in *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, 1999

different clothes and brought alternative political ideas with them, such as communism or religious diversity. They were portrayed as dangerous, violent criminals. In 1924 the National Origins Act restricted immigration by creating quotas for entry that were biased against them.

Racial tensions

The Ku Klux Klan, a racist group from the nineteenth century, re-emerged to battle against racial equality. They also protested about the rise in immigrants, especially Jews and Catholics who they believed to be more loyal to their religious beliefs than to US democracy. The number of members reached 4 million in 1924.

The same cinema that entertained Americans could also have a sinister side. One of the most successful films of the time, *Birth of a Nation*, was

a racist retelling of the Civil War. A smash-hit, it played a vital role in rekindling white supremacy and racial tensions.

Did women's lives really change?

Even the image of gender equality seems exaggerated. Older Americans were appalled by what they saw in the newspapers about modern women's behaviour, but in reality there were very few actual flappers. Some women might have copied their hairstyles and fashions, but most of rural, traditional America retained the attitude that a women's place was in the home. The growth in cosmetic sales might indicate a limit to how far social attitudes had really changed — women were still expected to look attractive in order to impress men.

The end of the boom

The Roaring Twenties came to a crashing halt in 1929. The boom of the 1920s had encouraged speculation on the stock market. People used loans to buy shares, gambling that they could repay the loan as the value of the stock went up. However, the US economy was not as strong as it appeared: the stock market value hid the fact that the technological boom of the 1920s had meant that the USA could produce too much. When it was clear that the USA could not sell its surplus, the value of the stock market on Wall Street in New York City crashed.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression was a global economic crisis and US society was badly hit. Unemployment reached nearly 25% in 1933. Desperate men travelled across the country in the forlorn hope of finding a job. Over-farming had denuded the quality of agricultural land so much that winds whipped up 'dust-bowl' storms that buried houses and cars. Farms were 'foreclosed' by banks because the farmer could not pay his mortgage. This led to violence as farmers armed themselves to keep hold of their land.

Life in the cities

The cities were also badly affected. The 1920s had seen a massive boom in the construction industry as US cities expanded rapidly. The Depression saw this come to a sudden end and 2 million people in the construction trade lost their jobs. This meant that architects and engineers lost their jobs too. Steel plants and mines all closed. People stopped buying cars, so the car factories closed.

City dwellers could not make do by growing their own food and many began to starve. Previously, accepting government welfare payments was considered a disgrace — in some places newspapers published their names as a source of shame. Now, with their families starving, people swallowed their pride

Source E

Sign in an American town during the Great Depression





and signed up for help, or queued at soup kitchens for a free meal.

'Jobless men: keep going'

Men left their families and travelled from town to town searching for work. In some towns billboards were erected telling them to 'keep going' because the town could not look after them. Men themselves started wearing signs, listing their employment history and qualifications, pleading for a job. Men who had previously travelled to the cities in search of work now reversed the migration. Unable to buy a train ticket, they jumped on rail-road wagons or hitchhiked a ride moving back to their rural communities in search of work.

'Brother, can you spare a dime?'

The impact of the Depression was made even worse by the overconfidence of the previous decade. Angry ex-soldiers who had fought in the First World War formed a so-called 'bonus army' that marched to Washington to demand the financial support that they had expected. The lyrics of Al Johnson's song,

'Brother, can you spare a dime?' spoke of the desperation that many men felt: the vocalist 'once built a railroad' during the boom and 'wore khaki' as a war hero, but now was desperate for charity.

African-Americans fared particularly badly. Racist employment practices meant that finding work was very difficult and that they were the first to be dismissed from their jobs. Women too faced the burden of trying to find work and also complete domestic chores while their husbands struggled to find work. By 1932 there were 15 million unemployed, more than 20% of the US population.

Conclusion

It was only in 1933, with the election of a new president, Franklin Roosevelt, that the USA began to recover. Roosevelt introduced more activist government intervention — a 'New Deal' to replace Hoover's overconfidence. Even then, it was only with the outbreak of the Second World War that the economy improved completely. Just as the First World War had sparked the previous economic boom, so the Second World War helped the USA recover from the Depression.

The image of the 1920s as one of economic prosperity and dizzying social changes is only one side of the story. While the changes were undeniable and permanent, many Americans did not enjoy the new prosperity and in many ways the 1920s only cemented the increasingly wide differences in wealth, social mobility, rights and attitudes. The 1920s might be seen as a period that increased the differences and tensions between different groups and religions — even between the cities and towns in the USA. The country remains starkly polarised to the present day. **HS**

Source F

A poor young family, hitchhiking in California during the Great Depression

Summary

- The advent of the motor car changed US society, its economy, and even its landscape.
- There were new opportunities for women in the 1920s, including employment and leisure.
- Many of those living in agricultural communities in the 1920s did not enjoy as many benefits as those living in the cities.
- The arrival of many immigrants coincided with the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan.
- US society was badly hit by the Great Depression.