

31  
THE MASSES



THE NEW PRESIDENT IN 1921 was a Republican from Ohio named Warren Gamaliel Harding, and he looked and spoke like a president, even if he liked to drop rather large words into the middle of speeches, just as his parents had dropped his big middle name between two more ordinary ones. Harding reassured people that despite the worst war in human history, fought with machine guns and poison gas and cannons the size of railcars, there wasn't "anything the matter with world civilization, except that humanity is viewing it through a vision impaired in a cataclysmal war. Poise has been disturbed, and nerves have been racked . . . and men have wandered far from safe paths." But never mind the wandering, elephantine words. In 1920 it was Harding, not Woodrow Wilson, who knew what people wanted. "America's present need is not heroics, but healing," said Harding, "not nostrums, but normalcy." People were tired of progressive campaigns for new laws and weary of war. Americans wanted to return to the old ways: to normalcy.

But could they return? Were the old ways even normal any more?

The Nineteenth Amendment had just given women the vote, a right they had pursued for decades, and they were not going back. In fact, women's lives had been changing so much that people were talking about a "New Woman" of these modern times, more independent and freethinking. This woman wanted a simpler style of dress, to begin with. She discarded her bulky petticoats and heavy woolen skirts that dropped to the ankle in favor of sleeker garments made from silk or a new artificial fiber, rayon. Sometimes her skirts barely covered her knees. She "bobbed" her hair, cutting it short, and she shocked many by wearing makeup, tight felt hats, and galoshes that flapped when left fashionably unbuckled. A "flapper girl," the newspapers called her. Rather than stay at home, the New Woman was more likely to take a job as a secretary, teacher, nurse, or beautician. In Texas and Wyoming women even ran for governor—and won.

Of course, the women who could afford to dress and behave so independently were largely from the middle class. The plain truth was, most women who took jobs outside the home were blue-collar folk. They worked not as secretaries or teachers but as poorly paid servants or as factory workers, perhaps standing all day preparing tobacco or working as "kidney pullers" in meatpacking plants. Despite such hardships, what was important was the idea that women could do more than tend the home. "We cannot believe it is fixed in the nature of things that a woman must choose between a home and her work, when a man may have both," said one student at Smith, a college for women.

And the lives of women were hardly the only things that were changing. Steam engines had been the marvel of the nineteenth century, powering everything from cotton looms to locomotives. As electric service spread, factories replaced their old steam engines with electric "dynamamos." The research labs of large corporations turned out hundreds of new products, and Americans marveled. Imagine—a watch small enough to wear on your wrist! New chemical products were developed, like rayon and cellophane, a trans-

parent wrap for packages. There were electric sewing machines that didn't need to be pumped by foot and electric refrigerators that kept food cold without the need for the iceman to deliver a block of ice every day. Jazz, a new style of music pioneered by black musicians, spread its catchy melodies across the nation and sparked a dance craze, the Charleston. "Some dance, some prance, I'll say, there's nothing finer / Than the Charleston, Charleston. Lord, how you can shuffle!" Older Americans frowned upon such sinful "wriggling" and so did younger folk used to traditional ways. One Mexican ballad complained about wives who wore "a bob-tailed dress of silk" and kids who "speak perfect English / And have no use for our Spanish / They call me 'fader' and don't work / And are crazy about the Charleston." But like it or not, normal or not, Americans in all walks of life were living differently. Small wonder the 1920s came to be called the New Era.

What set apart this era was not simply the new. It was the way new products were used and new experiences shared by millions of people—masses of people. Imagine the biggest crowd you've been in. At a football game, perhaps, where thousands flock to a stadium, or a presidential inauguration. But you've almost certainly joined a much larger crowd without leaving your living room—if you've watched the Super Bowl, the Oscars, or a hit television show. The idea of millions upon millions of people watching a single event is so common today it seems odd to speak of this sort of "mass culture" as new. The 1920s were when people began sharing such experiences.

Two key inventions led the way toward mass culture: motion picture films and the radio. The first machines for projecting "moving pictures" spread in the 1890s, in cities where working-class folk eagerly lined up to see shows. (The theaters were called nickelodeons because tickets cost a nickel.) Films projected sights never seen before indoors: crashing ocean waves, the Grand Canyon, lions and tigers. Then filmmakers had the idea of telling simple stories. *The Great Train Robbery*, a ten-minute extravaganza, played all across

the country. But movies really came into their own in the 1920s when huge theaters were built in big cities, boasting grand names like the Roxy (in Manhattan) or Grauman's Chinese Theatre (in Hollywood, which became the movie capital of the world). These theaters seated thousands and their spaces felt like cathedrals. Doormen wearing white gloves greeted customers, even offering the shelter of an umbrella on rainy days. Ushers escorted patrons to their seats. The films had no sound, but a live pipe organ provided music to go with them. And unlike live theaters, Americans all around the country could see the very same show, swoon over the same movie actors or actresses—see them in close-ups, their faces filling the screen. By 1926, twenty thousand movie theaters had been built across the nation.

At about the same time, inventors found a way to broadcast radio waves through the air; these could be picked up by anyone who owned one of the new radios being sold. In November 1920, the first real broadcast went out from a shack on the top of a Westinghouse Electric Company building in East Pittsburgh. Station KDKA announced the election returns giving Warren Harding his victory. Americans loved this new way of bringing news and entertainment directly into their homes. Within a few years 3 million residences had radios; and the president broadcast a speech from St. Louis during a cross-country tour. (Being Harding, he did not just call it a tour to meet Americans; it was his "Voyage of Understanding.") Midway through the journey he had a heart attack, fell dead on his bed, and understood no more. The new president, Calvin Coolidge, spoke to a much wider radio audience a few months later. It was a marvel: not just to read a president's words but to actually hear his *voice*, coming from thousands of miles away.

The new masses were traveling differently, too. Inventors had long dreamed of making a carriage that moved on its own power. A "steam wagon" appeared in France as early as 1771. But more than a century passed before practical motorcars were made, using engines that ran on gasoline. The contraptions frightened horses

and were widely distrusted. Vermont passed a law requiring drivers to send someone with a red flag to walk ahead of the vehicle to warn other travelers. Tennessee drivers had to take out newspaper ads a week in advance announcing their travels. By the beginning of World War I, more than a million autos were on the road, but they were so expensive that they remained the toys of the rich. That changed after a racecar buff named Henry Ford got into the car business. "Everybody wants to be somewhere he ain't," Ford commented. In his Michigan factory he created an "assembly line": instead of mechanics putting together cars one at a time, a chain pulled each auto along a line at the rate of about a foot a minute from one worker to the next, and each did a separate job. Ford's black Model T cars cost \$845 apiece—much cheaper than others—and the price dropped to only \$290 by 1925.

It was a car for the masses—and built by them. Ford paid his thousands of workers \$5 a day, twice as much as most wages in the auto business. But the work was mind-numbing. You stood all day doing your single task over and over, relieved only by one fifteen-minute lunch-and-bathroom break. And Ford demanded that there be no whistling, laughing, or talking on the assembly line. Workers learned to speak without moving their lips. This was too much for the wife of one worker, and she wrote the boss: "The chain system you have is a slave driver! My God! Mr. Ford. My husband has come home and thrown himself down and won't eat his supper—so done out! Can't it be remedied? . . . That \$5 a day is a blessing—a bigger one than you know but oh they earn it."

The sale of so many autos helped the economy to boom. With the taxes collected from the sale of gasoline, states and the federal government began a highway system that turned dirt roads into gravel, and gravel roads into concrete or asphalt, a gooey tar left over from refining gasoline. With millions of people making cars, building roads, and constructing skyscrapers, Americans experienced a higher standard of living than ever before. They had

usually been cautious about buying what they couldn't afford, but companies were offering "installment plans" so that people could purchase cars, pianos, washing machines, or vacuum cleaners even if they didn't have the money to pay the full price right away. In short, they bought on credit. Why not? Prosperity had come to stay.

President Coolidge applauded the good times. As a Republican he championed the businesses that led the boom, large and small. "The man who builds a factory builds a temple," he said. "The man who works there, worships there." Coolidge rejected the Progressives' worry that too many workers were "living in industrial slavery." Businesses should be free to do as they wished, the president said, boasting that he governed best by "minding my own business." In other words, laissez-faire—let business alone. Though voters elected him to a term of his own in 1924, Coolidge chose not to seek reelection four years later. His secretary of commerce, Herbert Hoover, easily followed him into the White House in 1928, boasting that "the poorhouse is vanishing from among us."

Millions of Americans shared his confidence. They had begun to pay attention to the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street—the place where investors bought shares of exciting new businesses like RCA, Radio Corporation of America. In the spring of 1928 RCA was selling for \$94 a share. If you bought a hundred shares, the cost was \$9,400. Even better, you could buy stocks on credit. Pay only \$5,000 and get your broker to loan you the rest on "margin." RCA jumped from \$94 to \$108 in a week, then to \$120 the next day. Another week and it roared along to \$138—and so many new investors wanted it, the price then zoomed to \$168. If you had paid \$5,000 for a hundred shares, you could sell now for \$16,800. "Everybody Ought to be Rich," proclaimed a popular ladies' magazine. The excitement of making a fortune in the stock market spread everywhere—to "the elevator man, the barber, the boot-black, the engineers, the porters, the newsstand man," remarked

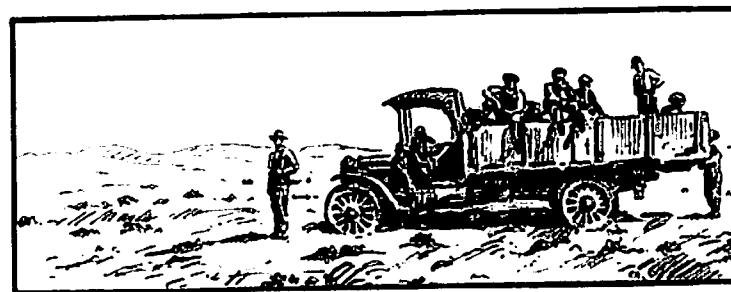
one businessman. Stockbrokers had offices with a stock ticker machine, a contraption that clattered as it spit out the latest prices on a long slim paper ribbon.

And then the great "bull market" crashed. Panic set in on October 24, 1929, as investors worried that stocks were headed for a fall. Millions of orders came in to brokers' offices: sell, sell! Almost nobody wanted to buy, so stock prices plummeted. Investors who bought on margin suddenly found their brokers demanding that their loans be paid back immediately, just as their profits were disappearing in smoke. Anxious crowds gathered on Wall Street while traders bellowed on the floor of the stock exchange. "The whole place is falling apart!" reported one clerk.

Prosperity had seemed as if it would go on forever. The American people had created a mass society in which millions gazed at movie stars, bought automobiles and radios, went to work on assembly lines, bought stocks—and now sold them, or what was left of them. The New Era was over and done in a whirlwind of weeks.

In the midst of the turmoil, a man staying in a New York hotel tried to make a phone call. He couldn't get a line. He went downstairs and finally located the hotel telephone operator. She was modern and up-to-date. Perhaps she even thought of herself as one of the New Women. Now, as she got off the phone, she was in tears. "That was my broker," she said. "I'm ruined. All I have left in the world is my sealskin coat."

## A NEW DEAL



THE TWO MOST FRIGHTENING days of the Great Crash, October 24 and 29, 1929, became known as Black Thursday and Black Tuesday. But the stock market plunge lasted months, not days. This is important, because it wasn't just money that people lost, it was confidence. Now and then stocks rose slightly, and hopes would flutter. But the plunge resumed, deeper and deeper; and hope began to fade.

If the "roaring" economy had been strong, Americans might have ridden out the crash, simply enduring a year or two of hard times. But the economy's weakness was much more serious. True, factories had been turning out cars and appliances by the millions. But the same workers who made those products—the new masses—were also the customers buying these items. And workers weren't being paid high enough wages to be able to afford all the goods being produced. Many had bought items on the installment plan, with money they hoped to earn in the future. Now, who