Roaring 1920s and the Jazz Age
The 1920s were an age of dramatic social and political change. For the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The nation’s total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929, and this economic growth swept many Americans into an affluent but unfamiliar “consumer society.” People from coast to coast bought the same goods (thanks to nationwide advertising and the spread of chain stores), listened to the same music, did the same dances and even used the same slang! Many Americans were uncomfortable with this new, urban, sometimes racy “mass culture”; in fact, for many—even most—people in the United States, the 1920s brought more conflict than celebration. However, for a small handful of young people in the nation’s big cities, the 1920s were roaring indeed.

The "New Woman"
The most familiar symbol of the “Roaring Twenties” is probably the flapper: a young woman with bobbed hair and short skirts who drank, smoked and said what might be termed “unladylike” things, in addition to being more sexually “free” than previous generations. In reality, most young women in the 1920s did none of these things (though many did adopt a fashionable flapper wardrobe), but even those women who were not flappers gained some unprecedented freedoms. They could vote at last: The 19th Amendment to the Constitution had guaranteed that right in 1920. Millions of women worked in white-collar jobs (as stenographers, for example) and could afford to participate in the burgeoning consumer economy. The increased availability of birth-control devices such as the diaphragm made it possible for women to have fewer children. And new machines and technologies like the washing machine and the vacuum cleaner eliminated some of the drudgery of household work.

The Birth of Mass Culture
During the 1920s, many Americans had extra money to spend, and they spent it on consumer goods such as ready-to-wear clothes and home appliances like electric refrigerators. In particular, they bought radios. The first commercial radio station in the U.S., Pittsburgh’s KDKA, hit the airwaves in 1920; three years later there were more than 500 stations in the nation. By the end of the 1920s, there were radios in more than 12 million households. People also went to the movies: Historians estimate that, by the end of the decades, three-quarters of the American population visited a movie theater every week.

But the most important consumer product of the 1920s was the automobile. Low prices (the Ford Model T cost just $260 in 1924) and generous credit made cars affordable luxuries at the beginning of the decade; by the end, they were practically necessities. In 1929 there was one car on the road for every five Americans. Meanwhile, an economy of automobiles was born: Businesses like service stations and motels sprang up to meet drivers’ needs.

The Jazz Age
Cars also gave young people the freedom to go where they pleased and do what they wanted. (Some pundits called them “bedrooms on wheels.”) What many young people wanted to do was dance: the Charleston, the cake walk, the black bottom, the flea hop. Jazz bands played at dance halls like the Savoy in New York City and the Aragon in Chicago; radio stations and phonograph records (100 million of which were sold in 1927 alone) carried their tunes to listeners across the nation. Some older people objected to jazz music’s “vulgarity” and “depravity” (and the “moral disasters” it supposedly inspired), but many in the younger generation loved the freedom they felt on the dance floor.

Prohibition
During the 1920s, some freedoms were expanded while others were curtailed. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1919, had banned the manufacture and sale of “intoxicating liquors,” and at 12 A.M. on January 16, 1920, the federal Volstead Act closed every tavern, bar and saloon in the United States. From then on, it was illegal to sell any “intoxication beverages” with more than 0.5% alcohol. This drove the liquor trade underground—now, people simply went to nominally illegal speakeasies instead of ordinary bars—where it was controlled by bootleggers, racketeers and other organized-crime figures such as Chicago gangster Al Capone. (Capone reportedly had 1,000 gunmen and half of Chicago’s police force on his payroll.)

To many middle-class white Americans, Prohibition was a way to assert some control over the unruly immigrant masses who crowded the nation’s cities. For instance, to the so-called “Drys,” beer was known as “Kaiser brew.” Drinking was a symbol of all they disliked about the modern city, and eliminating alcohol would, they believed, turn back the clock to an earlier and more comfortable time.

The "Cultural Civil War"
Prohibition was not the only source of social tension during the 1920s. The Great Migration of African Americans from the Southern countryside to Northern cities and the increasing visibility of black culture—jazz and blues music, for example, and the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance—discomfited some white Americans. Millions of people in places like Indiana and Illinois joined the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. To them, the Klan represented a return to all the “values” that the fast-paced, city-slicker Roaring Twenties were trampling.

Likewise, an anti-Communist “Red Scare” in 1919 and 1920 encouraged a widespread nativist, or anti-immigrant, hysteria. This led to the passage of an extremely restrictive immigration law, the National Origins Act of 1924, which set immigration quotas that excluded some people (Eastern Europeans and Asians) in favor of others (Northern Europeans and people from Great Britain, for example).

These conflicts—what one historian has called a “cultural Civil War” between city-dwellers and small-town residents, Protestants and Catholics, blacks and whites, “New Women” and advocates of old-fashioned family values—are perhaps the most important part of the story of the Roaring Twenties.

**Reading Response Questions:**

1. Do you think the “new woman” was a positive or negative thing? Do you think the ability to drink, smoke, were short skirts should be considered “liberation”? Do you think flappers represented the true values of the “new woman”?

2. What type of appliances and products did many Americans begin to buy and have in their homes that they didn’t have before? What type of businesses sprang up as a result of these new products being created?

3. What were the names of the two most famous jazz clubs in America at this time? What cities were they located in? Why do you think so many Americans were attracted to dancing and jazz music? Why was it considered a form of “liberation”?

4. What is the name of the illegal clubs that served alcohol during the 1920s? Who was the infamous gangster who controlled much of the illegal selling of booze at speakeasies?

5. Define “Cultural Wars”. How did it come about? How did the rise of all these new subcultures in America cause friction?