The 1920s

It was the first full year after the Treaty of Versailles had officially ended the Great War, and Americans were not as relieved as they had hoped to be. They were joyful, of course, but at other times saddened; optimistic, but no less confused; enthusiastic, yet unable to escape a certain sense of dread. It is neither easy nor usual to hold such conflicting emotions at the same time; then again, the year was neither easy nor usual.

Americans were joyful, naturally, that the fighting in Europe was over and their troops were back home; but their sadness that the troops had ever had to depart in the first place still lingered, as did an even deeper sadness that so many young men had not returned. Americans were optimistic that the twentieth century could at last begin without interference, and that its remaining eighty years would be the most productive and profitable ever for the nation. But they were not productive and profitable now, as in the words of one historian, “a punishing postwar recession” had settled like a cloud of mustard gas over manufacturing and industry and would not fully disperse for another two years.

They were enthusiastic, though, about something else in the air, the beat of distant music, music that had never heard before, making those who felt it celebratory, eager to twist their bodies into contortions new and lascivious, unable to sit still. And, in some cases, unable to behave conventionally any longer. Some women began to smoke cigarettes in public. Some joined men in sipping cocktails to the point of giddiness, cocktails that had not even existed before the war and could be as dangerous to the imbiber’s health as the war’s weaponry.

Other Americans were also enthusiastic about more substantive matters: the League of Nations, which would never come to be, but which President Woodrow Wilson had assured them would bring everlasting peace to the world; and advances in transportation, education, and factory output.

Even so, they were fearful, a chill running through them as they wondered whether the treaty agreed upon last year in Paris could hold, would keep them safe. Might future conflicts break out regardless of the present accord, conflicts even more brutal than those they had just known? Might those conflicts even be fought on their own soil? Might the armaments be more powerful? In the wake of the Great War, the French composer Claude Debussy lamented to a friend, “When will hate be exhausted?” He did not expect an answer.

Many men and women, soldiers and civilians alike, especially those between the ages of twenty and thirty, were in the phrase uttered by Gertrude Stein but popularized by Ernest Hemingway, a “lost generation,” unable to find their moorings, to regain their belief in the visions of political leaders who kept speaking at them. In the wake of the fighting and devastation abroad, they found themselves living in a world they thought was “shallow, corrupt, and depraved.” They were suffering as Thornton Wilder said about his older brother, who had served in France, from “some kind of radical depletion, made up of battle fatigue, sleeplessness, and nervous strain.”

On the one hand, Americans were hopeful that the worst was behind them and ahead lay homes and employment for all, as well as families to raise and children to be watched as they grew benignly into adults never to know war, living as beneficiaries of the ease that technology would inevitably bring.

Yet, on the other hand, it might have been true that, in the words of historian Paul Fussell, “Neither race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won, and would go on winning.”

Nineteen twenty, and the nine years to follow, make up the only such period in the country’s history to have its own clear identity, a widely applied nickname: the Roaring Twenties. But although the year that is the subject of this book was a preview of a decade, it turned out to be more than that: it would be a preview of the entire century and even the beginning of the century to follow, the one in which we live today. The year was like the trailer for a movie, and the movie was an epic beyond the scope of a director even as skilled as D.W. Griffith, a film of such sweeping proportions that it seemed there would never be a last reel. The birth of an even greater nation. But it did not start out that way. Nineteen twenty was not the happy-go-lucky year of popular myth.

It was then, for instance, that the United States pretended the Constitution was a high school term paper and, ignoring it, conducted raids on suspected terrorists, battering down the doors of men whom government agents believed had sent bombs through the mail to prominent state and local officials. Later in the year, terrorism on a much greater scale struck Americans for the first time, and among the reactions were calls for homeland security, although the term was not used back then….

It was in 1920 that the increasing power of American women first became legally recognized with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, exactly 365 years after the first American women had insisted on voting in the New World, demanding a voice in her government and being told she was not entitled.

Coincidentally, as the Nineteenth Amendment became law, none woman was already running the entire nation, although no one had marked her name on a ballot and few people even knew of her power. Many who did know resented it and found the circumstances surrounding her ascension intolerable. This could not be allowed to happen again. For the time being, however, there seemed no alternative.

Another woman, much less influential as 1920 began, would soon begin to touch the lives of millions, becoming much more powerful in the long run that the lady “president.” Imprisoned a few years earlier, she had by now been free long enough to plan and begin to create the institution that would forever change the meaning of intimacy between men and women.

Yet 1920 was the only year in American history, post-Bill of Rights, in which two constitutional amendments were passed, and the second became the most openly ignored regulation in American history. Even by those who were normally law-abiding citizens. Even, in many cases, by those whose occupation it was to enforce the law. It had its heart in the right place, one might have said of the Eighteenth Amendment, but its brain was severely defective. Not only did the Amendment fail to be heeded; it often failed to be acknowledged with a straight face. Vaudeville comedians began to work it into their acts, and it always brought painful laughs of recognition.

“Prohibition is better than no liquor at all,” said the humorist Will Rogers, consoling those who were victims of inferior product so common in the twenties. Then, summing up the Eighteenth Amendment shortly after its repeal, Rogers asked a question: “Why don’t they pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting anybody from learning anything?” he wanted to know. “If it works as well as prohibition did, in five years Americans would be the smartest race of people on Earth.”

It was in 1920 that corruption in public and private affairs began their ascent to levels that were unprecedented up to that time. There had long been misdeeds in government at all levels; but when the presidential election that autumn brought to the White House the so-called “Ohio Gang,” all barriers of decency were crossed. The Gang started small, but eventually worked it way up to the greatest scandal that American politics had seen up to that time. As for the president, most people thought him innocent of wrongdoing, a bit thick-headed perhaps, but appalled at the behavior of his supposed friends. His regrets did not kill him, of course, but something about the timing of his death, so unexpected, made the citizenry wonder about the real cause of Warren Gamaliel Harding’s premature passing. Was it, in fact, as stated? Why were so many possibilities being suggested?

It was 1920, with the country prospering more than ever following the Great War, that many Americans, especially the most recent arrivals, began to look for the streets of gold that had been their dream in the old country. Most did not find them, not even a glimmer; in most cases, they found streets not even paved. And so America’s ever-swelling number of immigrants lost all hope, however unrealistic those hopes might have been in the first place, and became cogs in the machinery that allowed the chose few, the so-called robber barons, to make their own golden thoroughfares a reality, amassing fortunes, beyond the power of the immigrants even to imagine. As far back as 1913, for example, John D. Rockefeller is said to have had almost a billion dollars in his toy chest, “or 2 percent of the U.S. gross national product; a comparable share today would give Rockefeller a net worth of $190 billion, or more than triple that of the richest man in the contemporary world, Bill Gates.”

Actually, it was even worse than that for the human cogs. Machinery is maintained and repaired when necessary; the men who operated it were simply pushed until they dropped and then replaced by others. None of them had health insurance; workman’s compensation (it would not be called “worker’s” compensation for many years yet) was harder to get than it is today. The robber barons disdained it, called it socialism, fought in in capitalism’s courts—which, for all practical purposes, they owned.

A few Americans, though achieved wealth either by working hard or by demonstrating extraordinary vision, or both. A few others had parents who brough their own money with them from abroad. And a very few others, not having inherited a vast sum and too impatient to spend a lifetime accumulating it, figured out ways to stockpile a fortune in a different manner, and so easy did it seem that they wondered why others had not devised similar deceits. One man in particular would become legendary for his scam, a brilliant notion that started out legally but quickly went south, the result of which was that his name lived on, and continues to live, in ignominy. Long after he had been stripped of his millions and started running from the law, he died not only in poverty but in eternal night, thousands of miles from either his American or Italian home.

It was in 1920 that radical expressions in the arts revealed themselves to be what they really were: a rebellion in politics, culture, and the very premises upon which the Main Street type of society, a much more realistic version of the American dream, had been erected. In fact, Sinclair Lewis’s volume was first published in 1920. But in painting, film, and music, as well as literature, there appeared goals and techniques that had never been seen or heard before; new genres were created and, refusing to settle for merely telling stories or rendering placid landscapes or other kinds of diversion, determined not to divert at all, but to demand. They would look beyond life’s exteriors, into the soul not only of society but of the people who populated it; they would seek the most profound meanings, answer the most vexing of questions. They were aspirations that did not sound as naïve then as they do now.

There was a countervailing force at work, though, and in retrospect one sees it as the most important and enduring event of 1920: the invention of the American mass media. It began with radio, whose allies quickly became the newspapers with their tabloid value systems—and, in massing, the two media would form the most persuasive and pervasive of all American industries, as they went about making far too much of matters ever less consequential, the private lives of actors and singers, musicians and authors, comedians and athletes, heirs and heiresses, perpetrators and victims, millionaires and billionaires…

Many of the names that were well known in 1920 are still well known at present. In other cases, the historical record no longer seems to have room for them, but the deeds for which they were responsible still resound in either impact or interest or both. Among the former are Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, J. Edger Hoover, Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Charles Ponzi, Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, F. Scoot Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O’Neill, and T.S. Eliot.

It was in 1920 that the Roaring Twenties first began to roar. But it was not the year that people think it was. The roar might have been a sound of pain as much as power, frenzy as much as affirmation. For during the uniquely hectic twelve months in which the United States first solidified itself as a world colossus, it did so despite increasing internal turmoil. Big government versus anarchy, conventional values versus unholy doctrines, labor versus management, “wets” vesus “drys,” the lost generation versus the Jazz Age, wealth versus poverty, restraint versus hedonism—perhaps this was the continuing warfare so many had dreaded, struggles that took place between neighbors rather than nations.

It is an irony little short of breathtaking that the United State could grow and thrive and in fact enrich itself exponentially while engaged in such internecine struggles, some of them actually shedding blood. It was, at times, as if we were two different nations, opposites in temperament, yet forced by geography to exist side by side.

No less an irony is it that 1920 foretold the years to come so accurately. Foretold them, in fact, with such precision that there is an eeriness about it, a rattling of chains in the night. The story of the first full year of peace after the Treaty of Versailles seems on occasion as if it were as current as an email aler, a beep that one hears within seconds of the message’s arrival.

**Life in the 20s was….**

**Evidence to support your description:**