8 Silent Cal and the Roaring Twenties

Coolidge was happy to play the tunes big business wanted to hear—and it was music to the fat cats' ears.

Thrifty, Vermont-born Calvin Coolidge became president when Harding died. He had been an active governor of Massachusetts and, like most Vermonters, he didn't waste words, but he did get a lot done. So most people thought he would be an energetic and decisive chief executive. And he started that way. In his first message to Congress he called for federal laws to punish "the hideous act of lynching," and for more attention to education, minimum wages for women workers, and other progressive measures.

But then something terrible happened. Coolidge's son, 16-year-old Calvin Jr., died of blood poisoning, which developed from a toe blister he had gotten playing tennis. Coolidge was overwhelmed with grief. He couldn't concentrate. He developed an assortment of illnesses, including severe depression. His work suffered.

Still, the times were prosperous, he was popular, and almost no one, besides his wife and close friends, knew what was happening to him. Today, he is mostly remembered as a president who didn't say or do much—but he held more than seven press conferences a month, which was more than Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson did before him or Franklin Roosevelt did after him. As for not doing much, that was part of his philosophy. He was against ac-

1925: Wyoming elects the first woman governor in U.S. history, Nellie Taylor Ross. *The New Yorker* is introduced as a magazine for "caviar sophisticates... not for the old lady in Dubuque." The first issue costs 15 cents. At Nome, Alaska, dog-team relays bring serum to combat a serious diphtheria epidemic. Born in 1925: Robert F. Kennedy, Rod Steiger, and Malcolm X.

1926: The first motion picture with synchronized sound, *Don Juan,* stars heartthrob John Barrymore. The sound comes from a phonograph record. (Until now, theaters have usually hired a piano player to play along with the films.)

1927: The United States Supreme Court in *Nixon* v. *Herndon* rules unanimously that a Texas law forbidding blacks to vote in primary elections violates the 14th Amendment and is unconstitutional. The first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer,* starring Al Jolson, opens.

The '20s were the age of fad contests. People tried to set records for doing something the most, the fastest, or the longest. Dance marathons went to extremes. Resting only 15 minutes an hour, couples danced for days, even weeks. The last couple left won a little bit of money.

Hardly anyone remembers Philo Farnsworth, but they should. Farnsworth is the man who invented TV. The idea for the TV picture tube came to him when he was 14 and a farm boy in Idaho tilling a potato field, back and forth. He realized an electron beam could scan images the same way. He was right. In 1927 he transmitted his first electronic image. He talked it out with his high school chemistry teacher, Justin Tolman, who encouraged him to go further.

Women wearing bathing suits were measured to see if they were showing too much leg. Here, Chicago police make an arrest for "indecent exposure" in 1922.

tive government. "Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments of my administration has been minding my own business," he said. The argument between active government and stand-aside government continues today. Most Americans at the time thought Coolidge a splendid president.

He had a wry wit—typical of Vermonters. When a woman told him she had bet someone that she could get him to say more than three words to her, he responded, "You lose."

It was the 1920s. Some called the decade the "Roaring Twenties," some called it the "Jazz Age," and some the "Dance Age." Whichever you chose, it seemed like a time of fun and change.

More people had more money than ever before. And, mostly, they were intent on having a good time. Hardly anyone seemed to worry that some people were left out of the prosperity boom.

In 1919, before the '20s began their roar, women's ankles sometimes could be glimpsed beneath long skirts. Those ankles, however, were modestly hidden beneath high-topped shoes. Then skirts started going up, and up, and up.

That made it a tough time to be the parent of a girl. It wasn't easy to be a girl then either. Most young women were cutting their hair—short. They called it "bobbing." Some parents wouldn't allow it. Short hair seemed indecent to the older generation, but up to the minute to those who did it. The girls who weren't allowed to cut their hair felt old-fashioned.

Some daring women were wearing bathing suits that left their legs uncovered. Police arrested women on the beaches for doing

that. And makeup! "Nice" women started wearing lipstick, rouge, and powder. The older generation worried. "What is the world coming to?"

Those girls who bobbed their hair and wore short skirts and lipstick were called "flappers." They did other things, too. They drove automobiles, got jobs, went to the movies, read romantic novels, played Ping-Pong, and danced. My, did they dance! It was the big thing in the '20s. And the big dance was the Charleston. (In New York City, Gimbel's department store advertised special Charleston dresses that swung loose on the body. The price was $1.58.) When you danced the Charleston you swung your arms, kicked up your heels, knocked your knees together, and moved frantically.

Frantic is a good word to describe the '20s. The idealism of the Wilson years seemed to have come to nothing. After the war, everything was supposed to be better. But anyone could see that it wasn't. And there was the Prohibition idea. Americans wanted to have a good nation—where all people behaved themselves and didn't get drunk—but that wasn't working either. If you read the newspapers you could see that criminals were becoming rich and powerful selling liquor. So maybe the best thing to do was to forget about ideals and have a good time—frantically—which was what a

In 1927, sculptor Gutzon Borglum, using a steam shovel and dynamite as chisel and mallet, begins carving four gigantic heads (60 feet high) on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. (Whose heads are they?)

President Coolidge had a dog named Prudence Prim.

By the time Henry Ford brought out his Model A, in 1927, there were 21 million cars in America—and the traffic jam was beginning to be a familiar phenomenon.

lot of Americans did in the '20s.

It was a materialistic age. People concentrated on making money and buying things for themselves. Successful businesspeople became national heroes. There were more rich people than ever before in American history. No one seemed to notice, however, that there were also growing numbers of unemployed people—people who were desperately poor. And many farmers were in terrible trouble.

But for most Americans, the times seemed good. The stock market—like women's hems—went up and up and up. Land values boomed. People were able to buy things they never could buy before. In 1920 the car was a novelty. Ten years later, almost every family had a car. Many Americans who didn't have indoor toilets in their homes had motorcars in their yards. The automobile was becoming a necessity.

Before the war, life had been slow-paced; now change was coming with cyclone speed. Ordinary people owned radios and listened to comedy shows and the nightly news. In Florida, in 1924, a schoolboy named Red Barber heard radio for the first time at a friend's house. Barber was so excited he stayed up most of the night listening to news from around the nation. It was a new experience. "A man...in Pittsburgh said it was snowing there...someone sang in New York...a banjo plunked in Chicago...it was sleeting in New Orleans." (Red Barber later became a radio sports broadcaster.)

Young people were flocking to the movies and, in 1927, movies began to talk. Talk about fun!

The following year, in Hollywood, California, a young filmmaker named Walt Disney produced the first animated sound film, *Steamboat Willie,* and introduced a little mouse named Mickey to the American public.

Suddenly, America seemed filled with artistic geniuses: musicians George Gershwin and Aaron Copland; writers Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; and artists Mary Cassatt, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton. And those are just a few of the names.

Harlem (a part of New York City with a rapidly growing black population) began vibrating with artistry. It was contagious. Playwrights, poets, musicians, artists, and actors, all living within a few blocks of each other, were sharing ideas. Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen began writing poetry. Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer wrote novels. Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden painted pictures. And Duke Ellington and a whole lot of other people made music. Artistic excellence was something that the segregationists couldn't suppress. And Harlem, during this time known as the "Harlem Renaissance," exploded with creativity.

While this was going on, sad, grieving Calvin Coolidge sat in the White House and did little. His campaign slogan, "Keep Cool with Coolidge," seemed right for the times. The country was thriving, so when he said, "The chief business of America is business," many agreed, without ever hearing the rest of his speech. "The accumulation of wealth cannot be justified as the chief end of existence....So long as wealth is made the means and not the end, we need not greatly fear it." He added, "I cannot repeat too often that America is a nation of idealists. That [idealism] is the only motive to which they [Americans] ever give any strong and lasting reaction."

Do you think he was right?

Coolidge was uncomfortable in front of the camera—in this down-home photo opportunity he looks as if he's never been on a farm in his life.