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Document-Based Activities on the 1920s

Using Primary Sources and the Internet

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DOCUMENT-BASED ACTIVITIES ON THE 1920S TEACHER INTRODUCTION

Description:

Students will learn the history of the 1920s, also known as the “Roaring Twenties” and the “New Era.” The unit begins with an exploration of the rapid growth of the economy during this time period. Students then analyze the implications of economic prosperity, and the resulting social, political, and cultural conflicts that characterized the decade. Students are introduced to key social movements, and asked to interpret newspaper clippings, written documents, poems, political cartoons, and photographs. The unit as a whole centers around the following question: “Did the economic prosperity of the 1920s bring positive social and cultural change to the United States?”

Unit objectives:

Knowledge: students will

- evaluate the political, social, and economic climate of the United States during the 1920s
- interpret consumerism, advertising, and new inventions of the era
- analyze two key social movements: the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of the KKK
- study the 18th amendment, Prohibition, and its implications
- understand the crash of the stock market in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression

Skills:

- analyze, evaluate, and interpret primary source documents
- discuss and debate issues
- use evidence to draw conclusions

Prior Knowledge Required:

Students will need to be familiar with the Progressive movement, the temperance movement, and U.S. involvement in World War I.

Lesson Format:

Each lesson consists of two parts: a teacher’s page and a student handout or worksheet. The teacher’s page contains an overview, objectives, materials (including Web addresses), directions, discussion questions, and an extension activity. Each student handout contains an introduction, directions, Web addresses, and questions to be answered about the source.

Assessment:

Most questions on the student handouts are short-answer questions; evaluation should be done based on the precision and accuracy of answers. A suggested answer key can be found in the appendix. Point values are not assigned to questions on the worksheets to allow teachers to evaluate students according to standards that have been previously developed and maintained in the classroom. It is recommended, however, that teachers evaluate each individual student worksheet in conjunction with that student's participation in class discussions. Suggested rubrics are included in the Appendix.

Additional Sources:

The Appendix contains answer keys, primary source documents, an annotated list of Web sites on the 1920s, rubrics, and supplementary materials available from www.socialstudies.com.

OVERVIEW: THE ROARING TWENTIES

“A great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.”

—Herbert C. Hoover, Speaking of Prohibition in a letter to William E. Borah, Feb. 28, 1928.

Following the election of Warren G. Harding in 1920 and a brief two-year recession, the American economy began an unprecedented period of growth. The nation’s industrial capacity expanded quickly, as did the income of its citizens; America’s position in world trade became unrivaled. In the corporate world, once-disdained captains of industry became national heroes. The nation’s manufacturing, for example, rose by more than 60 percent during the decade; the gross national product increased at an average of five percent a year; and output per worker rose by more than 33 percent.¹ A boom in the automobile industry fueled the economy and new industries benefited from technological growth, including radio, motion pictures, aviation, and electronics, as well as industries which capitalized on inventions such as new plastics and synthetic fibers. With the economic boom came the new notion of “consumerism.” Consumerism maintained that not just the affluent but the middle classes as well should be able to buy items not just because of need, but for the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of buying and owning. Many citizens purchased electric refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. During the economic growth of the 1920s, both consumerism and advertising came of age.

However, widespread economic growth during the third decade of the twentieth century did not occur without social and cultural conflicts. Culturally, the 1920s saw a bitter dispute between the forces of modernism associated with the new urban-industrial society and the forces of traditionalism associated with provincial, rural communities.² Many farmers moved from surrounding rural areas to cities. Increasing tensions between the old society and the new became apparent in arguments over race, religion, and prohibition. In New York City, a group of African American intellectuals, poets, novelists, and artists created a wide range of works that emphasized the richness of their racial heritage; the movement as a whole came to be known as the “Harlem Renaissance.” In addition, innovations in the artistic, music, and intellectual communities added to the creative ferment of the “Jazz Age.” In contrast, the Ku Klux Klan experienced its greatest growth during this time period and drew its members primarily from small towns and rural areas in the south. The organization claimed 4 million members in 1924 and terrorized Catholics, Jews, African Americans, and foreigners.

In addition to cultural conflicts, the 1920s experienced political tensions and public policy disputes. Controversy erupted over the 18th amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol. The first Prohibition commissioner promised to enforce the amendment, but Prohibition succeeded only in stimulating organized crime. Led by notorious gangsters such as Al Capone, the bootleg alcohol industry produced large profits for many criminals, but also led to bloody gang wars and violent deaths. Crime was not just limited to gangsters: early in the decade, members of President Harding’s administration were involved in a shady scheme that came to be known as the Teapot Dome Scandal, and encouraged distrust of the Republican party. Harding himself suffered two heart attacks and died in office; Calvin Coolidge, a taciturn New Englander

1. *American History, A Survey*, Seventh Edition, Volume II: Since 1865, Knopf, New York, 1987, pg. 677.

2. *Ibid* 1.

with a squeaky-clean record and a reputation for honesty, succeeded Harding and was able to restore faith in the administration.

The Roaring Twenties, as this new era is often referred to, hoped to embrace “normalcy,” in the words of Harding. But the decade turned out to be anything but “normal” and was marked by dramatic social, intellectual, and economic change. Many felt that economic prosperity would last forever, and no one thought that the good times would virtually end overnight. However, in October, 1929, the crash of the stock market sparked off a series of events that plunged the nation into a severe economic depression, ending a decade of prolonged growth and a period of unprecedented social reform.

1920s Consumerism Teacher Page

Overview:

The goal of this activity is to give students an understanding of the nation's new economy. Students are exposed to advertisements from the 1920s and asked to draw conclusions about consumers and consumer motivation. Students are also asked to recognize innovations in the new economy and interpret how these innovations shaped the lives of citizens.

Objectives:

Students will:

- understand and interpret advertisements from the 1920s
- draw conclusions about 1920s society

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

There are a number of steps to follow in order to get to the 1920s advertisements:

Go to the Library of Congress Web site linked for Lesson 1

Click on "Guide to People, Organizations, and Topics in Prosperity and Thrift"

Click on "Social Science Research"

Click on "An analysis of over 3,000,000 inquiries received by 98 firms from 2339 magazine advertisements," (1927) by Daniel Starch Click on "Here" to see the full text of this document

Click on "PART XIV Twelve Advertisements"

Click on "page image viewer"

Type in "36" in the space that says, "Turn to Image." Below will appear the first advertisement for Wallace Silver. If you type in the number 40, you will find the second advertisement for Log Cabin's Maple Syrup. If you click on the actual images they become enlarged.

Both advertisements are available as reproducible handouts in the Appendix.

Additional Web sites that can help students gain background information on consumerism in the 1920s can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Strategies:

Begin by reviewing the notion of consumerism and by describing the economic growth and prosperity that many U.S. citizens experienced during the 1920s. Discuss important innovations such as the radio, cheap automobiles, and the assembly line.

Next, have students examine advertisements on the Internet and complete the attached worksheet. In order to have students successfully complete the worksheet you will need to provide them with a magazine advertisement. If you can find a modern advertisement for Log Cabin's Maple Syrup (one of the primary source documents is a Log Cabin's Maple Syrup advertisement), that would be best, but any modern advertisement will do.

Wrap-Up:

After students complete the worksheet, review answers as a class and use the following questions to lead a discussion.

1. Why did the United States experience a period of economic growth during the 1920s?

Following World War I, the debilitation of the European economy strengthened the economy of the United States. Innovations in technology allowed industrial expansion which in turn caused a "trickle-down effect." For example, the boom in the auto industry helped other industries (e.g., oil and road construction, etc.). Consumerism and migration patterns were also key.

2. Can economic change create social and political change? What evidence do we see in 1920s advertisements that economic changes caused social changes in the U.S.?

Consumerism, fashion and style changes, ads targeting women who have disposable income, etc.

3. Did economic growth threaten conservative political ideology of the era? If yes, why? If not, why not?

Open-ended question. Answers will vary.

Extension Activity:

Have students pretend they are trying to sell a modern-day product to 1920s consumers and design advertisements in the style of that time period.

Name:

Period:

1920s Consumerism Student Worksheet

Introduction:

The nation's economy soared during the 1920s. Manufacturing, for example, rose by more than 60 percent during the decade. With the economic boom came the new notion of "consumerism," which maintained that customers should be able to buy items not just because of need, but for the sheer pleasure of buying and owning. Many middle-class citizens purchased new "luxuries" such as electric refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners. Growth in retailing and merchandising increased during this "get rich quick" era. Department stores in major urban centers sought to attract customers by presenting the latest fashions using innovative marketing techniques.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Directions:

Follow the steps below to find the 1920s advertisements on the Internet and fill in the chart.

"Wallace Silver" and "Log Cabin Syrup"

Click on "Guide to People, Organizations, and Topics in Prosperity and Thrift"

Click on "Social Science Research"

Click on "An analysis of over 3,000,000 inquiries received by 98 firms from 2339 magazine advertisements," (1927) by Daniel Starch. Click on "Here" to see the full text of this document Click on "PART XIV Twelve Advertisements"

Click on "page image viewer"

Type in "36" in the space that says, "Turn to Image." Below will appear the first advertisement for Wallace Silver. If you type in the number 40, you will find the second advertisement for Log Cabin's Maple Syrup. If you click on the actual images they become enlarged.

Compare and contrast the 1920s magazine advertisements to magazine advertisements today. Your teacher will provide you with an ad from a current magazine.

	1920s advertisement Wallace Silver (#36)	1920s advertisement Maple Syrup (#40)	An advertisement today (provided by teacher)
What do you see literally depicted in the advertisement?			
What is the advertisement trying to sell?			
What audience is the advertisement targeting? How can you tell?			
What can we assume about the time period based on this advertisement?			

Answer the following questions about the primary sources:

1. What do all three advertisements have in common?
2. What mediums did advertisers use in the 1920s? What mediums do advertisers use today?
3. How are 1920s advertisements different from ones today? Do you think advertising is more or less effective today than in the 1920s?
4. Compare and contrast the role of consumerism in the 1920s to the role of consumerism today. In what ways are they similar and how are they different?