

Fun Times in the 1920s

Document 1A

Buying on credit/buying on time → To acquire something immediately without paying in full with the promise that the entire amount will be completely paid by a later date; today, people use credit cards and the concept is essentially the same

Buy Now – Pay Later:

The Consumer Society Is Born

It's a Sunday evening in the mid-1920s. Sitting at the kitchen table, a young married couple is putting money in a stack of small envelopes. "That's \$5 for the payment on the radio, \$12 for the refrigerator, and \$4 for the washing machine," says the husband. "And don't forget \$15 for the new bedroom set," his wife adds.

Like many other Americans in the 1920s, this husband and wife have a houseful of items they're buying "on time." Instead of paying for things all at once, they make small payments every month. This was a new way of buying. How did it come about?

Business created "buying on time" to increase sales. American factories were producing more in the 1920s. American business needed consumers – buyers – for the sewing machines, cars, refrigerators, and gas cookers coming off the factory lines. But

these things were expensive. To help people afford them, business encouraged people to "buy now – pay later."

It was the right idea at the right time. For years, American inventors had been dreaming up new products. Manufacturers had found new and better ways to make those products. Then, in the 1920s, salaries went up. Prices went down. Americans wanted to use their new buying power to try the products they were seeing in advertisements. Here are just a few of the "toys" and household goods many Americans first tried after the war: cars, radios, and washing machines; vacuum cleaners and electric toasters; cellophane and cigarette lighters; wristwatches and canned food; Kleenex and zippers.



From 1909 to 1930, Sears, Roebuck and Co. sold houses by mail order. The house shown above arrived at its lot unassembled, with instructions.

Buy Now, Pay Later

"Buying on time" quickly caught on with the American public. In 1926, Americans used credit to buy *\$4.5 billion a year* in goods. By the end of the 1920s, consumers owed more than \$6 billion. But today's numbers would surprise the consumer of the 1920s. At the beginning of the 1990s, American buyers used credit cards to charge *\$12.5 billion per week* in goods and services! ■

Common Items in the 1928 Home

In 1928, electric irons were found in most of the 27 million American homes. Other items included:

Radios	10 million homes
Vacuum cleaners	6.8 million homes
Washing machines	5 million homes
Electric fans	4.9 million homes
Electric toasters	4.54 million homes
Electric heaters	2.6 million homes
Electric refrigerators	755,000 homes

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce

Fun Times in the 1920s
Advancements & Advertising!

■ **"SELL THEM THEIR DREAMS"**

With cars, radios, and various electrical devices, a new consumer culture had been born. And with credit purchasing, Americans didn't need all the money up front to buy a new washing machine, vacuum cleaner, or radio. Advertisers aggressively marketed the products of a newly electrified life to consumers. "Give her a *real* thrill this Christmas with a gift of a Frigidaire [refrigerator]," one magazine advertisement urged husbands. It added, "Use part of your Christmas savings to cover the first small payment."

Advertising, previously consisting of barebones business and product listings in local papers, became almost an art form in the 1920s. Experts such as public

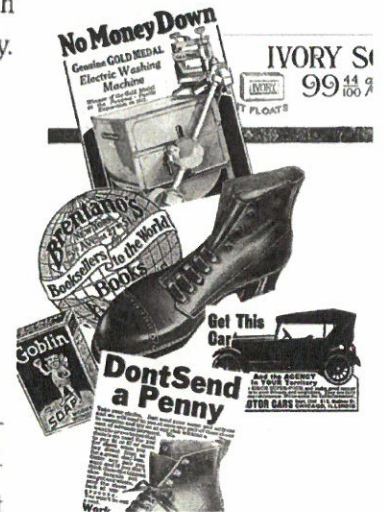


relations wizard Edward Bernays studied human psychology to determine which messages were most effective in getting consumers to part with their money. "Sell them their dreams," one advertising professional told his colleagues,

sell them what they longed for and hoped for. . . . Sell them hats by splashing sunlight across them. Sell them dreams—dreams of country clubs and proms and visions of what might happen if only. After all, people don't buy things to have them. . . . They buy hope—hope of what your merchandize might do for them.

Another agency executive explained that advertising needed to "arouse desires and stimulate wants, to make people dissatisfied with the old and out-of-date and by constant iteration [repetition] to send them to work harder to get the latest model—whether that model be an icebox or a rug or a new home."

Colorful magazine advertisements showed Americans enjoying the good life.



This advertising photo shows **A FASHIONABLE WOMAN USING THE LATEST HOME TECHNOLOGY**, including an electric refrigerator and a home phone.

■ CARE AND FEEDING

Prior to the 1920s, people stored perishable food in iceboxes. These wooden cabinets had an insulated compartment that held a big block of ice and shelves for holding food. Naturally, the ice melted. So an iceman traveled from home to home in a horse-drawn truck to replace it. Homeowners kept a pan beneath the icebox to collect the meltwater.

Once again, new technology arrived in the 1920s. The electric refrigerator, which used chemicals instead of ice for cooling, offered many advantages over the icebox. It kept food cooler, resulting in less spoilage of perishable foods, and needed only to be plugged into the wall. No more ice deliveries or sloppy meltwater. In 1926 a Frigidaire home refrigerator cost more than three hundred dollars—a hefty price tag for a working family. Still, Americans bought refrigerators at a brisk pace, often on a payment plan.

Restaurants and grocery stores also installed refrigerators. Suppliers shipped perishable foods over long distances in refrigerated trucks and train cars. The American diet became increasingly varied, with spinach, lettuce, oranges, and carrots arriving year-round from sunny climes.

Meanwhile, manufacturers sold more and more brand-name foods, packaged in standardized boxes, bottles, cans, and wrappers. Wheaties cereal (called



Document 1C – Continued Fun Times in the 1920s

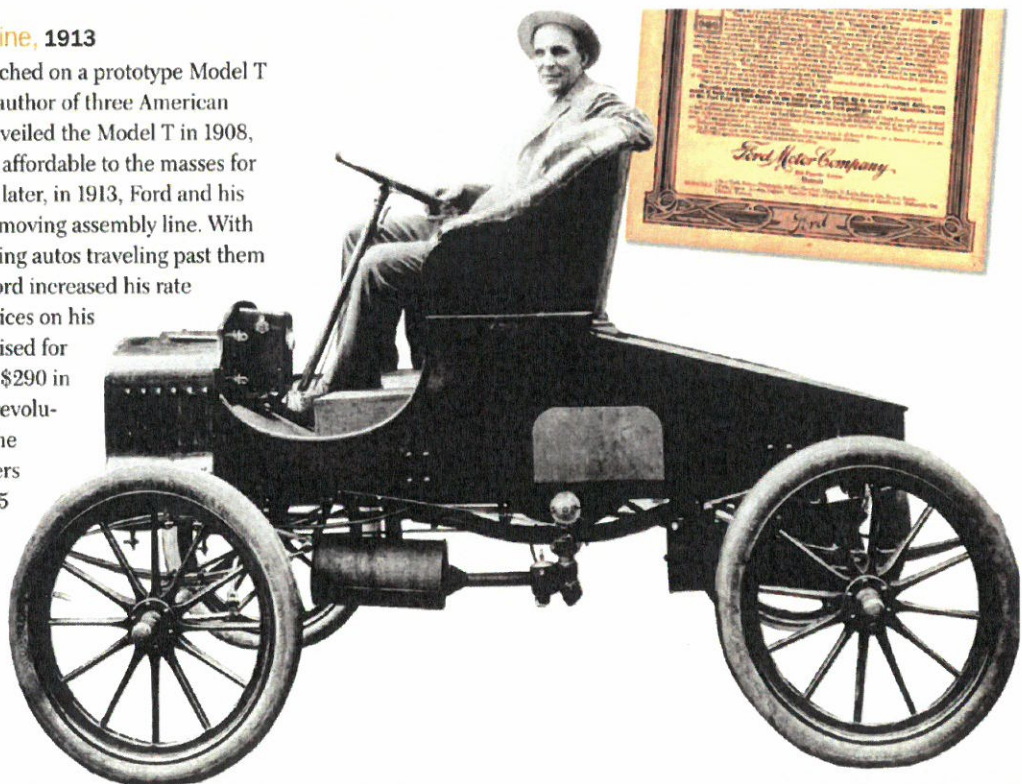
“The Breakfast of Champions”), Popsicles, Gerber’s baby foods, Peter Pan peanut butter, Fleer’s bubble gum, and Baby Ruth, Mounds, Milky Way, and Butterfinger candy bars were just a few of the thousands of new packaged food products in the 1920s. “Mom and pop” grocery stores were common, but so were new chain grocers such as Piggly Wiggly, Kroger, and Ralphs. As more and more packaged foods arrived, women did less home canning and baking.

In part because of a more varied diet, Americans became healthier in the 1920s. In addition, scientists developed new treatments for diseases in that decade. Cities began regular street cleaning and garbage pickup, further reducing the spread of disease. School nurses taught children about germs and instructed them to bathe regularly, wash their hands before meals, and brush their teeth twice a day. More and more women had babies in the hospital instead of at home, leading to lower death rates for infants and mothers. These measures produced big results. In 1920 life expectancy in the United States was fifty-three years for men and fifty-four years for women. By 1930 the numbers had risen significantly, to fifty-eight and sixty-two years, respectively.

Document 1D

Enter the Assembly Line, 1913

Henry Ford, proudly perched on a prototype Model T at right in 1907, was the author of three American revolutions. When he unveiled the Model T in 1908, he made the automobile affordable to the masses for the first time. Five years later, in 1913, Ford and his engineers perfected the moving assembly line. With stationary workers building autos traveling past them on chain-driven lines, Ford increased his rate of production and cut prices on his cars; the Model T advertised for \$850 in 1909, right, cost \$290 in 1924. Ford’s third great revolution was social: in 1914, he began offering his workers the unheard-of sum of \$5 for a day’s work; labor prices around the nation rose in response, and poor Southern blacks moved north to find work.



I will build a motor car for the great multitude. . . . It will be large enough for the family but small enough for the individual to care for. . . . It will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one. . . .

– Henry Ford, October 1908

This was a bold statement. But Henry Ford made good on it. The motor car Ford described was called the Model T. Within a few years, it completely changed the way Americans traveled. Soon, the automobile was no longer a toy for the rich; instead, it became a "must" for millions of average Americans.

A New Way to Build Cars

In 1909, Ford made about 10,000 Model Ts. In 1916, his company made more than 1 million. To up car production, Ford completely changed the way cars were made. He developed the world's first continuously moving assembly line in his Highland Park, Michigan, plant during 1913 and 1914. By bringing parts to the assembly workers, the line helped workers put Model Ts together faster and better. Ford called this "mass production."

Mass production wasn't completely new. But Ford's mass-production method was different. As he said, it involved "power, accuracy, economy, system, continuity, and speed." Other industries tried to use Ford's mass-production method for making furniture or building houses. They soon found that it didn't work. In fact, by the late 1920s, the Model T kind of

Cheap, Rugged, Versatile

What was it about the Model T that made it so popular? First, as Ford promised, it was cheap. It cost around \$1,000 – about half the cost of most cars. Within a few years, Ford had even lowered the cost by 60 percent.

Second, it was durable and easy to maintain. Steel alloys made the Model T strong and rugged. Repairs were simple and quick because the "T" used standardized parts.

Third, the Model T was versatile. Its body rode high above the ground, so it was ideal for bumpy country roads. And with a top speed of about 45 miles per hour, it could make excellent time on the new paved roads.

mass production didn't work for Ford either. By then, car buyers looked for new and different models each year. Ford's mass production worked only for making the same car year after year. When buyers started looking for different types of cars, *flexible* mass production replaced Ford's method.

Mass-produced automobiles brought cheap, dependable transportation to millions of American families. These cars made it possible to work in the city and live in the suburbs. And the American landscape of today – with highways and freeways linking city, suburb, and countryside – is the direct result of cars like Ford's Model T. ■

Imagine life before the automobile. List different ways that the automobile has changed people's lives.

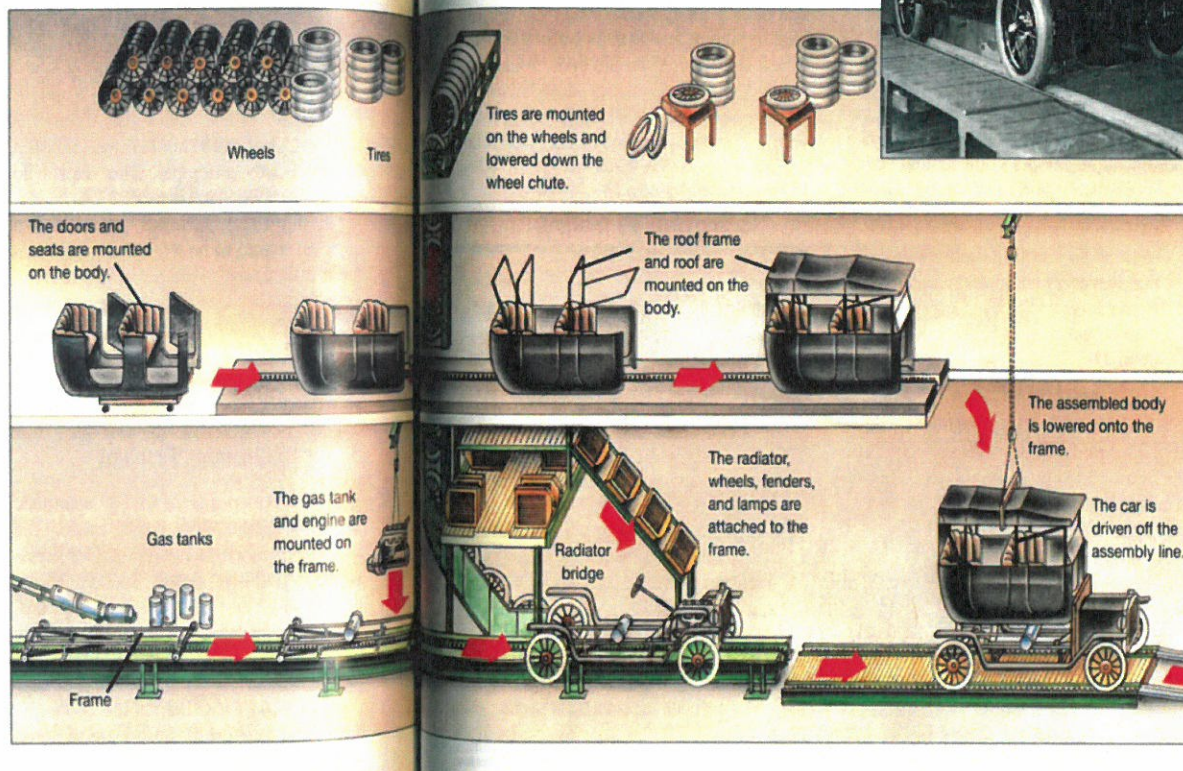
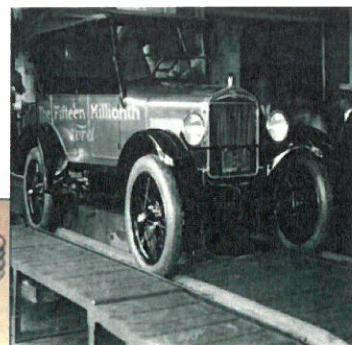
Fun Times in the 1920s

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EXPLORING TECHNOLOGY

The Ford Assembly Line Henry Ford transformed manufacturing with the automobile assembly line. Workers stood at their stations while unfinished cars moved past them on a conveyor belt. Each worker performed one task on each car as it passed by.

Science and Technology What disadvantages might there be to working on an assembly line?



Document 1E

That's Entertainment!

In the 1920s, radio broadcasts began to compete with the movies for America's free time. The first regular radio broadcasts came in 1920 from station KDKA in Pittsburgh. The station carried news, church services, and some music. By 1929, more than 600 radio stations were on the air in the United States. That year, Americans spent an estimated \$850 million to buy radios and spare parts.

American families gathered around the radio to hear favorite shows, much

as families today watch TV together. "Until radio came along," remembers George Burns, "home entertainment [was] listening to a relative play the piano or violin, dropping a stray cat on top of the sleeping pet dog, or slipping a whoopee cushion under the old man's chair." But with a radio in the house, families didn't have to wait for once-a-year visits from favorite vaudeville acts or tent shows. The "big show" was on the air every night of the year – to be enjoyed by all.

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Fun Times in the 1920s

Radio Unites the Country

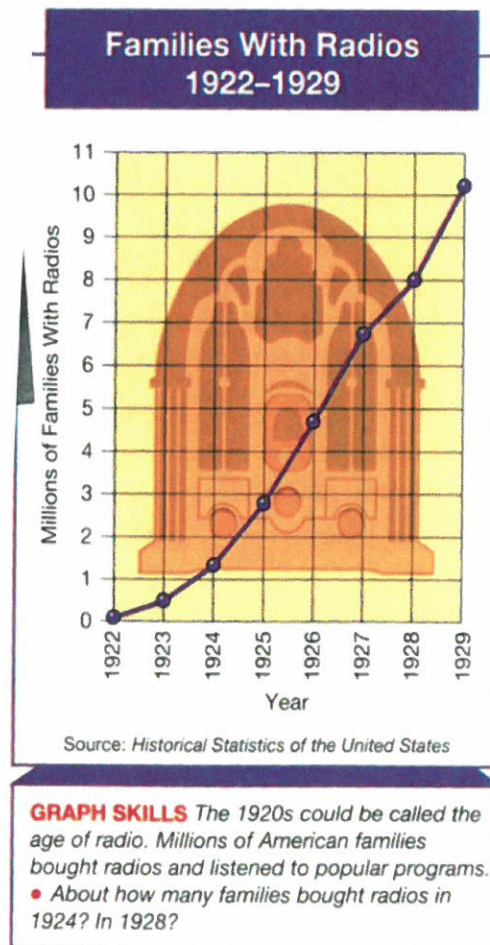
Radio connected Americans in a new way. From coast to coast, people listened to the same news and opinions. They laughed at "Amos 'n' Andy," a show about black people in Harlem. They danced to the music of the Paul Whiteman orchestra. And they listened to the same radio ads for coffee, soap, refrigerators, and other products.

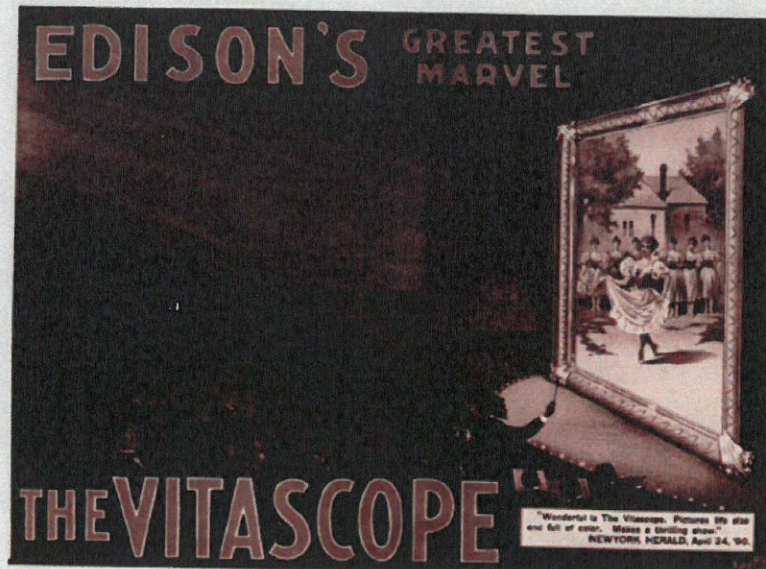
Radio listeners were united by real-life drama too. They heard news reports about ongoing events, and they wondered how the story would end. Would young pilot Charles Lindbergh make it all the way to Paris on the first solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic? (Yes.) Could boxer Jack Dempsey come back to defeat the younger champion,

Gene Tunney? (No.) Would a Tennessee jury convict a young teacher for teaching the theory of evolution? (Yes, but he didn't go to jail.) The radio brought famous people and faraway places right into our living rooms. Almost overnight, radio made the world seem to be a smaller place. ■

How is modern radio different from what was on KDKA radio? Think of the different kinds of programs that can be heard across your radio dial today.

Take a product that you use and like, and write a radio ad for it. Remember: you cannot show the product; you have to describe it with words alone.





An ad for Thomas Edison's **VITASCOPE** shows moviegoers watching a film while an orchestra provides the soundtrack. By 1904, movies with fictional stories and famous actors were the most popular with viewers.

■ MOVING PICTURES: PEEP SHOWS AND NICKELODEONS

When Thomas Edison first developed the motion-picture camera in 1888, he wanted his invention to make money. But it took another six years before he devised a way for people to see motion pictures. Edison encased the moving camera in 50 feet (15 m) of looped film on a reel in a box. For a penny, individual viewers watched the film action through a tiny hole in the box. Peep-show machines, as these contraptions were called, displayed dancing women, romping dogs, acrobats, speeding trains, and other scenes.

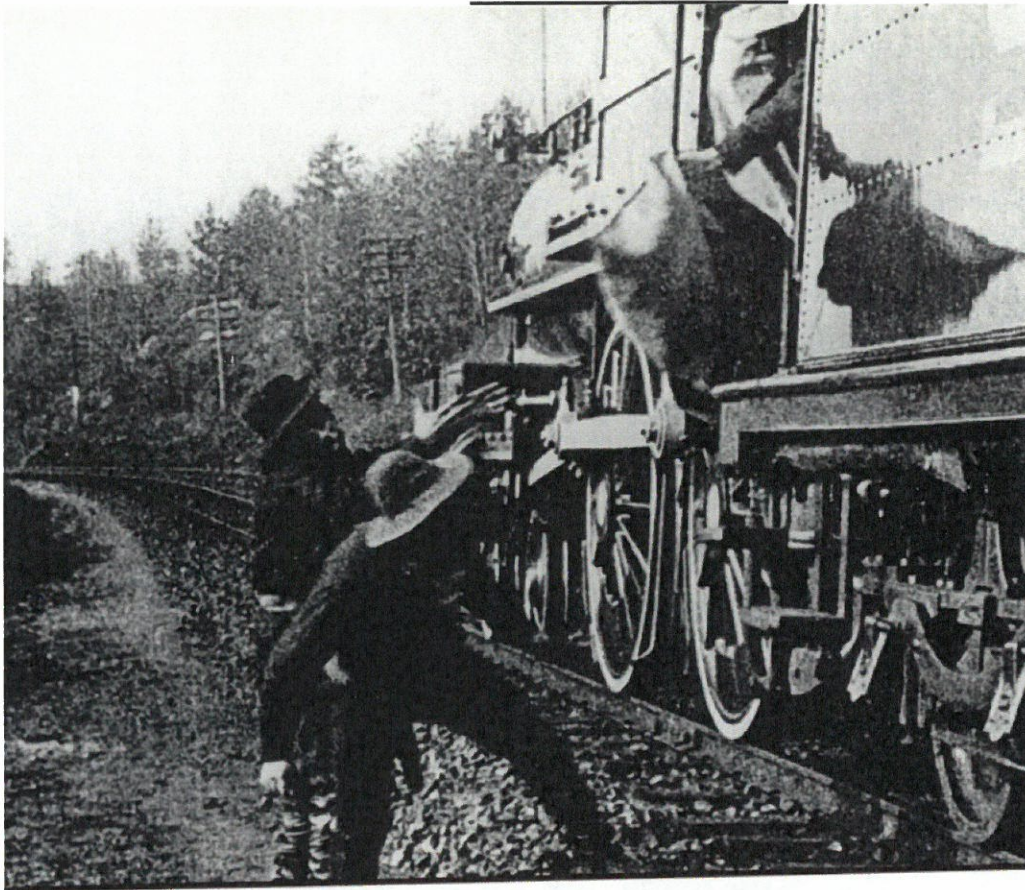
The concept caught on. Americans loved seeing still pictures explode with movement, and Edison was pleased to earn money from his idea.

In 1896 Edison patented another projector called the vitascope, invented by his employee Thomas Armat. This machine projected moving pictures onto a large screen so that many people could watch at once. Soon makeshift theaters began using the vitascope to show movies. The first films lasted between ten and twelve minutes. They cost a couple hundred dollars to make and could be filmed in one day.

Once other companies learned about the technology, they tried to compete. Edison hired lawyers to fend off rivals who copied his inventions. Meanwhile, his company worked to keep ahead of his competitors. Edison's company made one of the first storytelling motion pictures in 1903. The 11.2-minute *Great Train Robbery* was a silent Western shot

“It will do for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear.”

—inventor Thomas Edison (1847–1931),
describing motion-picture technology



THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY was a Western film made in 1903. It used new techniques in filmmaking, and some scenes were hand tinted to appear in color.

in New Jersey. It showed two bandits who tried to rob a train depot agent. The movie was an instant hit. Audiences became so engaged in the film that they shouted, "Catch 'em!" as the bandits ran away. The movie went on to earn two million dollars in profits in five years—a large sum for the time.

Movie houses in converted storefronts and barns sprang up across the nation. These early movie theaters were called nickelodeons. The name combined the word *nickel*, a reference to the five-cent price of admission, with the Greek word *odeon*, which means

"theater." Nickelodeons presented shows that were between fifteen and ninety minutes long. The nickel entry fee was cheap enough that Americans earning even the smallest of salaries could afford a movie break now and then. Non-English-speaking immigrants especially liked the fact that the films had no sound and language comprehension was not an issue. Instead, piano players accompanied the action on the screen with fast, slow, lively, or grim tunes depending on the mood of each scene. A new era of entertainment was beginning.

Fabulous Fads

With the passing of old values, the nation seemed to want to forget the "serious" issues of life. Crazy fads swept the nation. People wanted to be daring and different – as long as hundreds of other people were doing the same thing! Crossword puzzles, the card game bridge, and the Chinese table game mah-jongg became very popular. Both adults and children enjoyed roller-skating and yo-yos. There were contests of all kinds, from dance

marathons (contests to see how long a couple could dance without resting) to flagpole sitting. In 1929, champion Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly spent 145 days on flagpoles. Marathon dancer Mary "Hercules" Promitis made news by "pickling" her feet in vinegar and salt water. Why? To help her feet stand up to weeks of nonstop dancing. At the end of one three-week Madison Square Garden dance contest in 1928, Mary and her feet were feeling fine. ■

Flagpole sitting was one of many fads that swept the nation in the 1920s. Marathon dancing was another.



*****And don't forget flappers, the Charleston, and all that Jazz!*****