

# The United States in the 1920s

**The Roaring 20s**

# Learning Objectives

Explain the cause of the decline in rural population

Identify the meaning of the term “Lost Generation”

Identify key details of the Scopes “Monkey Trial”

Define “Prohibition”

Explain the rise of Gangsterism

Explain the significance of Al Capone

# Declining Rural Population

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# The Farm Depression

“The 1920 Census determined for the first time that more Americans lived in cities than in the countryside. The margin was narrow -- 51 to 49 -- but none the less it was a key turning point in our nation's history.

What about those forty-nine percent who lived in the countryside? For them the 1920s were hardly a golden age. On the contrary, there was an agricultural depression that lasted the entire decade and kept a noticeable divide in place between this class and the urban classes. The women of the farms made great sacrifices in this time just to keep their families underneath a roof.

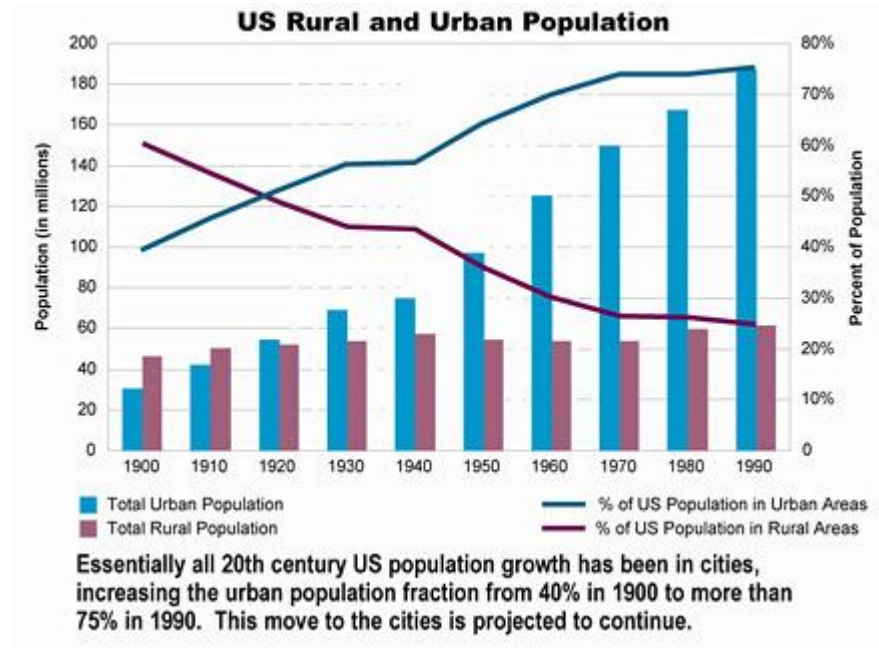
As the American economy was becoming increasingly mechanized and industrialized, there was simply not as great a need for half of the population to work on farms. “



Source: <https://www.americanhistoryusa.com/great-farm-depression-1920s/>

# Postwar Price Collapse

“The origins were both political and structural. Agricultural exports to Europe exploded during the Great War, and even this was not enough to keep up with demand. Corn, wheat, and cotton all hit very high prices, and this encouraged new tilling, new growing, and most importantly new borrowing. With a postwar price collapse came a rural financial collapse as well.”



Source: <https://www.americanhistoryusa.com/great-farm-depression-1920s/>

# **The Lost Generation**

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# Origin of the Phrase

In the aftermath of the war there arose a group of young persons known as the "Lost Generation." The term was coined from something Gertrude Stein witnessed the owner of a garage saying to his young employee, which Hemingway later used as an epigraph to his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): "You are all a lost generation." This accusation referred to the lack of purpose or drive resulting from the horrific disillusionment felt by those who grew up and lived through the war, and were then in their twenties and thirties. Having seen pointless death on such a huge scale, many lost faith in traditional values like courage, patriotism, and masculinity. Some in turn became aimless, reckless, and focused on material wealth, unable to believe in abstract ideals.

# The Writers

In literature, the "Lost Generation" refers to a group of writers and poets who were men and women of this period. All were American, but several members emigrated to Europe. The most famous members were Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot.





# Common Themes

Decadence - Consider the lavish parties of James Gatsby in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or those thrown by the characters in his *Tales of the Jazz Age*. Recall the aimless traveling, drinking, and parties of the circles of expatriates in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Moveable Feast*.

With ideals shattered so thoroughly by the war, for many, hedonism was the result. Lost Generation writers revealed the sordid nature of the shallow, frivolous lives of the young and independently wealthy in the aftermath of the war.

Gender roles and Impotence - Faced with the destruction of the chivalric notions of warfare as a glamorous calling for a young man, a serious blow was dealt to traditional gender roles and images of masculinity.

Idealised past - Rather than face the horrors of warfare, many worked to create an idealised but unattainable image of the past, a glossy image with no bearing in reality.

Visit for list of publishings:

<http://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/lost-generation>

# Scopes “Monkey Trial”

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# Background

“When Darwin announced his theory that humans had descended from apes, he sent shock waves through the Western world.

In the years that followed his 1859 declaration, America's churches hotly debated whether to accept the findings of modern science or continue to follow the teachings of ancient scripture. By the 1920s, most of the urban churches of America had been able to reconcile Darwin's theory with the Bible, but rural preachers preferred a stricter interpretation.

Amid the dizzying changes brought by the roaring decade, religious fundamentalists saw the Bible as the only salvation from a materialistic civilization in decline.”

Source: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/47b.asp>

# The Case


“In 1925, the Tennessee legislature passed the BUTLER LAW, which forbade the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in any public school or university. Other Southern states followed suit.

The AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION led the charge of evolution's supporters. It offered to fund the legal defense of any Tennessee teacher willing to fight the law in court. Another showdown between modernity and tradition was unfolding.

The man who accepted the challenge was JOHN T. SCOPES, a science teacher and football coach in Dayton, Tennessee. In the spring of 1925, he walked into his classroom and read, from Dayton's Tennessee-approved textbook HUNTER'S CIVIC BIOLOGY, part of a chapter on the evolution of humankind and Darwin's theory of natural selection. His arrest soon followed, and a trial date was set.

The jury sided with the law. Clearly, Scopes was in violation of Tennessee statute by teaching that humans descended from monkeys. He was fined \$100 and released. But the battle that played out before the nation proved a victory for supporters of evolutionary theory. A later court dismissed the fine imposed on Scopes, though in the short term, the antievolution law was upheld.”

Source: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/47b.asp>



**THE SCOPES MONKEY TRIAL**  
**EXPLAINED**

The Scopes Monkey Trial Summary

# Prohibition

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# Origins

“In the 1820s and ’30s, a wave of religious revivalism swept the United States, leading to increased calls for temperance, as well as other “perfectionist” movements such as the abolition of slavery. In 1838, the state of Massachusetts passed a temperance law banning the sale of spirits in less than 15-gallon quantities; though the law was repealed two years later, it set a precedent for such legislation. Maine passed the first state prohibition law in 1846, and a number of other states had followed suit by the time the Civil War began in 1861.”

“In 1917, after the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson instituted a temporary wartime prohibition in order to save grain for producing food. That same year, Congress submitted the 18th Amendment, which banned the manufacture, transportation and sale of intoxicating liquors, for state ratification. Though Congress had stipulated a seven-year time limit for the process, the amendment received the support of the necessary three-quarters of U.S. states in just 11 months.”

Source: <http://www.history.com/topics/prohibition>

# Enforcement

“Both federal and local government struggled to enforce Prohibition over the course of the 1920s. Enforcement was initially assigned to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and was later transferred to the Justice Department. In general, Prohibition was enforced much more strongly in areas where the population was sympathetic to the legislation—mainly rural areas and small towns—and much more loosely in urban areas.

Despite very early signs of success, including a decline in arrests for drunkenness and a reported 30 percent drop in alcohol consumption, those who wanted to keep drinking found ever-more inventive ways to do it. The illegal manufacturing and sale of liquor (known as “bootlegging”) went on throughout the decade, along with the operation of “speakeasies” (stores or nightclubs selling alcohol), the smuggling of alcohol across state lines and the informal production of liquor (“moonshine” or “bathtub gin”) in private homes.”

Source: <http://www.history.com/topics/prohibition>



# Prohibition Ends

“The high price of bootleg liquor meant that the nation’s working class and poor were far more restricted during Prohibition than middle or upper class Americans. Even as costs for law enforcement, jails and prisons spiraled upward, support for Prohibition was waning by the end of the 1920s. In addition, fundamentalist and nativist forces had gained more control over the temperance movement, alienating its more moderate members.

With the country mired in the Great Depression by 1932, creating jobs and revenue by legalizing the liquor industry had an undeniable appeal. Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for president that year on a platform calling for Prohibition’s repeal, and easily won victory over the incumbent President Herbert Hoover. FDR’s victory meant the end for Prohibition, and in February 1933 Congress adopted a resolution proposing a 21st Amendment to the Constitution that would repeal the 18th. The amendment was submitted to the states, and in December 1933 Utah provided the 36th and final necessary vote for ratification. Though a few states continued to prohibit alcohol after Prohibition’s end, all had abandoned the ban by 1966.”

Source: <http://www.history.com/topics/prohibition>

# Gangsterism

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## Rising Crime

The 1920s saw a rapid increase in the American crime-rate. This was mainly owing to the illegal alcohol trade that had been developed to overcome prohibition. All the main cities in America suffered from this problem but the most violent and corrupt was Chicago. During the late 1920s Chicago was dominated by a gangster called Al Capone. It has been estimated that in 1929, Capone's income from the various aspects of his business was \$60,000,000 (illegal alcohol), \$25,000,000 (gambling establishments), \$10,000,000 (vice) and \$10,000,000 from various other rackets.



Source:

<http://spartacus-educational.com/USAgangster.htm>



BBC Documentary- The American Mafia and Prohibition



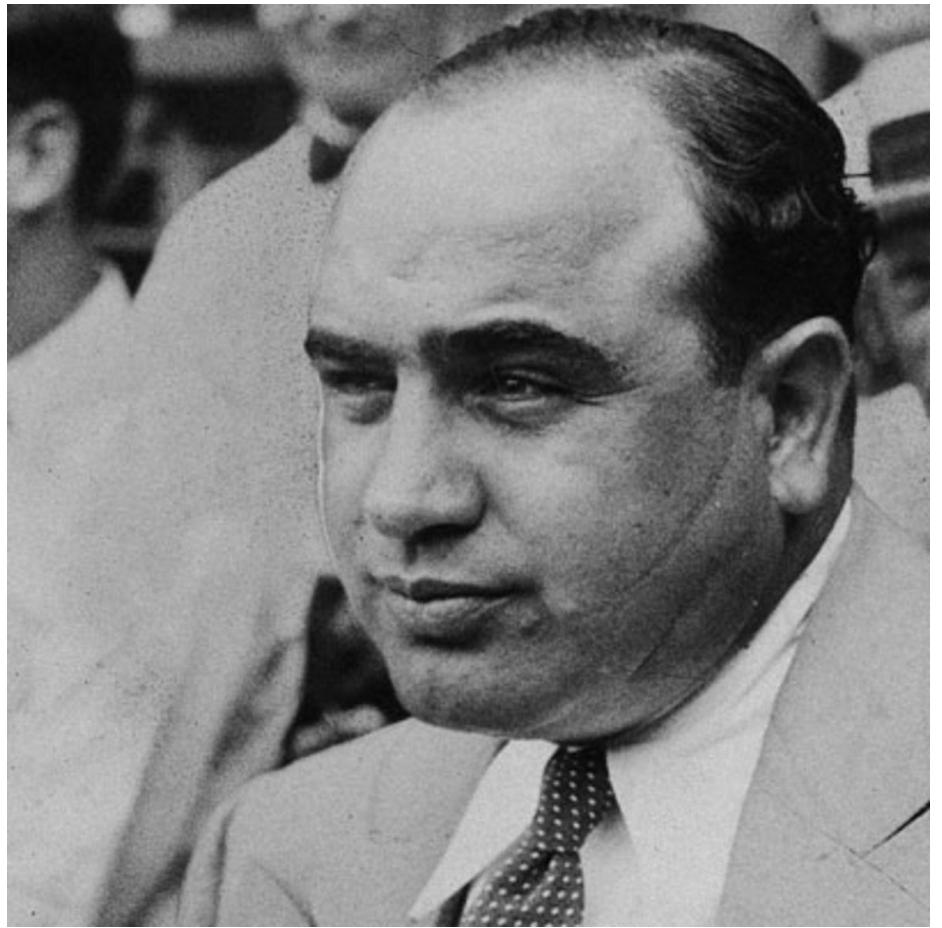
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**Al Capone**

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## Who was Scarface?

“One of the most famous American gangsters, Al Capone, also known as "Scarface," rose to infamy as the leader of the Chicago Outfit during the Prohibition era. Before being sent to Alcatraz Prison in 1934 for a tax evasion conviction, he had amassed a personal fortune estimated at \$100 million as the head of the infamous crime syndicate.”



# A Few Fast Facts

## *Al Capone Fact 1:*

He lived the American Dream becoming a Millionaire before he was 30 years old. His lavish lifestyle included expensive, elegant clothes and diamond jewelry, customized cars, houses and boats.

## *Al Capone Fact 2:*

He was one of 7 children born to Gabriel and Teresa Capone who had immigrated from Naples in Italy to Brooklyn, New York City in 1894. He was the fourth of five sons and two daughters. His brother names were Salvatore (Frank) Raffaele (Ralph "Bottles") and Vincenzo. The names of his sisters were Rosalia (Rose) and Mafalda.

## *Al Capone Fact 3:*

He quit school in the sixth grade at age fourteen and joined two "kid gangs" the Brooklyn Rippers and the Forty Thieves Juniors.

## *Al Capone Fact 4:*

Al Capone's nickname was due to the three scars on his left cheek. In 1917 he was slashed across the face by Frank Gallucio whilst working as a bouncer for gangster Frankie Yale in a in Coney Island night club called the Harvard Inn.

## *Al Capone Fact 5:*

Al Capone was recruited to the James Street Boys gang by Johnny "The Brain" Torrio, one of the most successful Italian-American gangsters in Brooklyn.

## *Al Capone Fact 6:*

Johnny Torrio moved to Chicago in 1909 at the request of "Big Jim" Colosimo, an Italian-American Mafia crime boss who built a criminal empire in Chicago based on prostitution, gambling, and racketeering. Extortion by the Black Hand 'La Mano Nera' was a serious threat to Colosimo's operation in Chicago that Johnny Torrio would help him tackle.



Al Capone Documentary



# Review:

What was the cause of the decline in rural population in the 1920s?

What was the “Lost Generation”?

What was the Scopes “Monkey Trial”?

What was “Prohibition”?

What caused the rise of Gangsterism in the 1920s?

Who was Al Capone?