

# THE ROARING TWENTIES

The 1920s were a period of dramatic changes. More than half of all Americans now lived in cities and the growing affordability of the automobile made people more mobile than ever. Although the decade was known as the era of the Charleston dance craze, jazz, and flapper fashions, in many respects it was also quite conservative. At the same time as hemlines went up and moral values seemed to decline, the nation saw the end of its open immigration policy, the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and the trial of a Tennessee high-school teacher for teaching evolution

**The Red Scare and immigration policy.** In the first few years after World War I, the country experienced a brief period of hysteria known as the **Red Scare**. Widespread labor unrest in 1919, combined with a wave of bombings, Communists in Russia, and the short-lived Communist revolt in Hungary fed a fear that the US was also on the verge of revolution. The bias against foreigners was exemplified in the **Sacco and Vanzetti trial**. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian-born, self-admitted anarchists who were indicted for robbery and murder in Massachusetts in 1920; they were found guilty and sentenced to death. Their supporters claimed that they were convicted for their ethnic background and beliefs rather than on conclusive evidence. Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in August 1927 after all their appeals were exhausted.



Hostility toward foreigners was also reflected in a fundamental change in American immigration policy. In 1920, the flow of new immigrants approached pre-war levels. Congress responded in 1921 with the **Quota Act**, which set the maximum number of immigrants entering the United States annually at 350,000, apportioned at 3 percent of each nationality living in the country in 1910 (based on the 1910 census). However, this act still allowed for a significant immigration from southern and eastern Europe, alleged hotbeds of radicalism. Consequently, the **National Origins Act** of 1924 reduced the total number of immigrants to 150,000 a year, with quotas set at 2 percent of each nationality's population in the United States in 1890. Under this formula, the quota was less than 4,000 for Italy and around 6,000 for Poland, while the quotas for Great Britain and Germany were 34,000 and 50,000 per year, respectively.

**The Ku Klux Klan**, an organization formed by white southerners during Reconstruction, was revived in Georgia in 1915. The new Klan was particularly strong in the Midwest and Southwest as well as in cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis. According to its supporters, it stood for law and order, "old time religion" and the moral values associated with it, immigration restriction, and opposed groups who were not 100 percent American — foreigners, Catholics, Jews, and African-Americans.

Prohibition was one of the programs the Klan supported. The 18th Amendment became effective in January 1920. Although alcohol consumption in the United States did drop by as much as half during the '20s, people who wanted to drink found it easy to do so either by brewing their own alcohol (which was legal, as long as it was not sold) or by buying "bootleg" liquor in illegal saloons known as **speakeasies** that had sprung up everywhere. Enforcement of Prohibition was never adequately staffed or funded, and the illicit trade in alcohol contributed to the growth of organized crime. By the end of the decade, many Americans recognized that Prohibition may well have caused more problems than it solved. A national debate was joined during the 1928 presidential campaign when Smith called for an end to the "noble experiment." Prohibition was finally repealed in December 1933 with the ratification of the **21st Amendment**.

**Fundamentalist** Protestants felt their beliefs challenged in the 1920s. Secular culture of the time seemed to have little place for religion, and church attendance was in decline. A movement to defend traditional religion by emphasizing a literal interpretation of the Bible gained momentum in the '20s and especially targeted Darwin's theory of evolution as a symbol for what was wrong in modern society. By the mid-1920s, a number of states had enacted laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution. The law was challenged in Tennessee by a young high school biology teacher named John Scopes.

Popularly known as the **monkey trial**, Scopes's trial was the first ever broadcast over radio and became a national event primarily because of the notoriety of the attorneys representing each side. The American Civil Liberties Union brought in Clarence Darrow, the most famous defense lawyer in the country, for Scopes, while the World Christian Fundamentalist Union engaged William Jennings Bryan, three-time presidential candidate to assist the prosecution. The trial was a clash between these two men and the beliefs they represented. The high point came when Darrow called Bryan, a recognized lay authority on the Bible, as a witness, and Bryan admitted on the stand that it was possible that creation may not have taken place in six, 24-hour days, thereby refuting a literal interpretation of the Bible. Nonetheless, the jury found Scopes guilty of violating the state's anti-evolution statute and fined him \$100.