Changing Ways of Life in the 1920s

THE NEW URBAN SCENE At the beginning of the 1920s, New York, with a population of 5.6 million people, topped the list of big cities. Next came Chicago, with nearly 3 million, and Philadelphia, with nearly 2 million. Another 65 cities claimed populations of 100,000 or more, and they grew more crowded by the day. Life in these booming cities was far different from the slow-paced, intimate life in America’s small towns. Chicago, for instance, was an industry powerhouse, home to native-born whites and African Americans, immigrant Poles, Irish, Russians, Italians, Swedes, Arabs, French, and Chinese. Each day, an estimated 300,000 workers, 150,000 cars and buses, and 20,000 trolleys filled the pulsing downtown. At night people crowded into ornate movie theaters and vaudeville houses offering live variety shows. For small-town migrants, adapting to the urban environment demanded changes in thinking as well as in everyday living. The city was a world of competition and change. City dwellers read and argued about current scientific and social ideas. They judged one another by accomplishment more often than by background. City dwellers also tolerated drinking, gambling, and casual dating—worldly behaviors considered shocking and sinful in small towns. For all its color and challenge, though, the city could be impersonal and frightening. Streets were filled with strangers, not friends and neighbors. Life was fast-paced, not leisurely. The city demanded endurance, as a foreign visitor to Chicago observed. In the city, lonely migrants from the country often ached for home. Throughout the 1920s, Americans found themselves caught between rural and urban cultures—a tug that pitted what seemed to be a safe, small-town world of close ties, hard work, and strict morals against a big-city world of anonymous crowds, moneymakers, and pleasure seekers.

THE PROHIBITION EXPERIMENT One vigorous clash between small-town and big-city Americans began in earnest in January 1920, when the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect. This amendment launched the era known as Prohibition, during which the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages were legally prohibited. Reformers had long considered liquor a prime cause of corruption. They thought that too much drinking led to crime, wife and child abuse, accidents on the job, and other serious social problems. Support for Prohibition came largely from the rural South and West, areas with large populations of native-born Protestants. The church-affiliated Anti-Saloon League had led the drive to pass the Prohibition amendment. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, which considered drinking a sin, had helped push the measure through. At first, saloons closed their doors, and arrests for drunkenness declined. But in the aftermath of World War I, many Americans were tired of making sacrifices; they wanted to enjoy life. Most immigrant groups did not consider drinking a sin but a natural part of socializing, and they resented government meddling. Eventually, Prohibition’s fate was sealed by the government, which failed to budget enough money to enforce the law. The Volstead Act established a Prohibition Bureau in the Treasury Department in 1919, but the agency was underfunded. The job of enforcement involved patrolling 18,700 miles of coastline as well as inland borders, tracking down illegal stills (equipment for distilling liquor), monitoring highways for truckloads of illegal alcohol, and overseeing all the industries that legally used alcohol to be sure none was siphoned off for illegal purposes. The task fell to approximately 1,500 poorly paid federal agents and local police—clearly an impossible job.

SPEAKEASIES AND BOOTLEGGERS To obtain liquor illegally, drinkers went underground to hidden saloons and nightclubs known as speakeasies—so called because when inside, one spoke quietly, or “easily,” to avoid detection. Speakeasies could be found everywhere—in penthouses, cellars, office buildings, rooming houses, tenements, hardware stores, and tearooms. To be admitted to a speakeasy, one had to present a card or use a password. Inside, one would find a mix of fashionable middle-class and upper-middle-class men and women. Before long, people grew bolder in getting around the law. They learned to distill alcohol and built their own stills. Since alcohol was allowed for medicinal and religious purposes, prescriptions for alcohol and sales of sacramental wine (intended for church services) skyrocketed. People also bought liquor from bootleggers (named for a smuggler’s practice of carrying liquor in the legs of boots), who smuggled it in from Canada, Cuba, and the West Indies. “The business of evading [the law] and making a mock of it has ceased to wear any aspects of crime and has become a sort of national sport,” wrote the journalist H. L. Mencken.

ORGANIZED CRIME Prohibition not only generated disrespect for the law, it also contributed to organized crime in nearly every major city. Chicago became notorious as the home of Al Capone, a gangster whose bootlegging empire netted over $60 million a year. Capone took control of the Chicago liquor business by killing off his competition. During the 1920s, headlines reported 522 bloody gang killings and made the image of flashy Al Capone part of the folklore of the period. In 1940, the writer Herbert Asbury recalled the Capone era in Chicago. By the mid-1920s, only 19 percent of Americans supported Prohibition. The rest, who wanted the amendment changed or repealed, believed that Prohibition caused worse effects than the initial problem. Rural Protestant Americans, however, defended a law that they felt strengthened moral values. The Eighteenth Amendment remained in force until 1933, when it was repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment.
AMERICAN FUNDAMENTALISM The Protestant movement grounded in a literal, or non-symbolic, interpretation of the Bible was known as fundamentalism. Fundamentalists were skeptical of scientific knowledge; they argued that all important knowledge could be found in the Bible. They believed that the Bible was inspired by God, and that therefore its stories in all their details were true. Their beliefs led fundamentalists to reject the theory of evolution advanced by Charles Darwin in the 19th century—a theory stating that plant and animal species had developed and changed over millions of years. The claim they found most unbelievable was that humans had evolved from apes. They pointed instead to the Bible’s account of creation, in which God made the world and all its life forms, including humans, in six days. Fundamentalism expressed itself in several ways. In the South and West, preachers led religious revivals based on the authority of the Scriptures. One of the most powerful revivalists was Billy Sunday, a baseball player turned preacher who staged emotional meetings across the South. In Los Angeles, Aimee Semple McPherson, a theatrical woman who dressed in flowing white satin robes, used Hollywood showmanship to preach the word to homesick Midwestern migrants and devoted followers of her radio broadcasts. In the 1920s, fundamentalism gained followers who began to call for laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution.

THE SCOPES TRIAL In March 1925, Tennessee passed the nation’s first law that made it a crime to teach evolution. Immediately, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) promised to defend any teacher who would challenge the law. John T. Scopes, a young biology teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, accepted the challenge. In his biology class, Scopes read this passage from Civic Biology: “We have now learned that animal forms may be arranged so as to begin with the simple one-celled forms and culminate with a group which includes man himself.” Scopes was promptly arrested, and his trial was set for July. The ACLU hired Clarence Darrow, the most famous trial lawyer of the day, to defend Scopes. William Jennings Bryan, three-time Democratic candidate for president and a devout fundamentalist, served as a special prosecutor. There was no real question of guilt or innocence: Scopes was honest about his action. The Scopes trial was a fight over evolution and the role of science and religion in public schools and in American society. The trial opened on July 10, 1925, and almost overnight became a national sensation. Darrow called Bryan as an expert on the Bible—the contest that everyone had been waiting for. To handle the throngs of Bryan supporters, Judge Raulston moved the court outside, to a platform built under the maple trees. There, before a crowd of several thousand, Darrow relentlessly questioned Bryan about his beliefs. Bryan stood firm, a smile on his face. Darrow asked Bryan if he agreed with Bishop James Ussher’s calculation that, according to the Bible, Creation happened in 4004 B.C. Had every living thing on earth appeared since that time? Did Bryan know that ancient civilizations had thrived before 4004 B.C.? Did he know the age of the earth? Bryan grew edgy but stuck to his guns. Finally, Darrow asked Bryan, “Do you think the earth was made in six days?” Bryan answered, “Not six days of 24 hours.” People sitting on the lawn gasped. With this answer, Bryan admitted that the Bible might be interpreted in different ways. But in spite of this admission, Scopes was found guilty and fined $100. The Tennessee Supreme Court later changed the verdict on a technicality, but the law outlawing the teaching of evolution remained in effect. This clash over evolution, the Prohibition experiment, and the emerging urban scene all were evidence of the changes and conflicts occurring during the 1920s. During that period, women also experienced conflict as they redefined their roles and pursued new lifestyles.

Questions - Answer these on a separate piece of paper using complete sentences:

1. List the most populated cities of the 1920s and their population size.
2. What evening entertainment did city life provide?
3. Give examples of what city dwellers tolerated that small towns would not.
4. List the causes of effects of Prohibition.
5. Define Prohibition.
6. What is a speakeasy and what purpose does it serve?
7. What is the only constitutional amendment that repeals another amendment?
8. Explain fundamentalism.
9. What is Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution? Do fundamentalists agree with him?
10. Explain the events leading up to and the outcome of the Scopes Trial.