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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Nation Gets Funky

THE ERA immediately after World War I came to be known as the "Roaring Twenties," and with good reason: Each of the years had a "twenty" in it, as in 1923, 1925, and so forth. Also there was a lot of wild and zany activity, with "flappers" going to "speakeasies" where they would listen to "jazz," dance the "Charleston," and drink "bathtub gin" until they "puked" all over the "floor." It was a very exciting time, but it also made for an exhausting life-style, which is why you will notice that any people who happened to live through it tend to look kind of elderly.

But all was not fun and games during the twenties. There was also Labor Unrest, caused by coal miners emerging from the ground and making

radical demands such as: (1) they should get paid; or, at least (2) they should not have the tunnels collapse on them so often. The coal companies generally responded by bringing in skilled labor negotiators to bargain with the miners' heads using clubs. This often resulted in violence, which forced the federal government, in its role as peacekeeper, to have federal troops shoot at the miners with guns. Eventually the miners realized that they were safer down in the collapsing tunnels, and there was a considerable decline in Labor Unrest.

Another significant accomplishment of the federal government during the twenties was the refinement of high-level corruption, which peaked during the administration of President Harding G. Harding with the famous

TEAPOT DOME SCANDAL

The Teapot Dome Scandal involved a plot of federal land in Wyoming that derives its unusual name from the fact that, if viewed from a certain angle, it appears to be shaped like a scandal. The government had placed a large amount of oil under this land for safekeeping, but in 1921 it was stolen. The mystery was solved later that same evening when an alert customs inspector noticed former Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall attempting to board an oceanliner with a suitcase

containing 3.256 trillion barrels of petroleum products, which he claimed had been a "gift" from a "friend." At this point President Harding, showing the kind of class that Richard Nixon can only dream about, died.

Harding's successor was Calvin Coolidge, who was popularly known as "Silent Cal" because that was his nickname. The major accomplishment of the Coolidge administration is a group of humorous anecdotes revolving around the fact that Coolidge hardly ever talked. For example, there's the famous story of the time that Coolidge was sitting next to a woman at a White House dinner and the following hilarious exchange took place:

WOMAN: So, Mr. President. How are you?
COOLIDGE:
WOMAN: Is there something wrong?
COOLIDGE:
WOMAN: Why won't you answer me?
COOLIDGE:
WOMAN: What a cretin.

Another popular humorist of the day was Will Rogers, who used to do an act where he'd twirl a lasso and absolutely slay his audiences with such wry observations as: "The only thing I know is what I read in the papers." Ha-ha! Get it? Neither do we. Must have been something he did with the lasso.

But there was more to the twenties than mere hilarity. A great deal of important breakthroughs were being achieved in the field of culture by giants such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, who, in 1924, after years of experimentation at their laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, successfully tested the modern American novel, which is still in widespread use today. Poets such as T. S. Eliot and e. e. "buster" cummings were producing a new type of "free-form" verse designed to prove that a poem did not have to be long to be boring. Then, too, in Memphis, Tennessee, the first supermarket, a Piggly Wiggly, was opened. On the West Coast, the motion-picture industry was producing "talkies" featuring such stars as Douglas Fairbanks, Edward G. Robinson, the young Joan Collins, and numerous twitching pieces of film lint magnified to the size of boa constrictors. It was also a Golden Age of Sports, with the most famous hero of them all, of course, being the immortal Babe "Herman" Ruth, who provided what is perhaps baseball's finest moment during the seventh game of the 1927 World Series when, with the score tied and two out, he pointed his bat toward the left-field bleachers, and then, on the very next pitch, in a feat that will live forever, he knocked out the immortal Jack Dempsey.

But no achievement symbolized the spirit of the Roaring Twenties more than that of a tall young

American aviator named, simply, Charles A. Lindbergh. Those of us who are fortunate enough to live in this era of modern commercial aviation, where air travel is extremely safe, thanks to advanced safety procedures such as making the airports so congested that airplanes hardly ever take off, can little appreciate the courage it took for Lindbergh to climb into the cramped cockpit of his single-engine plane, the *Heidy-Ho IV,* and take off into the predawn October 8 gloom over Roosevelt Field, Long Island, towing a banner that said, simply, TAN DON'T BURN WITH COPPERTONE.

It was not an easy flight. Because of air turbulence, there was no beverage-cart service, and it turned out that Lindbergh had already seen the movie.[1] Nevertheless he persevered, and thirty-three hours later, on the afternoon of October 8, he arrived at an airfield near Paris, where, to the joy of a watching world, he plowed into a crowd of French persons at over 140 miles per hour. An instant hero, he returned in triumph for a motorcade ride in New York City, where millions welcomed him, in typical "Big Apple" style, by covering the streets with litter, much of which can still be seen today. But little did the cheering crowds realize, as streams of ticker tape fluttered down from office windows, that within just two years, the falling paper would be replaced by fall-

[1] *The Poseidon Adventure.*

ing stockbrokers. If the crowds *had* realized this, of course, they would have stayed to watch.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do coal companies *do* with the coal, anyway? You never see it for sale.
2. Is "Big Apple" a stupid nickname, or what?