



Objectives:

Students will gain an understanding of the history of the automobile industry in the 1920's, including methods of production, popular design materials, economic influences, political policies, and the cultural and social impact on American society.

Students will be able to answer critical thinking questions about the automobile industry and its impact on the decade.

Illinois State Social Studies Standards:

SS.6-8.H.1.Mc: Evaluate the significance of historical events to multiple groups and the relationship to modern day movements and events.

SS.9-12.H.1: Evaluate the context of time and place as well as structural factors that influence historical developments.

SS.9-12.H.2: Analyze change and continuity across historical eras and identify what perspectives have typically influenced how historical eras are constructed.

SS.9-12.H.4: Analyze how people and institutions have interacted with environmental, scientific, technological, and societal challenges.

The Roaring Twenties: The Automobile Revolution

The 1920s, often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties," was a transformative decade for the automobile industry in the United States and around the world. This period saw dramatic advances in production methods, the emergence of iconic makes and models, and a profound impact on American culture, economy, and infrastructure. This article explores the essential aspects of the automotive landscape during the 1920s, highlighting how automobiles shaped the era.

Methods of Production

The assembly line, introduced by Henry Ford in the early 1910s, continued to dominate automobile manufacturing in the 1920s. Ford's refinement of mass production techniques not only reduced the cost of vehicles but also increased their availability. By the mid-1920s, the production of automobiles had expanded significantly, with automakers producing millions of vehicles annually (Gordon, 2021).

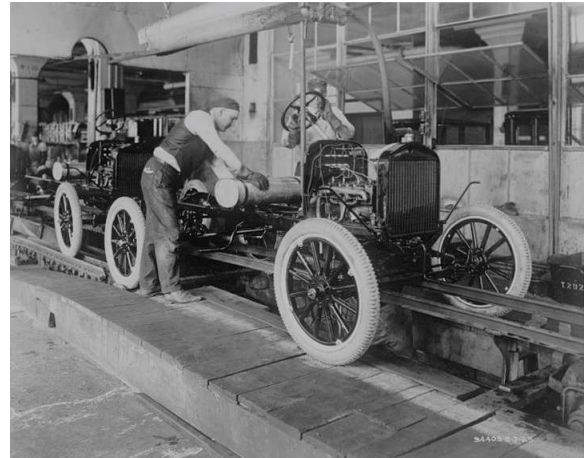
The era also witnessed innovations in automation and mechanization. Manufacturers like General Motors (GM) embraced flexible mass production systems, allowing for greater variation



in models without significant downtime. GM introduced the concept of annual model changes, which became a marketing strategy to entice consumers (Culley, 2022).

Popular Materials

The 1920s saw advancements in automotive materials. Steel remained the primary material for car frames and bodies, providing strength and durability. The use of aluminum increased for engine components and body panels, making vehicles lighter and enhancing performance. Additionally, innovations in safety led to the widespread adoption of laminated safety glass and improvements in rubber for tires, enhancing both safety and comfort (Duffy, 2019).



Above: Ford automobiles being produced on a Detroit assembly line in 1923

Popular Makes and Models

Several makes and models became synonymous with the 1920s. Notable vehicles included:

- **Ford Model T:** Although its production waned by the mid-1920s, the Model T had laid the groundwork for mass-market automobiles and remained a cultural icon.
- **Chevrolet:** The 1927 Chevrolet Series AA Capitol was a significant competitor to Ford, featuring innovations like electric starters and better styling.
- **Dodge Brothers:** Known for their rugged construction, Dodge cars gained popularity for their performance and reliability.
- **Buick and Cadillac:** These brands represented luxury, with models offering advanced features and opulent designs.

The 1920s also marked the rise of car racing as a popular spectator sport, with events like the Indianapolis 500 gaining immense popularity. Racing not only showcased automotive technology but also spurred innovations in speed and design (Miller, 2022).

Economics of the Automobile Industry



The automobile industry became a crucial pillar of the American economy during the 1920s. By 1929, nearly 26 million cars were on the road in the United States, reflecting a boom in consumer demand (Gordon, 2021). This surge led to the creation of jobs in manufacturing, sales, and maintenance, further stimulating the economy.

The decade also saw the emergence of credit systems, allowing consumers to purchase cars through installment plans. This accessibility fueled the growth of the automobile market and contributed to a consumer culture that defined the era (Culley, 2022).

Cultural and Social Impact

Automobiles profoundly influenced American culture and society in the 1920s. The rise of car ownership transformed leisure activities, with families traveling for vacations and enjoying road trips. The development of motels, roadside diners, and gas stations catered to the new mobile lifestyle. This period also saw the birth of the suburban movement, as people sought housing outside urban centers, facilitated by the automobile (Hagley, 2020).

Automobiles also played a role in changing social dynamics. The freedom of mobility offered by cars contributed to the liberation of women, who began to drive independently. The iconic image of the flapper often included a car, symbolizing modernity and independence (Duffy, 2019).

Political Implications

The growing popularity of automobiles prompted changes in infrastructure and public policy. The federal government began investing in road construction, leading to the establishment of the U.S. highway system. In 1921, the Federal Aid Road Act provided funds for the construction of rural roads, facilitating travel and commerce (Hagley, 2020).

Left: The 1920s saw a rise in buying cars and appliances "on credit"

Ford
Weekly Purchase Plan
The easiest way to buy a car.

It is easy to save a small sum each week to apply on the purchase of a Ford car. The amount you pay is what you feel you can afford out of your earnings. You do not have to sacrifice other necessities. The "down payment," so often a handicap, is eliminated.

A local bank acts as your depository and allows interest on your deposits.

165,000 families have already secured their cars by this easy method. Enrollments are now being made at the rate of 1000 a day.

Ask the nearest Authorized Ford Dealer about this practical plan or write us direct.

BALLOON
Tire Equipment
Full Size (29" x 440)

Now Optional On All Ford Cars At An Extra Cost of \$25

Runabout Coupe	\$250	Model Sedan	\$350
Model Sedan	\$350	Model Sedan	\$350
All prices f. o. b. Detroit			

Ford Motor Company, Dept. N-3, Detroit, Mich.
Mail me full particulars on your easy plan for owning an automobile.

Name _____
Street _____
Town _____ State _____

Ford Motor Company
Detroit

TOURING CAR
\$290
On cash - extra demonstrable
size and motor are \$30 extra
F. O. B. Detroit

MAKE SAFETY YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

Conclusion

The 1920s were a defining decade for the automobile industry, characterized by technological advancements, mass production, and a cultural shift toward mobility and individualism. The



impact of automobiles during this period extended beyond transportation, shaping the economy, altering social dynamics, and influencing the political landscape. As the world moved into the 1930s, the legacy of the Roaring Twenties and its automotive revolution would continue to resonate.

References

- Culley, M. (2022). *The Rise of Automotive Innovation: How GM Changed the Game*. Journal of Industrial History.
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- Gordon, S. (2021). *The Model T and Beyond: A Social History of the Automobile in America*. Journal of American History.
- Hagley, M. (2020). *The Automobile and American Society: Infrastructure and Culture in the 1920s*. Transport Studies Quarterly.
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Other Historical Highlights

Between 1920 and 1929, the United States entered the Roaring Twenties, a decade marked by cultural dynamism and social change. In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified, granting women the right to vote, a significant victory for the women's suffrage movement. The era also saw the rise of organized crime, with figures like Al Capone becoming notorious during Prohibition. In 1927, Charles Lindbergh made history by completing the first solo nonstop transatlantic flight in his plane, the Spirit of St. Louis, capturing the nation's imagination. Meanwhile, sports icon Babe Ruth became a household name, revitalizing baseball with his extraordinary talent. The film industry saw a revolutionary moment in 1927 with the release of Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer," the first significant talkie, which marked the decline of silent films and the end of vaudeville as the primary entertainment form. This decade encapsulated the spirit of innovation and change that defined the period.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. In what ways did the widespread adoption of automobiles during the 1920s contribute to the growth of suburban areas? How did this shift affect urban planning and the landscape of the U.S?
2. What role did credit systems and installment plans play in making automobiles more accessible to the average American during the 1920s? How did this affect consumer culture and the economy?
3. How did the increasing freedom of mobility provided by automobiles contribute to changing social dynamics in the 1920s, particularly regarding women's independence and the concept of modernity?



The Automobile Industry in the 1920s: The Birth of Route 66 and Cultural Transformation

The 1920s marked a significant era for the automobile industry, characterized by the rise of mass production, iconic vehicle models, and an expanding road network that fundamentally altered the American landscape. Among the most important developments of this decade was the establishment of Route 66, which not only facilitated travel across the United States but also reflected and contributed to the growing car culture. This article delves into the history of Route 66, its significance, the policies that fostered its development, and its impact on architecture and the landscape, with a focus on landmarks like the Cucamonga Gas Station.

The Building of Route 66

History and Purpose

Route 66, often referred to as the "Main Street of America," was established in 1926 as part of the U.S. Highway System. Spanning approximately 2,448 miles from Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica, California, it was designed to facilitate the movement of goods and people across the country (Sullivan, 2018). The highway was built in response to the increasing popularity of automobiles, which demanded better infrastructure to accommodate long-distance travel. As personal vehicle ownership soared during the 1920s, there was a pressing need for a reliable and efficient roadway network that connected rural areas to urban centers.



Left: The portion of Route 66 across New Mexico made road work intensive because of the hard rock formations and changes in elevation

Policies Contributing to Its Construction

Several policies and initiatives contributed to the construction of Route 66. The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916 was one of the first pieces of legislation aimed at

improving U.S. roadways. It provided federal funds to states for the construction and maintenance of highways, encouraging states to develop their road systems (Baker, 2020).



In 1921, the Federal Highway Act provided additional funding and emphasized the need for a unified highway numbering system, which helped in the formal designation of Route 66. The road was crucial not only for its practical purpose but also as a means of economic development, promoting tourism and commerce across states.

Impact on the Landscape and Architecture

The establishment of Route 66 transformed the American landscape and architecture in several ways. As the highway facilitated increased mobility, it spurred the growth of towns and cities along its route, leading to the development of new businesses, motels, diners, and gas stations designed to cater to the traveling public.

The architecture along Route 66 reflected the era's optimism and Americana, with many establishments adopting distinctive styles such as Art Deco and Streamline Moderne. Iconic roadside attractions emerged, embodying the spirit of adventure and leisure that characterized the decade. This transformation helped lay the groundwork for what would become a culture of road trips and vacationing by automobile (Higgins, 2019).



Right: Map of Route 66, Below: Historic Cucamonga Service Station

The Cucamonga Gas Station

One of the notable landmarks along Route 66 is the Cucamonga Gas Station, built in 1915. Located in Rancho Cucamonga, California, this gas station became an important stop for travelers heading west. Its distinctive architecture and strategic location made it a key point of interest for those traversing the highway.

The Cucamonga Gas Station exemplifies the rise of roadside architecture, featuring a Spanish Mission style that appealed to travelers seeking a picturesque experience. The station offered not only fuel but also a place for weary travelers to





rest, eat, and socialize, encapsulating the community spirit fostered by the automobile culture (Hagley, 2020).

As Route 66 gained popularity, the Cucamonga Gas Station became symbolic of the evolving American landscape. It was more than just a fueling station; it was a gathering place that contributed to the burgeoning culture of the open road.

Cultural and Economic Impact

The 1920s were a decade of significant cultural change driven by the automobile and the new road networks. The increased accessibility provided by Route 66 and similar highways transformed how Americans traveled and experienced leisure. Families could now embark on road trips, exploring national parks and coastal regions that were previously difficult to reach.

The economic impact was also profound. The establishment of businesses along Route 66 created jobs and stimulated local economies. As tourism flourished, the highway became a vital artery for economic activity, contributing to the growth of the hospitality industry, including motels and diners that catered to travelers (Sullivan, 2018).

In terms of social dynamics, Route 66 helped facilitate greater interaction among diverse populations. It connected rural areas to urban centers, promoting the exchange of ideas and culture. The highway became an integral part of American folklore, often celebrated in songs, literature, and films, cementing its status as a cultural icon.

Conclusion

The 1920s represented a transformative period for the automobile industry, marked by the introduction of Route 66, which facilitated travel, commerce, and cultural exchange across the United States. This iconic highway not only reshaped the physical landscape but also influenced architectural styles and fostered a burgeoning car culture. Landmarks like the Cucamonga Gas Station exemplified the spirit of the era, serving as vital stops for travelers and symbols of the evolving American experience. The legacy of Route 66 endures, representing a significant chapter in the story of American mobility and identity.

References

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- Higgins, L. (2019). *Steel, Brass, and Leather: The Materials of Early Automobiles*. Automotive Materials Review.
- Hagley, M. (2020). *Automobiles and American Society: The Cultural Impact of Cars in the Early 20th Century*. Transport Studies Quarterly.
- Sullivan, T. (2018). *Route 66: The Highway and Its Legacy*. American Road Magazine.



Critical Thinking Questions

1. What were the cultural and economic effects of Route 66 on the towns and businesses located along its route? How did it stimulate local economies and change the landscape of these areas?
2. The Cucamonga Gas Station became a key landmark along Route 66. How did its architecture and services reflect the values and lifestyle of the 1920s, and why did it symbolize the culture of the open road?
3. How did policies like the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1916 and the Federal Highway Act of 1921 contribute to the development of Route 66 and the broader U.S. highway system? What were their long-term impacts on transportation infrastructure?
4. In what ways did Route 66 contribute to social and cultural exchange in the United States during the 1920s? How did it connect diverse populations and foster a sense of shared American identity?



Bring this lesson to the museum!

Help students connect their learning to real-world contexts by exploring these related vehicles on display at Klairmont Kollections:

- 1921 Rolls Royce Silver Ghost
- 1926 Hispano-Suiza H6B
- 1929 Auburn 8-120 Sport Sedan