

Chapter 29

The Clash Between Traditionalism and Modernism

How did social, economic, and religious tensions divide Americans during the Roaring Twenties?

29.1 Introduction

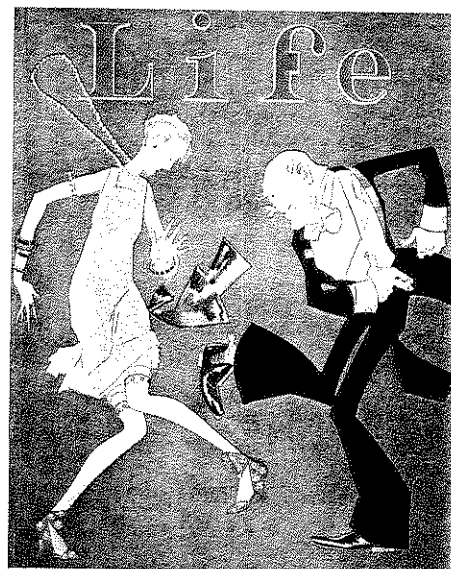
Norman Rockwell was born in New York City in 1894. A talented artist, he studied at a number of the city's art schools. For many young painters in the 1920s, it would have been natural to draw all the new and strange sights the city offered. But Rockwell's works had nothing to do with New York. Instead, they depicted a more traditional America, one that could be found on farms and in small towns.

In 1916, the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of the country's most popular weekly magazines, started putting Rockwell's charming pictures on its covers. By 1925, Rockwell was nationally famous. "Without thinking too much about it in specific terms," Rockwell said of his work, "I was showing the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed."

Most of the trends and changes that made the 1920s roar emerged in the nation's cities. Although rural life was changing as well, Rockwell's paintings appealed to a longing for the reassurance of the simple life. Some people who lived in rural areas did not approve of the changes they had witnessed since the end of World War I. They were **traditionalists**, or people who had deep respect for long-held cultural and religious values. For them, these values were anchors that provided order and stability to society.

For other Americans, particularly those in urban areas, there was no going back to the old ways. They were **modernists**, or people who embraced new ideas, styles, and social trends. For them, traditional values were chains that restricted both individual freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

As these groups clashed in the 1920s, American society became deeply divided. Many rural dwellers lined up against urbanites. Defenders of traditional morality bemoaned the behavior of "flaming youth." Teetotalers opposed drinkers. Old-time religion faced off against modern science. The result was a kind of "culture war" that in some ways is still being fought today.



The two magazine covers shown opposite and above capture the tension between traditionalism and modernism during the 1920s. The *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* appealed to traditionalists with nostalgic images rooted in small-town America. *Life* reached out to modernists with images of trendy fun seekers and style setters.

◀ "Fact and Fiction," a *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* cover by Norman Rockwell in 1917

After World War I, many Americans wanted to have fun. Performances by popular entertainment groups like Uncle Sam's Follies, shown on the right, offered freedom from traditional rules of behavior. People could dress in the latest fashions, dance the latest dances, smoke, and drink, despite prohibition.



29.2 The Growing Traditionalist-Modernist Divide

As the war ended and the doughboys began to come home from France, the title of a popular song asked a question that was troubling many rural families: "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm (after they've seen Paree)?" After seeing the bright lights of cities, many returning soldiers decided to leave behind the small towns they came from. The 1920 census revealed a startling statistic: for the first time ever, the United States was more than 50 percent urban. This population shift set the stage for the growing divide between traditionalists and modernists.



In the 1920s, a booming economy and high wages lured workers to urban areas such as New York City. Cities offered steady jobs and freedom to explore new ways of thinking and living.

Urban Attractions: Economic Opportunity and Personal Freedom During the 1920s, some 19 million people would move from farms to cities, largely in search of economic opportunities. Urban areas, with their factories and office buildings, were hubs of economic growth. As the economy boomed, the demand for workers increased. Wages rose as well. Between 1920 and 1929, the average per capita income rose 37 percent. At the same time, the **consumer price index**, a measure of the cost of basic necessities such as food and housing, remained steady. As a result, urban wage earners saw their standard of living improve.

Cities also offered freedom to explore new ways of thinking and living. City dwellers could meet people from different cultures, go to movies, visit museums, and attend concerts. They could buy and read an endless variety of magazines and newspapers. They could drink, gamble, or go on casual dates without being judged as immoral.

Rural Problems: Falling Crop Prices and Failing Farms The personal freedom people experienced in cities stood in strong contrast to small-town life. In rural areas, most people lived in quiet communities, where they watched out for one another. New ideas and ways of behaving were often viewed with suspicion.

In addition to losing their younger generation to cities, rural communities faced other problems during the 1920s. Farmers had prospered during the war, producing food crops for the Allies and the home front. Enterprising farmers

had taken out loans to buy new machines or extra land in hopes of increasing their output and profits. After the war, however, European demand for U.S. farm products dropped sharply, as did crop prices. With their incomes shrinking, large numbers of farmers could not repay their loans. Hundreds of thousands of farmers lost their farms in the early 1920s alone. For the rest of the decade, farmers' share of the national income dropped steadily. By 1929, per capita income for farmers was less than half the national average.

Congressmen from rural states tried to reverse this downward slide with farm-friendly legislation. The most ambitious of these measures, the McNary-Haugen Bill, was first introduced in 1924. This legislation called on the federal government to raise the price of some farm products by selling surplus crops overseas. Congress passed the bill twice, in 1927 and then in 1928, but President Calvin Coolidge vetoed it both times. A strong opponent of the government's interference in markets, the president dismissed the McNary-Haugen Bill as "preposterous."

Changing Values Lead to Mutual Resentment The divide between urban modernists and rural traditionalists was not just economic. Modernists tended to view rural Americans as behind the times. Sinclair Lewis, the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, mocked small-town values. In one of his novels, he described the residents of a small Midwestern town as

a savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.

—Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, 1920

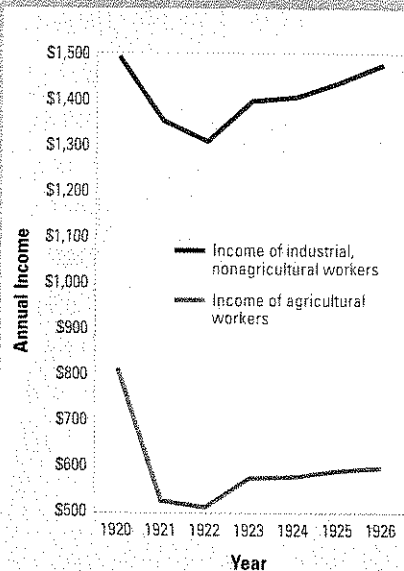
Rural traditionalists, not surprisingly, resented such attacks on their behavior and values. In their eyes, they were defending all that was good in American life. They saw the culture of the cities as money-grubbing, materialistic, and immoral. At the same time, however, many rural people could not help but envy the comfort and excitement city life seemed to offer.

The defenders of traditional values often looked to their faith and the Bible for support in their struggle against modernism. As a result, the 1920s saw a rise in religious **fundamentalism**—the idea that religious texts and beliefs should be taken literally and treated as the authority on appropriate behavior.

Billy Sunday, a former major league baseball player, emerged as the most prominent fundamentalist preacher in the nation. His dramatic preaching style drew huge crowds. He was said to have preached to more than 100 million people in his lifetime. Sunday's largest following was in rural areas, including the South. "There is ten times more respect for God and the Bible and the Christian religion in the South," he said, "than in any other part of the United States."

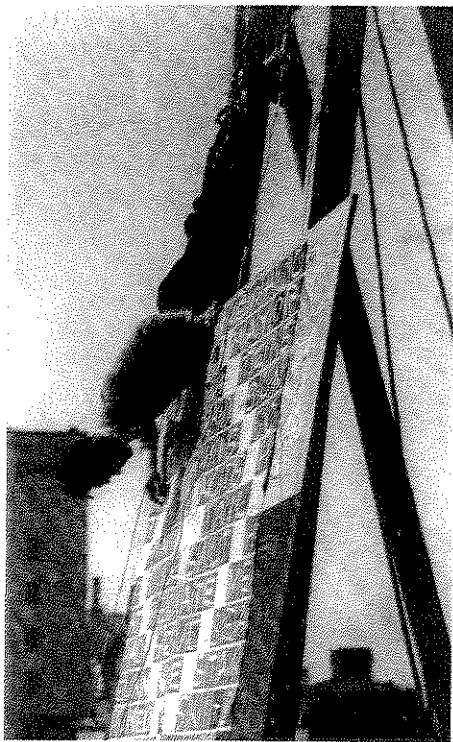
Still, times were changing. A growing number of young modernists were rejecting long-accepted American values. Rural areas were losing population to the cities, and agriculture was no longer the backbone of the American economy. In addition, with improvements in mass media, country people themselves were being exposed to new ideas, music, and social values.

Agriculture and Nonagriculture Incomes, 1920–1926



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

All workers saw their incomes drop during the recession that followed the war. But although the incomes of industrial workers eventually recovered, those of farm workers did not.



In the 1920s, youth were enamored by various fads such as pole-sitting, dance marathons, a game called mah-jongg, beauty contests, and crossword puzzles. Here, a daredevil completes a crossword puzzle while being hung from a building.

29.3 Generations Clash over the New Youth Culture

Before World War I, if a young man were interested in courting a young woman, he would visit her at home and meet her parents. If things went well at this first meeting, the boy would visit again. If he invited the girl to a dance or concert, an older adult would go with them as a chaperone. Eventually, the girl's parents might trust the young couple enough to let them sit by themselves on the front porch. In traditional families, these courtship patterns continued after the war. In more modern families, however, courtship changed dramatically, often confusing, if not upsetting, the older generation. Courtship was one example of how the older and younger generations clashed in the 1920s.

The Youth Perspective: The Old Ways Are Repressive During the 1920s, a growing drive for public education sent a majority of teenagers to high school for the first time in U.S. history. College enrollment also grew rapidly. As young people spent more time than ever before outside the home or workplace, a new youth culture emerged. This culture revolved around school, clubs, sports, music, dances, dating, movies, and crazy fads.

The fads young people followed were, for the most part, ephemeral. In one fad, young couples entered marathon dance competitions. The last couple left standing after many hours of dancing won a prize. Flagpole sitting, in which a participant would spend days perched atop a flagpole, was another short-lived fad. One fad from the 1920s that remains popular today is the crossword puzzle.

The most daring young women broke with the past by turning themselves into “flappers.” They colored their hair and cut it short. Their skimpy dresses—worn without restrictive corsets—barely covered their knees. They rolled their stockings below their knees and wore unfastened rain boots that flapped around their ankles. Flappers wore makeup, which until that time had been associated with “loose” women of doubtful morals. Draped with beads and bracelets and carrying cigarette holders, they went to jazz clubs and danced the night away.

In a magazine article on the flapper, Zelda Fitzgerald wrote,

She flirted because it was fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure, she covered her face with paint and powder because she didn't need it and she refused to be bored because she wasn't boring . . . Mothers disapproved of their sons taking the Flapper to dances, to teas, to swim and most of all to heart.

—Zelda Fitzgerald, “Eulogy on the Flapper,” 1922

Modern young couples traded old-fashioned courtship for dating. Whereas the purpose of courtship had been marriage, the main point of dating was to have fun away from the watchful eyes of parents. Sedate tea parties or chaperoned dances gave way to unsupervised parties.

Older people fretted about the younger generation's “wild” ways. Many young people, however, felt free to ignore their elders. After witnessing the war's waste of life, they decided that the adults who had sent young men into battle did not deserve respect. As one young person said, “The older generation had certainly pretty well ruined this world before passing it on to us.”

Easy access to cars and the mass media helped fuel the youth rebellion. Cars gave young people a means to escape the supervision of their elders.

Magazines and movies, in the meantime, spread images of a good life that was often very different from the way their parents had grown up.

Writers Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote about youth of the time in books with such titles as *The Beautiful and Damned*. Perhaps no one better captured the feelings of rebellious youth than poet Edna St. Vincent Millay when she wrote,

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay, “A Few Figs from Thistles,” 1920

The Adult Perspective: Young People Have Lost Their Way Many adults considered the behavior of young people reckless and immoral. They tried to restore the old morality in a number of ways. One was censorship. Traditionalists pulled books they saw as immoral off library shelves. They also pressured filmmakers for less sexually suggestive scenes in movies. The Hays Office, named for former Postmaster General Will Hays, issued a movie code that banned long kisses and positive portrayals of casual sex. In bedroom scenes, movie couples had to follow a “two feet on the floor” rule.

Some states tried to legislate more conservative behavior. They passed laws to discourage women from wearing short skirts and skimpy swimsuits. Police with yardsticks patrolled beaches looking for offenders.

Mostly, however, the older generation restricted itself to expressing loud disapproval. When nagging did not work, many parents crossed their fingers and hoped for the best. More often than not, they were not disappointed. Most young people, even the most rebellious flappers, usually ended their dating days by getting married and raising the next generation of rebellious youth.

29.4 Wets and Drys Clash over Prohibition

On February 14, 1929, men dressed in police uniforms raided the headquarters of Chicago’s Moran gang. When the officers ordered the gangsters to raise their hands and line up against the wall, the gang members thought nothing of it. The police were always annoying them. These “police officers,” however, were members of Al “Scarface” Capone’s rival gang in disguise. Capone’s men whipped out their guns and blasted away. Seven members of the Moran gang died in what soon became known as the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre. This bloodbath was one of many unexpected consequences of what Herbert Hoover called “an experiment noble in purpose”—prohibition.

The “Dry” Perspective: Prohibition Improves Society Traditionalists and progressive reformers saw passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transport of alcoholic beverages, as a great victory. They pointed to evidence that alcoholism caused crime, violence, and the breakup of families. “Drys,” as backers of prohibition were known, believed that stopping people from drinking would result in a healthier, happier society.



In this 1922 photograph, a Washington, D.C., policeman checks to see that a bathing suit hits no higher than six inches above the knee. Traditionalists in many communities passed laws designed to prevent women from appearing in public in immodest clothes. Nonetheless, modernists continued to wear revealing swimsuits.



Federal agents were fighting a losing battle as they tried to destroy stashes of illegal alcohol. The harder they tried to enforce prohibition, the more fashionable it became to flout the law. “When I sell liquor, it’s called bootlegging,” observed Chicago gangster Al Capone. “When my patrons serve it on Lake Shore Drive, it’s called hospitality.”

Drys also saw prohibition as a way of taming city life. Support for prohibition centered mainly in rural areas, and many drys saw the Eighteenth Amendment as a triumph of rural over urban Americans. As one dry put it, prohibition allowed the “pure stream of country sentiment and township morals to flush out the cesspools of cities.” In addition, many traditionalists were suspicious of foreigners. They associated beer drinking with immigrants of German descent and wine drinking with Italian immigrants. To them, prohibition was a way to curb such “foreign” influences.

At first, prohibition seemed to the drys to deliver its expected benefits. The national consumption of alcohol did decline, from an annual average of 2.6 gallons per capita before the war to less than 1 gallon by the 1930s. Fewer workers spent their wages at saloons, to the benefit of their families. The greatest decline in drinking probably occurred in the groups that resented prohibition the most—poor and working-class ethnic groups. In their view, prohibition was just another example of nativist prejudice toward immigrants.

The “Wet” Perspective: Prohibition Restricts Freedom and Breeds Crime

Opponents of prohibition, called “wets,” were small in number at first. But as the law went into effect, their numbers grew. Opposition centered mainly in large cities and immigrant communities.

Many modernists attacked prohibition as an attempt by the federal government to legislate morality. Journalist H. L. Mencken, a champion of modernism, called drys “ignorant bumpkins of the cow states who resented the fact that they had to swill raw corn liquor while city slickers got good wine and whiskey.” Another modernist, Massachusetts Senator David Walsh, rejected traditionalist arguments that drinking was sinful. He reminded drys that the first miracle performed by Jesus had been to turn water into wine. Were Jesus to perform this miracle in prohibition-era America, Walsh observed, “he would be jailed and possibly crucified again.”

Prohibition seemed doomed from the start. In October 1919, Congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment. But the federal government never gave the enforcement agency, called the Prohibition Bureau, sufficient personnel, money, or supplies. The bureau’s agents were simply outnumbered by the millions of Americans who wanted to drink. Hoover later estimated that the government would need 250,000 agents to make prohibition work.

As a result, prohibition led to an increase in illegal behavior by normally law-abiding citizens. Millions of Americans simply refused to abstain from drinking. Some learned how to brew their own “bathtub gin.” Others bought “bootleg” alcohol that was distilled illegally or smuggled into the United States from Canada. As thousands of bars and pubs were forced to close, they were replaced by nearly twice as many secret drinking clubs, called *speakeasies*. The term *speakeasy* came from the practice of speaking quietly about illegal saloons so as not to alert police. A 1929 issue of New York City’s *Variety* boldly reported, “five out of every seven cigar stores, lunchrooms, and beauty parlors are ‘speaks’ selling gin.” The number of *speakeasies* in New York City alone was estimated at 32,000. The widespread availability of illegal alcohol led the humorist Will Rogers to quip, “Prohibition is better than no liquor at all.”



Many Americans—such as the woman shown above—chose to ignore the ban on drinking. Bootlegging became a common trade. In 1929, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Walker Wildebrandt reported that alcohol could be bought “at almost any hour of the day or night.”

The growing demand for liquor created a golden opportunity for crooks like Al Capone. **Bootlegging**—the production, transport, and sale of illegal alcohol—was a multibillion dollar business by the mid-1920s. Chicago bootlegger Capone exhibited his wealth by driving around in a \$30,000 Cadillac while flashing an 11½-carat diamond ring. To keep his profits flowing without government interference, he bribed politicians, judges, and police officers. He also eliminated rival bootleggers. His thousand-member gang was blamed for hundreds of murders. In 1931, Capone finally went to jail—not for bootlegging or murder, but for tax evasion.

As lawlessness, violence, and corruption increased, support for prohibition dwindled. By the late 1920s, many Americans believed that prohibition had caused more harm than good. In 1933, the states ratified the Twenty-First Amendment, which repealed prohibition.

29.5 Modernists and Traditionalists Clash over Evolution

In 1925, Dayton, Tennessee, was a sleepy town of almost 2,000 people, plus a freethinking New York transplant named George Rappelyea. That year, the state legislature passed a law making it illegal for a public school “to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible.”

While chatting with friends one day, Rappelyea mentioned an offer by the American Civil Liberties Union to defend any teacher who would test the law. Why not find one right here, he suggested. A trial would show how foolish the law was. It would also attract national attention to Dayton. One of his friends knew just the man for the job—a young science teacher named John Scopes, who would be willing to teach a lesson on evolution. And so the stage was set for a dramatic contest between modernists and traditionalists over the place of science and religion in public schools.



The Modernist Perspective: Science Shows How Nature Works

Like many modernists, Rappelyea looked to science, not the Bible, to explain how the physical world worked. Scientists accepted as true only facts and theories that could be tested and supported with evidence drawn from nature. By the 1920s, people could see the wonders of modern science every time they turned on an electric light, listened to the radio, or visited their doctors.

One of the most controversial scientific ideas of that time was British naturalist Charles Darwin's **theory of evolution**. Darwin theorized that all plants and animals, including humans, had evolved from simpler forms of life. The evolution of one species from another took place over thousands or millions of years. It worked through a process he called “natural selection.” Others called it “survival of the fittest.” In this process, species that make favorable adaptations to their environment are more likely to survive than those that do not. As favorable adaptations pile up, new species evolve from old ones. In such a way, Darwin argued, human beings had evolved from apes.

Aimee Semple McPherson, a famous fundamentalist preacher, founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. In 1923, she built the Angelus Temple, which sat more than 5,000, in Los Angeles, California. She enhanced her services there with bands, choirs, and other theatrical touches. Radio broadcasts increased her audience and made her a nationally known religious figure.



The Scopes trial pitted the respected fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan, pictured above, against the brilliant defense attorney Clarence Darrow. Although Bryan won the case, he did not win his war against the teaching of evolution. Five days after the trial, Bryan died in his sleep.



John Scopes did not testify during his trial for violating Tennessee's anti-evolution law. But after being found guilty, he addressed the judge: "Your honor, I feel I have been convicted of violating an unjust statute. I will continue in the future, as I have in the past, to oppose this law in any way I can. Any other action would be in violation of my idea of academic freedom—that is, to teach the truth as guaranteed in our Constitution."

Modernists embraced the concepts of evolution and natural selection. Rather than choosing between science and religion, they believed that both ways of looking at the world could coexist. "The day is past," declared a New York City preacher, "when you can ask thoughtful men to hold religion in one compartment of their minds and their modern world view in another." By the 1920s, the theory of evolution was regularly taught in schools.

The Traditionalist Perspective: The Bible Is the Word of God Traditionalists were more likely to see science and religion in conflict. This was especially true of Christian fundamentalists, who believed the Bible was the literal word of God. They rejected the theory of evolution because it conflicted with **creationism**, the belief that God created the universe as described in the Bible.

During the early 1920s, fundamentalists vigorously campaigned to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools. They found a champion in William Jennings Bryan. A spellbinding speaker, Bryan had played a major role in American politics for 30 years. He had run for president three times and served as secretary of state under President Woodrow Wilson. Bryan toured the country, charging that modernists had "taken the Lord away from the schools."

Bryan had two reasons for taking up the creationist cause. The first was his deeply held Christian faith. The second was his fear that teaching evolution could lead young people to accept social Darwinism. This is the belief that as in nature, only the fittest members of a society will survive. Social Darwinism had been used to justify imperialism on the grounds that the fittest, or most powerful, peoples should rule the less powerful. It had also been used to promote **eugenics**, or the idea that the human species should be improved by forbidding people with characteristics judged undesirable to reproduce. Bryan saw such views as a threat to the poor and weak. He worried that widespread acceptance of social Darwinism and eugenics "would weaken the cause of democracy and strengthen class pride and power of wealth."

Creationism Versus Evolution in Tennessee Tennessee became the first state to enact a law banning the teaching of evolution in public schools. The law might not have caused a nationwide stir if Rappelyea had not decided to contest it. He sent a student to pull Scopes off a tennis court and said, "John, we've been arguing, and I said that nobody could teach biology without teaching evolution." Scopes not only agreed but also volunteered to teach a lesson on evolution the next day. Rappelyea then asked the American Civil Liberties Union to defend the young science teacher before going to the police and having Scopes arrested.

The Scopes trial, which began on July 10, 1925, brought far more attention to Dayton than Rappelyea had hoped. Bryan offered to represent the state of Tennessee. Scopes's supporters added high-powered lawyer Clarence Darrow to the defense team. Although Darrow had supported Bryan for president, he disagreed with him about religion and agreed to defend Scopes for free. Some 200 reporters arrived in Dayton as the trial opened, along with tourists and hawkers selling toy monkeys. The whole country was following this contest between creationism and evolution.

In their opening statements, the opposing lawyers recognized that the issue to be decided was much more than whether Scopes had broken the law. "If evolution wins," Bryan had warned, "Christianity goes." Darrow argued, "Scopes isn't on trial; civilization is on trial." To make his point, Darrow had brought a variety of experts to Dayton to testify against the Tennessee law. After hearing one of them, the judge refused to let the rest testify because what they had to say was not relevant to the guilt or innocence of the science teacher.

For a moment, it looked like Darrow had no defense. Then he surprised everyone by calling Bryan to the stand as an expert on the Bible. "Do you claim that everything in the Bible should be literally interpreted?" Darrow asked. Bryan answered, "I believe everything in the Bible should be accepted as it is given there." However, when asked if Earth had been created in six days, Bryan answered, "I do not think it means necessarily a twenty-four-hour day." Creation, he added, "might have continued for millions of years." Darrow had tricked Bryan, the fundamentalist champion, into admitting that he himself did not always interpret each and every word in the Bible as the literal truth.

When the trial ended, it took the jury fewer than 10 minutes to find Scopes guilty, whereupon the judge fined him \$100. A year later, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the conviction because the judge, not the jury, had imposed the fine.

Summary

Culturally, the United States became a deeply divided nation during the Roaring Twenties. Tensions arose between traditionalists, with their deep respect for long-held cultural and religious values, and modernists, who embraced new ideas, styles, and social trends.

Urban versus rural By 1920, the United States was becoming more urban than rural. Urban areas prospered as business and industry boomed. Rural areas declined economically and in population.

Youth versus adults Suspicious of the older generation after the war, many young people rejected traditional values and embraced a new youth culture. Chaperoned courting gave way to unsupervised dating. Flappers scandalized the older generation with their style of dress, drinking, and smoking.

Wets versus dries The Eighteenth Amendment launched the social experiment known as prohibition. The Volstead Act, which outlawed the sale of alcohol, was supported by dries and ignored by wets. The Twenty-First Amendment repealed prohibition in 1933.

Religion versus science Religious fundamentalists worked to keep the scientific theory of evolution out of public schools. The Scopes trial, testing Tennessee's anti-evolution law, was a legal victory for fundamentalists but a defeat in the court of public opinion. The issue of teaching creationism in biology classes is still current today.