

How the Twenties Roared in North Carolina

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The name the Roaring Twenties evokes certain images, such as young people dancing the Charleston, people lining up outside movie theaters, men and women drinking illegal whiskey in bars called speakeasies, and women shopping for new clothes and appliances. With more money in their pockets, many North Carolinians believed that the 1920s would be a decade of continued economic growth.

On the promise of prosperity, people bought cars and radios or took trips to the state's new hotspots, such as Asheville. For others who longed for goods advertised in national magazines, the 1920s meant Listerine, makeup, rayon dresses, or vacuum cleaners that could be purchased in New York City, Chicago, or Raleigh. The 1920s marked the advent of voting for North Carolina's white women. It also meant bobbed hair, short skirts, and cigarettes. For the 75 percent of the state's population who still lived in rural areas, these images served as evidence of both the decline of traditional values and the growing distance between urban and rural America. The Roaring Twenties was a time of change for many North Carolinians who moved to cities and towns across the state. For most, however, it was not an era of prosperity.

The excitement of urban living and the promise of new jobs pulled many North Carolinians to urban areas such as Asheville, Raleigh, Durham, Charlotte, Burlington, and High Point. Hard times in the country also pushed farmers off the land, and they came looking for jobs in rayon and cotton mills, tobacco manufacturing, road construction, and furniture factories. The manufacturing sector prospered in the 1920s. The value of all North Carolina's manufactures was \$944 million in 1920. By 1930 that value had grown to \$1.3 billion.

Textile mills contributed to this urban prosperity. While technological advances mechanized more and more of textile manufacturing, the arrival of textile companies from the Northeast expanded the industry and increased jobs. Not all the growth came from outsiders moving in, however. J. Spencer Love was a native North Carolinian who took part in this expansion. In 1925 Love opened a rayon mill in Burlington that soon grew into Burlington Mills, the nation's leading producer of "synthetic silk." Another North Carolinian, Greensboro's Bernard Cone, applied new theories about scientific management to minimize the waste of time, space, and manpower and, in turn, preserved the profits of the textile mills.

Tobacco manufacturing and furniture making also contributed to North Carolina's prosperity. Black and white North Carolinians took jobs in the ever-expanding tobacco industry in Winston, Durham, and Reidsville. James B. Duke's company made cigarettes, and its fabulous profits made his family rich. His philanthropy transformed Trinity College into Duke University, with its stone spires built from rock from nearby Hillsborough. His electric power company, Duke Power, expanded the number of steam plants and increased the availability of electricity to individuals and industries. Drawing upon the state's wealth of timber, the furniture industry centered in High Point provided jobs, and in the 1920s, North Carolina surpassed Michigan as the nation's leading furniture producer.

North Carolina's governors and legislators used this industrial prosperity to help cement their state's progressive reputation. During the 1920s, state income taxes rose, and the state's coffers grew from automobile and gasoline tax revenues. The "Good Roads Governor," Cameron Morrison, who served from 1921 to 1925, oversaw the expansion of the state's highway and road system—a system that employed construction workers and brought trade and the freedom of travel to people from the Mountains to the coast. Increased state expenditures also improved the education and health-care systems. Some funds filtered down to prison reform and mental health services, making even the most vulnerable North Carolinians beneficiaries of the state's prosperity.

But the prosperity of the 1920s was uneven and did not characterize the entire state. In 1930, 25 percent of North Carolinians lived in urban areas, but the vast majority still lived in rural areas eking out a living from agriculture-related enterprises. The Roaring Twenties was not a flush decade for the state's farmers. As agricultural overproduction drove prices down, a depression settled over the state's farms in the early 1920s. Many farmers lost their land. The number of tenant farmers—farmers who worked but did not own the land—grew during the decade. In fact, the total wealth of North Carolinians actually fell during the Roaring Twenties. Faced with such bleak economic news, many farmers left the land and headed toward the cities.

The cities did not always bring prosperity. The influx of people to urban areas meant that there were often more workers than jobs. With higher levels of unemployment, workers lost the power to negotiate for better wages or better working conditions. A manager could always replace unhappy workers with unemployed men and women. To make matters worse, unstable cotton prices and overproduction reduced the profit margin of the plants. Managers tried to make up for this loss of profit in a number of ways. With new technologies, textile workers could be forced to man more looms, and the number of workers could be reduced. Higher and higher production targets for workers—called the stretch-out—increased the level of labor discontent in the state.

The Roaring Twenties was also a decade of mixed blessings for black North Carolinians. Urbanization did provide new opportunities for African Americans. Many welcomed the jobs that the tobacco industry offered. They did not find jobs in the textile industry, though. In efforts to promote the textile industry in the New South, boosters had promised that the benefits of industrialization would go first to whites. As a result,

African Americans were largely banned from textile work. As continued victims of a Jim Crow system, they suffered the economic costs of another decade of racial segregation. To make matters worse, the Ku Klux Klan experienced unprecedented growth, and violence remained a fact of African American life in North Carolina.

While the 1920s was an age of prosperity for many North Carolinians, this prosperity left many behind. It was also an era of prosperity that did not last. The economic struggles that farmers, textile workers, and African Americans experienced suggested deeper problems with the overall economy. In 1929 textile workers tired of the stretch-out and frustrated by their inability to keep up economically went on strike. Several months later, the stock market crashed, and the age of buying goods on the promise of continued prosperity ended. During the Great Depression, the state government struggled with tighter budgets and less money to spend on projects begun in the 1920s. North Carolinians living in the cities now faced the hard times that farmers had been experiencing. More than a decade would pass before North Carolinians felt economically secure again.

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