Station 1: New Technology and Consumerism

If you walked into a store in the 1920s, you might think you had stumbled into the future. This is a partial list of the items that appeared in that decade: refrigerators, electric stoves, vacuum cleaners, wristwatches, foam rubber, disposable tissues, canned grape juice, and frozen foods.

Throughout the war years, people had sacrificed. Now, like a person coming off a bland diet, Americans began a decade-long buying binge.

Technology Changes American Life

The economy was booming in the 1920s. Both Harding and Coolidge kept government regulation to a minimum, and business flourished. Part of the "roar" in the Roaring Twenties was the growth in the nation's wealth. The average annual income per person rose more than 35 percent during the period-from $522 to $716. This increase in income gave Americans more money to buy goods and to spend on leisure activities.

Automobiles had the greatest impact on life during the 1920s. Henry Ford, who built his first successful automobile in 1896, was determined to make a car that most people could afford. At the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, his dream came true with a car called the Model T. In 1920, Ford produced more than a million automobiles, at a rate of one per minute. Each car cost the consumer $335.

To speed up production and lower costs and prices, Ford used an assembly line. In an assembly line, the product moves along a conveyor belt across the factory. Workers at various stations add parts as the belt moves past them. By the mid-1920s, a Model T came off a Ford assembly line every ten seconds.

Consumer Buying

Part of the "roar" in the "Roaring Twenties" was the growth in the nation's wealth. From 1921 to 1929, the average income per person rose from $522 to $716 a year. There was more money to spend and more to spend it on.

New technologies began making once-costly items available to the middle class. For instance, people who could not afford expensive fabrics could now buy artificial, or synthetic, fabrics such as rayon. Synthetic materials replaced costly wood or metal in many products. This drove prices down. New machines turned out products faster and cheaper, and more industries began to use the assembly line to manufacture their products. This too caused prices to tumble. The cost of a tire and an inner tube, for example, dropped from $30 in 1914 to $15 in 1929.

Even those who did not see a rise in their incomes could join the buying spree. They were able to do this through a new option for consumers: installment buying. A family could now buy its first radio and pay for it over time in small monthly payments rather than all at once. One advertisement for tires told people that they could "Ride Now, Pay Later." As you will read in the next chapter, many people did pay dearly later on.

Powering the Nation

Cheap power fueled the new prosperity. During the 1920s, petroleum and electricity became widely available. They powered machines in the factories and tractors on the farms. They made possible new inventions that made daily life easier. These included vacuum cleaners, washers, sewing machines, toasters, and fans.

You have already read about advances in the use of electricity in the late 1800s. By 1920 electricity flowed into the homes of most Americans.

“What is the world coming to?”

Many writers have said that the 1900s "began" in 1920. What they mean is that much of today’s modem culture was born at that time. The pace of life became much quicker. Cars changed the look and size of cities. Suburbs grew. In 1927 the nation's first commercial airline, Pan American Airways, was founded. Passengers on airplanes could know fly to distant cities in hours.

Other changes brought the nation together as well. Small general stores were replaced by giant, nationwide department store chains. Consumers from coast to coast could now buy the same prod-ucts. The big business of national advertising got its start during this time. New types of mass media - communication that reaches a large public - began to take hold. The first commercial broadcasting station came on the air in 1920, and by 1922 listening to the radio had become a popular craze. New media, such as radio, movies and magazines, spread the latest ideas and fashions.