

Society in the 1920s

READING FOCUS

- How were women's roles changing during the 1920s?
- How were the nation's cities and suburbs affected by Americans on the move from rural areas?
- Who were some American heroes of the 1920s? What made them popular with the American public?

MAIN IDEA

The 1920s were a time of rapid social change, in which many young people, particularly young women, adopted new lifestyles and attitudes. As its rural population decreased, the United States became an urban nation, and traditional values were increasingly challenged.



VIEWING HISTORY Flappers defined a new style of dress.

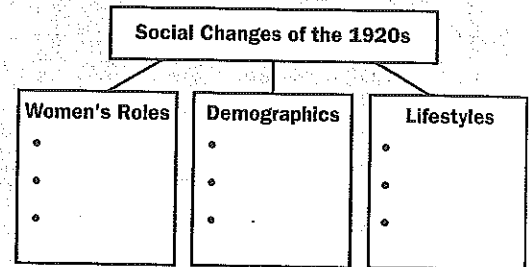
Drawing Inferences How does this young woman's attitude reflect the mood of the 1920s?

KEY TERMS

flapper
demographics
barrio

TAKING NOTES

Copy the chart below. As you read, fill in details relating to various social changes of the 1920s.



Setting the Scene The decade of the 1920s stands out as a time of rapid change in American society. Much of the change had its roots in the previous century. In the late 1800s, industrialization and immigration began transforming the United States into an urban nation. Farm families streamed into the cities. Along with masses of immigrants, the new arrivals helped form a more complex urban culture.

The Great War accelerated those changes. Millions of young people had marched off to war full of enthusiasm. Many returned bearing the scars of that war: shell shock, permanent injury, and the effects of poison gas. Many also came back disillusioned, a condition they shared with others who had stayed home during the war. Together, they questioned the ideas and attitudes that had led to the war. Their challenge of traditional values helped ignite a revolution in manners and morals.

The **flapper** symbolized this revolution. The term described a new type of young woman: rebellious, energetic, fun-loving, and bold. One author depicted the flapper this way:

“Breezy, slangy, and informal in manner; slim and boyish in form; covered in silk and fur that clung to her as close as onion skin; with carmined [vivid red] cheeks and lips, plucked eyebrows and close-fitting helmet of hair; gay, plucky and confident.”

—Preston Slosson, *The Great Crusade and After*, 1930

Many older Americans held more traditional views of how young women were supposed to behave in public. They disapproved not only of the flappers' display of free manners but also of the behavior of the young men who flocked around them.

Of course, not all young women became flappers, and not everyone questioned traditional values. Still, those who did had a lasting effect on society. They helped create what we think of today as modern America.

Women's Changing Roles

Women stood at the center of much of the social change in the 1920s. Both single and married women had been in the work force for a long time. During the war, their numbers rose and they moved into better, higher-paying jobs. After the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted in 1920, all American women could vote. These experiences made them eager for still greater equality with men. Without intending to, the rebellious flapper brought all women closer to that goal.

The Flapper Image The flapper represented only a small number of American women, yet her image had a wide impact on fashion and on behavior. Stylish young women began wearing dresses shorter than their mothers did, to the dismay of some guardians of decency. The fashion page of the *New York Times* declared in July 1920 that "the American woman . . . has lifted her skirts far beyond any modest limitation." At that time, hemlines had risen to just nine inches above the ground. By 1927, they would rise to knee-length or even higher. Between 1913 and 1928, the average amount of fabric used to make a woman's outfit shrank from 19.5 yards to just 7 yards.

Women also broke with the past in other ways. While most of their mothers had grown their hair long and then pinned it up, young women bobbed, or cut short, their hair. Instead of wide-brimmed hats, they wore the close-fitting "cloche," whose bell shape accentuated the new hairstyles. They also began wearing heavy makeup, a practice formerly associated only with actresses or prostitutes.

Women's manners changed as well. Before the 1920s, "proper" women rarely drank anything much stronger than wine, much less smoked, in public. By the end of the decade, many women were doing both, in part to defy Prohibition, but also to express their new freedom. Between 1918 and 1928, the number of cigarettes produced in the United States more than doubled. Though men were smoking more (many switching from cigars and pipes to cigarettes), the new woman smoker accounted for a large part of the increase. All these changes shocked American society and enraged many parents.

Women Working and Voting Although many women bobbed their hair and wore shorter skirts, most did not embrace a flapper lifestyle. Some women adopted the new fashions simply because they were more convenient.

Convenience was an issue for young working women, as they had less time to spend maintaining elaborate wardrobes or hairstyles. During the 1920s, about 15 percent of wage-earning women became professionals and about 20 percent held clerical positions. Generally, these were single white women, although the percentage of married women working increased from 23 percent of the total female work force in 1920 to 29 percent in 1930.

Businesses remained prejudiced against women seeking professional posts. Many hospitals refused to hire female doctors, and many legal firms rejected female lawyers or offered them secretarial jobs. Employers seldom trained women for jobs beyond the entry level or paid them on as high a scale as men. Few women advanced to leadership positions. Employers expected women to quit if they married and became pregnant.

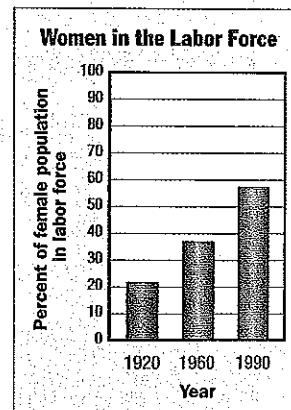
Fast Forward to Today

Women in the Workplace

Over time, the nature of women's work has changed to accommodate the needs of the labor market and changes in attitudes about women working outside the home. In a rural setting, women looking for outside work have typically found their choices more limited than in a city. As more and more people moved from rural areas in the 1920s, growing urban economies made room for women to enter the paid work force. The 1920s saw many women securing clerical jobs, work once reserved for men. From the 1920s to today, work available to women in the United States has expanded from jobs women have traditionally held, such as teaching and nursing, to include a range of options never before available.

As shown by the chart below, the percentage of women in the labor force has risen from the 1920s to the 1990s.

? What types of jobs are limited to rural areas or to cities today?





VIEWING HISTORY In 1920, women in New York City vote after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think more women did not turn out to vote in the early 1920s?

READING CHECK

How did women influence politics in the 1920s?

Like the situation of women at work, women's status in politics changed little. As of 1920, women could vote in all elections. At first, some politicians feared that women might vote as a bloc, or special-interest group. That did not happen. Most women voted along the same lines as men. Moreover, relatively few women voted at all, especially in the early years after gaining national suffrage. Only about 35 percent of women voters went to the polls in 1920. In 1923, a survey asked women in Chicago why they did not vote in the mayoral election. Most notably, about a third said that they lacked interest. Another eleven percent said that they did not think women should vote at all.

Early on, women did not exercise their right to vote for a number of reasons. Women who lived in rural areas or had children to look after had to make special arrangements to get to the polls. Sometimes women's families discouraged them from voting. Other women were not comfortable with the idea of voting. In short, women had yet to make voting a habit, and it would take time for the habit to develop.

As the decade wore on, more women voted, but their choices did not change politics greatly. In national elections, women voted in patterns similar to men's. In local elections, however, women's votes often differed from men's, perhaps because women were more familiar with the candidates and issues.

After the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted, the alliance that worked for suffrage split, weakening its ability to push bills through Congress. Progressive reformers did lobby successfully for the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, the first major federal welfare measure concerned with women's and children's health. A constitutional amendment calling for an end to child labor failed, however. So did the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), introduced in Congress for the first time in 1923. The original wording of the ERA stated that "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction." Some reformers opposed the ERA because it would make the laws requiring special working conditions for women unconstitutional.

Despite their disagreements, women worked together to win political office. Jeannette Rankin of Montana won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1916, becoming the first woman to serve in either house of Congress. Miriam A. Ferguson from Texas and Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming, both wives of former governors, were elected governors themselves in 1924. By 1928, there were 145 women in 38 state legislatures. Thus, although women did not increase their political power as quickly as suffragists had hoped, they did lay a foundation for future participation in government on a larger scale.

Americans on the Move

In addition to social changes, many changes in **demographics** occurred in the 1920s. Demographics are the statistics that describe a population, such as data on race or income. The major demographic change of the 1920s was a movement away from the countryside. The 1920 census showed that for the first time in the nation's history, more Americans lived in urban areas than in rural areas.

Rural-Urban Split The 1920s magnified the gap between rural and urban society. One aspect of that gap was economic. Farmers had done well for the first two decades of the century. After the war, however, market prices dropped while the costs of operation rose. By the early 1920s, many farmers were economically stressed.

Meanwhile, the industrial and commercial economy began to boom. This prosperity bypassed much of rural America. Many farmers reluctantly left the land and headed to cities. During the decade, some 6 million people moved from rural to urban areas.

This migration, combined with urban prosperity, had important effects on society. Attendance at public high schools rose from 2.2 million in 1920 to 4.4 million by 1930. Some of this rise came from an increase in urban population and greater prosperity, but an important part of it resulted from a change in the labor pool. On farms, most older children played vital roles as laborers, so they often had to drop out of school to help their parents. In cities, children needed more education to compete in urban-based industry.

Rural and urban America also split over cultural issues. You read earlier about the change in manners and morals. This general shift away from traditional values took place mainly in the cities. Most rural populations wanted to preserve traditional values, not defy them. They frowned on the flappers and other aspects of society that they deemed immoral or dangerous.

African Americans in the North As you have read, the passage of Jim Crow laws, as well as new job opportunities in the North, produced the Great Migration of blacks from the South to northern cities. This migration continued from the late 1800s through World War I. The boom in northern industries further encouraged this demographic shift.

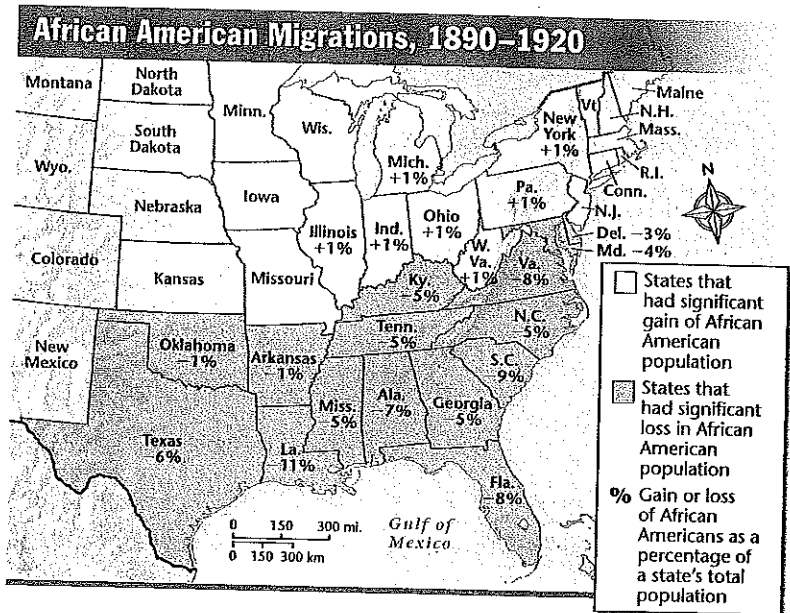
Throughout the early 1900s, jobs for African Americans in the South had been scarce and low-paying. Many factories refused to hire blacks for anything other than menial jobs. As industries expanded during the 1920s, many jobs opened up for African Americans in the North. In 1860, 93 percent of all African Americans lived in the South. By 1910, this figure had dropped to 89 percent. By 1930, it had fallen far more, to 80 percent.

Yet the North was no promised land. African American factory workers often faced anger and hatred from whites, who believed that migrants would work for lower wages and take their jobs. African American women generally worked for very low wages as household help for whites.

Other Migration After World War I, masses of refugees applied for entry into the United States. During the 1920s, Congress acted to limit immigration, especially from southern and eastern Europe and also from China and Japan. Since the limits did not apply to nations in the Americas, employers turned to immigrants from Mexico and Canada to fill low-paying jobs.

In the West, Mexicans supplied most of this labor, migrating to work on the farms of California and the ranches of Texas. In the Northeast, Canadians from the French-speaking province of Quebec traveled south to work in the paper mills, potato fields, and forests of New England and New York.

Migrants also took jobs in the cities. Los Angeles, for example, became a magnet for Mexicans and developed a distinct **barrio**, or Spanish-speaking neighborhood. New York also attracted a Spanish-speaking population—Puerto Ricans migrating in the hope of a better life in the United States.



MAP SKILLS The migration of African Americans from the South to the North helped alter the populations of both regions. *Movement* Which states lost the largest percentages of their black populations?

Growth of the Suburbs As a result of the migrations of the 1920s, American suburbs grew. Suburban growth had begun to accelerate in the late nineteenth century. Cities built transportation systems that used electric trolleys—cars that ran on rails laid in the streets, and were powered by overhead wires. Trolleys allowed people to get from their suburban homes to jobs and stores in the city cheaply.

During the 1920s, buses replaced trolleys in many areas. Buses did not need rails and overhead wires, and thus were less expensive and easier to route. By the mid-1920s, about 70,000 buses were operating throughout the United States. At the same time, the automobile became more affordable to middle-class families and offered even greater flexibility in travel.

New York City provides a good example of the demographic changes that occurred during the 1920s. The number of residents decreased in Manhattan, the heart of the city, while the suburb of Queens saw its population double.

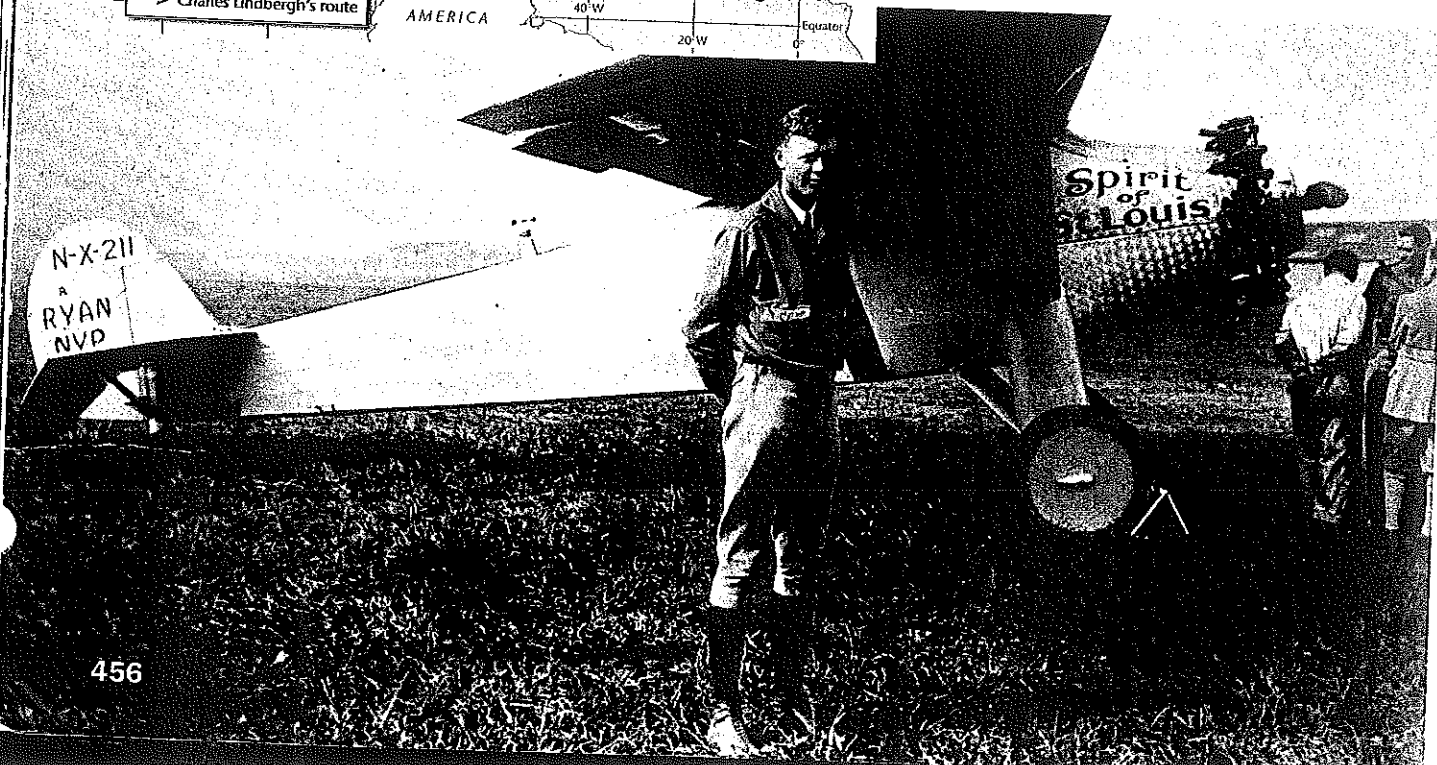
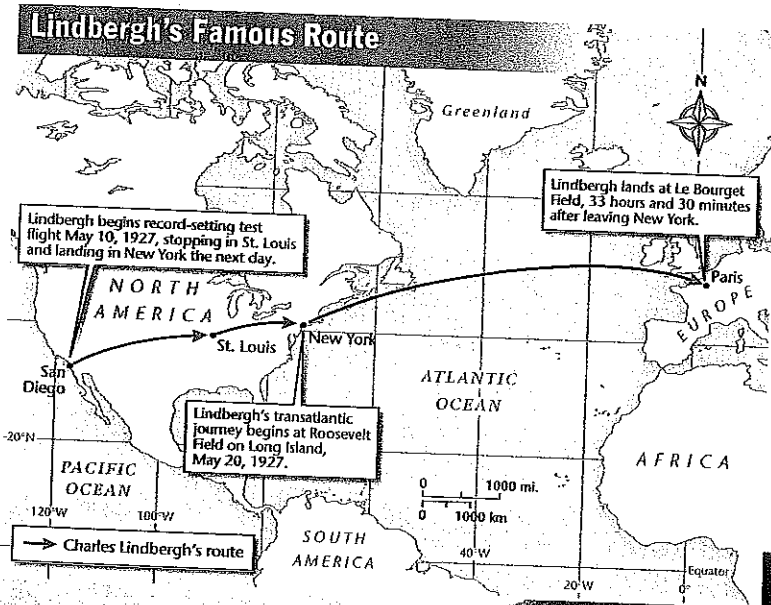
American Heroes

The changing morals of the 1920s made many Americans hungry for the values of an earlier time. Many in the nation became fascinated with heroes. Some were admired for their bravery and modesty, others for the way they showed Americans how to meet new challenges, with spirit and vitality. Among the decade's heroes, none became more famous than Charles Lindbergh.

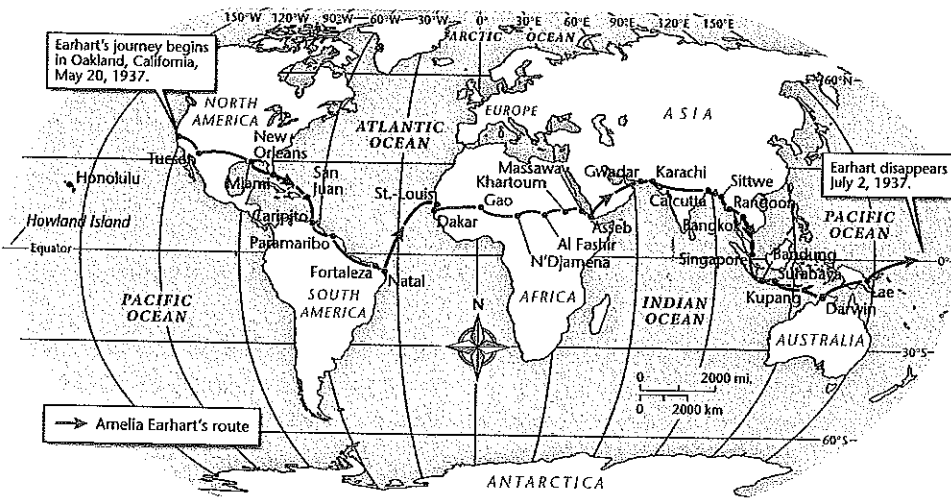
"Lucky Lindy" The sky was drizzling rain at Roosevelt Field on Long Island, New York, on the morning of May 20, 1927. A 25-year-old Minnesotan, Charles Lindbergh, climbed into the cockpit of his plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, and revved the engine. He had not slept much, but he did not dare wait any longer. Two other teams were waiting on the airfield, hoping to be the first to fly nonstop from

MAP SKILLS Charles

Lindbergh's transatlantic flight helped foster the development of commercial aviation. Lindbergh is shown below with his *Spirit of St. Louis*. **Location** What body of water did Lindbergh cross from New York to Paris?



The Last Flight of Amelia Earhart



MAP SKILLS The map shows the route aviator Amelia Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan took in their attempt to fly around the world. **Regions** What continents did Earhart and Noonan fly over on their journey?



Amelia Earhart helped open the field of aviation to more women.

New York to Paris. The prize was \$25,000, and Lindbergh was determined to capture it.

In those days, flying was an infant science. Orville and Wilbur Wright had achieved the first powered, sustained, and controlled airplane flight only two decades earlier, in 1903. Radio and navigation equipment were primitive at best, and Lindbergh had no autopilot to switch on if he grew tired. Flying solo, he would have to stay awake and alert for the entire flight.

The minute Lindbergh's plane was aloft, the news flashed by telegraph and telephone to news desks around the nation. Americans everywhere took notice and began to wait eagerly for the latest word. The newspapers fed this hunger, printing some 27,000 columns of information about Lindbergh in the first few days after his departure.

After a brutal flight over the Atlantic Ocean, battling icy weather and fighting off sleep, "Lucky Lindy" landed safely in an airfield outside Paris, 33½ hours after he had left New York. America went wild with jubilation. Lindbergh was brought home on a navy cruiser, given the Congressional Medal of Honor, and celebrated with parades throughout the nation.

Yet despite this frenzy of hero-worship, Lindbergh remained modest and calm. He refused offers of millions of dollars in publicity fees. To millions of Americans, Lindbergh was proof that the solid moral values of the old days lived on in the heartland of America. The public's fascination with Lindbergh may have played a role in a great tragedy for him, however, when one night his firstborn son was kidnapped from his crib. The child was later found murdered. Ironically, the murder case brought Lindbergh and his family more media attention than ever before.

Amelia Earhart Lindbergh's feat inspired later flyers, including Amelia Earhart. In 1928, Earhart became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, although she was only a passenger. In 1932, she made the trip on her own, becoming the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. Later Earhart set another record, as the first person to fly solo from Hawaii to California, a challenge that had resulted in the deaths of many aviators before her. In 1937, Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, tried to fly around the world. After completing two thirds of the trip, they disappeared mysteriously while crossing the Pacific Ocean.

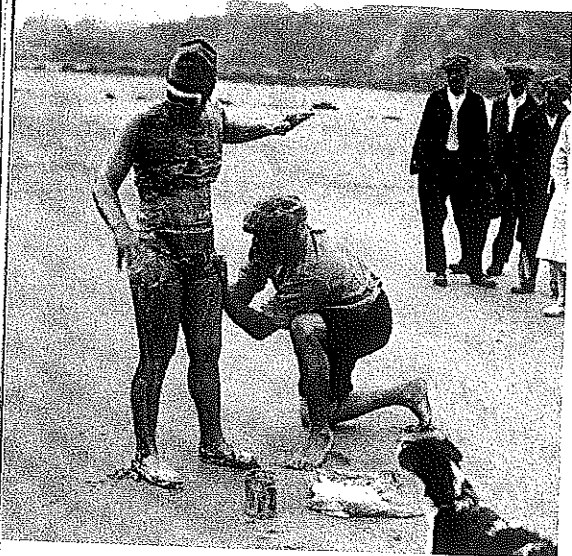
Sports Heroes Though spectator sports had long been popular with the American public, they became big business in the 1920s. The new, heavy commercialization of sports led to larger audiences and more revenues. A highly publicized fight between boxers Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier in 1921 broke the record for ticket sales, taking in \$1 million. Dempsey won the fight to become the heavyweight champion of the world and a new American hero.

Another hero, Jim Thorpe, starred as a professional football player in the 1920s. By then he was in the late stages of his career, and his role was to attract fans to the games. Earlier, he had won Olympic gold medals in the decathlon and pentathlon and had also played professional baseball. Thorpe, a Native American, was elected the first president of what later became the National Football League.

Of all the sports heroes of the era, none generated more excitement than baseball's George Herman "Babe" Ruth, known as "the Sultan of Swat." During his career with the Boston Red Sox and then with the New York Yankees, Ruth hit 714 home runs, a record that was unbroken for nearly 40 years. In 1927, the champion enthralled Americans by setting the legendary record of 60 home runs in a 154-game season.

Women who excelled in sports included Hazel Wightman and Helen Wills, Olympic and Wimbledon tennis stars, and Gertrude Ederle, who smashed record after record in women's freestyle swimming. Ederle won one gold and two bronze medals in the 1924 Olympic Games. Newspapers hailed her as the "bob-haired, nineteen-year-old daughter of the Jazz Age." Her coach explained that her feat was a product of modern times. Thirty years previously, he said, "corsets and other ridiculously unnecessary clothing" would have hampered her physical conditioning. In 1926, Ederle became the first woman to swim the English Channel, having made an unsuccessful attempt the year before. She covered some 35 miles, taking into account crosscurrents and rough water. Her time beat the men's record by nearly two hours.

Besides being eager spectators, more Americans participated in amateur sports during the 1920s. With wide-ranging transportation, such as buses and automobiles, plus more leisure time, people took up golf, tennis, swimming, and many other types of recreation.



VIEWING HISTORY At Cape Gris Nez, France, Gertrude Ederle is greased up in preparation for her swim across the English Channel.

Analyzing Visual Information What does the photograph show about the difficulties of a Channel swim and what the feat might mean to the public?

Section

1

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. How did the **flapper** symbolize change for women in the 1920s?
2. What conditions brought about the **demographic** shifts of the 1920s?
3. How did a **barrio** develop in Los Angeles during the 1920s?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

4. **Making Comparisons** How is today's youth culture similar to the youth culture of the 1920s?
5. **Writing a News Brief** Write a short news article and headline reporting on women voting in 1920 after the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment.



Take It to the NET

Activity: Writing a Biography
Research the lives of Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.
www.phschool.com