**A Period of Extremes**

For many, the 1920s was a time of excess, of extremes. It was Flappers, Jazz, and speakeasies; it was the Roaring Twenties. At the other end of the spectrum, however, Jim Crow and racism kept the nation segregated, and for many farmers the Great Depression had already essentially begun.

Steinbeck's writings chronicled a disappearing way of life. His major works set in the 1920s and 1930s examine the lives of people in rural, agrarian settings. But the frontier had been declared officially closed by the 1890 census and the census of 1920 found that the urban population had finally surpassed the rural population. The nation was becoming more and more industrialized, mechanized, and urban - trends that had widespread effects on the lives of Americans.

#### Economy

World War I (1914-1918) put the American economy into high gear. Even prior to the United States joining the war, the nation was producing and exporting materiel of war for sale to, primarily, the Allied Powers. With America's entrance into the war in 1917, the economy became even more engulfed in wartime production. Factories output more weapons, mechanical parts, gunpowder, clothing for uniforms, and much more. Farmers purchased more land, expanded their farms, and produced large amounts of food and cotton to supply the demands of the war in Europe.

After the war this new, highly demanding market disappeared and the economy took a brief downturn. Factories that had been producing weapons and other materials no longer had a large demand to supply. Workers were laid off as industries downscaled and refocused on peacetime production. Farmers who had been producing massive amounts of crops for the war suddenly were left holding more than they could sell. Crop prices plummeted and unemployment was on the rise; the country was in a recession.

For farmers, this trend was made worse during the Twenties by a variety of manmade and natural factors. Overproduction on the land during the war years depleted the soil, making it less productive. Meanwhile, the decade saw droughts that made matters worse for farmers; these conditions would, unfortunately, continue to worsen until the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. With post war prices so low, many farmers lost their land when they could no longer keep up with their loan payments. Banks repossessed farmland and sold it, often, to large agribusiness operations. Family owned farms worked by man and horse power were replaced by absentee landowners and tractors. This trend worsened during the Great Depression and is seen most starkly in the travails of the Joad Family in The Grapes of Wrath.

While farmers suffered throughout the 1920s, manufacturing rebounded in 1922 and continued to grow and prosper throughout the decade. This is seen most clearly in the automobile industry. The moving assembly line made manufacturing quicker and more productive, allowing automobiles to become less expensive and easier to purchase. Ford's Model T, priced at $260 in 1920, became a car that working class families could afford. More manufacturing jobs meant more people in the workforce who could purchase those automobiles. The industry boomed, creating millions of jobs in related industries including steel, oil, highway construction, tourism, and more. Traveling by automobile was a newfound freedom for millions of Americans, one that allowed them to travel to destinations on their own schedule - and to places where the railroad did not go. This ability to pick up and travel at will would become essential to the migration of millions of people heading west, fleeing the Dust Bowl in the early 1930s.

#### Social

The 1920s were a time of liberation for many. Women, after nearly a century of concerted effort, had finally won the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Millions of young men returned from fighting in Europe; they had seen the world and returned to find that life in rural America no longer interested them. Also, with the agricultural economy in such shambles, there was little hope for many young men returning home to life on a farm. Many moved to urban areas for opportunities, both economic and social.

Industrialization had been drawing young adults from rural farming areas into the urban, industrial working environments for decades; the process was accelerated by the war effort. Although Rosie the Riveter and World War II are generally thought of as the time when women joined the workforce in large numbers, this had been going on since the textile mills of the 19th century, and World War I accelerated the process. African Americans also joined the industrial workforce. Millions of African Americans left the South in what is known as The Great Migration, heading north and west to urban areas. This urban and industrial growth was enhanced when soldiers returned from the war, many of whom did not return to their rural roots. The 1920s saw a large population of young adults in urban areas with income to spend and relative freedom from their parents' watchful eyes. For them, the 1920s was a time of liberation, consumption, and excitement; a time of Jazz, Flapper dresses, and the speakeasy: The Roaring Twenties.

For African Americans the 1920s helped to give more momentum to the steadily building Civil Rights Movement. Many men fought in the war and helped to push the German army out of France. They were treated as heroes by the French people, but they fought in units segregated by race. Back home in the United States, Jim Crow continued to reign. When they returned home, these war heroes were again treated like second class citizens. The larger world called out to them, as did opportunities in large American cities, especially in the North where racism was less extreme. They joined a growing population of African Americans who had migrated out of the South for war time jobs.

Whether they moved out of the South or not, African Americans encountered rampant racism. Jim Crow still gripped the South, but the North was only better by comparison. Lynchings were still a reality across the nation. One of the last public lynchings occurred in San Jose, California in 1933, inspiring Steinbeck's "The Vigilante," published in [The Long Valley](http://sits.sjsu.edu/context/historical/hist_context_1920s/%7B%7Bf:1633766%7D%7D). Although the lynching in San Jose was of two white men believed to have kidnapped and murdered the oldest son of a prominent San Jose family, the victim in "The Vigilante" was a black man.

Whether or not Steinbeck was making a larger point about racism and lynching, his choice reflects the broader image that black men were most often the targets of lynching. Steinbeck touches this issue again in Of Mice and Men with the character Crooks. The threat of lynching was a tangible fear to black men who dared to step "out of line" or who were successful in business. The civil rights and women's rights crusader Ida B. Wells was a prominent leader in the Anti-Lynching movement from the 1890s to her death in the 1931. Her pamphlets and speeches spoke of the realities of lynching and its use as a way to keep African Americans beneath whites.

#### California and the West

Migration west continued throughout the 1920s. California in particular drew people chasing the American Dream. Land was still cheap during the Twenties and agriculture was still a growing business. Whether you were looking for work or to establish yourself as a farmer, California was an attractive destination.

California's economy depended heavily on migration. Land speculation and boosterism drew people to the state looking to start fresh and to make it big. Migrants came from the East and the South, but also from outside the United States. Filipino immigrants came to California in large numbers during the Twenties, mostly to work as farm laborers. Agribusiness was on the rise across the nation's farmland, and nowhere was this more prominent than in California.

Agribusiness-friendly Growers Associations would often use Filipino laborers instead of the more expensive white migrants - especially those that attempted to organize unions. This led to racial tension between whites and Filipinos in California that grew to a violent head in the 1936 Salinas Lettuce Strike.

Further drawing migrants to California was the oil boom that took place during the 1920s. The oil industry exploded in the Los Angeles area. By 1923, California became the leading producer of oil, bringing more jobs and wealth into the state. As a result, Los Angeles grew rapidly and widely. The automobile made it possible for people to live further from work and the congested city centers. Suburbs sprawled inland, making Los Angeles County the wide-spread network of suburbs and highways that it still is today.

Along with migrants into the state came tourists, drawn to California's beaches and weather. The growing highway system and the freedom of the automobile fueled the tourist industry in California. But this economic growth, based on leisure time, consumption, and a surplus of jobs, made California particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Great Depression looming just around the corner. When the Stock Market crashed in 1929 and the Dust Bowl decimated the livelihood of farmers in the Midwest, leisure time and spending money dried up while millions of Dust Bowl refugees poured into the state, flooding the labor market and driving down wages.