

READING: America & The Roaring 20s



were wearing bathing suits that left their legs uncovered. Police arrested women on the beaches for doing that. And makeup! “Nice” women started wearing lipstick, rouge, and powder. The older generation worried. “What is the world coming to?”

Those girls who bobbed their hair and wore short skirts and



lipstick were called flappers. They did other

things, too. They drove automobiles, got jobs, went to the movies, read romantic novels, played ping-pong, and danced. My, did they dance! It was the big thing in the ‘20s. And the big dance was the Charleston. (In New York City, Gimbel’s department store advertised special Charleston dresses that swung loose on the body. (The price was \$1.58.) When you danced the Charleston you swung your arms, kicked up your heels, knocked your knees together, and moved frantically.

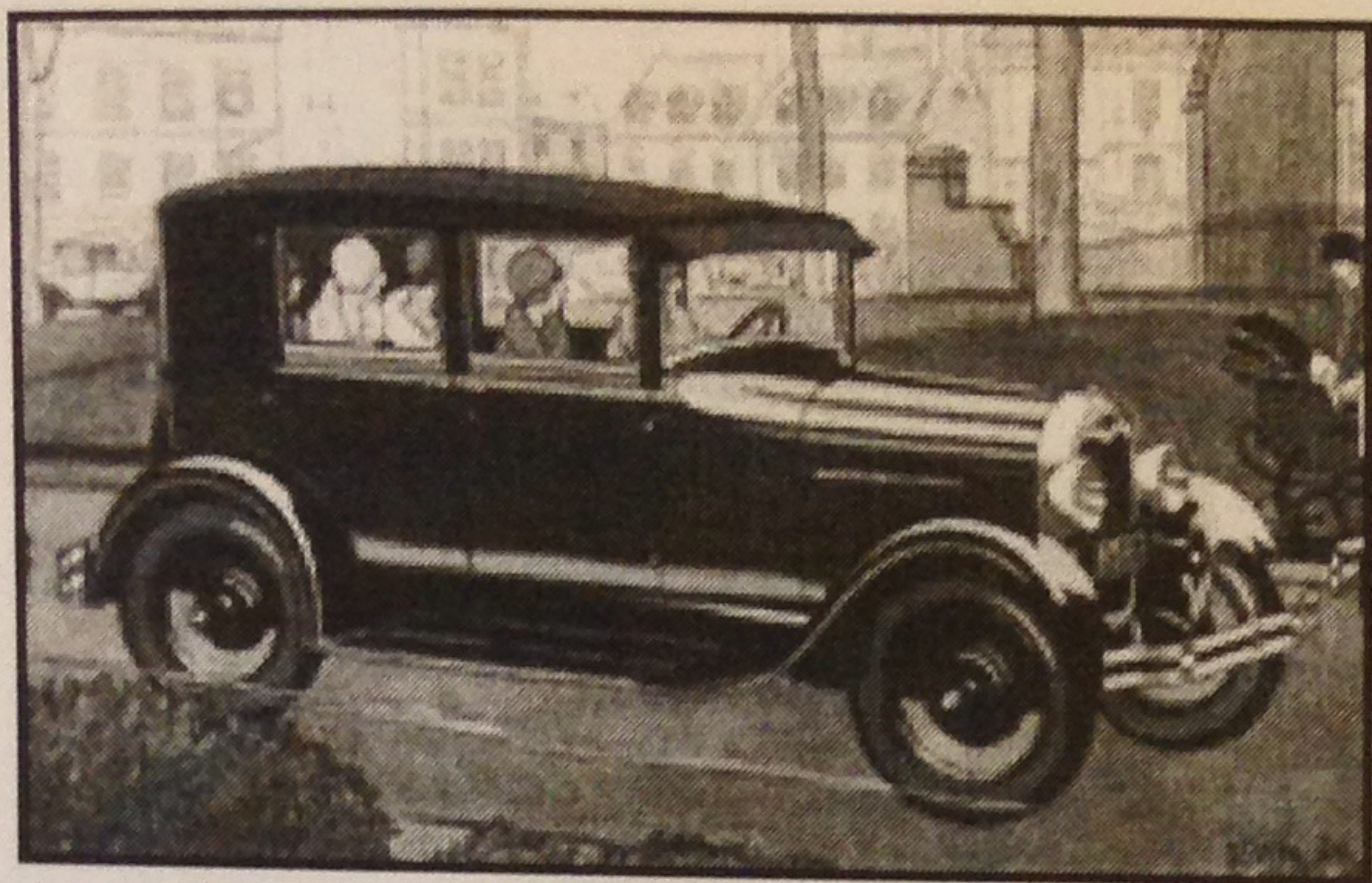
Frantic is a good word to describe the ‘20s. The idealism of the Wilson years seemed to have come to nothing. After the war, everything was supposed to be better. But anyone could see that it wasn’t. And there was the Prohibition idea. Americans wanted to have a good nation—where all the people behaved themselves and didn’t get drunk— but that wasn’t working either. If you read the newspapers you could

The 1920s were a confusing time. They were called the “Roaring Twenties” because everyone seemed to be intent on having a good time. The decade has also been called the “Jazz Age” and the “Dance Age.” I would have been fun to be alive in the ‘20s.

It was a time of great change. In 1919, before the ‘20s began their roar, women’s ankles sometimes could be glimpsed beneath long skirts. Those ankles, however, were modestly hidden behind high-topped shoes. Then skirts started going up, and up, and up.

That made it a tough time to be the parent of a girl. IT wasn’t easy to be a girl then either. Most young women were cutting their hair— short. They called it bobbing. Some parent wouldn’t allow it. Short hair seemed indecent to the older generation, but up to the minute to those who did it. The girls who weren’t allowed to cut their hair felt old-fashioned.

The first motion picture with synchronized sound, **Don Juan**, opens in 1926 and stars heartthrob John Barrymore. The sound comes from a phonograph record (Until now, theaters have usually hired a piano player to play along with films.) The first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, opens in 1927.



see that criminals were becoming rich and powerful selling liquor. So maybe the best thing to do was to forget about ideals and have a good time- frantically- which was what a lot of Americans did in the '20s.

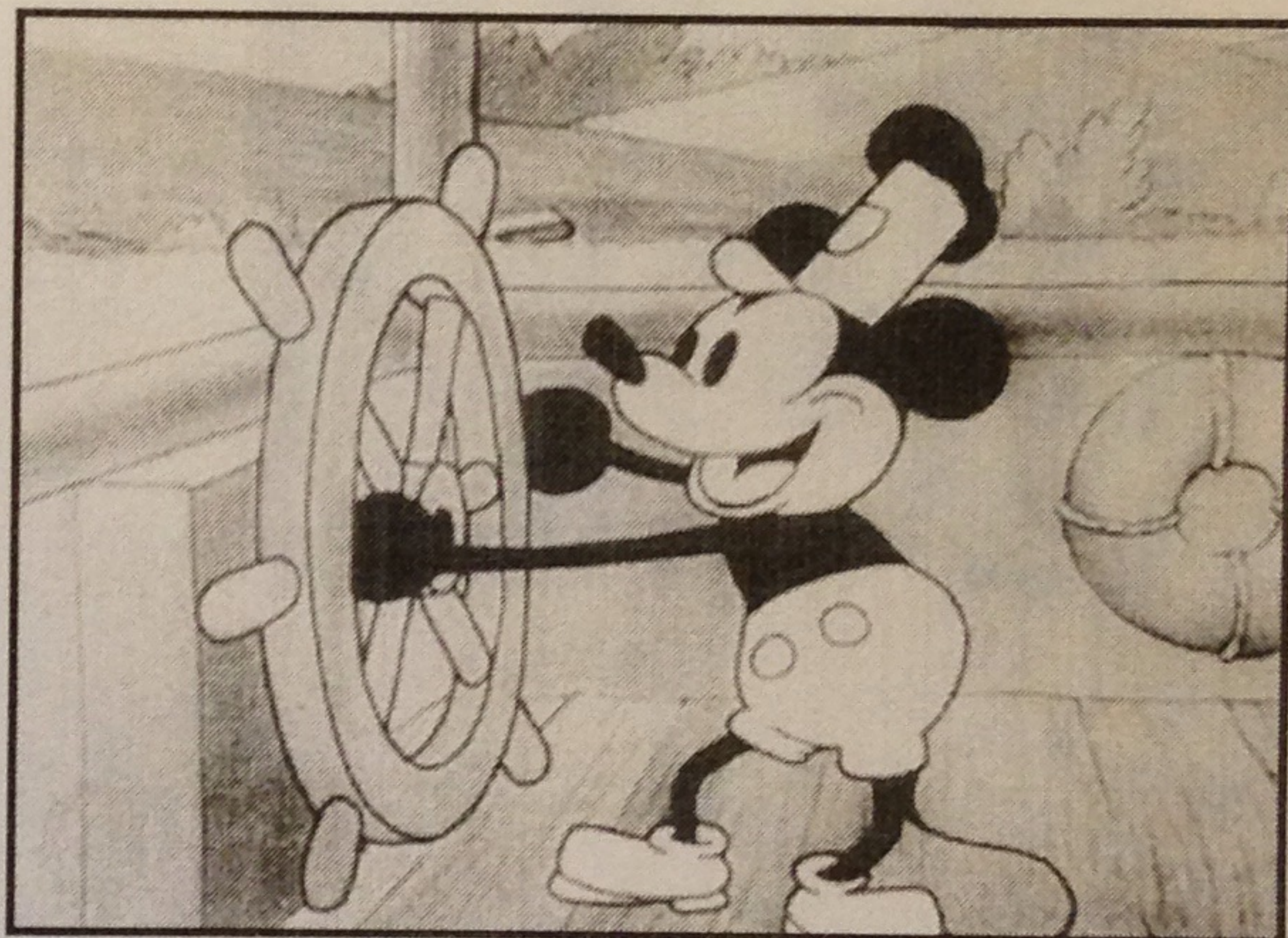
It was a materialistic age. People concentrated on making money and buying things for themselves. Successful businesspeople became national heroes. There were more rich people than ever before in American history. For most Americans, the times seemed good. The stock market- like

women's hems- went up and up and up. Land values boomed. People were able to buy things they never could buy before. In 1920 the car was a novelty. Ten years later, almost every family had a car. Many Americans who didn't have indoor toilets in their homes had cares in their yards. The automobile was becoming a necessity.

Before the war, life had been slow-paced; now change was coming with cyclone speed. Ordinary people owned radios and listened to comedy shows and the nightly news. In Florida, in 1924, a schoolboy named Red Barber heard radio for the first time at a friend's house. Barber was so excited he stayed up most of the night listening to the news from around the nation.

It was a new experience. "A man...in Pittsburgh said it was snowing there...someone sang in New York...a banjo plunked in Chicago...it was sleeting in New Orleans." (Red later became a radio sportscaster) Young people were flocking to the movies and in 1927, movie began to talk. Talk about fun!

The following year in Hollywood, California, a young filmmaker named Walt Disney produced the first animated sound film, *Steamboat Willie*, and introduced a little mouse named Mickey to the American public.



Suddenly, America seemed filled with artistic geniuses: musicians George Gershwin and Aaron Copland; writers Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; and artists Mary Cassatt, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton. And those are just a few of the names.

In New York, Harlem began vibrating with artistry. It was contagious. Playwrights, poets, musicians, artists, and actors, all living within a few blocks of each other, were sharing ideas. Langston Hughes,

Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen began writing poetry. Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer wrote novels and Romare Bearden painted pictures. And Duke Ellington and a whole lot of other people made music. Artistic excellence was something that the segregationists couldn't suppress. And Harlem, during this time known as the Harlem Renaissance, exploded with creativity.

In 1927, sculptor Gutzon Borglum, using a steam shovel and dynamite as chisel and mallet, begins carving four gigantic heads (60 feet high) on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. (Whose heads are they?)