

Lesson 1: Interpreting History

Teacher Instructions

Overview

The 1920s were a time of unprecedented growth for the American economy. Businesses were thriving, stock prices were soaring, and wages were climbing. Mass production allowed new products to hit the market at an alarming rate. New items like cars, fridges, washing machines, pianos, vacuum cleaners, furniture, and radios were making life easier for millions of Americans. If you couldn't afford these items you could buy them on credit. America was truly becoming a land of plenty...with some exceptions.

After World War I, American farmers were no longer producing to meet a global demand. Surpluses formed as a result, and food prices began to fall. Unable to make payments on their farm loans, many farmers lost their farms.

This lesson is designed to allow students to “do history” and discover these causes on their own. By evaluating the pictures, graphs, and quotes on their handouts students will be able to understand why the 1920s were prosperous without ever opening a textbook or hearing a lecture.

Lesson Objectives

- Students will be able to identify the causes of prosperity in the 1920s.

Materials

- Handout: Interpreting History Worksheets (Each worksheet will go to 1/5 of the class)

Activity

This activity works best as an introduction to the unit. To begin the lesson, we like to put the Essential Question up on the board, “What caused the economic prosperity of the 1920s?” You may get a few responses, but for the most part students will have no idea. This perceived lack of knowledge serves as a nice transition into the lesson. Let them know that they probably know more than they think, and that they will be able to answer the question by the end of the lesson.

The lesson itself is a basic jigsaw activity. You will hand out one of the worksheets to each student. You will want to have as close to the same number of students working on each worksheet as you can to make the activity work properly. (Ideally, you will have a class size that is divisible by 5, but if not you may have uneven groups.)

The first step is to have all of the students with the same worksheet get together and complete the questions about their assigned documents. Their individual worksheet will lead them to one of the causes of economic prosperity from the 1920s: mass production, consumer goods/advertising, government policies, and the bull market. All of the questions are scaffolded to ultimately guide them to the answer the essential question. (Note: The group with the farmers worksheet may be confused. Having your farm foreclosed doesn't seem like a cause of prosperity. They would be correct in this assumption. You may have to help them understand that they are the exception to the rule.) Instruct students that they are to become “experts” on their particular cause.

Once all groups have finished, you will then instruct them to form new groups. Now they must have one member (or more depending on your class size) from each group represented in their new groups. Each student has a different worksheet, and should be a certified “expert” on that information. Each member of the group should give a brief explanation of their cause to the others. The students who are listening, should be noting the important aspects of each worksheet. Once all members of the group have shared their responses, have students return to their seats.

Wrap Up

The end of the lesson is to have every student write a brief paragraph explaining what caused the economic prosperity. We generally use this as a formative assessment so that misconceptions can be noticed and addressed when doing the supporting lecture to this assignment. It works great as an exit slip for the end of class, but it could also be a higher value assessment that you have them prepare for homework.

Interpreting History – Document A

Directions: Examine the items below and answer the questions that follow.



“I will build a car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one — and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces.”

-Henry Ford, 1922

American Automobile Sales in the 1920s

Year	Number of Cars Sold
1920	2 million
1921	1.5 million
1922	2.5 million
1923	3.6 million
1924	3.2 million
1925	3.7 million
1926	3.7 million
1927	3 million
1928	3.7 million
1929	4.5 million

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Questions

1. Examine the picture at the top of the page. Write down your initial impressions. What do you think is happening?

2. How might this be different from the way the task may have been done before?

3. What would be the benefit of doing the task this way instead of the old way?

4. Now read the quote at the bottom of the page. Explain what Henry Ford is saying as it relates to the picture.

5. Now interpret the chart at the bottom of the page. Does the chart reflect what you would expect based on the picture and the quote? Why or why not?

6. Think about the automotive industry. What other industries might benefit from more cars being sold?

7. Finally, put it all together. How does the information on this page help answer the overall question – What caused the economic growth of the 1920s?

Interpreting History – Document B

Directions: Examine the items below and answer the questions that follow.

CHILDREN LOVE GOOD SOUP



Almost a whole meal!

Campbell's Vegetable Soup combines in each delightful plateful fifteen luscious vegetables, hearty cereals, flavory herbs, and the invigorating essence of choicest beef. Each spoonful comes to you richly laden with delicious solid foods, blended with pure meat broth and tasty vegetable juices.

Campbell's Vegetable Soup makes the best part of a luncheon—it is so nourishing and filling. At dinner you can easily reduce the number of your other dishes by serving it. There is so much rich, strengthening food in this Campbell's Soup that it is used as a regular article of diet in millions of homes. Have it today.

21 kinds 12 cents a can

Campbell's SOUPS
LOOK FOR THE RED AND WHITE LABEL

We call our garden "Campbell's Own."
There all the nicest things are grown—
Baby limas, darling peas
And everything that's sure to please.



UNIVERSAL
The Trade Mark known in every Home
Home Needs



"I don't mind Housekeeping a bit!"
The Universal Housewife Says—

NO wonder—with UNIVERSAL Home Needs to do the hard work. Really—they make housework a pleasure. And how they do cut down the bills!

With the **UNIVERSAL Coffee Percolator** it's the matter of a few minutes to make coffee of delicious flavor. The **UNIVERSAL Food Chopper** makes delicious dishes from left-overs that would ordinarily go to waste. Saves its cost many times over in the food it saves.

Perfect Bread in the **UNIVERSAL Bread Maker** in three minutes. The **Cake Maker**, **M-zonnaise Mixer**, **Tea Ball Tea Pot**, and scores of other **UNIVERSAL Home Needs** all doing their part to lessen the housewives' work. And with **UNIVERSAL Aluminum Ware** gleaming from shelf and cabinet—the Universalized Kitchen is truly a wonderful "workroom" of the home.

UNIVERSAL Electric Grill and Toaster prepare a complete meal right at the table. Handy and economical. All the conveniences of a kitchen at your hand.

The **UNIVERSAL Electric Waffle Iron** makes delicious waffles at the turn of a switch. Served piping hot in less than two minutes. No smoke, no odor.

UNIVERSAL Vacuum Cleaner has conveniently located toggle switch and pistol grip which fits the hand. Full width nozzle, and for picking up thread, lint, etc., which cannot be removed by air alone, there is a gear-driven brush. Is beautifully finished in Verd Antique.

UNIVERSAL Electric Washer—beautifully enameled cabinet with all moving parts enclosed. Gear-driven mechanism, automatic safety clutch. Light, durable, sanitary cylinder, non-sagging, swinging wringer, with safety release. Locks in four positions; will not operate except when in position. Self-draining tub.

UNIVERSAL Electric Iron takes the drudgery out of ironing—saving many tedious steps to and from the hot stove carrying a heavy iron. No roasting in a stuffy kitchen. Iron in comfort anywhere.

On sale at Hardware, Housewifery and Department Stores,
Electric Appliances at Electric Dealers and Lighting Companies.
Write for FREE Booklet No. 88, "Universalize Your Home."

LANDERS, FRARY & CLARK, New Britain, Connecticut
Metalworks for over Half a Century © 1919 L. F. C. C.

"UNIVERSAL Devices Help Solve the Servant Problem"



"No nation in the history of the world was ever sitting as pretty. If we want anything, all we have to do is go buy it on credit. So that leaves us without any economic problems whatsoever, except perhaps someday having to pay for them. But we are certainly not thinking of that this early."

-Will Rogers
Radio commentary,

Percentage of American Families Owning Various Appliances, 1920 and 1930

	1920	1930
Inside flush toilets	20%	51%
Central heating	1%	42%
Home lighting with electricity	35%	68%
Mechanical refrigerators	<1%	8%
Washing machines	8%	24%
Vacuum cleaners	9%	30%
Radios	<1%	40%
Automobiles	26%	60%

Source: Lebergott, Stanley. 1976. *The American Economy: Income, Wealth, and Want*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Questions

1. Examine the advertisements at the top of the page. What products are being advertised?

2. How do the ads try to convince consumers that they need these products?

3. Why would these products be beneficial to the consumer?

4. Now read the quote at the bottom of the page. What does Will Rogers say about buying products in the 1920s?

5. Now interpret the chart at the bottom of the page. Does the chart reflect what you would expect based on the pictures and the quote? Why or why not?

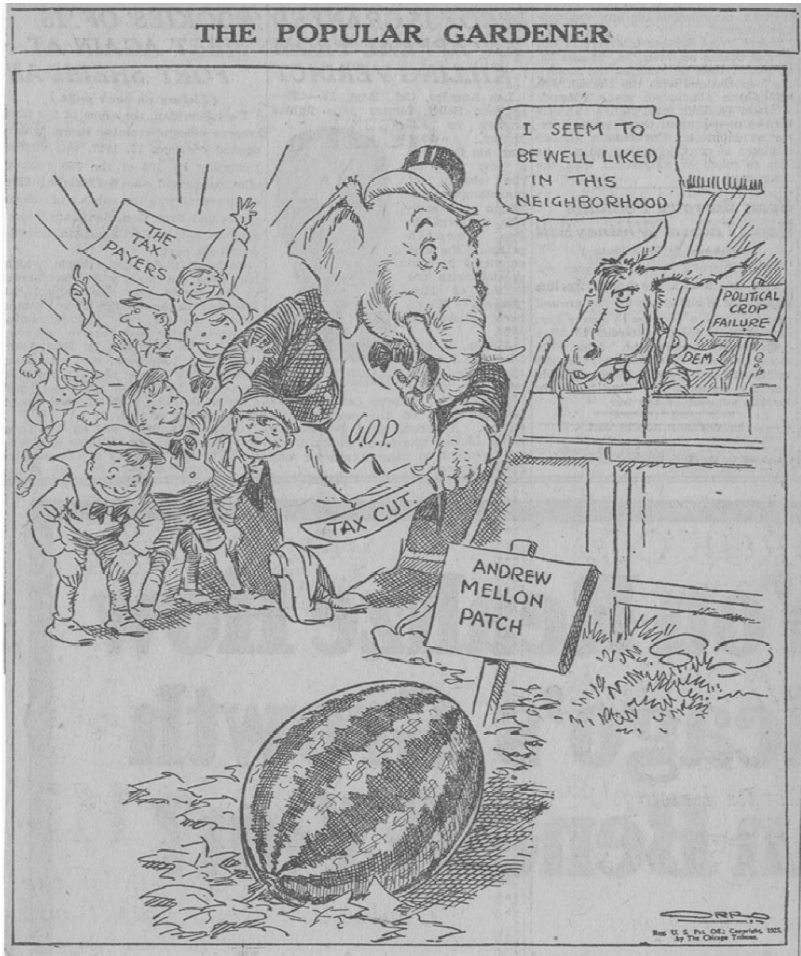
6. How does credit work? What are the positives and negatives of buying items on credit?

7. Finally, put it all together. How does the information on this page help answer the overall question – What caused the economic growth of the 1920s?



Interpreting History – Document C

Directions: Examine the items below and answer the questions that follow.



Source: Orr, Carey. Chicago Tribune. September 16, 1925.

"We mean to have less of Government in business and more business in Government."

-President Warren Harding

"After all, the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world."

- President Calvin Coolidge

FIGURE 2 – UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (1920-1930)

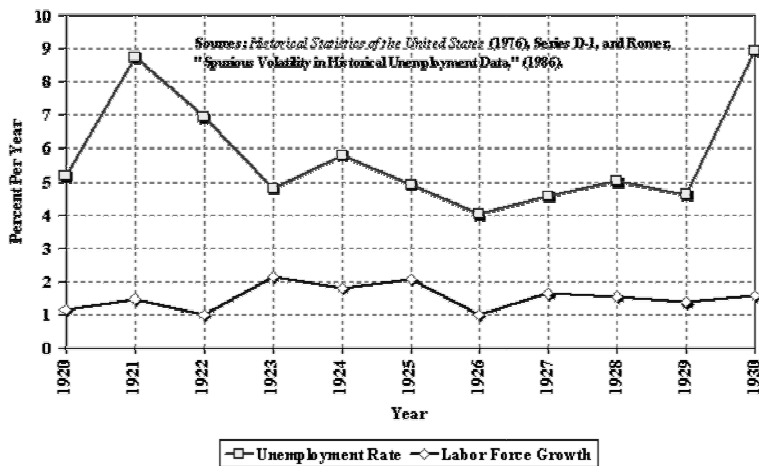
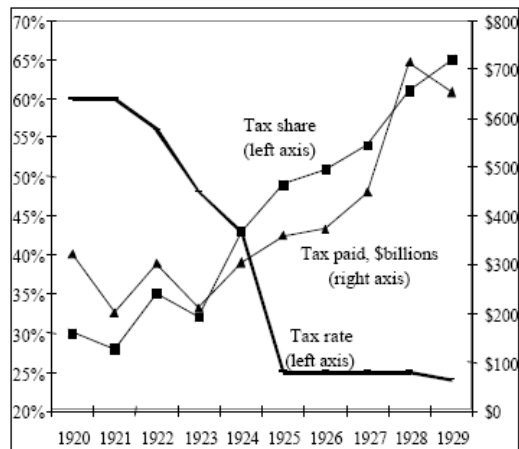


FIGURE 1 – MARGINAL TAX RATE FOR THOSE WITH INCOME OVER \$100,000



Source: U.S. Department of Treasury, "Statistics of Income," annual 1920 to 1929. The tax rate shown is for taxpayers at \$100,000; for years before 1925, the top rate was even higher.

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Questions

- 1. Examine the political cartoon at the top of the page. Write down your initial impressions. What do you think it is trying to express?

- 2. Look at Figure 2, how does it relate to the political cartoon?

- 3. Now look at Figure 1. What do you notice about unemployment? How might that relate to the political cartoon and Figure 2?

- 4. Now read the quotes at the top of the page. What do these quotes from Presidents Harding and Coolidge tell you about the focus of government in the 1920s?

- 5. What are some ways in which the government can stimulate business?

- 6. Finally, put it all together. How does the information on this page help answer the overall question – What caused the economic growth of the 1920s?



Interpreting History – Document D

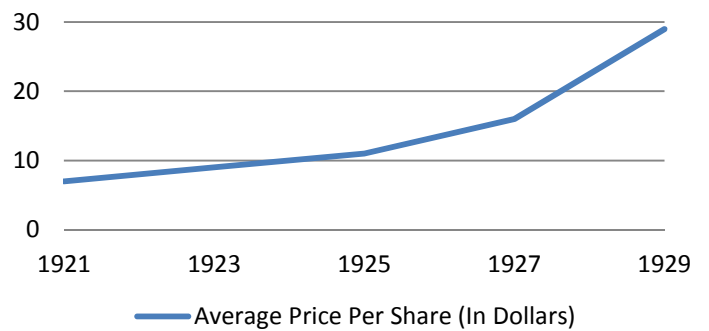
Directions: Examine the items below and answer the questions that follow.



"Stock prices have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau."

- Irving Fisher
Summer 1929

Average Price of Selected Stocks, 1921-1929



Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Questions

1. Examine the picture at the top of the page. Write down your initial impressions. What do you think is happening?

2. Now read the quote at the bottom of the page. Explain what Irving Fisher is saying as it relates to the picture.

3. Now interpret the chart at the bottom of the page. Does the chart reflect what you would expect based on the picture and the quote? Why or why not?

4. What causes stock prices to rise and fall?

5. Finally, put it all together. How does the information on this page help answer the overall question – What caused the economic growth of the 1920s?



Interpreting History – Document E

Directions: Examine the items below and answer the questions that follow.



"The farmer has to be an optimist or he wouldn't still be a farmer."

"Every time somebody has thought of relief for the farmer it has been to make it so he could borrow more money. What he needs is some way to pay back. Not some way to borrow more."

Will Rogers

TABLE 1 - FARM MORTGAGE FORECLOSURE RATE



Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Questions

1. Examine the picture at the top of the page. Write down you initial impressions. What do you think is happening?

2. Now read the quote at the bottom of the page. Explain what Will Rogers is saying as it relates to the picture.

3. Now interpret the chart at the bottom of the page. Does the chart reflect what you would expect based on the picture and the quote? Why or why not?

4. What might explain the situation farmers faced in the 1920s? What causes crop prices to rise and fall?

5. Finally, put it all together. How does the information on this page help answer the overall question – What caused the economic growth of the 1920s? (Hint: Maybe it doesn't. What else could this tell you?)
