The Roaring '20s

Many Canadians believed that by 1920 their country was experiencing the dawn of a new era. This era was symbolized by the flapper, the young woman who bobbed her hair and shortened her skirts. Bangles adorned her bare arms and long beads emphasized the slim, straight line of her dress. Corsets were out and flat figures and bright red lipstick were in. She danced the Charleston and the Black Bottom, smoked cigarettes, and even sipped gin from silver flasks. The appearance of this free-spirited figure suggested to some Canadians that the total emancipation of the Canadian woman would soon be a reality.

Actually, equality of any sort was slow to develop. While education and working conditions were slightly better, revolutionary change did not occur. Marriage, housework, and motherhood continued to dominate women's lives. Having the vote did not create a significant break with the past.

Figure 7-1 The image of the flapper symbolized the age known as the Roaring '20s. Can you think of a feminine image that could symbolize our present era?

Figure 7-2 A flapper and her beau dancing the Charleston from a Life magazine cover of 1926.
Childhood

While many families welcomed girl babies, a preference for male children still existed in Canada. Not all parents preferred male children, though. Fearful of a second world war, one mother claimed, “I wanted a girl baby badly. I didn’t want any more cannon fodder.”

Differences in attitude toward boys and girls appeared in child rearing practices, in childhood verses, and in the toys children played with. Most parents assumed that a young girl’s childhood should prepare her for her future role as a wife and mother. A boy, however, would become the breadwinner for his family. Many young girls prepared for their future at home, where they were expected to help with the housework and mind their brothers and sisters. An Aboriginal woman born in 1930 remembered her mother teaching her to sew moccasins when she was only eight years old.

Primary Source

CHILDHOOD VERSES

I like coffee, I like tea,
How many boys are crazy for me?

Bobby Shafto’s gone to sea,
Silver buckles at his knee;
He’ll come back and marry me,
Bonny Bobby Shafto!

What are little boys made of?
Frogs and snails
And puppy dogs’ tails.
That’s what little boys are made of.

What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice
And all that’s nice.
That’s what little girls are made of.

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor,
Rich man, poor man,
Beggarman, thief,
Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.

Examples of verses popular with children in the 1920s. How many of these are you familiar with? Taken together, what do they say about a girl’s expectations in life?
School Days

There were also distinctions between boys and girls at school. Many schools had separate entrances for male and female students. While both sexes learned reading, writing, and arithmetic, only girls studied "domestic science," and only boys took "manual labour."

By 1926, typing and shorthand were also acceptable subjects for women. In that year enrollment at Toronto’s Central High School of Commerce was 74% female.

Even though sex roles were still rigidly defined, female students were beginning to share in some of the experiences previously reserved for their brothers. They became Girl Guides, basketball players, university grads, and "CGITs." Similar to Guides, Canadian Girls in Training was established in Canada in 1915 by the YWCA and the major Protestant churches. Through organizations of this type, and through their sports activities, young women were becoming more active participants in their communities.

Women in Sports

The Edmonton Commercial Grads

"She shoots, she scores!" In the last second of play, with the score 40 to 39 for the Tulsa Stevens, Number 9 of the Edmonton Grads lets go a long shot and sinks the winning basket. Noel Macdonald was one of 58 girls who wore the team uniform. A girls’ basketball team founded in 1915, the Grads became world champions 16 times. Out of the 522 games the Grads played, they won 502 of them. Their record remains one of the most remarkable achievements in Canadian sports history.

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Women Undergraduates in University, 1891-1991

Figure 7-5 The table gives female enrollments as a percentage of full-time undergraduate enrollment across Canada. As the education of girls in primary and secondary schools improved, the enrollment of women in a diversity of university programs began to increase. As this table shows, however, it wasn't until the 1970s that female enrollment in fields like medicine, theology, and law increased significantly.
The 1928 Olympics

Canadian women triumphed at the Amsterdam Olympics. This was the first Olympics in which women were allowed to compete in track and field events. It was in these events that the Canadian women’s team won all their medals, racking up two golds, two silvers, and one bronze.

Eighteen-year-old Ethel Catherwood, the “Saskatoon Lily,” became the first Canadian woman to snag Olympic gold when she won the high jump event. She logged a winning jump of 1.59 metres.

A team of four Toronto women narrowly edged out the American crew to win the gold medal in the 400-metre relay, setting a world record time of 48.1 seconds.

In the 100-metre dash, Canadians Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld and Ethel Smith took the silver and bronze medals respectively.

Figure 7-6 A 1928 publicity poster for the Edmonton Grads. Whose picture is most prominently displayed on this poster?

RECONNECT

1. What messages about the roles of boys and girls are communicated in the verses and toys of the era? Can you think of other verses you learned as a child that reflect a similar message? Are there distinct toys for boys and girls today?

2. Young people need positive role models to inspire them. Do you think girls in 1928 were inspired by the achievements of Ethel Catherwood and Fanny Rosenfeld? Are you inspired by the achievements of athletes today? Why or why not?

Figure 7-7 Canada's first female Olympic gold medalist, Ethel Catherwood, shows her winning form in clearing the high jump bar.