

# Prosperity in the 1920s

In the period directly after the first world war Canada was finding itself as a nation as a young global power. The role that Canada played during the conflict of WWI earned Canada some recognition. It allowed them to be seen as more than a piece of the British Empire. However as we will find out the nation of Canada had a lot more maturing to do in order to become a full player on the international stage.

## Booming Economy for Some



By 1923, Central and Western Canada had begun to recover and entered a great period of growth. Agricultural production increased in the Prairies and mining activity increased in Central Canada and British Columbia. Trade with the United States increased driven by the demand for pulp and paper. US manufacturers such as Ford, GM, and GE built factories in Canada to avoid a **tariff** (tax) on products imported to Canada.

By the 1920s electricity was in wide-spread use in Canada's urban cities. The introduction of the **assembly line**, a row of workers and machines along which work is passed until the final product is made, greatly increased the number of products that could be made. As the decade progressed, employment increased, and more workers could afford to buy new technologies, such as the electric range (a Canadian invention). A consumer society was just beginning.

## Declining Economy for Others

While most of Canada saw an economic boom, the Maritimes and the Dominion of Newfoundland did not. Shipbuilding had been the main industry for a long time; however it began to decline even before the First World War. It had not been replaced by another major industry. The ports of Halifax and Saint John were unable to modernize to compete with Montreal, who had received federal funding to aid its expansion.

Other policies also harmed the region:

- Increased freight train rates - Atlantic Canada was located further from their markets than the rest of Canada.
- Between 1920 and 1926 the region lost 42 percent of its manufacturing jobs due to rising prices.
- Many in turn migrated to other parts of Canada to find jobs.
- Hydroelectricity was slower to develop in the Maritimes as there was less money to invest in it. Without electrical power they could not take advantage of the new technologies.

Natural resources were the main sources of employment in the 1920s. However, with the United States raising their tariffs on these industries many could not afford to export their goods. The coal industry in Nova Scotia also saw a decline in its market as manufacturers and industries in Central Canada began to prefer oil and electricity for their power.

## Lifestyle and Technology

The 1920s are often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties" because of the social freedoms and new technologies that made life easier.

### The Haves

As wages increased, workers were able to spend money on the new products there were being mass-produced. For the first time, large numbers of people began buying on credit. People believed that the good times were here to stay, so many had no worries about going into debt.

Cars topped many people's wish lists. Telephones also became popular as they allowed communication between people in isolated areas. Newly developed electric appliances were also in great demand and monthly payments allowed many to purchase these products.

### The Have Nots



Not all Canadians benefited from the prosperity of the 1920s. The working poor, for example, did not benefit from the 1920s boom. In rural regions of Canada families would barter their home grown products with local shopkeepers for necessities. In towns and cities, the working poor struggled with day-to-day existence, often without electricity or the means to purchase the newly available goods.

During the First World War many women took up the jobs while the men were away fighting; however, upon their return most of the women lost their jobs. Most girls left school by grade 8, expected to marry and become mothers. Women with some education could be employed as teachers, nurses, bookkeepers, or secretaries. Unskilled women could only find work as domestic help, or as clerks in offices, stores, or factories. Some women were able to attend University, but they were usually paid far less than men in the same positions.

As a group, the First Nations of Canada saw little economic growth of the 1920s. The government still hoped to assimilate First Nations into the mainstream culture. Through residential schools the government would remove children from the influence of their families. Thousands were uprooted and forbidden to speak their own languages, wear their own clothing, or participate in their own cultural celebrations.

These policies did not go unchallenged; Mohawk First World War veteran Fred Loft founded the League of Indians of Canada in 1918 to improve the standard of education offered to First Nations. In 1927, the government amended the Indian Act to make it illegal for First Nations to organize politically or to hire lawyers to represent in any claims against the government. These restrictions remained in place until 1951.

