



PROVO IN THE JAZZ AGE

BY GARY C. KUNZ

GARY C. KUNZ received his master's degree in history from Brigham Young University. Acknowledgements go to Professor Carl Marlow of the BYU history department for suggesting this topic of research.

The decade in American history from 1920 to 1929 is known as the "Jazz Age" of the "Roaring Twenties" and is remembered as a fun-filled era of bathtub gin, bootlegging, speakeasies, flaming youth, flappers, stock-market mania, and mahjong. Yet these flamboyant fads and happenings are often only associated with big cities. The





term *flapper* is likely to conjure up an image of a short-haired pleasure-seeking woman living in Manhattan or Hollywood rather than Grand Forks, North Dakota, or Twin Falls, Idaho. Similarly the term *speak* or *speakeasy* connotes a club which illegally sold alcoholic beverages in Chicago or Detroit rather than Salem, Oregon, or Des Moines, Iowa.

The idea that modern secular influences existed only in large cities has also been promoted by historians. David Shannon, for example, alleges that "prohibition was observed in rural areas and small towns," while "speakeasies operated openly" in the big cities.¹ Another historian states that the "wild parties, aggressive females, and heavy drinking" of the twenties were "limited to the upper middle-class of the largest metropolitan areas."² "The life of a flaming youth," echoes still another, "was open only to those who were young and rich and lived in the big cities."³ Summing up this attitude, historians Frank Freidel and Alan Brinkley write that:

The modern secular culture of the 1920s did not exist alone. It grew up along side an older, more traditional culture with which it often bitterly competed. One was the society of an affluent, largely middle class, committed to a new set of values, adopting a new, increasingly uninhibited life style. The other was a society of less affluent, less urban, far more provincial Americans.⁴

AFTER visiting a Provo resort, a horrified deputy sherriff reported his observations: "Young girls of 14 and 15 were dancing the cheek to cheek, stopping frequently to kiss and embrace with men and boys. Before the evening was over, they were biting each other on the neck. . . . Liquor wasn't needed to intoxicate the girls and boys. The jazz music did that."

But is this image of wet, wild, sophisticated cities and dry, moral, ignorant small towns a correct one? A look at the small rural community of Provo, Utah, provides a surprising answer. During the 1920s, Provo's chief source of income was agriculture.⁵ Far from being a suburb of a larger city, this farming town was a very isolated community, unlikely to adopt the urban behaviors of the Jazz Age because of its location. Yet adopt them it did.

On 25 April 1921, a Provo newspaper, the *Herald*, announced, "BIGGEST STILL RAIDED WITHIN TWO BLOCKS OF COURTHOUSE." The raid was conducted at the home of a local citizen, Frank Lyons. The still was 40 gallons in size and 3 quarts of booze were netted in the raid by the police.⁶

That summer a group of ladies from numerous

women's organizations made a formal complaint to the Utah County Commissioner's office concerning the drinking and "immoral dancing" observed in Provo resorts and halls. Among those organizations submitting the complaint were the Mutual Improvement Association, Sorosis, the Women's Municipal Council, and the Service Star Legion. The report, published on the front page of the *Herald*, observed in part:

Dancing of a standard far worse than anything permitted in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles [was] witnessed at dance halls near Provo.

Some eastern people with us were shocked at the dancing permitted at the resort.

I have seen a great deal of intoxication at dancing resorts in the county.

The obnoxious dancing positions are not graceful. Jazz music must be prohibited.⁷

In September of that same year, the Geneva resort came under heavy fire from Provo citizens and police for both drinking and dancing. On the evening of 20 September 1921, Provo Deputy Sheriff Otto Birk was assigned to cover the resort. The following day's newspaper records his horrified reaction:

Young girls of 14 and 15 were dancing the cheek to cheek, stopping frequently to kiss and embrace with men and boys.

Before the evening was over, they were biting each other on the neck.

There was liquor floating around, but liquor wasn't needed to intoxicate the girls and boys. The jazz music did that.⁸

A few days later, front-page headlines again reported "BOOTLEGGING AT GENEVA." L. R. Hebertson, manager of the resort, admitted that drinking had been rampant at the resort the entire season. "There hasn't been a dance at Geneva this summer," he said, "when Salt Lake bootleggers didn't come down, loaded with liquor, which was sold to the dancers and others."⁹

The following summer drinking and "improper dancing" were found at still another Provo area resort, Vivian Park. J. F. Carter, park manager, confessed to *Herald* reporters that there had been "drunkenness and improper dancing at the resort all summer."¹⁰

In spite of the negative attitudes expressed towards "intoxicating" music and "improper" and "immoral" dancing, the popularity of jazz was not to be stopped. One well-known local group, the Provo Band, had for twenty years "steadfastly refused" to play jazz. Yet on 12 November 1925 the band broke up because of lack of business.¹¹

Illegal drinking also continued to gain popularity. By the end of 1923, local authorities had raided 54 stills and recorded 159 violations of the Prohibition Amendment in that year alone.¹² Appalled at this apparent moral decline, forty officers and teachers of the Utah Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints met together and unanimously passed a resolution to combat "the use of tobacco and intoxicants and profanity [which] are increasing alarmingly among the minors of our local community among both males and females." The complaint was carried on the front page of the *Herald*.¹³

In the summer of 1924 a bishop of the LDS church



In a single month in 1925, Provo police and Salt Lake federal agents made five separate raids, netting two stills, 55 gallons of wine, and 55 bottles of beer. In December 1928, police discovered a giant still in the heart of town, reporting that most of the whiskey produced had been sold around Provo "in anticipation of the brisk holiday demand."

complained to Provo authorities that there was "too much disorderly conduct" at local resorts. Upon the bishop's recommendation police raided two resorts on the fourth of July in company with federal prohibition agents from Salt Lake City. Eight arrests were made at one resort and six at another.¹⁴

In the fall federal agents were again called into Provo to assist local police who raided a 100-gallon still near the mouth of Provo Canyon. Authorities also netted 300 gallons of alcohol and peach brandy in the raid.¹⁵

The following February five separate raids were made in Provo by local police and Salt Lake federal agents. Two raids netted two stills near downtown Provo, a third raid found 55 gallons of Dago Red Wine, while a fourth raid interrupted a drinking party in which 55 bottles of beer were found. In a fifth raid a "large quantity" of home brew was found in a Provo home.¹⁶ In September, 1925, Provo police raided a "keg and bottle party" where a local bootlegger had set up a 10-gallon keg of whiskey and was filling patrons' bottles when the police arrived.¹⁷

Raids such as these continued to the end of the decade. Towards the end of 1928 Provo citizens awoke to the banner headline, "GIANT PROVO STILL IS DESTROYED." The still was 160 gallons in size and was located near the heart of town. Provo police pointed out that the still was capable of producing over 200 gallons of whiskey every 24 hours and that "the greatest part of the output of the still [had] been sold around Provo during the month in anticipation of the brisk holiday demand." Police also netted 25 gallons of whiskey in the raid.¹⁸

Violations of the liquor laws were not limited to young people or those of ill repute. In May 1926 Clifton Hoover, manager of the Provo Businessmen's Club, was arrested for having 300 bottles of home brew delivered to upstairs rooms behind the clubhouse.¹⁹ The previous December Provo police arrested George Studham of Salt Lake City for having 36 "London quart bottles of Gordon & Company Gin and an order book containing a long list of names of customers among prominent Provo people" in the trunk of his brand-new Ford roadster.²⁰

Nor is it true that permissive attitudes toward Prohibition were held only by a tiny minority of Provoans. In 1926, a national newspaper poll asked Provo citizens three questions: (1) Do you favor keep-

ing the prohibition law as it now stands with no modifications?(2) Do you favor modification of the law to allow the sale of light wines and beer?(3) Do you favor the outright repeal of the law, allowing the sale of any and all alcoholic beverages? Of the three thousand people who responded, forty-eight percent favored either outright repeal of the law or modification, while fifty-two percent advocated keeping the law as it stood.²¹

The twenties were also known for sexy movies and bathing-beauty contests. Frederick Lewis Allen notes that the films of this decade were characterized by "beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, neckers, petters, white kisses, red kisses, pleasure-mad daughters, [and] sensation-craving mothers."²²

Such movies and contests were as popular in Provo as they were in major metropolitan areas. In April 1923, the movie *Forbidden Fruit* with Pola Negra was shown to Provo audiences. Its opening was heralded by a four-page newspaper ad filled with photos of passionate embraces and daring desert adventures. A year later, a *Herald* ad for the movie *Sandra* promised "TEMPESTUOUS LOVE AFFAIRS FROM LONG ISLAND TO PARIS." Later that same summer, a theater showing *The Red Kimona* warned of the film's "DARING SUBJECT" and, in a 1920s version of the rating system, claimed it was not for everyone. Such warnings went even further later in the decade when the provocatively titled *Is Your Daughter Safe?* played to an "adults-only" audience because it dealt with a "MOST DARING SUBJECT, DELICATELY HANDLED."

Theater-owners in Provo were also quick to install the latest technological equipment to satisfy their audiences. In November 1928, Provo's Gem Theater

In the summer of 1921, representatives from women's organizations made a formal complaint about the "immoral dancing" in Provo dance halls, proclaiming, "Jazz music must be prohibited."

installed the era's new movie sound equipment, known as Vitaphone, which received its debut with the talking picture *Hit of the Show*. Not to be outdone, the Paramount Theater installed Vitaphone the following year, an event which made the front page of the local paper. The Paramount's first "talkie" was Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*, the same movie which premiered sound movies to New York audiences just three years before.

If Provo citizens grew weary of movies, they could also find exciting diversion in local bathing-beauty contests. In the summer of 1927 front-page headlines announced, "STRAND THEATER TO STAGE BEAUTY CONTEST." The purpose of the contest was to choose a girl to represent Provo at the Utah State Fair in Salt Lake City that fall. Provo citizens submitted names of local beauties and ten finalists were selected to appear on stage in bathing suits provided by Jenkins Knit Company

of Provo. The winner was determined by audience applause and would represent Provo at the Utah State Fair.²³

The following month the Provo Paramount Theater hosted a beauty contest to promote the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Provo citizens were invited to mail a photograph of a local girl to the "Preferred-Blonde Contest Director" at the *Herald* office. Once all the names had been submitted, "all contestants . . . appear[ed] on the stage of the Paramount Thursday evening, March 15th, at which time the five semi-finalists [were] . . . selected by the judges. These five . . . appear[ed] again on the stage Friday evening, March 16th, when the audience . . . select[ed] the first- and second-place winners."²⁴

DURING the 1920s, Provo was a small, isolated farming community, unlikely to adopt the urban behaviors of the Jazz Age because of its location. Yet adopt them it did.

Blondes shown on stage and screen could only lead to blondes appearing in illustrations advertising Provo wares. In this Provoans again reflected the secular culture of the day: Across America, the twenties gave birth to what Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy call a "new arm of American commerce: . . . advertising. By persuasion and ploy, allure and sexual suggestion, advertisers sought to make Americans chronically discontented with their paltry possessions."²⁵

In December 1920, Robinson Brothers Music took out a full-page advertisement in the *Herald*. Lavish drawings advertised pianos and phonographs. In bold print, the ad also announced "NO MONEY DOWN," and further promised "TERMS FROM 6 TO 24 MONTHS TO COMPLETE THE PURCHASE OF A NEW EDISON PHONOGRAPH OR PIANO," typifying the buying-on-credit that characterized the decade.²⁶

Other advertisers resorted to blatant sex-appeal. In December 1929, Startup Candy ran pictures of a beautiful blonde in a bathing suit. Underneath the photograph ran the caption, "AND WHAT AMERICAN GIRL WOULD REFUSE A BOX OF STARTUP'S CHOCOLATES?" Provo Greenhouse also placed full-page advertisements showing a beautiful movie star wearing nothing but a wreath of flowers, sitting on a rock, and smiling at the viewer. The caption explained that "FLOWERS SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF BEAUTY."²⁷

The decade of the twenties was also characterized by sports spectacles. "Spectator sports such as baseball, football, and prizefighting attracted millions of fans," notes one history book. "Prizefighting had two of history's greatest champions in Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney."²⁸

Interest in prizefighting during this decade was as great in Provo as anywhere else. In September 1927, Jack Dempsey fought Gene Tunney, the world heavyweight champion in Chicago. Broadcast nationwide by radio, the fight was tremendously popular because Tunney had defeated Dempsey the previous summer and millions of fight fans were anxious to see Dempsey



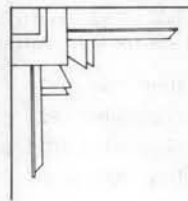
THE Princess Theater was one of the first theaters in Provo which installed sound equipment. The theater became available late in the decade. The first "talkies" was Al Jolson's *The Singing Fool*, which premiered at the Princess Theater in Provo several years after its industry-shaking New York

regain the crown.

The *Herald* set up a radio and loudspeakers at their downtown office to broadcast the fight and invited everyone interested to come and listen to it live. An enormous crowd of five thousand people came to hear the fight which was recounted in the newspaper the following day:

It was the biggest crowd that [had] ever congregated in Provo to receive the returns of a sport event. Considering the number of residents, it is doubtful if any newspaper in the United States had proportionately as large an audience as did the Evening Herald. The streets for blocks away from the Herald building were crowded with cars. They were parked closely together on both sides of the street for many blocks.²⁹

The Provo crowd favored Dempsey, who came from



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Herald office was practically equal to the record-breaking throng which assembled for the Tunney-Dempsey encounter last September."³⁰

Boosterism, a strong optimistic spirit, was another characteristic of the decade. As John M. Blum, et al., notes in *The Democratic Experience*: "Americans were optimistic during Coolidge's second term. The middle class in particular, more comfortable than ever before, experienced a sense of well-being. They neither liked nor trusted the 'knockers,' but preferred the 'boosters,' those with their eyes and hearts set on the rosy future."³¹

Provo had plenty of middle-class optimists, or boosters, in a decade when a popular slogan was "everybody ought to be rich." In May 1925, F. T. Mackay, manager of the Salt Lake City Ford dealership, gave a typical booster talk to the Springville Kiwanis Club. Speaking on the topic of "pep," Mackay explained that this word "stands for vigor, energy, strength, ambition, determination, will power, initiative, tact and pluck," he said. "Pep is the thing that is essential in any business. You can tell how much pep a man has by the way he talks, the way he carries his shoulders and head when he walks, you can tell it by his dress and his personal appearance and you can tell it by the way he undertakes to do his jobs. A man who moves like he has lead in his shoes may just as well get out of the parade. If a man has lead in his shoes, he ought to go somewhere and get electrified."³²

In the fall of 1924, Columbia Steel Corporation of San Francisco began construction of a large steel mill south of Provo on the road to Springville. The mill was completed in the fall of 1926 and for the dedication, L. F. Rains, vice president and general manager of Columbia Steel, invited E. H. H. Simmonds, president of the New York stock exchange, to speak. Simmonds accepted and in his speech praised the "ability, energy and initiative" of his hosts. "I look for no special depression," he said, "but rather for a growing steadiness of securities prices. There seems to be very little danger of any future money panics in Wall Street."³³

The following month an open house was held at the steel mill and more than 350 people came, including Utah Governor George H. Dern; LDS Church President Heber J. Grant; Salt Lake City Mayor C. Clarence Nelson; and Malcom A. Keyer, president of the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce.³⁴

Boosterism remained strong in Provo throughout the decade. In the fall of 1927 an upbeat and optimistic article appeared on page one of the *Herald* entitled "Provo Plans Great Future." "No other section of the western part of the United States has greater possibilities or a brighter future than Provo and Utah county," the article said. "The territory within a radius of 30 or 40 miles of

Utah. The paper reports that "pandemonium broke loose" when Dempsey knocked Tunney down for the famous "long count" in the seventh round. However Tunney came back and won the fight. The Provo crowd "was silent, lamenting the passing of the Utah battler."

Gene Tunney met Tom Heeny in New York City for the heavyweight championship in the summer of 1928. Again the *Herald* set up loudspeakers and invited all Provo area residents to come and listen to the fight. "Any doubt as to Provo's interest in championship fights," reported the corresponding *Herald* article, "was dispelled Thursday night by the size of the throng which gathered to get the Heeny-Tunney results. In spite of the absence of Jack Dempsey, famous Utah mauler, who is a popular idol in Provo, the crowd in front of the

THE Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney fight drew an enormous crowd of five thousand people to the radio and loudspeakers set up at the *Herald* office.

Provo is resting snugly in the lap of fortune. In the not far-away future this section will be industrial center of the Rocky Mountain territory."³⁵

In the spring of 1928 Brigham Young University inaugurated a fund-raising campaign to build a five-thousand seat addition to their football stadium. The Provo Chamber of Commerce was given the responsibility to raise twenty-five thousand dollars for the stadium expansion. The Chamber undertook its responsibility with a tremendous amount of pep and enthusiasm. A reading of just the bold print on the first page of the *Herald* suggests that Provo's booster spirit was as strong as any other community during this age of optimism:

President Franklin Harris (of BYU): We need twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars to put five thousand seats in the stadium.

I. E. Brockbank (Provo banker): Make it fifty thousand, and put in more seats.

President Clayton Jenkins of the Provo Chamber of Commerce: I am sure Jessie Ellertson and his committee can get the money.

Secretary E. S. Hinkley (of the Chamber of Commerce): In the Chamber of Commerce lexicon, there is no such word as fail; we can raise the money!

All: We can do it.³⁶

The charge that small towns in the twenties were a culture apart from the changing lifestyles of urban Americans does not apply to the community of Provo. The insight of her citizens is demonstrated by the editorials which appeared in the local newspaper during this decade. Typical of these is an essay written by the *Herald* editor in the spring of 1928. Entitled "Prosperity—Two Sides," the article begins by noting that "the people are prosperous. Being prosperous, they are contented. Being contented, they have no use for any radical cure-all theories. It's a very nice state of affairs, when you stop to think about it."

The editor goes on to ask if the surface prosperity will last forever. Despite the fact that the stock market was booming and many investors were making fortunes in the market, the economy during most of the latter part of the twenties was in serious trouble. The market was badly overextended and business inventories were piled high nationwide. Enormous sums of capital that should have been used for plant improvements were invested in stock instead. A few raised their voices that the "tinsel prosperity" might not last forever, but their voices of warning were lost in the roar of those making millions in the market. Speculating on these conditions, the *Herald* editor outlined a prophetic scenario:

Suppose, just once, that there should come an era of genuine depression—depression similar to the panics of the old days, more far-reaching and severe than anything the last decade has seen. Suppose that factories should shut down and men everywhere should be thrown out of work. Suppose that the men who remained at work should have to accept greatly reduced wages. What then?

It seems fair to assume that the American working man should display an aptitude for a radicalism that would make some people shudder.³⁷

The idea of "two Americas," one wet, wild, and urbane, the other dry, quiet, and backward does not hold true for Provo. This small community had considerable bootleg traffic, many large stills, and a large appetite for

"hootch." Jazz was played in Provo dance halls where young people danced the "cheek to cheek." Community members had considerable interest in sexy movies and advertising and plenty of middle-class boosterism and pep. Provo citizens were as interested in heavyweight boxing as any other community and wrote some very thoughtful editorials, at least one of which predicted the era's tragic demise. Only additional research will tell whether the traditional image of a small town holds true in other locations, or whether, like Provo, the image is in need of revision.

Notes

1. David A. Shannon, *Twentieth Century America*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1977), 2:134.
2. Carl M. Degler, et al., *The Democratic Experience*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1979), 2:196.
3. Forrest McDonald, *The United States in the Twentieth Century*, 2d ed., 2 vols., (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1970), 2:38.
4. Frank Freidel and Alan Brinkley, *America in the Twentieth Century*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 2:187.
5. John Clifton Moffitt, *The Story of Provo, Utah* (Provo: Published by author, 1975), p. 115.
6. *Provo Herald*, 25 April 1921, p. 1. This newspaper changed its name to the *Provo Herald* in 1923, and to the *Evening Herald* in 1926. For the sake of clarity, this source is hereafter referred to simply as the *Herald*.
7. *Ibid.*, 22 June 1921, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 21 September 1921, p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 26 September 1921, p. 1.
10. *Ibid.*, 6 July 1922, p. 1.
11. *Ibid.*, 12 November 1925, p. 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 4 January 1924, p. 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1923, p. 1.
14. *Ibid.*, 16 July 1924, p. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, 15 September 1924, p. 1.
16. *Ibid.*, 24 February 1925, p. 1.
17. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1925, p. 1.
18. *Ibid.*, 20 December 1928, p. 1.
19. *Ibid.*, 10 May 1926, p. 5.
20. *Ibid.*, 1 December 1925, p. 1.
21. *Ibid.*, 12 March 1926, p. 1.
22. Paul Sann, *The Lawless Decade* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1957), p. 77.
23. *Ibid.*, 13 July 1927, p. 1.
24. *Ibid.*, 11 March 1928, p. 4.
25. Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, *The American Pageant*, 7th ed., 2 vols. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1983), 2:709.
26. *Herald*, 20 December 1920, p. 5.
27. *Ibid.*, 22 December 1929, p. 6.
28. Norman A. Graebner, Gilbert C. Fite, and Philip L. White, *A History of the American People* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970), p. 671.
29. *Herald*, 23 September 1927, p. 1.
30. *Ibid.*, 27 July 1928, p. 1.
31. John M. Blum, et al., *The National Experience*, 5th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 2:639.
32. *Herald*, 12 May 1925, p. 2.
33. *Ibid.*, 15 November 1926, p. 1.
34. *Ibid.*, 21 December 1926, p. 1.
35. *Ibid.*, 4 September 1927, p. 1.
36. *Ibid.*, 25 May 1928, p. 1.
37. *Ibid.*, 16 May 1928, p. 2. For other examples of thoughtful, well-written editorials, see *ibid.*, 16 September 1928, p. 2, and 2 October 1928, p. 2.