The Flapper Girl

Several factors were in play in the 1920s for the emergence of what came to known as flappers, teenagers and young women who flouted convention and spent their time pursuing fun instead of settling down to raise children in the prime of their lives. Many entered college or the workforce and felt entitled to make their own decisions about how to live their lives. A lot of young men did not return home from World War I, which left an entire cohort of women without enough husbands to go around. The horror of the war (and the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918) also impressed young people with the knowledge that life is short and could end at any moment. Instead of staying home preparing to marry a man who might never come, young women wanted to spend what time they had enjoying all that life had to offer.

Movies popularized the image of the fun-loving and free-thinking woman throughout the US and Europe. The 1920 movie The Flapper introduced the term in the United States. The title character, Ginger, was a wayward girl who flouted the rules of society. Played by Olive Thomas, a former Ziegfeld Girl. Ginger had so much fun that a generation of lonely young women wanted to be like her. Another role model was stage and screen actress Louise Brooks (right), who also modeled for artists and fashion designers. She was the inspiration for the flapper comic strip Dixie Dugan.

Clara Bow wasn't the first flapper on screen, but she was certainly a role model for young women of the era. She didn't play by the rules, and was tabloid fodder for years for her sexual escapades with the biggest movie stars of the time. Bow's first film was in 1922 and her career peaked in 1927 with the film It. "It" was defined as the sexual allure some girls have and others don't. Bow's fans wanted "it", so they copied her look and behavior. One of the most copied hairstyles was the "bob". Many flapper girls cut their hair shockingly short, starting a famous fashion trend copied nationwide for decades.

The rise of the automobile was another factor in the rise of flapper culture. Cars meant a woman could come and go as she pleased, travel to speakeasies (illegal underground bars where
banned alcohol was served) and other entertainment venues, and cars used for heavy petting or even sex.

These young women have plenty of opportunities for fun. Although Prohibition drove alcohol underground, that only added to its allure. Postwar prosperity allowed for leisure time and the means to spend that time drinking, dancing, smoking, and hanging out with free thinkers.

Being a flapper wasn't all about fashion. It was about rebellion. In this article from 1922, a would-be flapper (but still a "nice girl") explains her lifestyle choices to her parents. Flappers did what society did not expect from young women. They danced to Jazz Age music, they smoked, they wore makeup, they spoke their own language, and they lived for the moment. Flapper fashion followed the lifestyle. Skirts became shorter to make dancing easier. Corsets were discarded in favor of brassieres that bound their breasts, again to make dancing easier. The straight shapeless dresses were easy to make and blurred the line between the rich and everyone else. The look became fashionable because of the lifestyle. The short hair? That was pure rebellion against the older generation's veneration of long feminine locks.

The party stopped when the economy crashed and the Great Depression curtailed the night life. Although the flapper lifestyle died along with the Roaring Twenties, the freedoms women tasted in that era weren't easily given up.