Horsefeathers! The Fabled Flapper

Larissa Shirley

The flapper is an icon in popular culture. With her bobbed hair, fringed dress, flask of bootleg gin, and rebellious attitude, she symbolizes the spirit of the 1920s.

In the 21st century, just about anything remotely relating to the 1920s from knitting patterns to plastic cigarette holder stage props get the moniker "flapper" attached to them. Most people have a distinct image of who the flapper was.

Where did this iconography come from? Was every woman with bobbed hair and a short skirt in the 1920s a flapper? Even people in the fashion history world default to the adjective "flapper" to describe any 1920s dress. Perhaps this current distilled image of the flapper is "horsefeathers," to use a contemporary term for nonsense.

Today we will explore history of the term "flapper," see how she was portrayed in contemporary popular culture, attempt to separate myth from fact, and discover who the flapper of the 1920s really was.

Origin of the Term

There are varied explanations of where the term "flapper" came from and the sort of girl that it described. The explanations vary in plausibility and fancifulness. Most agree that the term originated in England, and that it was used to describe a young, adolescent girl—one who had not yet made her debut into society.

The 1906 *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* defines the word as "A young bird when first trying its wings." In 1911, *The New York Times* quoted "Mr. Blackmore, the well-known theatrical agent" describing "what in our technical language we term

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¹ (Whitney 1906, 2254)

'flappers'—the little hair-down-her-back sort of girl." A 1922 letter to the editor explains this shift in language with an amusing anecdote.

The word, of course...means a young duck, but the present...adaptation came into fashion in England a few years prior to the war...when a schoolgirl...began resolutely to shoulder her elder sister aside in a determination to taste, over-early the whirl of pleasure. The young and giddy male...turned to the indignant older sister and contemptuously whisking the schoolgirl's long back hair, remarked, "Why, she's nothing but a flapper!" 3

Some sources attribute the term's genesis to the trend of wearing unbuckled galoshes,⁴ which would flap when the wearer walked. However, this trend, which seems to have originated on college campuses, didn't appear until 1920 or 1921⁵, while the term seems to have been used to describe young women for at least a decade prior.

The department store Bonwit Teller commercialized the term in the United States in 1914, when ads for "flapper frocks" appear. 6 Clearly an explanation was needed, because in 1915, the ads read, "Flapper Apparel: An English idea, originated by and introduced to America exclusively by Bonwit Teller & Co. for the *hard-to-fit girl of* 12 *to* 16 who has outgrown her years, yet must be attired in girlish fashion."

Also in 1914, the song "Florrie the Flapper" was published. Although it was published in New York, the song appears to have British origins. The song follows the life

² (The New York Times 1911)

³ (EX-FLAPPER 1922)

⁴ (The New York Times 1922)

⁵ (Fass 1977, 231)

⁶ (Bonwit Teller & Co. 1914)

⁷ (Bonwit Teller & Co. 1915)

of a woman from girlhood to old age, and the refrain is "Florrie was a flapper, she was dainty, she was dapper, she really was a fascinating kid."

By 1922, the term flapper was all over the American media. That year, a "sub-deb" interviewed by *the New York Times* dismissed the term flapper as "just a magazine word…we never call each other flappers."

F. Scott & Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald

When F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *This Side of Paradise* was published in 1920, it caused a sensation with its sexy portrayal of university life. The New York Evening World described it as "no book for a daughter to put in the hands of her mother!" 9

The hero Armory Blaine's love interest Rosalind was based on Fitzgerald's (soon-to-be) wife Zelda Sayre. Rosalind was a flirt and a heart breaker, whose morals were described as "average—smokes sometimes, drinks punch, frequently kissed." Her physical appearance also embodied the traits of the "new woman." She was "slender and athletic without underdevelopment" and had a "vivid instant personality."

The book catapulted the Fitzgeralds into wealth and fame and the couple became media darlings. In 1920, Fitzgerald earned \$18,850 (approximately \$176,000 today) in royalties from *This Side of Paradise*, eleven short stories, and film rights for three of his stories.¹⁰

The Fitzgeralds were famous for their wildly extravagant lifestyle, and were often called upon by the media to comment and editorialize on youth culture.

In her 1922 "Eulogy on the Flapper," Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald wrote, "the Flapper...bobbed her hair, put on...a great deal of audacity and rouge, and went into

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⁸ (The New York Times 1922)

⁹ (Sons 1920)

¹⁰ (Zeitz 2006, 43)

battle. She flirted because it was fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure; she covered her face with powder and rouge because she didn't need it and she refused to be bored chiefly because she wasn't boring."11

Flapper Films

The flapper was a staple movie character in the 1920s. These characters standardized and popularized the image of the young flapper girl.

Four actresses are generally associated with the flapper look and lifestyle: Colleen Moore, Clara Bow, Louise Brooks, and Joan Crawford.

Colleen Moore started her career in the teens, but became a screen flapper in 1923 with her starring role in *Flaming Youth*. Sadly, this film does not survive, but Colleen Moore's flapper reputation was set. In a 1922 interview, she declared, "Why, I'm a flapper, myself! ...The flapper has charm, good looks, good clothes, intellect, and a healthy point of view. I'm proud to flap, I am!"12 She acted in other flapper films throughout the decade, such as *The Perfect Flapper* and *Synthetic Sin*.

Clara Bow was a working-class Brooklyn native whose film career started in 1921 when she won a walk-on role in a film as a prize in *Motion Picture* magazine's "Fame and Fortune Contest." 13 Her scene was cut from the film, but she caught the attention of film executives, and she moved to Hollywood in 1923.¹⁴ Her first hit flapper role was in the film The Plastic Age, 15 where she plays a party girl co-ed whose wild lifestyle leads the studious and athletic hero astray. Her most famous film is *It* from 1927, in which she plays a charming department store clerk who falls in love with the handsome son of the

¹¹ (Fitzgerald 1991, 391)

¹² (Hall 1922)

¹³ (Stenn 1988, 19)

¹⁴ (Stenn 1988, 35)

¹⁵ (Stenn 1988, 55)

department store's owner. Her role in *It* caused F. Scott Fitzgerald to describe her as "the quintessence of what the term 'flapper' signifies as a definite description: pretty, impudent, superbly assured, as worldly-wise, briefly-clad and 'hard-berled' as possible." 16

While Louise Brooks was billed as a flapper, and definitely had the look (and wild New York lifestyle as a Ziegfeld girl)¹⁷, she derided the idea of flapper writing, "The flapper did not exist at all except in Scott Fitzgerald's mind."18

Joan Crawford's role as Diana Medford in Our Dancing Daughters (1928) earned her a place as an iconic film flapper. Diana Medford was an uninhibited, fun-loving girl who loses the man she loves thanks to her wild reputation and a duplicitous gold-digging friend. Also starring in Our Dancing Daughters was Crawford's iconic beaded and fringed party dress, complete with detachable underskirt for particularly enthusiastic dancing.

John Held Jr.'s Flappers

Perhaps some of the most powerful iconography of the flapper comes from John Held Jr.'s illustrations. His *Life* magazine covers and depictions of flapper life are charming and unforgettable. His flapper woman was a lanky blonde with a penchant for necking and the Charleston. Her counterpart was the "sheik", a bobble-headed young man in collegiate wear, including his distinctive "Oxford bag" wide-leg trousers.

The Flapper Look

¹⁶ (Stenn 1988, 87) ¹⁷ (Zeitz 2006, 253)

¹⁸ (Zeitz 2006, 254)

The August 1922 issue of *The Flapper* declares that it stands for (among other things) "Short Skirts, Rolled Sox, Bobbed Hair, Powder & Rouge, No Corsets, One-Piece Bathing Suits...[and]...Attractive Clothes."19

Bobbed Hair

While fashionable women had been bobbing their hair since the mid-teens, the bobbed haircut was practically a prerequisite to flapperdom. The dancer Irene Castle popularized bobbed hair for women when she cut hers in 1914. A New York Times fashion piece claimed that she her hair cut "for comfort in dancing and swimming." 20

Despite its increasing ubiquity, bobbed hair was still considered somewhat provocative in the early 1920s. In 1921, department store Marshall Field & Co. "issued an ultimatum against rouge, powder and short hair." However, the general manager of Saks & Co. described short hair as "neat and effective."²¹

At any rate, the cloche hats of the era required bobbed hair, and most fashionable women conformed.

The Flapper Slouch

The "Flapper Slouch" was also derided by the press. This stance, which consists of curving the back and throwing the shoulders forward is impossible to attain with a corseted body. A 1925 advertisement by the Corset & Brassiere Manufacturers Association of the United States declared, "The Flapper Slouch caught young girls when immature during the growing period when their muscles and bones and body framework became easily molded into the debutante slump." The ad then goes on to list all of the

¹⁹ (The Flapper 1922) ²⁰ (The New York Times 1915)

²¹ (The New York Times 1921)

physical ills caused by slouching and lack of corsetry, including indigestion, nerves, shallow breathing, and the weakening of "trunk" muscles.

Their recommendation? "The Modern Health Corset."²² Obviously, this recommendation fell on deaf ears, and the corset was rejected by flappers and most modern women.

Bathing Suits

The scandal created by one-piece bathing suits is hard to understand today, but the switch from conservative bathing costumes which were comprised of an undergarment, dress and stockings to sleek, form-fitting knitted one-piece swimsuits was shocking and considered indecent. In 1916, Zelda Sayre scandalized her neighbors when she donned a flesh-toned silk jersey bathing suit.²³

Throughout the early 1920s, there were conflicting ordinances and opinions on the suitability of this new style. In 1920, the police chief of Long Beach, Long Island declared that woman bathers were "permitted to wear one-piece bathing suits, without either shoes or stockings." Apparently this caused some unruly behavior, because he banned one-piece swimsuits the following summer, and additionally mandated that woman bathers "must wear socks." Meanwhile, the Mayor of Somers Point, New Jersey issued an invitation welcoming women to wear one-piece bathing suits on the beaches of his town. The Mayor of Boston, an avid swimmer, thought one-piece bathing suits a "sensible and comfortable thing for a woman to wear," and added, "I don't know how

²⁴ (The New York Times 1920)

²² (Corset & Brassiere Manufacturers Association of the United States 1925)

²³ (Milford 2001, 17)

²⁵ (The New York Times 1921)

²⁶ (The New York Times 1921)

they can swim at all in those clumsy suits," referring to the older style of skirted bathing costumes.27

Galoshes

One flapper trend constantly mocked by the press was the practice of wearing unbuckled galoshes. Galoshes were advertised at "every school which had women students." A 1922 editorial in the *New York Times* entitled "Flappers Flaunt Fads in Footwear" mocks the unbuckled rubber overshoe as being worn "on the slightest excuse—a heavy fog, a slight rain, any sort of snowfall and any sort of evening function where formal dress is required." This rebellious anti-fashion trend had become so widespread by 1927 that the Town Marshall of Salem, Indiana "declared the open footwear a nuisance and ordered galoshes fastened when worn on the streets."29

What Makes a Flapper?

Here we see three evening dresses from the Costume Institute. Each of them has a loose, tubular shape and beaded embellishments. The catalogue entries for each refers to the dresses as being in the "flapper style," and goes on to describe the flapper lifestyle. Curiously, a search in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection database for the keyword "flapper" does not bring up any galoshes or one-piece swimsuits, only evening wear. In the case of these three evening dresses they are all high-end or haute couture evening dresses, one of which was owned by a 29 year old stylist who would later become known as Sophie of Saks.

In this 1927 portrait of the Mumford family³⁰, several of the ladies have bobbed hair and are wearing fringed evening dresses with long strings of pearls. While

²⁹ (The New York Times 1927)

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²⁷ (The New York Times 1921)²⁸ (Fass 1977, 421)

³⁰ (Owen 1993)

fashionably dressed, it is immediately apparent that these mature women could in no way be considered "flappers." But would their fringed evening dresses be called a "flapper dresses" if they survived in a museum's collection?

The October 1922 issue of *The Flapper* shows photographs of the entrants to their "most typical flapper contest." The most striking thing about these photos is how varied the entrants look. There are a few girls in their daring one-piece bathing suits, but there is nary a fringed dress or string of pearls in sight.

In its call for entries, *The Flapper* writes, "Personally, we think a flapper is a flapper whether in street dress, bathing suit or 'knickers.' It's sort of an intangible vivacity that identifies the flapper from everybody else."³²

F. Scott Fitzgerald seems to have agreed. In a 1927 interview with *Motion Picture* magazine, he said, "It's rather futile to analyze flappers—They are just girls, all sorts of girls. Their one common trait being that they are young things with a splendid talent for life."33

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³² (The Flapper 1922)

³¹ (The Flapper 1922)

³³ (Fitzgerald 2003, 149)

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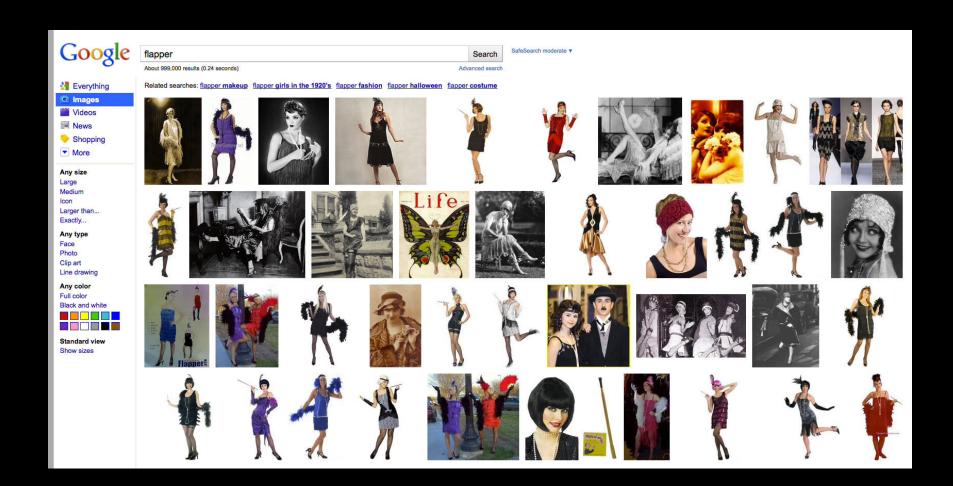
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Horsefeathers!
The Fabled Flapper

Larissa Shirley



The Origin of the Term



The Flapper, 1920 Olive Thomas plays a precocious 16-year old girl who tries to win the heart of an older man.



Florrie the Flapper Sheet Music, c.1914 (www.nypl.org)

BONWIT TELLER & CO.

The Specialty Shop of Originations FIFTH AVENUE AT 38TH STREET

"Flapper" Apparel

"Flapper" apparel originated by this shop for the hard-tofit girl of 12 to 16 who has outgrown her age yet must be attired with the proper chic in a becoming girlish fashion.

"Flapper" & Girls' Apparel

IN SPECIALLY DESIGNED STYLES.

"Flapper" Suits 16.50

Plaited Norfolk coats, with plaited skirts, in navy blue serge and checks. Sizes 12 to 16.

"Flapper" Suits 25.00

Flare and Norfolk suits—two distinct models of navy blue serge and checks. Sizes 12 to 16.

"Flapper" Frocks 10.75 to 39.50

Blazer stripe and dotted challies, figured foulard, glace taffeta, pongee. Sizes 12 to 16.

Girls' Hand=Smocked Frocks 2.95

In chambray, rose, green, tan, white and delft, with pique collars. Sizes 6 to 12.

Bonwit Teller & Co. Advertisement The New York Times, March 25, 1915, Pg. 3

F. Scott & Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald

Were you ever under thirty? Then Read

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE By F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

"'This Side of Paradise' is no book for a daughter to put in the hands of her mother!"—New York Evening World.

"One of the season's brilliancies, and bewilderingly interesting."—New York World.

Harry Hansen, Literary Editor of the Chicago Daily News writes:
"I have just had a wenderful evening with "This Side of Paradise".
It is one of the few really American novels extant."
\$1.75



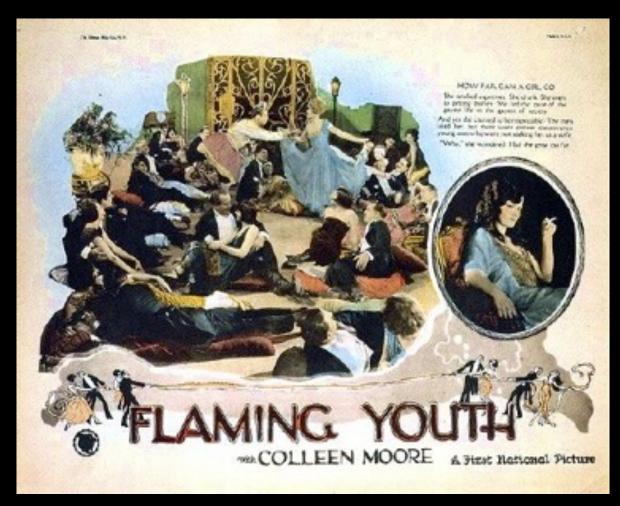
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS FIFTH AVE. AT 48 ST. NEW YORK





F. Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald. Summer 1920. (The Romantic Egoists pg. 73)

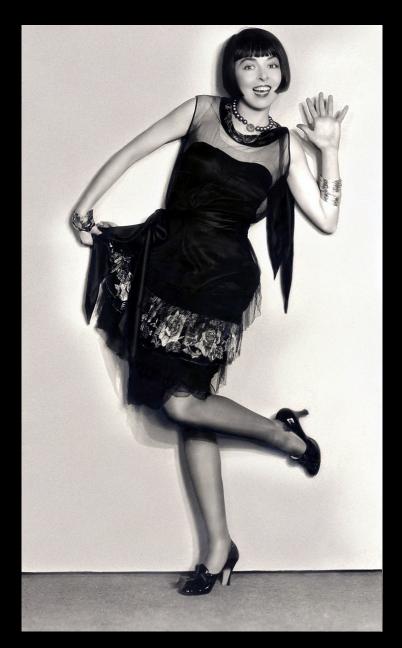
Flapper Films





Flaming Youth poster, 1923 (ColleenMoore.org)

Colleen Moore in *Flaming Youth*, 1923 (Colleen Moore.org)



Publicity Photograph for Colleen Moore in Synthetic Sin, 1928 (IMDB.com)



Clara Bow and Antonio Moreno in *It*, 1927 (Screen Capture)



Clara Bow in *Red Hair*, 1928 (*Clara Bow: Runnin' Wild*, pg. 82)



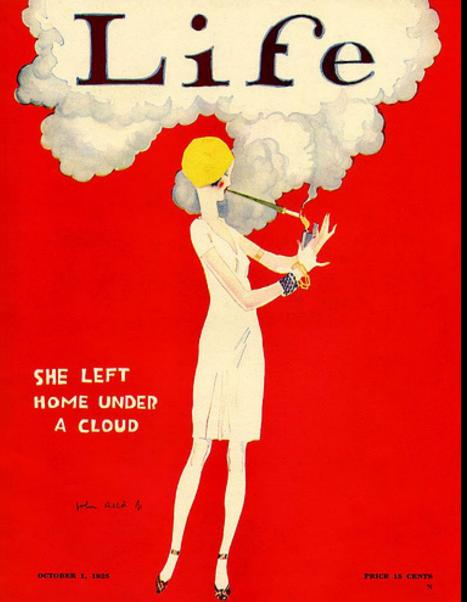


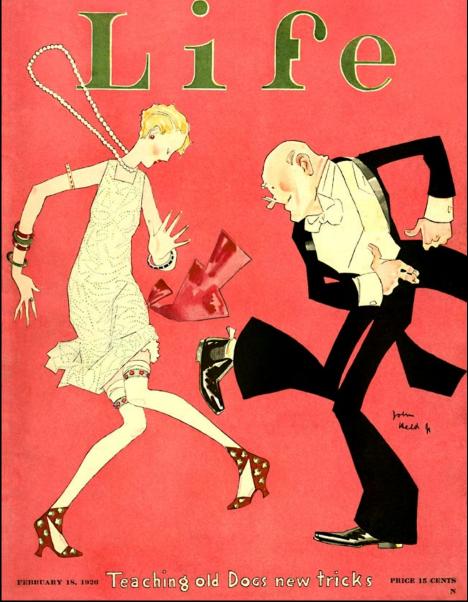
Publicity Photograph for Joan Crawford in Our Dancing Daughters, 1928 (IMDB.com)

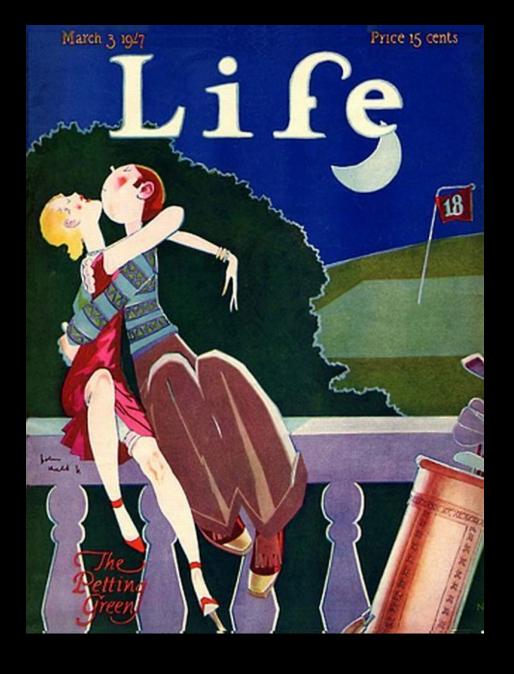


Joan Crawford's Famous Dress Lovett, Josephine. 1928. *Our Dancing Daughters.* DVD. Directed by Harry Beaumont. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Picture.

John Held Jr.'s Flappers

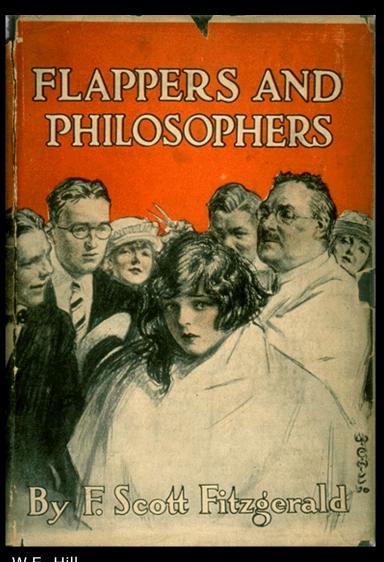






The Flapper Look

Bobbed Hair



W.E. Hill "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" (www.sc.edu)



Irene & Vernon Castle, c. 1915 (danceheritage.org)

The Flapper Slouch

STUDIES FLAPPER SLOUCH.

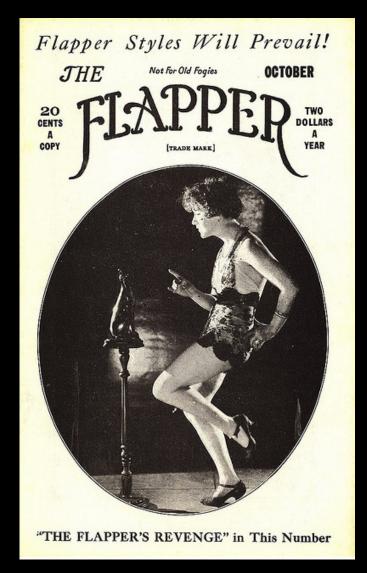
Chicago Business Man Starts Laboratory to Find What is Wrong.

Special to The New York Times.

CHICAGO, July 5. - Colonel George



Corset Advertisement, The New York Times



The Flapper, October 1922 (LushiePeach, Flickr.com)

Bathing Suits

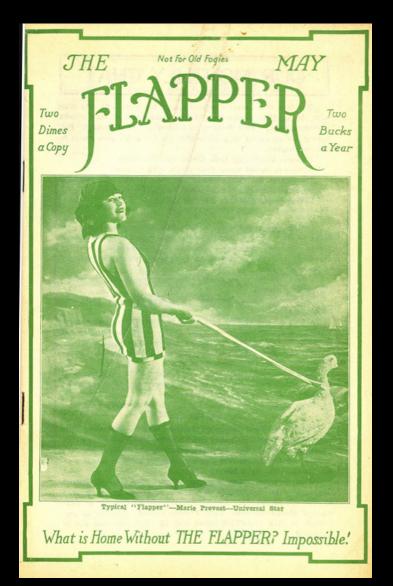




Atlantic City, 1922 (Library of Congress)



Myrtle Reeves, Lillian Langston, and Edith Roberts wearing 2 Piece Swimsuits, c.1918 (Library of Congress)



The Flapper, May 1922 (Lushie Peach, Flickr.com)

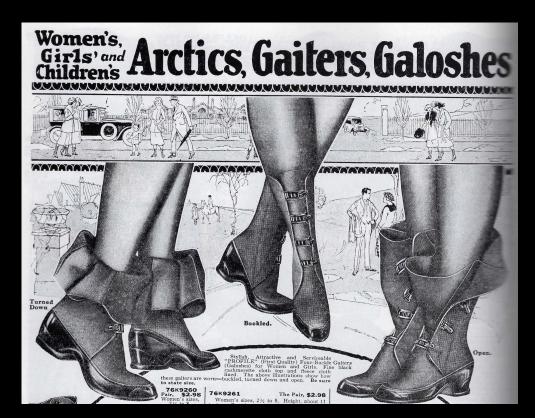


1 Piece Swimsuit, c.1918 (Library of Congress)

Galoshes



Actress Bessie Love in unbuckled galoshes. 1928 *Vintage Shoes,* Caroline Cox, pg. 27



The 1922 Sears Catalogue showcased the many ways galoshes could be styled. *Everyday Fashions of the 1920s,* Stella Blum, pg. 62

What Makes a Flapper?

Flapper Dresses?



Evening Ensemble
Philippe & Gaston
c. 1925
Metropolitan Museum of Art
2009.300.2490a, b
Gift of Mollie Hoffman in
memory of Ida Held



Evening Dress
Edward Molyneux
1926-1927
Metropolitan Museum of Art
C.I.42.33.3
Gift of Mrs. Adam Gimbel



Evening Dress
Anne & Thérèse
c.1925
Metropolitan Museum of Art
2009.300.1351
Gift of Mrs. Robert G. Olmsted and
Constable MacCracken

Flapper Dresses?



The Mumford Family, April 1927 Fashion in Photographs 1920-1940 p.

"Most Typical Flapper"

THE FLAPPER

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FLAPPERS OF THE EAST
Entered in THE FLAPPER Beauty Contest



Upper row, left to right: Jane and Betty O'Connor, Jersey City, N. J.; Mildred McKee, Trenton, N. J.; Bobbie Gloria Kephart, Pittsburgh, Pa. (Western Union Telegraph Social Club); Chic Hendricks, Yonkers, N. Y. (Palomine Club); Edna Totton, Manayunk, Philadelphia, Pa. Second row: (Above) Betty Schlafman, Bradford, Mass.; (below) Jean H. Cerino, M. Airy, Philadelphia, Pa.; Lillyn Liebeskind, Newark, N. J.; Honey Dew, McKeeport, Pa.; Peggy Mack, Sheepshead Bay, L. I., N. Y.; (above) Helen Redman, Haverhill, Mass.; (below) Gertrude Foster, Dorcheber, Vork City; Elizabeth M. Foley, Worcester, Mass.; Prances M. Fink, New York City; Diana Spengler, Reading, Pa.

THE FLAPPER

15

FLAPPERS OF CHICAGO
Is the Winner Among These?



Upper row: M. B. Halat, Irene Berger, Ruth Smith.
Second row: Anna McNeff, Marion Mars (Gay Flappers), Cecelia Weadock. (Photo
by Burke.)
Third row: Grace Nelson, Lilly Vogt, Louise Whitfield.
Last row: Phyllis Cochran (S. S. Club), Margaret Larson, Marie Dammeyer.