

Jazz Age Glossary

The 20's were a time for new language and expressions in America. Many of the new words were not acceptable to the general population.

All Wet – wrong; arguing a mistaken notion or belief.

Applesauce – a term of derogation; nonsense; same as baloney, bunk, banana oil, hokum, and horsefeathers.

Baloney – nonsense; same as applesauce, etc.

Bee's Knees – a superb person or thing.

Belly Laugh – a loud, uninhabited laugh.

Berries – anything wonderful; similar to bee's knees.

Bible Belt – an area in the South or south Midwest where Fundamentalist religion prevails (coined by H. L. Mencken).

Blind Date – a date with an unknown person of the opposite sex, usually arranged by a mutual friend.

Big Cheese – an important person.

Bronx Cheer – aloud, derisive noise from an audience (coined by humorist Bugs Baer, who credited Bronx rooters at athletic events with inventing this mode of expression).

Bull Session – an informal group discussion.

Bump Off – to murder.

Bunk – nonsense; same as applesauce, etc. (a shortened form of bunkum, which is also spelled buncombe, from the name of a North Carolina county whose representative in Congress in 1820 explained the irrelevance of a speech he was making by saying that he was “talking to Buncombe.”)

Cake Eater - a ladies' man.

Carry A Torch – to suffer from unrequited love.

Cat's Meow – anything wonderful; similar to bee's knees, berries.

Cheaters – eyeglasses.

Copacetic – excellent.

Crush – an infatuation with a person of the opposite sex.

Darb – an excellent person or thing.

Cogs – human feet.

Drugstore Cowboy – a fashionably dressed idler who hangs around public places trying to pick up girls.

Dumb Dora – a stupid girl.

Fall Guy – a scapegoat.

Flapper – a typical young girl of the 20's usually with bobbed hair, short skirts, and rolled stockings.

Flat Tire – a dull, boring person.

Frame – to cause a person's arrest by giving false evidence.

Gam – a girl's leg (from French dialect gambe).

Gatecrasher – a person who attends a party without an invitation, or a show without paying admission.

Giggle Water – an alcoholic drink.

Gin Mill – a speak-easy.

Gold Digger – a woman who uses feminine charm to extract money from a man.

Goofy – silly.

Gyp – to cheat (from gypsy).

Hard-Boiled – tough; without sentiment.

Heebie-Jeebies – the jitters.

Hep – wise.

High-Hat – to snub.

Hokum – nonsense; same as applesauce, etc.

Hooch – bootleg liquor (from Hoochinoo, a tribe of Alaskan Indians who made distilled liquor).

Hooper – chorus girl.

Horsefeathers – nonsense; same as applesauce, etc.

Hotsy-Totsy – pleasing.

Jake – okay (most commonly used in the phrase “Everythin’s jake”).

Keen – attractive; appealing.

Kiddo – a familiar form of address.

Kisser – the mouth.

Line – insincere flattery.

Lounge Lizard – a ladies’ man; same as cake-eater.

Lousy – bad; contemptible.

Main Drag – the most important street in a town or city.

Neck – to caress intimately.

Nerts (nuts) – an interjection expressing the speaker’s disgust.

Ossified - drunk.

Peppy– full of vitality.

Pet– same as neck.

Pinch– to arrest.

Pushover– a person or thing easily overcome.

Raspberry– same as Bronx cheer.

Ritzy– elegant (from Ritz, the Paris hotel).

Real McCoy, The– the genuine article (the derivation is in dispute; it comes either from a Scottish clan leader named MacKay; a boxer named Kid McCoy, who had a rival with the same name, or a bootlegger named McCoy who did not adulterate his liquor).

Run-Around– deceptive or delaying action, especially in response to a request.

Scream– to leave hurriedly (from scramble).

Screwy– crazy; eccentric.

Sex Appeal– physical attractiveness to members of the opposite sex.

Sheba– a young woman with sex appeal.

Smeller– the nose.

Sob Sister– a woman reporter who leans toward sentimentality in the treatment of her subject matter.

Speak-Easy– a saloon or bar selling bootleg whiskey.

Spiffy– having an elegantly fashionable appearance.

Spifflicated– drunk.

Stuck On - having a crush on.

Swanky – ritzy.

Swell – marvelous.

Torpedo – a hired gunman.

Upchuck – to vomit.

Whoopee – boisterous, convivial fun.