

Courting and Dating

The 1920s saw the continued transition from courting to recreational dating as the primary way that young men and women carried on their relationships.

Questions

1. Which social and cultural shifts during the 1920s influenced the transition from courting to recreational dating?
2. Reflect on the excerpt from *All The King's Men* and its portrayal of new dating practices in the 1920s. How does this text compare to your assumptions about dating a century ago? How does recreational dating compare to dating culture today?



Industrialization led to women working outside the home. This helped decrease the family's control over women and their relationships with men. Increased personal income created opportunities for recreation outside the home, as the 1920s saw the development of a "youth culture," a set of personal preferences and styles that distinguished young from old. Some dance styles in the 1920s allowed more physical contact between partners. Movie theaters and cars provided young people with various levels of privacy. "Going Steady" or "pinning" (giving a fraternity pin or other token to a dating partner) became dating practices that indicated a more serious relationship and perhaps an intention to become engaged and marry.

A courting stick (pictured above) allowed a man and a woman to exchange endearments privately but within view of chaperones and without being near each other.

The Great Depression and World War II temporarily restricted youth culture, although to some extent it continued with the Big Bands and swing dancing of the 1930s and 1940s. The youth culture returned with full force in the 1950s and became a permanent feature of American life.



Teenagers at a dance hall, 1941–1945

An excerpt from *All the King's Men*

Published in 1946, *All the King's Men* depicts events that occurred from before the Civil War to 1939. This excerpt is set in the 1920s. It describes a young man in his early twenties and a young woman, four years younger, out for a ride on a date. They come from wealthy families, but as the 1920s progressed, more and more young people had access to cars and thus to the freedom displayed by these two characters. This freedom was part of the change from courting to recreational dating.



Miss Suzette Dewey, daughter of Asst. Secty of Treasury and Mr. Chas. Dewey snapped beside her roadster. 11 09 26 12/29/27.

. . . Or we would get into the roadster¹ and drive out of the Landing² and pull the cutout³ and tear along, hell-for-leather, or as much hell-for-leather as was possible on the roads and with the mechanism of those days, out beyond the houses between the pines and the tidelands, with her head leaned against my shoulder and her hair puffed with the wind and tendrils whipping against my cheek. She would lean there and laugh out loud and say, "Oh, Jackie, Jackie, it's a wonderful night, it's a wonderful night, it's a wonderful night, say it's a wonderful night, Jackie-Boy, say it, say it!" Till I had to say it after her, like a lesson I was learning. Or she would hum or sing a song, one of those off the phonograph—God, what were they then? I don't remember. And maybe let the humming die off, and be perfectly still, with her eyes closed, until I stopped the car at some place where the breeze off the Gulf was enough to blow the mosquitoes away. (On nights when there wasn't any breeze, you simply didn't do any stopping.) Sometimes then, when I stopped the car she wouldn't even open her eyes till I had leaned over to kiss her, and I might have to kiss her enough to stop her breath. Or again, she would wait till just the instant before the kiss, then open her eyes wide, all at once, and say, "Boo!" and laugh. Then she'd be all knees and sharp elbows and little short laughs and giggles and serpentine evasions and strategy worthy of a jujitsu expert when I tried to capture her for a kiss. It was remarkable then how that little seat of a roadster gave as much room for deployment and maneuver as the classic plains of Flanders and how a creature who could lie in your clutch as lissome as willow and soft as silk and cuddly as a kitten could suddenly develop that appalling number of cunning, needle-pointed elbows and astute knees. While beyond the elbows and knees and sharp fingers, the eyes gleamed in the moonlight, or starlight, through the hair that had worked down loose, and the parted lips emitted the little bursts of breathless laughter, between the chanted words—"I don't—love—Jackie-Boy—nobody loves Jackie-Bird—I don't—love—Jackie-Boy—nobody loves—Jackie-Bird—" Till she would collapse laughing and exhausted into my arms and take her kiss and sigh and whisper. "I love Jackie-Boy," and rub a finger lightly over my face, and repeat, "I love Jackie-Boy—even with his ugly nose!" Then she would give the nose a sound tweak. And I would fondle that hooked, askew, cartilaginous monstrosity, pretending great pain but proud as Punch if the thing simply because she had put her fingers on it. . . .

Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt, 1946; 1974), 425–26.

Courting vs. Dating

Courting	Recreational Dating
Parental permission	Parental awareness
Marriage is the presumed goal	No expectation of marriage
Chaperoned meetings	Private meetings
One relationship at a time	Multiple relationships possible
Limited or no physical intimacy	Some physical intimacy
Prescribed period of time	No time limit

¹ A two seated automobile, often open or without protection from the weather, built to appear "sporty" or as if to be raced.

² The name of the area where the two characters live.

³ A cutout, when pulled or put in operation, vents the car's exhaust without going through mufflers. This increases engine noise, but also the power and hence the speed of the car.