Decades afterward, the year 1929 has remained linked with America’s darkest memories. In late October, the first signs of the economic Great Depression began to show. But until then, the times still sported a certain Roarin’ Twenties swagger.

On January 14 in 1929, Purdue-proud Harry Leslie took office as Indiana’s thirty-third governor. He was the first to come from Purdue and the first from Tippecanoe County in twenty-four years.

A few nights later, Lafayette’s eight-year-old Mars Theater showed Warner Brothers’ *On Trial*. This was the city’s first “talking” motion picture. Some patrons called them “soundies” because of the new sound-track technology. And at his desk up in Hazelden, George Ade was starting a story for a 1929 movie that would be called *Making the Grade*.

On April 26, the thirty-one-year-old aviator Amelia Earhart, darling of skillful publicists and marketers and steadily rising in national esteem, circled to land at Shambaugh Field. But it had been a soggy spring. The runway bluegrass lay drenched in brown water. Earhart feared that she could not safely land her loud, heavy, fourteen-seat Fokker monoplane at Shambaugh that day, so she dropped a note of regret and flew off.

Don Abbott would remember her anyway. He was nineteen then and majoring in aeronautics at Purdue. His dad, Professor
Raymond B. Abbott, was teaching physics. “I happened to be one of the group sent out to meet Amelia Earhart,” Don Abbott recalled. “Lots of fliers came in there, some with the [national publicity] tours. There were six or seven of us [chosen] to meet her. It had rained all night, but the sun had come out bright. She flew over, made several low passes at the field, but then dropped the note. I saw the note, and always wondered who got to keep it. Maybe no one!” (Abbott to author, 1991)

George Ade was the natural choice to introduce the guest speaker the night of May 21 at Purdue’s annual Literary Banquet. The guest was Elmer Davis, a bright young journalist and new author from Aurora, Indiana, with a hall-of-fame future in the field of radio news. He had attended Franklin College and had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in 1920 when his father became ill and died. Davis came home, became editor of Adventure magazine, then a reporter and editorial writer for the New York Times. In 1928, Davis’s novel Giant Killer retold the biblical story of David. Ade began by reciting the names of twenty-five Indiana authors:

I have met and known twenty of them. It seems to me that I had my innings during a most fortunate period. No other state in the Middle West and probably no other state in the Union can check up a list of twenty-five writers to compare with those I have just named, all of whom have been alive and in evidence at some time since 1890, when I emerged from the tall grass and began to have ambitions that dealt with putting stuff down on paper and handing it to a printer.

I treasure my recollections of General Lew Wallace and James Whitcomb Riley and Charles Major and George Barr McCutcheon. Even in the dark days when it seemed that Indiana had given up reading in the evening in order to put on the night-shirts of the Ku Klux Klan I found some consolation in the fact that Booth Tark-
ington and Meredith Nicholson and Kin Hubbard continued to reside in the state. I am not disposed to forget that I first met Tarkington and the two McCutcheon boys right here on the Purdue campus.

This evening it is a real pleasure to meet one whose books I read long before I knew he was coming here tonight—a comparative youngster for whom I have a genuine admiration, Elmer Davis. (*The Scrivener*, December 1929)

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On Thursday morning, May 15, a touring airplane called the “Independence” landed at Shambaugh Field. Owned by the Reid Murdoch Company of Chicago, the craft promoted Monarch brand foods. Monarch had converted the three-motored, corrugated metal monoplane with its seventy-four-foot wingspan and cabin seats for eleven, into a “flying grocery.” The “Independence” displayed on its shelves the Monarch line of food products the way any grocery store would. Visitors who entered the “food plane” viewed the grocery exhibit all that day. Big airplane arrivals still made newspaper columns. The *Journal and Courier* mentioned:

Shortly after arrival a trip was made over the city, passengers including Mayor Myron H. Morgan, of West Lafayette, Capt. L. I. Aretz and two local newspaper representatives, Walter Nelson and Gene Kantz, with R. A. Patterson, local representative for the Reid Murdoch Company.

Four days passed. On Sunday afternoon, Freddie Lund, a stunt pilot of some fame, visited Shambaugh Field. Lund, on the factory staff, piloted a new, blue and silver WACO built in Western Aviation’s Ohio plant. The free show brought out 5,000 people and hundreds of cars. Lund flew vertical rolls, Immelmann turns, and—new to stunt-flying—a “triple straight-up roll.”
The Journal and Courier further reported that “Dick Arnett did some pretty flying in his plane, and advanced students of Capt. Aretz also showed skill in the handling of their ships.” Arnett, son of the physician and Chamber of Commerce leader, was on his way to a career in flying cut short by accident.

Aviation made the news again on May 28-30 when Aretz flew Studebaker car dealer Charles Murdock and Purdue football coach Phelan from Shambaugh Field to Kansas City, Missouri. They used the airport’s new Curtiss 50C “Robin” high-winged cabin monoplane equipped with three seats and a 150- horsepower engine. In the “Robin” Aretz could fly from Shambaugh Field to Indianapolis—sixty miles—in twenty-some minutes.

Early that summer of 1929, Purdue, heeding advice from Dave Ross and President Elliott, hired G. Stanley Meikle to head a new Department of Research Relations with Industry. Purdue called Meikle “widely experienced as a research and engineering executive and a consulting scientist” (Kelly, Ross, 111). This set in motion a rare visit on June 26. On that day the nation’s premier car builder Henry Ford (1863-1947) came to review some of Purdue’s research projects.

Ford, then in his mid-sixties, arrived with his private secretary, Frank Campsall, from Detroit by Wabash Railroad train on Tuesday night June 25. Top people at Purdue knew that Ford was coming, but the public did not. Ford and Campsall stayed unnoticed for a night in Lafayette’s Fowler Hotel. The next morning, Meikle, Dave Ross, and Dean Potter led Ford and Campsall on a Purdue tour.

Marshall saw to it that a Journal and Courier man tagged along taking notes. The paper’s story that evening publicized Purdue’s rising reputation for research. On the tour, Ford “showed a ready smile, pleasant features, sparkling eyes and desire to talk to anyone he met.” He also showed a firm grasp of “technical stuff” and asked “good questions.” Ford accepted a souvenir kewpie doll
forged from iron in the Purdue foundry. When Dean Potter handed Ford a brass PU monogram watch fob for another memento, Ford mentioned that his four grandchildren sure would like those. Potter gave him six.

Ford studied mechanical, physics, and electrical research with the comment that “they all go together.” Ford liked the “practical way” Purdue was helping industries solve problems. He rated this type of work “of inestimable value to training young men to take important places in industry.”

Ford spoke of a museum and village he was building at his home city of Dearborn, Michigan. It would be the Edison Institute of Technology (later Greenfield Village.) The museum front would resemble Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The Village would reflect pioneer times and occupy 150 acres. It would contain Edison’s first laboratory. Antiquated equipment from that lab in New Jersey was being moved to Dearborn for display. Ford said the Edison Institute would be an educational project open to students of the world and that his visit to Purdue gave him many ideas for it. “We can’t know much of the future unless we know the past,” he said (Journal and Courier, June 26, 1929, 13).

In his walk through mechanical engineering projects Ford saw a Lincoln automobile engine he had given Purdue for study some years before. Ford said he had known one Purdue man since 1891. The man was the tall, lanky YMCA teacher and missionary to China, “Big Robbie” Robertson. Back in 1891, Ford had been a foreman in the Detroit Edison plant and Robertson had been a Purdue mechanical engineering student. Ford said he had followed Robertson’s religious, instructional, and scientific lecture work in China with great interest ever since.

Ford also discussed auto lubricants. Oil derived from castor beans then was being tested to replace motor oil. “We have been taking our oil from the ground,” Ford said, “but some day that will be exhausted and then we’ll have to get our oil from the top of the ground” (Journal and Courier, June 26, 1929, 13).
Ever the newsmaker, Amelia Earhart acquired a modified 1927 Lockheed “Vega,” a seven-seat cabin monoplane with a 300-horsepower engine. With it she finished third in the first Women’s Air Derby from Santa Monica, California, to Cleveland, Ohio.

When the September semester began in 1929, Purdue prevailed upon Captain Aretz to teach at Shambaugh Field so as to add eleven aviation courses. On a promotional air tour of Indiana that fall, Aretz again flew a Curtiss “Robin.” Lafayette firms that sponsored him arranged to have their names painted on one side of the “Robin.” Lettering on the other side advertised the eight 1929 Purdue football games that would start October 5 against Kansas State in Ross-Ade Stadium.

On November 1, 1929, the Indiana Supreme Court settled a seven-year-old case vital to Purdue. The court ruled that Purdue and the other state universities could condemn land for dormitories or military projects. This thorny and contentious eminent domain issue had arisen back in 1922 when Purdue, namely Dave Ross, wished to acquire for a dormitory some of the Dick Russell land in rural Wabash Township north and west of the existing campus. Tippecanoe Circuit Court Judge Homer W. Hennegar had ruled in December 1927 that Purdue could condemn under the terms of state laws enacted in 1911 and 1927, but legal counsel persuaded Russell to appeal. Russell argued that the 1911 and 1927 laws gave Purdue privileges not enjoyed by all citizens and was thus unconstitutional. Now the Supreme Court viewed the state colleges as a class by themselves that could be helped by special laws.

Since 1921, Dave Ross had been bringing to the Purdue Trustees the confidence of a self-made man of industry and wealth. His vision had led to and inspired the court battle with Russell. Ross also voiced practical, down-to-earth views about farming. To fellow Trustee Joseph Day Oliver, President of the Oliver Chilled Plow Works in South Bend, Ross once remarked: “If I were in the
plow business I’d have one that not only turned over the soil but disintegrated it ready for planting.”

“That might be hard to do,” said Oliver.

_Touchée!_ Professor William Aitkenhead in Purdue’s School of Agriculture helped Ross design a plow with a rotating part beside the moldboard that could break up soil. Ross received a patent for the plow in the fall of 1929 with three other patents for steering gear control assemblies he had designed.

While enmeshed in progressive work at Purdue, Ross in no way neglected his Ross Gear Company. Ross gears equipped seventeen of the twenty-six car models in the 1929 New York Automobile Show. The Lafayette plant produced its first roller-bearing-mounted cam followers. They improved by fifty percent Ross cam and lever gear efficiency.

Even before the stock market crash of 1929, the number of American car companies had been declining. Only a few large ones still made cars, trucks, and buses. So Ross Gear engineers worked at ways to steer farm tractors, combines, road graders, and other “off-highway” machines while retaining the lead among independent commercial steering gear makers.

The company had enjoyed good Roaring Twenties business. On February 14, 1929, Ross Gear directors had reported assets and liabilities of $2,657,567 with outstanding capital stock of 150,000 shares and a treasury surplus of $950,809 at the end of 1928. In the first quarter of 1929, the company showed a profit before taxes of $279,612—up more than $100,000 over the same quarter in 1928. All told, Ross Gear reported $565,581 in profit for 1929. This compared with $452,830 for 1926, $403,500 for 1927, and $751,351 for 1928 (The Gear, 11-12).

Business was going so well, in fact, that on December 16, 1929, Ross Gear directors raised the threshold of company earnings for executive payroll bonuses from $400,000 to $500,000. Just six years earlier the bonus threshold had been $60,000.
Coach Jimmy Phelan’s 1929 football team, one of Purdue’s best ever, won all of its games. It outscored eight foes 187 points to forty-four. In Ross-Ade Stadium the team beat Kansas State twenty-six to fourteen before 9,000 fans; Michigan twenty-to sixteen before standing-room-only 25,000; DePauw twenty-six to seven; Mississippi twenty-seven to seven; and Iowa seven to nothing before a stadium record 26,000. Football fans kept howling for more seats.

The Purdue Alumnus in the glow of victory—and pride—published a four-page Football Supplement on November 22. “Purdue Big Ten Champion” screamed an inch-tall front-page headline. A small, boxed item on the back page contained a comment titled “Wonderful:”

The students are happy, the townspeople are jubilant, sport lovers all over the country are forwarding congratulations, prominent sport writers everywhere are using unreservedly high-powered adjectives about our team, and the old grads who have been rooting for Purdue all thru these many years of heartbreaks and disappointments are simply gurgling and incoherent. - GEO. ADE

Yet for Purdue fans, the football news turned dark. Coach Phelan had led Purdue to its first undefeated, untied season since 1892. This team had finished with a thirty-two to nothing route of rival Indiana at Bloomington for possession of the Old Oaken Bucket. Among this team’s stars were halfbacks Glen Harmeson, Harry “Monk” Kissell, Ralph “Pest” Welch, Duane Purvis, and fullback Alex Yunevich, but then Phelan resigned to take the football job at the University of Washington. On December 24, Kellogg signed Noble E. Kizer for three years to succeed Phelan. Kizer, one of Phelan’s assistant coaches at Purdue, had been another Notre Dame product but with a less fiery approach. Two other coaches who had helped Phelan, A. K. “Mal” Elward and Earl Martineau, stayed at Purdue.
In the last days of 1929 the *Journal and Courier* found it necessary to print upsetting headlines almost every day about the nation’s economy. One read, “Tension Lifted in Wild Stock Market Flurry.” Others followed like one about a St. Louis stockbroker who swallowed poison, “Ends Life After Losing $400,000.”

The financial news would only get worse. There soon appeared full-page ads in American papers from the Ford Motor Company about this tense time. An economic panic slowly was setting in. Nervous investors were selling their stocks at sinking prices to avoid deeper losses. Plants were closing. Workers were being laid off.

Ford announced price cuts on twenty models of coupes, sedans, town cars, station wagons, taxicabs, pickup trucks, delivery trucks, and panel trucks. The price of a Standard Coupe—formerly $550—would drop to $500. Ford lowered its Roadster price from $450 to $435. A Phaeton that sold for $460 would drop to $440. The cost of the company’s most expensive Town Car sank from $1,400 to $1,200.

Ford told those who read the ads that the company “believes that basically the industry and business of the country are sound”:

> Every indication is that general business conditions will remain prosperous. We are reducing prices now because we feel that such a step is the best contribution that could be made to assure a continuation of good business throughout the country. It has always been our policy to pass on to the public as rapidly as possible the advantages of quantity production and newly developed manufacturing efficiencies. (Lafayette *Journal and Courier*, November 1, 1929)

Well and good, but on December 18 and 19, a shrieking Midwest blizzard dropped eighteen inches of snow on Lafayette, and the howling wind whipped it into six-foot drifts.

The Roaring Twenties still had roar, but had run out of days.