Probus Talk 23 October 2025

Paris – The Crazy Years

Patrick Murray

Patrick gave Allander Probus an entertaining presentation on Paris in the 1920s when it was a lively, creative centre of entertainment, literature, painting, jazz and general joie de vivre.

The aftermath of World War I affected countries in different ways – America continued Segregation and also brought in Prohibition but France became a magnet for music, dance and artistic expression with an “anything goes” lack of restriction.

That, and the generous franc exchange rate brought in many notables from other countries: -
Ernest Hemingway, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, Picasso, Modigliani, Man Ray, Kiki of Montparnasse and the truly amazing Josephine Baker. “The most amazing woman anyone ever saw” according to Ernest Hemingway

After a very hard childhood and early marriages at 13 and 15, Josephine went from chorus-line spots in Harlem and Broadway to starring in erotic dancing at the Folies Bergere in Paris wearing little more than pearls and a banana skirt, dancing in a unique, stunning loose-limbed style. It’s worth looking at he her on You Tube! e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2PCPsXXhm4 . She was immensely popular in France and Europe though still shunned in the US, eventually becoming a French citizen in 1937.

The Wall Street crash and then WW II brought an end to the roaring 20s but Josephine was recruited by the French Resistance and used her celebrity to gather information from the Nazis and shelter resistance fighters. After the war she was awarded the Croix de Guerre, raised her large group of adopted children, strongly supported the civil rights movement and was eventually symbolically interred in the Pantheon among other French greats.

Although Patrick talked at length about Josephine (who started his interest in the 1920s) he also described some of the people of that time such as the mentally-troubled President of France, Paul Deschanel who bizarrely fell out of his train window in his nightshirt, was found by a local farmer who refused to believe he was the President but gave him a bed and delivered him the next day to the local sanitorium.

Patrick also distributed several original hundred-year-old copies of the French magazine “Le Journal Amusant” with adverts and illustrations totally strange to modern readers. The talk was a fascinating insight into a unique period and well-received by our members.

Mel Burt Oct 2025