Our vision of the 1920s flapper was inspired by a Kansan—actress Louise Brooks from Cherryvale. She defined the era, and introduced the world to the Charleston.

When Brooks was young she liked to perform and direct stage plays with the neighbor children. One of those friends was Vivian Vance, who became an actress known for her role in I Love Lucy. By the time Brooks was 11 she was performing regularly in the community. Inspired by actress Gloria Swanson, she cut her long hair, and adopted a short bob.

When her family moved to Wichita, she attended high school and danced in community productions. The newspapers called her “graceful and delightful” and predicted she would have a great future.
Brooks headed to New York at age 15 to study with the leading modern dance company. She danced two seasons with the Denishawn School and became a close friend of another student, Martha Graham, who started her own famous school. Afterwards Brooks joined a Broadway revue, then took the American dance sensation to London and showed them how to do the Charleston.

Back in New York, Brooks was signed by Paramount Studios and cast in silent comedies. While she wasn’t considered a major star, Brooks became well known for her iconic style. She was the image of the flapper with her glamorous beauty, black cropped hair, and satiny gowns. At just 5-feet 2-inches, she created the illusion of height with tall heels and portrayed the modern woman. Newspapers and magazines built her fame, covering her life onscreen and offscreen, from New York to Hollywood. Fans called her face extraordinary and tried to copy her signature look.
With her star rising, Brooks wanted a raise. When the studio denied her request, she left Hollywood and was invited by one of the leading German directors to star in his films. The three films made in Europe are considered her finest work. Back in Hollywood, Brooks realized she had burned essential bridges. She turned down a role in The Public Enemy, which proved to be a mistake, and she was limited to small roles and an uncredited appearance. Brooks decided to retire from filmmaking in 1938, after making 24 movies.

Brooks briefly operated a dance studio in Los Angeles, then moved back to Wichita, where she taught the fundamentals of good ballroom dancing. It wasn’t long before she returned to New York, where she lived in obscurity for much of her life. When her films were rediscovered in the 1950s, Brooks returned to public life, and developed her own distinctive voice in a series of articles and an autobiography, reflecting on her life, which had begun in Kansas.
“For two extraordinary years I have been. . .learning to write,” she said. “At first it is quite impossible. You make yourself better than anybody, then worse than anybody, and when you finally come to see you are ‘like’ everybody—that is the bitterest blow of all to the ego.”