Life in the United States During the 1800s

R.J. Musto travels back in time to see what life was like in the rural US during the 1800s

The United States began as a rural nation. In 1800, approximately 75 percent of the population earned a living by farming. By 1880, less than 50 percent of the population earned a living by farming. However, the family farm was still an important part of life in the US. In the late 1800s, the country saw a shift with the urban population growing faster than the rural population and, by 1900, more than 30 million people lived in cities. The growth came from men and women being abandoned by the city and the influx of immigrants from Europe. Indeed, labor back in time and take a look at the lives of people during the 1800s. In almost every home, everyday life was simpler and neighborhoods helped neighbors.

Work
Farmers worked from sunup to sundown raising cattle, feeding farm animals, planting and harvesting crops. When the farmer completed the farm chores, he still had the everyday chores around the house such as cutting wood for the fireplace, maintaining fences and hunting to provide food for the family. Even if one did not live on a farm, most people still raised chickens for eggs and cows for milk; these animals required daily care.

The invention of machinery helped make farm life a little easier. For example, in 1831 Cyrus McCormick invented a reaper for cutting grain. However, even with advances in machinery, horses, oxen and people still did most of the work. Young children helped their parents with the farm; boys worked in the fields and around the barn, while girls sewed, cooked and helped with the wash.

Today, we go to the store and use cash or a credit card. In the 1800s, bartering was common. The early farmer also depended on store credit; the local general store would provide supplies to the farmer until the crops were harvested and sold, and then the farmer settled with the store owner.

Besides farming, a person might work as a shopkeeper, printer, tavern keeper or in a trade. An important person of the period was the blacksmith. He made and repaired tools and made horseshoes, a busy job since the horse served as the main means of transportation. Coal mining became a major employer of the poor and middle class during the late 1800s in Pennsylvania, Kentucky and West Virginia, and coal towns sprang up around the mines.

People began to work in factories. In the early part of the century, a workshop owner had a few close employees working for him. The factory, however, brought about changes and the employer no longer worked beside and with his employees. Eventually, the employer became less concerned with the employees’ welfare and more concerned with profit. Previously, employees made most of the products by hand and took pride in their work; now machines did much of the work and the employees became common laborers.

Near the end of the 19th century, women began working outside of the home, in the garment industry, working in stores and as teachers. The women of this period received a fraction of the pay a man received for the same job. Even children worked in shops and factories, many working 10 to 12 hours a day in unsafe conditions.
often cramped, working conditions.

**Housing & Daily Life**

The Homestead Act of 1862 gave many people a new start by providing the chance for private citizens to set claims to land in the public domain in the West. Farms and towns dotted the countryside and families often lived in one-room cabins. Neighbors helped in house or barn raisings where the men and boys would build the home or barn while the women and girls prepared the food. These homes were usually log cabins with one window measuring about 10 by 20 feet, with a dirt floor. This one room served as the kitchen, dining room, living room and bedroom. Due to the size of the homes and large families, parents were often the only ones to have any privacy. Small children and their adolescent siblings would be forced to sleep together, two or three to a bed.

Settlers who lived on the prairie found it difficult to find wood for homes. As a result, these settlers often built homes of sod, known as "soddies". settlers would cut the hard dry prairie sod into blocks and use the sod like bricks to construct the family home. This style of home did not provide long term protection, however, as rain caused the sod to fall apart. Also, due to its grass and mud base, insects, rodents and snakes liked to call the "soddy" home.

Lanterns fueled by whale oil and later, kerosene, were used to light the home. In the 1830s, cities had piped gas from the gas factory, which provided gas light. Electricity did not arrive until late in the century. In the 1820s, cast iron cook stoves reached the consumer. However, due to the high cost, only the rich could afford these stoves. As a result, most people relied on a fireplace for heat. If one needed water, they had to haul or pump water from a well. Not surprisingly, in these early homes, furniture was sparse.

Above: Root cellars were an important part of the pioneer home, as shown above. The cellar was 30 to 40 degrees cooler in the summer and was the pioneer version of the refrigerator before the days of electricity. Another staple of pioneer life was the sod house, shown right. Unfortunately, these homes, which were made from sod blocks, often deteriorated due to heavy rainfall. Various pests and vermin also liked to live in the warm, wet sod.

Sears, Roebuck & Company and Montgomery Ward catalogs came out in the late 1800s and afforded the consumer in rural areas the opportunity to buy apparel, furniture and household items. For the first time, rural residents could purchase items which previously were only available to residents in urban areas.

Today, most of us take a daily bath or shower to stay clean. During the 1800s, however, people only took a hot bath once a week, usually in a wooden or metal tub in the kitchen since the water was heated on the stove or in the fireplace. Between baths, people simply heated water on the stove and filled a basin to wash by hand.

Cities usually developed in a pattern. Poor people lived downtown in the older section of the city, the middle class lived in better homes or apartment buildings outside the city core and the rich lived farther away from the city, in the suburbs.

**Food**

People living in the city usually ate three or four times a day — breakfast, lunch, dinner and a snack in the late evening. The types of food eaten varied with the parts of the country and the ethnic background of the people. For example, in New England, due to its proximity to water, clam chowder and shellfish were common foods. The South, where cooking meat was popular, ham and pork became staple dishes. As today, coffee was a standard beverage.

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Miss Nettie Spencer grew up in rural Oregon in the 1870s and when interviewed in 1938 she described a fancy dinner of days gone by. "Our food was pretty plain most of the time and we didn't have any salads like they do now. The menu for a fine dinner would be: Chicken stew with dumplings, mashed potatoes, peach preserves, biscuits, and hominy."

During the 19th century, homes did not have refrigerators. However, this did not pose a problem in the winter for most regions. An ice house preserved ice cut from lakes for later use; the blocks were stored in the ice house, insulated by the structure's...
stone walls and separated by straw or sawdust. During the warmer months, the ice preserved food for as long as it lasted.

Another method of storing food was in a root cellar, usually dug 10 feet below the ground. The storage area was often 30 to 40 degrees cooler than daytime temperatures during the summer and the cooler air helped to preserve the food. Fresh milk filled crocks stored in the root cellar in the summer. The cream was taken off and later churned to make butter.

Hunting deer, wild turkey and rabbits provided most of the required meat. In the summer months, the meat had to be preserved quickly to prevent spoilage. Two methods to preserve meat for later use were to salt or smoke it. Regardless of the method, it was a lengthy process. For the salting method, meat was treated with a brine solution, and then stored in a cool place. Although salted meat lasted months, the meat had to be rinsed, scrubbed and soaked to remove the salt before preparing a meal. Another method of preserving meat was to smoke it in a smokehouse over a fire for several days.

Almost every home had fruit trees that would provide everything from apples and cherries to peaches and plums for the family. Canning, drying or making jams helped to preserve the fruits for later use, especially in the winter months.

Education
Most children in rural areas attended a one-room school house in a central location, so no child had to walk more than two miles to school. The school house usually held 20 to 40 students, with all grades in one room. The children learned the basics of reading, writing and math and, if time was available, the students also studied geography, history, grammar and drawing.

Students sat in one or two-seater oak desks with the smaller desks in front of the classroom for the younger students. A potbelly stove or fireplace provided the heat in winter.

In the front of the classroom, a blackboard hung on the wall with the alphabet above it. Being a teacher in the 1800s did not require a degree, just knowledge of the basics. Students used slateboards to write on as paper was expensive. Many times, the school was the only public building and it also served as a location for spelling bees, theater troupes, lectures and non-profit organizations.

One-room school houses had their positive sides; they provided individualized instruction, along with programs that allowed students to proceed at their own rate. The more advanced students helped the slower students with tutoring.

Amusements
After the long days of hard work, everyone wanted to relax. However, there really was not an abundance of free time. Men relaxed by going to the local tavern to drink, talk or play a game of cards. In a nearby field, one might see men and boys playing a game of baseball.

If men had little spare time, women had even less. Women spent much of their time taking care of the children and the everyday chores such as cooking, cleaning, ironing, sewing and laundry. When women found spare time, they might attend a quilting bee or church social.

Community dances and square dances with music provided by a fiddle, harmonica, banjo and even homemade instruments were popular.

Reading became an enjoyable pastime for the young and old alike, especially novels, and almost every home had a Bible. Several novels came in a series of books, such as the Pop-Gun and Rollo’s Tour in Europe series. Newspapers became popular in the 1800s, and by 1860, there were more than 3,500 newspapers and periodicals in circulation. Due to the cost of paper and printing, the majority of newspapers were only published weekly.

Children played with toys and took part in games. Toys reflected the people and culture of the period; this can especially be seen in the clothing and hair styles of children’s dolls.

Many early toys were made at home, maybe a father whittled a toy doll or animal for one of his children, or mother might have made a rag doll for her little girl. Native American children played with dolls made from corn husks and leather balls filled with feathers. Eventually, cast iron and tin
plate toys replaced wooden toys near the end of the 19th century; many of these toys came from Germany and England. Children did not purchase toys in a toy store, but in a local hardware store, and the Christmas season provided the largest selection of toys. Parents believed games should educate, so many of the games not only served to amuse, but also to teach.

Medicines
In the early 1800s, many future physicians learned to be doctors by the apprentice system. In 1810, only five medical schools existed to train doctors. By 1850, 40 medical schools served the needs of the growing population.

In many rural areas and small towns, the residents used home remedies because no doctor was nearby or the people had little money to pay the doctor. Whiskey or herbal teas served as a common remedy. One interesting treatment found in the Schroer family history, written by Anna E. Schroer was "For a sore throat, bread with a blue greenish mold would be soaked in warm water, then drained and the water used as a gargle." The treatment claimed to work like penicillin. The countryside saw many quacks and charlatans selling quick-fix elixirs, such as Dr. Townsend’s Sarsaparilla or Dr. Sterling’s Ambrosia. A good majority of these elixirs had no effect on the sick.

For house calls, some doctors might take two to three days to reach the sick in rural areas. The price of a house call varied. In the countryside, a house call cost around 50 cents and in the city $1 to $2.

Transportation
In the early 1800s, residents relied on land travel via wagon trails and crude roads or on water by rafts or boats. The 1800s gave way to several improvements in the area of transportation. These improvements developed because of a growing population and the need to transport manufactured goods to market and people westward.

Many roads consisted of nothing more than a path following Indian trails. As time went on, these paths became a network of roads. The "plank road" built in the mid 1800s, as the name states, consisted of planks laid on the ground. The turnpike grew as a method to improve transportation; the turnpike charged a fee to offset its construction and the maintenance cost of the road.

Today, we have hotels for travelers. In the 1800s, travelers stopped at taverns for the night, ate a hot meal, exchanged stories and discussed the news of the day. The age of the railroad was in the making and the "iron horse" became the best means of transportation for goods and travelers into the late 1800s.

How about taking a step back in time? Today, many families spend too much time watching television, playing video games or on the computer. Turn off the electronics and have the family sit around and just talk or play a board game with each other. It would be a learning experience and, for that one day, your family might bond a little and learn to better understand each other.