

The Atlantic

America in 1915: Long Hours, Crowded Houses, Death by Trolley

Bad news: No antibiotics. Good news: Streetcars, everywhere!



(Eugene de Salignac/Courtesy NYC Municipal Archives)

DEREK THOMPSON

FEB 11, 2016 | BUSINESS

TEXT SIZE



The presidential campaign is replete with allusions to better times and eclipsed golden ages of American greatness. But in a new review from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the economist Carol Boyd Leon [paints a sociological portrait](#) of America as it was 100 years ago, when technology was meager, financial ruin was one downturn away, war was ongoing in

Europe, and the choices that Americans have come to expect—in their cars, clothes, food, and homes—were preceded by a monotonous consumer economy. In 1915, Americans walked everywhere (or took a streetcar, if they lived in cities), lived in three-generation homes that they rarely owned, ate almost as much lard as chicken, and spent Friday nights dancing to player pianos. In short: Everything was worse, except for the commute.

Here is a closer look at America, one century ago.

America suffered worse working conditions, in just about every way.

- **For men:** Work for men was more widespread, more dangerous, worse paid, and, well, just more *annoying*. According to the 1920 census, 85 percent of men over 14 were in the labor force, compared with just 69 percent for men over 16 today. It was the dawn of scientific management, with factory workers introduced to a brand new office colleague, the time clock. Manufacturing workers averaged 55 hours at work per week, 10 percent more than self-reported averages today. And the jobs were more dangerous: With a fatality rate of 61 deaths per 100,000 workers, the workplace was about 30 times more dangerous than it is today.
- **For women:** Women were much less likely to work, and in 1915, many were finding employment at elementary and high schools. The reason for women's early entry into education in the U.S., however, is a little depressing. School boards preferred female teachers not only because they were seen as more loving, but also because they would do what male principals told them while accepting less than a man's wage.
- **For the elderly:** For those who did make it to old age (something of a feat back then), Social Security didn't exist, and in bad times, poverty among the old was so bad that contemporaries wrote of growing old as if it were a dystopia—the “[haunting fear in the winter of life.](#)” In 1938 a

writer with the American Association for Old-Age Security **said** "our modern system of industrial production has rendered our lives insecure to the point of despair." The industrializing economy was no country for old men or women. As families moved off farms into cities and suburbs, it became harder for some old people to find work in factories, which ran on limber sinews and sweat. In the 40 years before 1920, the share of men over 65 working on farms dropped 39 percent.

America ate lard and cold cereal and paid a lot of money for it.

It's hard to imagine many Americans begging to switch places with a 1915 gourmand. Food was not only less varied in 1915, but also considerably more expensive. The typical American spent one-third of his income on food 100 years ago, which is twice today's share.

The early 20th century was a golden age of cold-cereal products—Corn Flakes, Quaker Puffed Rice and Puffed Wheat, and Shredded Wheat all came on the market between 1906 and 1912—but on the farm, people enjoyed a heartier meal of eggs and pancakes. Lunch at the office provided a logistical challenge, as in 1915, there existed no such thing as a plastic bag to keep a sandwich fresh. Instead, contemporary cookbooks called for keeping sandwiches moist by "wrapping [them] in a dry towel, covered with a towel wrung out of hot water."

The average American ate roughly equivalent amounts of lard and chicken—11.5 pounds and 14 pounds, respectively, per year. One century later, the ratio has, blessedly, widened. Americans eat 57 pounds of chicken, compared to just 1.5 pounds of lard. But Americans, gluttons to their core, have replaced fat's flavor with something even worse: Their sugar intake has jumped from 88 to 130 pounds in the last 100 years.

American home life was extremely crowded.

"The business of America is farming business," one might have said in 1915, but industrialization was slowly removing the "farming" part. America had one-third of its current population in 1915, and it was considerably more spread out. Half of all families lived in rural areas, or in towns with populations below 2,500.

But you wouldn't notice the relative sparseness if you just stayed home. The average household was crowded, with more than four people, a figure which has fallen with each passing decade, and now resides just above 2.5 people. Loneliness was a financial impossibility, back then, as few could afford to live alone. Children remained under their parents' roofs until they were married (at an average age of 21, for women). Practically no couples got divorced, and widows moved in with their adult children.

Owning was a rarity. In 1920, there were about four times as many renters as homeowners, whereas today, the homeownership rate is above 60 percent. Houses were cheaper, but buying was a relative hassle: Although the average value of a home was no more than \$75,000 in today's dollars, mortgages typically required a downpayment of about 50 percent.

Infants were both more abundant and more precarious. Women had more children—three, on average—to help on the farm in the old agrarian economy. But the more disquieting reason women had so many children was that children were likely to die: Ten percent of infants died in their first year, compared with one in every 168 births in the U.S. today. For this happy and dramatic improvement, mothers and fathers can thank the professionalization of baby-delivery. Giving birth at home in 1915 wasn't merely normal; it was ubiquitous. In a major city like Pittsburgh, 87 percent of births happened outside of hospitals.

America was a younger country, but had no concept of "teen-agers."

In 1915, 100 million people lived in the United States, and more than half were under 25. One century later, the population is more than 300 million, but the share of people under age 25 has fallen to one-third. Meanwhile the share of people over 65 tripled, from 5 percent to 14 percent.

But in the early 20th century, the word “teen-ager” either didn’t exist or was scarcely used outside of development psychology. Since the term applies to a group of youngish people who hang out together, their invention required an insulated environment where teens could behave, well, teenagery. Teens didn’t create “high school.” High schools created “teenagers.”

As the U.S. economy shifted from a disparate agrarian society to a mass production machine, families relocated closer to cities and, at least initially, many sent their children to work. The movement to prevent kids from being forced to toil in mills encouraged compulsory education for teenagers. In 1920, just 28 percent of American youths between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were in high school. By 1930, 47 percent of this age group was attending high school. As young people spent more time in school, they developed their own customs in an environment away from work and family, and the possibility of a distinct teenage subculture became possible. It’s hard to imagine a teenage culture in an economy where every 16-year-old is expected to work with his father on the lathe, or in the fields.

The second key development in the creation of the teenager was the invention of cars. It might be a horrifying consideration for today’s singles, but a first date once meant an introductory chat in the living room with a girl’s parents. This might have been followed by a deliciously awkward family dinner.

But cars emancipated romance from the stilted small talk of the family parlor. Just about everything a modern single person considers to be a “date” was made possible, or permissible, but the invention and normalization of

car-driven romance. (If you think Tinder and dating apps are destroying romance today, you would have hated cars in the 1930s.) The fear that young men and fast cars were upending romantic norms was widespread. The chorus of the 1909 Cole Porter song “Keep Away From the Fellow Who Owns an Automobile” is instructive:

Keep away from the fellow who owns an automobile

He'll take you far in his motor car

Too darn far from your Pa and Ma

If his forty horsepower goes sixty miles an hour say

Goodbye forever, goodbye forever

Americans didn't drive: They walked, rode horses, and acrobatically dodged trolleys.

In the last 100 years, perhaps nothing about daily life has changed more than the commute.

Half of all families lived on farms in 1915, which means work was typically a walk away. Many city-dwellers also lived close enough to factories to arrive at the office on foot. Others went by horseback. In lieu of parallel parking spots along Main Street, there were hitching rails up and down central boulevards, where one might park a mule.

Horse use was peaking. The number of horses and mules on U.S. farms reached its all-century high around 1915, as tractors gradually replaced them. Streetcars were peaking, too, although their legacy would live on in

surprising vestiges. My favorite anecdote in Carol Boyd Leon's [remarkable essay](#) concerns the origin of the Los Angeles Dodgers' name:

The Brooklyn Grays baseball team, nicknamed the Brooklyn Trolley Dodgers in 1895 and later the Brooklyn Dodgers, was so named "in tribute to their fans, who had to avoid speeding [trolley] cars in the maze of trolley lines crisscrossing the city.")

One thing that wasn't peaking was cars. There were just 2 million cars on the sparse roads of 1915, or about one for every 50 people. The Model T was a hot commodity, but outside of a handful of cities, there weren't many places you could easily drive it. Today, after several decades of car-friendly policies and public construction, there are more than 255 million registered vehicles in the United States. The number of vehicles has grown by 100 times in 100 years, conveniently for memory's sake.

America danced to phonographs in blue serge suits and long skirts.

Globalization has dramatically brought down the cost of clothing in the last few decades. But before the United States exported its textiles to Asia and Mexico, Americans paid handsomely for handsome American apparel. Now just 3 percent of a typical consumer's budget, clothing demanded 13 percent of one's income in 1915.

Even those sick with nostalgia for debonair hats and gloves must acknowledge that the era's style was monotonous. Men uniformly wore blue serge suits at work. Women wore skirts whose length varied, according to the fashion and the amount of material available for apparel manufacturers (since some was conserved for the war).

There were all sorts of tech amenities that might seem quotidian today that were rarities in 1915. Thirty percent of the country had a telephone. Less than 20 percent had a stove. Very few people owned a refrigerator, and almost nobody owned a radio. Within 60 years, clothes washers, dryers, air-conditioning, and television sets would all be household staples, but in 1915 they were nowhere to be seen. Instead, the most popular media product of the time might have been the player pianos or the phonograph.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DEREK THOMPSON is a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, where he writes about economics, labor markets, and the entertainment business.

 [Twitter](#)