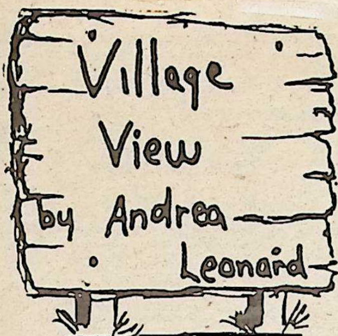

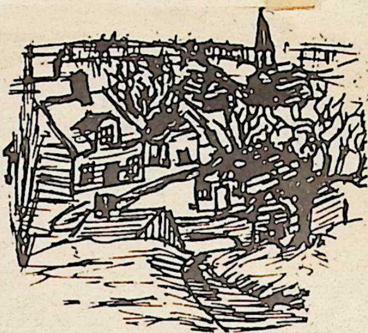

If you're told something often enough, you begin to believe it, after a while, even when it's really sort of absurd from first to last.

It's probably impossible for you to recall the first time you heard that young people today face greater complexities of life than previous generations, and this makes growing up in the modern world more difficult for the present youthful generation.

The first time I heard that said, I felt perplexed; but soon I came to accept it as true without analyzing it. At a recent family gathering, the notion came into the conversation again, and this time it was challenged. Let's consider.

How complex was life for earlier generations and what kinds of knowledge did people need to survive childhood and adolescence, to grow to adulthood, reproduce, raise their young, and finally cope with age and infirmity?

In an ordinary day a hundred years ago, the average child of ten or twelve might have had to know a good deal more than the average child today. Upon awakening on a cold winter's morning, he opened his eyes to a windowpane covered with frost, for there was no heat in his bedchamber and through the night the moisture from his breathing condensed on the coldest thing in the room: the window pane.

A boy must fling himself out of bed and into his clothes, and break the ice in his water pitcher to wash himself before dashing downstairs to help get the fires going before breakfast.

One of his chores was keeping the woodpile stacked high, for the only source of heat in the house was woodstoves in the kitchen and sitting room. The rest of the house was without heat.

After he'd brought in wood from the shed, laid a fire and gotten it burning, he went out to the yard for water from the pump.

Yesterday he'd known it would be cold during the night for he'd already learned to forecast the weather and last evening had been clear and still. To be sure the pump didn't freeze and crack, he'd let the water down before he went to bed.

To bring it back up from the well, he had to "catch it" by pouring enough water down the pipe to create a vacuum, and then pump hard until his exertions brought the clear cold water gushing forth into the buckets.

Back in the house, he filled the kettle with water and set it to boil on the big black iron kitchen stove, now giving off a welcome heat. He closed the damper and checked the draft so all the heat from the blazing wood didn't rush up the chimney, so the wood burned slowly and wasn't consumed faster than necessary, and wasted.

His last chore before breakfast was to fill the oil can so his sister, once breakfast was over, could do the lamps: wash the chimneys, refill the bowls, trim the wicks, and set the lamps on the mantleshelf, ready for lighting when evening came.

While he did his chores, Mother prepared the family's hearty breakfast. Sister set the table and helped Mother get the day's first meal. It was ready when Father came in from milking the cow, and

feeding and watering the livestock in the barn.

Before leaving for school, sister fed the hens, gathered the warm brown eggs from under the clucking pecking birds, and brought them safely to the kitchen where they were stored in a blue bowl in the pantry cold closet.

A cold closet is a small cupboard with an adjustable hinged door to let in enough outside air to keep food cool, but not enough to freeze it.

After breakfast, Father departed for work and the children set out for school. There was no bus so they walked the mile or two through whatever weather happened to come.

With the family out from under foot, Mother set about her duties. She made up the featherbeds, emptied the slops and refilled the pitchers with clean water. She mixed bread dough and set it to rise on the warming shelf above the stove. She made pie dough, rolling it thin on the maple board, fitting it carefully into the pie plates, filling them with slices of apples from the barrel in the barn where the heat of the animals' bodies kept the fruit from freezing.

While making the pies she got the fire up to heat the oven enough to bake properly. The kettle of water atop the stove would be hot enough to do laundry before noon. She'd made her own soap on a clear cool day in the fall and her shelf was well-stocked with hard yellow bars.

The tubs and scrubboard stood ready in the small back room off the kitchen that was also a passage to the woodshed. Beyond that was the out-house, and behind it, the barn. Near the wash tubs stood the churn used to make butter from the rich cream floating on the surface of the milk, cooling in milk pans where Father had left it.

In the corner of the sitting room stood the family's latest acquisition, a brand new treadle sewing machine. With its help Mother saved hours of time previously spent in handsewing, with tiniest of stitches; she could now machine-stitch the family's clothing, from undergarments to overcoats, and make curtains and patchwork quilts.

In the barn, along with paraphanalia for harnessing the horse, was Father's equipment for repairing footgear, mending tack, keeping the buggy in good order, caring for the animals: horse blankets, saddles, curry combs, hay and oats, watering troughs for the livestock, buckets and tools.

Compare this fragment of the "simple life" with the complexities of today. A boy wakes in a warm room, flings himself out of bed and into his clothes, washes up in a bathroom heated to 72°, and manages to get to the breakfast table in time to eat, grab his books, and bolt for the schoolbus.

Water comes and goes at the turn of a handle. Lights flash on and off at the flip of switches. Food appears in the form of milk and eggs straight from the refrigerator, a place that maintains a uniform cool temperature. Cereal pours from a package, fruit juice from a can, bread from a plastic wrapper. Lunch is provided at school.

Would he know a water pump if he saw one? Could he milk a cow? Could he saddle a horse, or harness one to a wagon?

What teenage girl could be expected to gather eggs, feed hens, wash blackened lamp chimneys, or empty slops? How many can thread a sewing machine, knead bread, make a cake from scratch, produce edible pies — or even clean their own rooms, except under protest?

And why should they? It's all done for them; food is prepared, wrapped, and ready to pluck from a supermarket shelf. Mechanical gadgets of all kinds do most of our work for us.

But complex it's not.

Politically and socially, you're assured, life is more complex. Is it? Are we less secure today than Americans living when this country was wracked by Civil War a century or so ago? By rebellion, two hundred years ago?

Dangers of the atomic age threaten us all. Yes, they do. And a hundred years ago, there were dangers, too. Dangers of war and famine and disease. The killers of appendicitis, scarlet fever, diphtheria, child-bed fever, measles, polio, influenza, blood poisoning, tetanus, and tuberculosis stalked young and old alike, in addition to cancer, heart disease and high blood pressure.

In those times, too, there were bandits and thieves, robbers and murderers; hostile, angry people who harmed others, took what they wanted and fled, just as there are today.

There were dangers of snake bite, being kicked by a horse, shipwreck and being lost at sea. People found life just as precious, and just as uncertain, as we do today. Perhaps a little bit more so.

Children died of fever. Women died in childbirth. Men died of unchecked infection and gangrene. Death came often, and often early.

The simple life we look back upon, and imagine as ideal, was a hard life, frequently a short life, and certainly anything but idyllic and free of strife and danger.

Think about it; think how it really and truly was anything but "simple".