

EDITORIAL

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Those Good Old Days

What makes so sweet our memories of the past? Do we summon images of ourselves when we were young? Is nostalgia no more than selected recollections viewed romantically but unrealistically? Or were some things truly better in the good old days?

Count the ways in which we honor the past and rewrite the facts of history to suit ourselves. Who among us descends from forebears who were anything except ingenious, industrious, and virtuous? Were the households of our grandparents and great-grandparents ever anything but havens of peace and tranquility? Would it not be preposterous to imagine that any family fortune was ever earned by means other than honest toil?

A moment of truth (while causing emotional discomfort) may provide valuable insight into our present and even a glimpse of our future. Among the first truths to be faced is our own disinclination to accept the past as it actually was rather than as we prefer to think it was. To look back dispassionately, we need to recognize that when we glorify history, we deny our capacity to learn. Knowledge has its price; that price is the loss of innocence. And innocence, once lost, never is regained. Accept that, and all that is true about the past is easier to understand. The good and the bad are believable. Once the veil drops from before our eyes, all history reveals a clear perception of the present and points toward future probabilities.

Our past, we find, was carved by men and women with all the strengths and weaknesses we, ourselves, possess. They aspired, as do we, to achievements; they suffered despair when they failed, knew elation when they succeeded, and learned patience and tolerance as they plodded their own long roads. We, in turn, learn as we travel similar paths. And precisely in the same way, future generations will trace our footsteps and lose their innocence as they gain knowledge.

And what of these future generations? Will they, like us, look back and view romantically this present day? Will they, like us, see us as we see those who went before? Will they clothe us in robes of righteousness and strip us of human fault and failing, allowing us no frailties? In their innocence, they may do that, just as we, in ours, are apt to do.

We celebrate two hundred years of our nation's independence with a parade of tall ships, conveniently forgetting

those now-idealized tall ships then carried human cargoes in their holds, and burying beneath romantic notions of sailing-before-the-mast truths of American sailing vessels carrying opium from Turkey to China. Many an American fortune was made running rum and dope, and trading slaves.

Life in isolated hamlets (such as Cape Cod villages before automobiles began bringing tourists to this peninsula) must have been idyllic. At least, we assume it was. Our assumption ignores the truth; in those earlier days living was harsh and cruel. Average life expectancy was less than fifty years; at forty, men and women were old and worn. Infant mortality rates were high. People died of tuberculosis, appendicitis, pneumonia; people were crippled by infantile paralysis; women married as young as fourteen years, produced as many as fifteen and sixteen children, and often died in childbirth. Men worked ten and twelve-hour days, six, sometimes seven days a week. Children were put to work before they were ten years old. Boys went to sea where life was hard and dangerous and all innocence was swept overboard.

How will future generations see you and me? Imagine, a century hence, when space stations permit dangerous experiments to be conducted at great distances from the mother-planet, Earth, so that her human inhabitants and other life-forms are not threatened. Imagine our great-great-grandchildren visiting Cape Canaveral, an historic site, and marveling that such crude attempts as ours to conquer space succeeded.

Think how those people will feel about us when Europeans and Soviets, both hemispheres of the Americas, and all Africans and Asians are allies in the fierce struggle to defend Earth's space stations against attacks from distant galaxies.

Consider how difficult it will be for those who follow us to understand the arguments for, and those against, nuclear weaponry, the bitter battles that erupted (and that nearly ended in civil war in the United States early in the 21st century) for control of water supplies, and the political shenanigans that surrounded attempts to control emissions causing acid rain. The resulting schism between the United States and Canada is, only now, mending well.

"Life then," they will say, "was so much simpler. Those were the good old days when the only things people had to worry about were acid rain and nuclear war."