1800 & EVERYDAY LIFE

by Jack Larkin

Were These the Good Old Days?

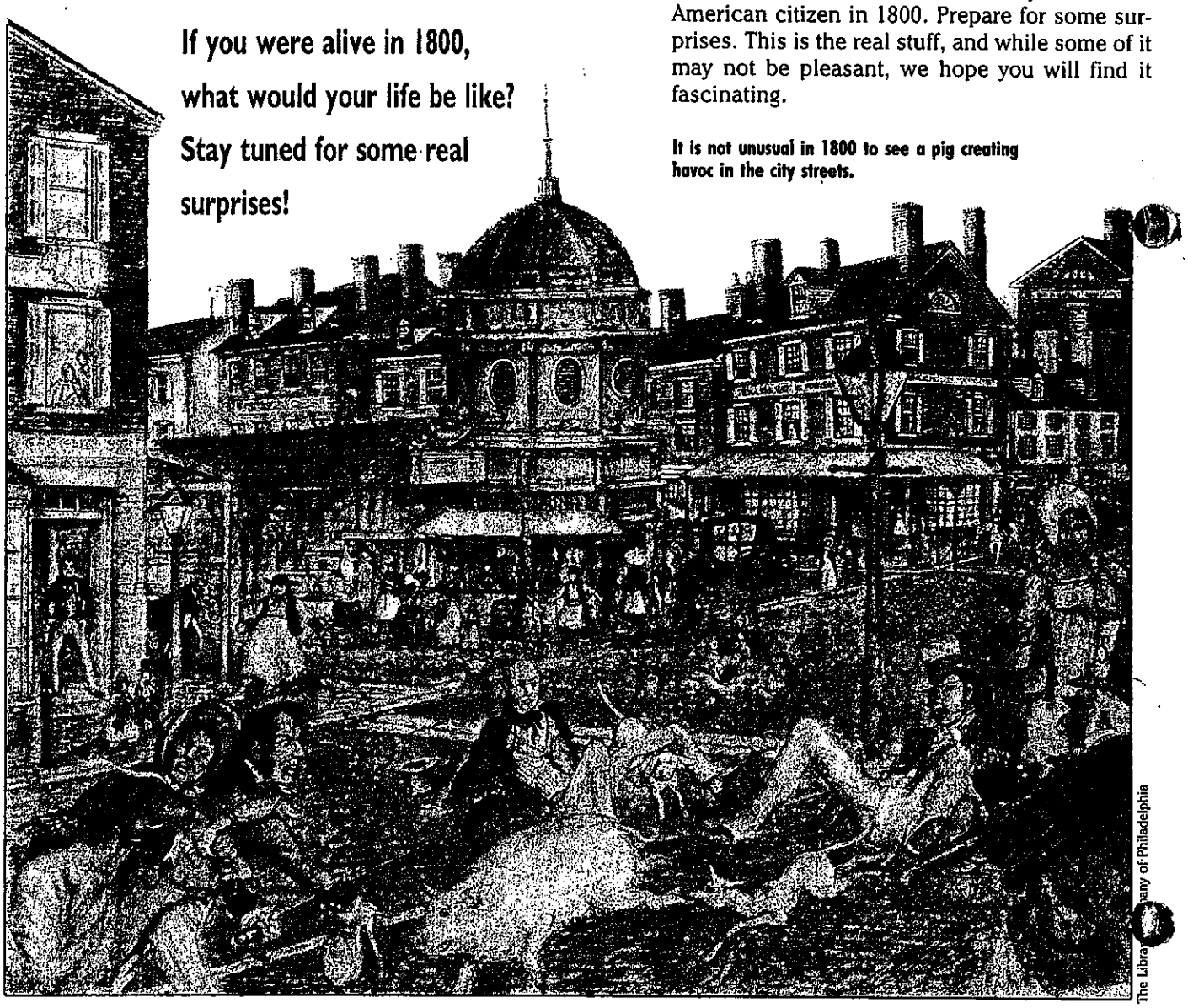
Back around 1800, city dwellers allowed pigs to roam freely through their streets. Visitors openly spit tobacco juice on the floors of government buildings and churches. And people bathed once a year. *Once a year?!!* Who were these people?

They were our ancestors.

Actually, it gets worse. Imagine having a doctor who thinks he can cure your fever by tying a bag of fingernail cuttings around the neck of an eel. And think about this: Students who misbehaved in school were often tied to a post and whipped.

The piece that follows is adapted from the book, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790-1840*. Jack Larkin is the author. He is the chief historian of Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, one of the largest outdoor history museums in the United States. By reading his article and those on pages 10–15, you will learn what your life might have been like had you been an American citizen in 1800. Prepare for some surprises. This is the real stuff, and while some of it may not be pleasant, we hope you will find it fascinating.

If you were alive in 1800, what would your life be like? Stay tuned for some real surprises!



It is not unusual in 1800 to see a pig creating havoc in the city streets.

The Library Company of Philadelphia

The United States was already a huge country in 1790. The nation extended 1,200 miles north to south, from Maine to Georgia. "It was," said one writer, "a vast continent, by far the greatest part of which is still in the state in which nature left it."

Americans were mostly a rural people. According to the 1790 census, only one American in 20 lived in a place with a population above 2,500.

Northern families lived close enough to their nearest neighbors to see the faint gleam of their candles at night. In the South and West, houses were spread more thinly. One Southern settler recalled that people lived in "little clearings detached from each other by intervening forest, through which foot paths, bridle paths and narrow wagon roads obstructed with stumps, wound their way."

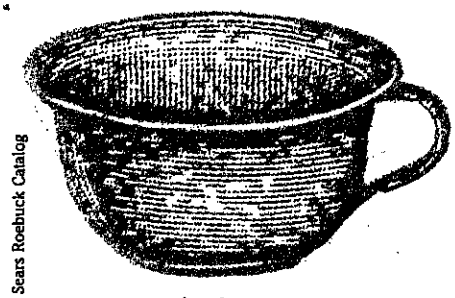
Cities were noisier, dirtier and more unhealthy than rural communities, but also more exciting. New York was one of the largest cities with 33,000 residents. New York was a busy place, and New Yorkers had already acquired their own characteristic body language. It was a popular American saying that "A New York merchant walks as if he had a good dinner before him and a bailiff behind him."

DIRT AND MORE DIRT

Early 19th-century Americans lived in a world of dirt, insects and powerful smells. Animal wastes covered farmyards, and farmers wore manure-spattered boots and trousers everywhere. Men's and women's working clothes were stiff with dirt and dried sweat, and men's shirts were often stained with tobacco juice.

Cities were often far dirtier than farmyards. Horse manure thickly covered city streets, and few neighborhoods were free from the horrible odors of tanneries and slaughterhouses. There was so much garbage piled on the streets of New York City, it was thought that the actual surfaces of the streets had not been seen for decades.

In most cities, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of pigs roamed the streets, eating garbage. They kept the streets cleaner than they otherwise might have been. One exception was Charleston, South Carolina. There, buzzards patrolled the streets.



Sears Roebuck Catalog

A chamber pot

WHERE'S THE BATHROOM?

Many people in small towns and rural areas simply sought out a patch of woods. Others built outside "privies" or "necessary houses" as bathrooms.

Because people did not want to go outside at night, a chamber pot became a fixture in almost every American household. Cleaning them was a part of every housewife's daily routine. Farm families often dumped the pots out the nearest door or window. In cities, that practice sometimes had horrible results.

Noted one observer about a certain Mr. Day: "He had a bad practice of pouring out of the upper window his filthiness. . . . One day came the discharge . . . on a man and wife going to a wedding, and her silk dress was fouled."

WHAT'S A BATH?

Americans were not "clean and decent" by today's standards. It was virtually impossible for them to be. There was no hot and cold running water. And sinks for washing were often in unheated kitchens.

One observer wrote that in Northern states each household member would be "fortunate if he had not to break ice in order to wash his face and hands, or more fortunate if a little warm water was poured into his basin from the kettle swung over the kitchen fire."

Those in the South and West enjoyed warmer climates. They could wash more easily in their kitchens or in water from their outside wells. Still, these were cold-water basins, or sinks that were outdoors and in full view of others. That made it unthinkable to do more than wash the face or hands once a day.

Most people washed without soap, reserving it for laundering clothes. Instead, they relied on a brisk rubbing with a coarse towel to scrub the dirt off their skins.

Writing in 1846, a doctor happily reported that "to wash the surface of the whole body in water daily" had finally become a standard practice among the upper classes. But, he added, many "who pass for models of neatness and cleanliness do not perform this work half a dozen times—nay once a year."

SMOKING AND SPITTING

"Everyone smokes and some chew in America," wrote Isaac Weld

You're floating like a balloon in a small cabin. Through a curved window above your head, you see what looks like the Earth. Whoops, this is not the kind of exploring you had in mind.

"Who the heck are you?" a man shouts.

You look down. Astronaut Neil Armstrong is floating below your feet, gaping at you in amazement.

It's July, 1969. You're in the Apollo spaceship bound for the moon. You may be in the right place to get a closer look at the heavens, but you won't learn what you need to know about the First Amendment right of religious freedom here.

Jump quickly before the other two Apollo astronauts see you. Armstrong will just think he was hallucinating.

Turn to the box on page 17.

in 1795. In colonial times, most men smoked pipes. Then, in the 1790s, cigars or "segars" were introduced from the Caribbean. They cost an expensive three cents apiece, so only prosperous men took them up.

By 1830, it was nearly impossible to avoid tobacco chewers in American streets, stores, public transportation and even private homes. The problem was not in the chewing, but in the spitting out of the tobacco juice, which could not be swallowed.

"In all public places of America," wrote the English author Charles Dickens, "men engaged in the awful practice of chewing and spitting." Every few minutes, he observed men "squirting a mouthful of saliva through the room."

Pots or "spittoons" were provided for the chewers, but men often ignored them. The floors of public buildings were filthy. The floor of the Virginia House of Burgessess, wrote one observer, "was actually flooded with their horrible spitting." Even church floors were black with tobacco juice spat out by choir members.

Yankee Nations (New York 1852)

An expert spitter takes aim.

Southerners used the most tobacco. "The farther we have come south, the more universal have we found that disgusting practice" was a typical observation.

A tobacco habit was a danger to anything that happened to be nearby—even a woman's dress at a fashionable ball.

"One night, as I was walking upstairs," recalled one innocent victim, "my partner began clearing his throat. This scared me. 'However,' I said to myself, 'surely he will turn his head to the other side.' The gentleman, however, had no such thought but deliberately shot across me. I had not courage enough to examine whether the result landed on my dress."

Don't believe that only men used tobacco. As the famous 19th-century newspaper editor Horace Greeley recalled, "It was often my duty to fill and light my mother's pipe." • stop

FARM LIFE

When Daniel Drake and his sister Lizzy were growing up in Mayslick, Kentucky, it was their job to tend to the younger children. Daniel wrote in his diary that he occasionally milked the cow. But that was mostly a job for Lizzy. It was considered too "gaalish" for a boy to milk.

When he was eight, Daniel learned to ride the horse to steady it while his father plowed. He planted corn seeds and spent endless hours weeding. He also chopped wood for the fireplace and hauled fence rails to the fields.

When he was 11, Daniel was given a gun to scare pests away from the fields. At 12, he held the plow and guided the horse. At 13, he was splitting rails and building fences himself. By 16, he was carrying a grown man's workload in the fields.

Lizzy didn't leave such a detailed account of her life. A woman named Susan Blunt, however, left a clear description of her life as a girl. At 10, she was sent away for a week at a time to keep house for a family down the road. That included caring for two young girls and their aged grandfather. Each day, she woke at five and walked a long distance to get water. She then spent her day cooking, cleaning, mending and caring for the people in the house. After a week of work, she was awarded 15 cents.

WORKING GIRLS

The spinning wheel was a fixture in most homes. And spinning well was a skill of hand and eye. Girls learned, after long hours of practice, to carefully feed the fibers that were twisted into thread by the swiftly turning spindle. It was long, drawn-out boring work. One New Hampshire woman later wrote that the "moaning of the big wheel was the saddest sound of my childhood."

Weaving was another common task for women. In rural areas, people often used woven cloth like money, to exchange for other household goods.

After cloth was woven, it had to be cut and sewn to make clothes. That was also a long and difficult task. "I have about two months of sewing to do," wrote a North Carolina planter's wife. "I have never been so tired of sewing in my life. My fingers are worn out."

Skill with a needle and a lifetime

You find yourself at the back of a large, wood-paneled room. In front of you sits an elderly man you recognize as Benjamin Franklin.

It's early June, 1787, and you're in the Philadelphia State House at the Constitutional Convention. Alexander Hamilton is preparing to make a speech.

As you inch forward to listen, the floor beneath you squeaks. Mr. Franklin turns around. "How did you get in here?" he asks angrily. "You're not a delegate."

Nice try, but the Constitutional Convention is a secret affair, and you weren't invited. You would have been better off at one of the state conventions.

"Grab that intruder!" someone cries. Get out of there.

• Turn to the box on page 30.

American Antiquarian Society

Unlike dueling, backwoods brawling has no rules of etiquette.

of sewing went hand in hand with womanhood. All but the wealthiest women cut and sewed the family's clothes.

In the dairy, usually a corner of the kitchen, girls learned the process of transformation. Under their hands, milk took on solid shape, powerful flavors and longer life in the form of butter and cheese. Butter was churned for more than an hour. That was hard, hard work. Pressing cheese also required strenuous effort.

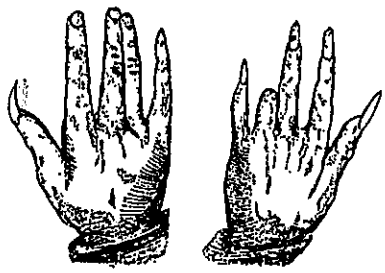
Laundry day came anywhere from once a week to once a month. Women would wake long before sunrise to scrub and pound the clothes. They would plunge their arms up to the elbows in tubs of near-boiling water and soft soap. The women would emerge in the afternoon with "bleached and parboiled fingers" and short tempers. It was a good day for the youngest children to stay away from the house.

DUELING AND GOUGING

During the Revolutionary War, many American military officers learned about dueling from the French and British. When the war was over, they introduced the custom into civilian life.

After Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in New Jersey in 1804, the shock and outrage ended dueling in the Middle Atlantic states. But it remained popular in the South, where wealthy gentlemen placed great importance on skill with weapons and personal honor.

Dueling sites were usually set up on the outskirts of towns. Some were used several times a day. If the man was slighted or insulted by a social equal, he would send a note to the offender demanding an explanation. If a man refused to explain or apologize, the process of arranging a duel was set in motion. Seconds (assistants) would be chosen, a



The hands of a celebrated gouger

doctor called, and a referee selected to supervise the duel. All of this was done with great politeness. There was even a book published on dueling etiquette.

Dueling was not always bloodthirsty. Most duels never got beyond the talking stages. Seconds tried hard to smooth over the arguments. If that didn't work, the duel would go forward. Then, the two parties would stand apart at a fixed distance and shoot when the signal was given.

Only one out of seven duels ended in death or serious injury. The display of courage was the most important aspect of a duel—not the opponent's death. Often the duelists deliberately shot wide of the mark. A wounded duelist often forgave his opponent, and a man who killed often wept for his victim.

The poorer farmers in the South fought less gentlemanly battles. "Whenever these people came to blows," wrote one reporter, "they fight like wild beasts, biting, kicking and trying to tear each other's eyes out with their nails."

Rough-and-tumble fighting was the specialty of Mississippi River boatmen, frontier farmers and hunters. Among them it was not uncommon, wrote the same reporter, "to meet with those who have lost an eye in combat, and there are men who pride themselves upon the dexterity with which they can scoop one out. This is called gouging."

The date is April 14, 18[illegible]

You're sitting in the balcony of a Washington, D.C., theater. President Abraham Lincoln and his wife are seated nearby in a private box. You're so excited watching them, you don't even look at the stage.

Suddenly, a man appears behind the President and points a gun at his head. "Look out!" you scream.

Too late. The man fires his revolver at Lincoln and runs off. The President slumps in his chair. You've just witnessed the assassination of one of America's greatest leaders.

The Second Amendment gives the American people the right to bear arms in order to protect themselves. Sadly, people have repeatedly violated the spirit of this amendment.

• To see what the Founding Fathers really had in mind when they wrote the Second Amendment, turn to the box on page 22.