

Government economic reports don't make good poolside reading. Their language is temperate; their tone is noncommittal.

The unhappy experience of Henry K. Oliver might help to explain why.

Oliver was founding director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, the world's first labor statistics bureau, established in 1869. He was also a social activist, who believed in using government statistics to help improve the lives of working-class families.

Oliver's activism met with strong disapproval from Massachusetts business interests, and that led to his undoing. In 1873, the governor appointed a new director, whose more technocratic approach helped to quiet the bureau's critics. The entire story is chronicled in *Their Lives & Numbers*, edited by Henry F. Bedford.

At the heart of the book are interviews with people who worked in the mills and factories of Massachusetts during the late 19th century. Most of the interviews originally appeared in annual reports issued by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, and not only do they provide a



1873!

don't set the time machine for

good baseline for measuring the improvement in our material standard of living, but they also serve as a perfect antidote to nostalgia. If you've ever fantasized about living in the 1870s, the workers' descriptions of their living conditions will bring you back to reality.

Not convinced? Here's how a Taunton, Massachusetts factory worker described his family's apartment in 1873:

I have two rooms with fire, four sleeping rooms, a pantry, and sink-room. It is an upstairs tenement. Two families in the house. Rent \$180 per year. Sleeping rooms miserably small, about 9 feet square. One window in each sleeping room; ventilation of these rooms is impossible without exposing the occupant. The fire rooms are about 12 x 12. Pantry and sink-room very small. When the tenement was engaged, [I] was informed that the water was brought up [piped in], but its impurities were carefully concealed from my knowledge. I soon found that the drainage of [the outdoor] privy affected the water badly, and that it could not be passed through the pump without filling the house with a disagreeable odor. . . . [We] have no cistern and are obliged to bring all the water for family use from the well across the street, up a hard flight of winding stairs, except what we catch in tubs when it storms. In winter the sink-pipes freeze, and all the slops have to be removed in a pail. The coal and wood must be brought from the cellar up two flights of stairs.

An outdoor toilet! No central heat! Bedrooms the size of a modern-day office cube! A contaminated water supply that makes your apartment smell like sewage! It's enough to make you wonder where the phrase "good old days" ever came from.