



# things to think about

## How could they live like that?

*Early nineteenth century Americans lived in a world of dirt, insects and pungent smells. Farmyards were strewn with animal wastes, and farmers wore manure-spattered boots and trousers everywhere. Men's and women's working clothes alike were often stiff with dirt and dried sweat, and men's shirts were often stained with yellow rivulets of tobacco juice. The location of privies was all too obvious on warm or windy days, and unemptied chamber pots advertised their presence. Wet baby "napkins," today's diapers, were not immediately washed but simply put by the fire to dry.*

*The Reshaping of Everyday Life*  
Jack Larkin

It's hard to read that passage without wondering how people could have lived like that. But maybe we shouldn't be too smug because 200 years from now people will almost certainly wonder how we could have lived the way we do.

So here's the question: When people look back at us from some distant point in the future, what will cause them to be thankful they didn't live in the 21st century? What aspect of 21st century life will be the most repulsive to them?

## Near and Far

If you'd lived in New England during the early 1800s, most of your possessions and almost all the food on your table would have been home-made, homegrown, or locally produced by people you knew. But by the end of the century, you would have been able to choose from a much wider variety of products and foodstuffs, many of which were mass-produced by other people in factories outside your local area. And today, of

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“A Letter From the Future” <http://www2.jun.alaska.edu/edtech/tat/creating/creatop.html> A fun exercise, complete with guidelines for writing a good letter. (Part of an online course offered by the Educational Technology Program of the University of Alaska Southeast)

**PBS: Public Broadcasting System**  
Three resources on the PBS web site:

- *The First Measured Century: An Illustrated Guide to Trends in America, 1900-2000* <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/>

The 20th century was the first to produce an extensive statistical record, and The First Measured Century uses that record to survey the extraordinary changes that took place in American life between 1900 and 2000. The web site features an online teachers guide, and, for those with time and patience, there's a free download of The First Measured Century book.

- *Frontier House* <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse/> PBS cameras recorded the experiences of three contemporary American families as they tried to live as Montana homesteaders did in the 1880s. It wasn't always pretty. (Be sure to click on the Resources section.)

- *The 1900 House*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/1900house> A British family volunteered to live the way middle-class Londoners did in 1900: No shampoo, very little hot water, a temperamental oven, and corsets. It didn't look like fun. (The web site has online lesson plans.)

- *Primer on Productivity*, Industry Canada, <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/pro0016e.html> (See **How do we measure “standard of living”?**)

- *Redefining Progress*, <http://www.rprogress.org> (See **How do we measure “standard of living”?**)

- *Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan — Photographs of Lewis Hine: Documentation of Child Labor, National Archives* [http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/lessons/hine\\_photographs/hine\\_photographs.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/hine_photographs/hine_photographs.html)

The National Archives web site uses the photos of Lewis Hine as the basis for a lesson plan on child labor.

- **Worksheet on GDP and Standard of Living**, Student Version: <http://www.bized.ac.uk/stafsup/options/works1.htm>

Teacher Version: <http://www.bized.ac.uk/stafsup/options/works2.htm>  
Online worksheets that cover standard of living variables and serve as a basis for making comparisons between countries. The worksheets are straightforward and easy to use.

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course, everything we use seems to come from someplace far away; not just outside New England, but outside the United States.

To get an idea of how much less local our lives have become, try this exercise: Go through your home and try to find ten consumer goods, apparel items, and foods that were produced within 50 miles of where you live. Not ten of each, but ten altogether. Chances are, you'll have a tough time finding five.

### A Reality Check

Are you one of those romantics who thinks it would have been fun to live “back in the day”? Well, then this exercise is for you. You don't actually have to do these things; just think about them.

**TASK ONE:** When you wake in the morning, reach under your bed and remove the chamber pot brimming with “night soil.” Grasp it in both hands, take it outside, and dump it.

**TASK TWO:** Share a crowded trolley car with dozens of other people who bathe once a week and don't use deodorant. (Be sure to try this one on a humid summer day.)

**TASK THREE:** Spend an hour in an iron lung so that you can recall the days when people were terrified of polio.

**TASK FOUR:** Take all the screens off your windows so that mosquitoes and flies can easily find their way into your house.

**TASK FIVE:** If you live in the North, turn off your heat and hot water for the month of February. If you live in the South, try to make it through August without air conditioning.

**TASK SIX:** Ask your legislators to roll back the clean air laws so that we can once again see the air we breathe.

**TASK SEVEN:** If you're an older person, give up your Social Security and rely on your children for financial support.

**TASK EIGHT:** Kids, limit your television viewing to ABC, CBS, and NBC and listen only to AM radio.

We could go on and on, but you get the point.