Ten reasons why today might be better than the "Good Old Days"

Digital Vision/Getty Images.

Reason 1

You don't have to empty chamber pots or walk to the outhouse.

Before you set the time-machine dial for "the good old days," try this exercise. We'll call it a "historical reenactment" of using an outhouse:

> Get out of bed just before dawn on a February morning when the ground is blanketed by snow and the thermometer reads 25 degrees. Walk around to the backyard, as if you were heading to the outhouse, and . . . . We're betting that most of you won't even make it out the door. But don't despair. There's an alternative. Grab a pot from the kitchen, and . . . oh, forget it. You wouldn't be happy in a world without indoor plumbing. Take our word for it.

Of course, if you had lived in 1800, when no one had a flush toilet, or 1900 when they were still a luxury, using outhouses and chamber pots would have been a normal part of everyday life. You wouldn't have been unhappy about it.

Outhouse. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Unhappiness wouldn't set in until most of your neighbors had a flush toilet and you didn't. The same goes for running water, central heating, refrigeration, and all the other comforts of modern life that we sometimes take for granted.

PERCENT OF OCCUPIED HOUSING UNITS IN U.S. WITH:

	1800	1900	1950	2000
Flush toilets	0	10	76	99
Central heat	0	8	50	94
Electricity	0	3	94	99
Refrigerators	0	0	80	99
Washing machines	0	0	47	81
Air conditioning	0	0	0	75

Sources: *The First Measured Century,* Theodore Caplow, Louis Hicks, and Ben J. Wattenberg, AEI Press, 2001.
Pursuing Happiness, Stanley Lebergott, Princeton University Press, 1993.
Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2002.
American Housing Survey: 2001, U.S. Census Bureau.

Reason 2

You don't have to grow your own food, if you don't want to.

An old Guy Clark song tells us there are, "Only two things that money can't buy. That's true love and homegrown tomatoes."

We're not sure about "true love," but he was right about homegrown tomatoes. And for those of us that spend our days in offices, factories, and other indoor workplaces, growing our own tomatoes is a labor of love. But if we had to grow all our own food — if we had no other choice and our survival depended on the fickleness of nature — our enjoyment would diminish.

Over the past 200 years, the increase in agricultural productivity has freed most of us from the burden of growing our own food. And cheaper, faster transportation has given consumers access to more varieties of food at a lower cost.

Another plus: Thanks to thermostat-controlled ovens, microwaves, and refrigerators, we no longer need to spend as much of our day preparing the food we eat. One example: In 1900, only 25 percent of the bread consumed in the United States was commercially baked. (source: Harvey Green, *The Light of the Home*).

True, few things can compare with freshly baked, homemade bread, but it loses some of its appeal when you *have* to bake it, whether you want to or not.

PERCENT OF LABOR FORCE WORKING IN AGRICULTURE

1800	1900	2000
73.7	40.2	2.3

Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States,* U.S. Census Bureau, and *Statistical Abstract of the United States,* 2001.

Reason 3

Anesthesia, Antibiotics, and Immunization

If you ever get a chance to visit Plimoth Plantation, Old Sturbridge Village, Colonial Williamsburg, or any of the other living history

FOOD EXPENDITURES

Percent of Household Income

	1929	2002
At home	20.3	6.2
Away from home	3.1	4.0
Total	23.4	10.2

Source: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

First public demonstration of anesthesia, Massachusetts General Hospital, 1846. Courtesy of Massachusetts General Hospital.

museums, be sure to stop by the doctor's house. When you first step through the door, you'll swear you've taken a wrong turn into the carpenter's shop. The surgical instruments will make you cringe, and when your eyes rest on the bone saw, bear in mind that when the doctor was cutting through an arm or a leg, the patient would have been fully awake, with only a shot of whiskey or rum to dull the pain.

Even injuries that weren't immediately life-threatening, such as gashes or puncture wounds, often proved fatal. The risk of infection was ever-present, and antibiotics had yet to be invented. Nor were there immunization programs or public health campaigns to stop the spread of diseases that are now preventable.

True, people might look back on us 200 years from now and recoil in horror at many of our medical theories and practices, but there's no denying that we are a lot better off than our ancestors were. Childhood immunization programs, better pre-natal care, municipal water and sewer projects, efficient trash management, automobile safety improvements, workplace safety programs, and smoking cessation campaigns have all led to measurable progress. Just look at the numbers:

• In 1920, measles killed 7,575 Americans. In 2000, there was one reported death from measles in the United States.
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control

• In 1900, 194 of every 100,000 U.S. residents died from tuberculosis. In 2000, the TB death rate was 5.8 per 100,000.
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control

• Since 1972, U.S. death rates from coronary heart disease have decreased more than 50 percent.
Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1999* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2002*

• At the beginning of the 20th century, for every 1,000 live births, six to nine U.S. women died of pregnancy-related complications. One hundred years later, the maternal mortality rate was less than 0.1 per 1,000 live births.
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control

• Since 1980, the U.S. infant mortality has fallen by 45 percent.
Source: "Smile, these are good times. Truly" *The Economist*, 3/11/04

But other health-related news is more open to interpretation . . .

• Use of cholesterol lowering statins in the U.S. quadrupled during the period from 1995/96 to 2001/02.
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control

From one perspective, you could say that our modern diet and sedentary lifestyle have led to a big increase in the number of Americans with dangerously high cholesterol levels. (Not a good thing.) But a more optimistic view might be that more Americans are undergoing cholesterol screening, and medical research has led to a drug that helps control high cholesterol.

• Use of antidepressant drugs in the U.S. tripled during the 1990s.
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control

You might see this statistic as yet another indication that modern life is incredibly stressful. (Not a good thing.) But there's also cause for optimism because more people are actively seeking help for depression, and

U.S. WORKERS KILLED ON THE JOB

	1913	1970	2000
Number	23,000	13,800	5,200
Rate per 100,000 workers	61	18	4

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics and *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2002.*

there's an effective form of treatment available to them.

• More than 45 million Americans were without health insurance in 2004. That's close to 16 percent of the U.S. population.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

No matter how you look at it, this is not a good thing. The only bright spot is that access to affordable health care is a major national concern, and Americans are talking about how best to address the problem.

Reason 4

You don't have to spend your whole life in one place if you don't want to.

Ah, for the good old days when people lived in close-knit communities where everyone knew your name and people always looked out for one another. . . . And peeked out their windows to check on what you were doing . . . and poked their noses into your business . . . and put tremendous pressure on you to behave exactly as they did. (Hey, if you want the comfort of a close-knit community, you have to take the whole package.)

One advantage of living in the modern world is that we're not stuck in one place if we don't want to be. We don't think twice about driving 100 miles to go for a hike in the mountains or driving 50 miles to get a good deal on a TV or flying across the country to attend a wedding.

Ryan McVay/Getty Images

That's in sharp contrast to pre-industrial times when people often lived and died within a few miles of where they were born because travel was slow, costly, uncomfortable, and dangerous. There were no simple trips. A shopping excursion to a market town 10 miles away could turn into a daylong odyssey.

Travel conditions had a big impact on commercial life. Prices were high and selection was limited because the distribution of goods was expensive and time-consuming. Three examples:

Courtesy of the Federal Highway Administration.

• A ton of goods could be brought 3,000 miles from Europe to America for about nine dollars, and for the same sum it could be moved only 30 miles overland in this country.
Source: U.S. Senate Committee Report, 1816

• In 1812, a freight wagon drawn by four horses took 75 days to travel from Worcester, MA, to Charleston, SC.
Source: *The Transportation Revolution*, George Rogers Taylor

• In the 1840s, the voyage from Boston to San Francisco took 150 to 200 days aboard a conventional sailing ship or 110 days by clipper ship. Today, commercial jets make the trip in under five hours.
Source: *The Transportation Revolution*, George Rogers Taylor

TV WATCHING

Average Daily Hours per Household with a TV

1955	1965	1975	1985	2000
4.9	5.5	6.1	7.1	7.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Until the mid-19th century, travelers were mainly people that needed to leave home to earn a living: sailors, whalers, trappers, itinerant peddlers. And, for the most part, they would have been bewildered by the notion of traveling for pleasure.

Railroads and steamboats gave pleasure travel a boost, but from about 1850 to 1950, travel, particularly foreign travel, was a pleasure reserved mainly for the well-to-do. The democratization of long-distance pleasure travel had to wait until the 1960s, when commercial jets began to have an impact on the cost of getting from point A to point B.

Today, when we hear people say they're going to Paris or some island paradise, we no longer assume they're related to someone named Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, or Gates. In fact, we've reached the stage where seasoned travelers sometimes grumble about overbuilding and overcrowding at popular vacation destinations.

But if you find yourself elbow-to-elbow with other tourists on your next trip to Venice or Honolulu, just remember this: If we were back in the days when those places were "unspoiled," chances are that you and I probably wouldn't have been among the happy few traveling to them.

Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Reason 5
You can talk to almost anyone, anywhere, anytime.

In 1800, news and information traveled at the speed of a rider on horseback or a sailing ship, which is to say, not very fast. By 1900, the telephone had increased the speed of information transfer, but fewer than 10 percent of U.S. households had a phone, and long distance calls were expensive, scratchy, hit-or-miss propositions.

Today, of course, we can exchange information in the time it takes to press "enter" on a keyboard or hit a speed-dial button on a cell phone. And unlike our ancestors, we're no longer limited to exchanging ideas with people who live nearby or accessing only the information in our local library. We can communicate instantly with those who share our interests, regardless of where they live, and we can do this conveniently and inexpensively.

For the most part, faster communication is a tremendous improvement that has increased our capacity to access information for commercial and scientific purposes or simply for the purpose of entertaining ourselves. But there is a downside. Mobile phones and e-mail can sometimes serve as an electronic leash that keeps us constantly tethered to our work. Television and the Internet can isolate and alienate us from our physical surroundings and erode our sense of community. "We may," observes Penn State professor Jorge Reina Schement, "feel closer to a disembodied communicant on a chat line than we do to the grocery clerk, the gas station attendant, or the mail carrier."

We also live in an age where "information overload" is a very real

AVERAGE ANNUAL HOURS WORKED IN 2002

South Korea	2,447
Japan	1,848
Australia	1,824
United States	1,815
Canada	1,778
Ireland	1,668
Sweden	1,625
France	1,545
Germany	1,444
Norway	1,342

Source: International Labor Organization, United Nations. Cited on CNNmoney web site.

possibility. We receive so much information that making even a simple consumer choice can be stressful. In *The Paradox of Choice,* psychologist Barry Schwartz tells of shopping for blue jeans and facing the daunting task of having to choose among 36 varieties. Ultimately, he left with a pair that fit him better than any he'd ever worn, but the experience was thoroughly draining.

And if you feel as if you are receiving more cues to buy, shop, and spend . . . well . . . you are.

So, is choice a good thing? The answer seems to be "yes, but . . . ." Few of us would want a return to the days when choice was either extremely limited or nonexistent, but beyond a certain point the number of choices we face in everyday modern life can sometimes overwhelm us.

Reason 6

Your work doesn't have to be your whole life unless you want it to be.

"Spare time" and "spare time activities" are fairly modern concepts—at least as they apply to the majority of people. The wealthy have always enjoyed the freedom to pursue interests that weren't related to earning a living, but until recently almost everyone else lacked the time, money, or energy to think about anything other than the basics: food, clothing, and shelter.

Today that's no longer the case. It isn't unusual for an avocation or a leisure time activity to engage us more completely than our jobs do. We may earn our living as lawyers, nurses, accountants, systems analysts, and heavy equipment operators, but our true passion might be gardening, golfing, gourmet cooking, book group discussions, or any of a thousand other things. We can even waste every evening watching mindless TV if that's what we want to do. (And, yes, that's a value judgment.)

Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lewis W. Hine Collection

U.S. COLLEGE GRADUATES

Four-Year Colleges/Percent of Population

1910	1960	2000
2.7	7.7	25.6

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999.* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2002.*

U.S. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Percent of Population

1910	1960	2000
13.5	41.0	84.2

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999.* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2002.*

Reason 7

Kids get to do homework instead of factory work.

Economic historians Claudia Goldin and Kenneth Sokoloff estimate that in 1820, children under 15 years of age accounted for 23 percent of all manufacturing workers in the northeastern United States. In 1836, the Massachusetts legislature passed a law requiring at least three months of formal education for children working in factories, but enforcement was often spotty. More than a century would pass before the U.S. Congress would pass the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which established a national standard for regulating child labor.

But well before that, communities were beginning to invest in public education. An article in *The Wall Street Journal* (September 3, 2003) noted that the number of public high schools in the United States went from 40 in 1860 to 6,005 in 1900.

Children play in city streets circa 1900. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

So, kids, the next time you're feeling bad about getting out of bed and dragging yourself to school, think about this: If you were a 14-year-old in 1900, chances are you would have been getting up even earlier to work in a factory, where you might well have spent the rest of your working life doing the same thing day after day . . . .

Reason 8
Cleaner Streets, Cleaner Air, Cleaner Water

Maybe there was a time when our air and water were cleaner, but that time wasn't 1890. In *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible*, Otto Bettmann cited this fact: In the 1890s, there were approximately three million horses in American cities, each producing 20 to 25 pounds of manure a day.

Bonus Feature
Here's a chance to sharpen your math skills. If 3 million horses each produce 20 pounds of manure, how many pounds is that in total? What's the total tonnage? (There are 2,000 pounds in a ton.)

True, we now have our own problems with smog and polluted beaches, but we've also passed laws and spent money to curb air pollution and clean up our rivers, lakes, and coastal waters. We've banned some of the most dangerous pesticides and industrial chemicals, and we've taken steps to protect wetlands and wildlife habitats.

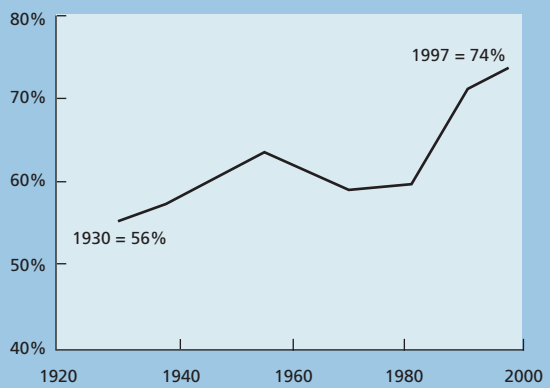
None of these measures would have been possible if we hadn't achieved a certain level of material prosperity through economic growth. And while you might be thinking that industrialization was responsible for polluting our environment in the first place, you might also want to consider that the pre-industrial world had its share of "all natural" death and disease—cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever—caused by contaminated drinking water, inadequate sewage treatment, and improper waste disposal.

Reason 9
Opportunity: More Seats at the Table

Not long ago, a commentator on one of the Sunday morning news shows advanced the notion that there ought to be a museum of the 1950s, and it ought to be a lot like his old neighborhood in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C. It was a sweet piece delivered by someone who obviously had a wonderful childhood in a lovely neighborhood where, among other things, none of the mothers worked, so they were able to look out for one another's children.

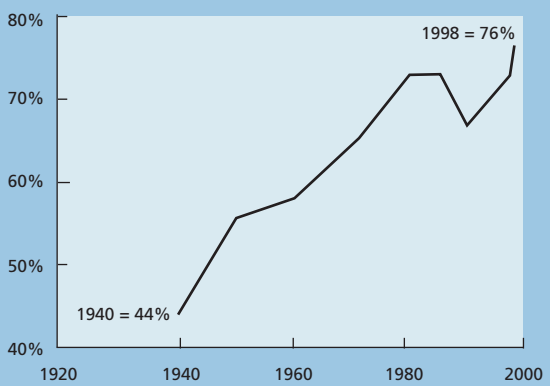
Hmmm. Sounds nice, but let's think this one through. A museum of the 1950s? Sure. There's no harm in a little nostalgia for '57 Chevies, carhops, sock hops, drive-in movies, and "Father Knows Best" neighborhoods . . . as long as visitors walk out the museum doors knowing that lots of Americans never had an opportuni-

Women's Earnings as a Percent of Men's Earnings
Year-Round Full-time Employees



Source: *The First Measured Century,* Theodore Caplow, Louis Hicks, and Ben J. Wattenberg, AEI Press, 2001.

Black Earnings as a Percent of White Earnings
Year-Round Full-time Male Employees



Source: *The First Measured Century,* Theodore Caplow, Louis Hicks, and Ben J. Wattenberg, AEI Press, 2001.

ty to "sit at the table" and enjoy their slice of the 1950s "good life."

Gender bias

The stay-at-home moms that kept the neighborhood together would have had few job options if they had decided they wanted to work outside the home. They also would have faced considerable pressure to "stop being so selfish" and think about how their desire for a career would affect their children's well-being. And if their daughters wanted to play a sport in school or grow up to be engineers, well, there would have been little doubt that the end of civilization was near at hand.

Racial discrimination

The 1950s were a time when racial segregation was still legal in many states, and, in practical terms, opportunities for people of color were sharply restricted in every state. To get an idea of how much things have changed, think about this: There were no black stars on prime-time TV until 1965, when Bill Cosby played Rhodes Scholar/world-class tennis player/secret agent Alexander Scott in *I Spy*. And that was a very big deal.

Women and the "Good Old Days"

Life is far from perfect for women in the early 21st century. There's still an earnings gap, and a "glass ceiling" still limits upward mobility in certain organizations. And at home, women still get stuck with more than their share of housework and child care responsibilities. But if anyone thinks that a return to the past would be an improvement, here are a few points to consider:

• In the 1890s, "without running water, housewives had to haul 10,000 gallons a year into the kitchen, laundry, or bath."

Source: *Pursuing Happiness*
Stanley Lebergott

• "In 1900, fewer than 5 percent of women worked outside the home. The rest spent an average of 58 hours a week on housework. "

Source: "Microwave Oven Liberation"
Steven Landsburg
Slate, 01/03/2001

• "[A] typical housewife's laundry day in 1900: First, our heroine ports water to the stove and heats it by burning wood or coal. Then she cleans the clothes by hand, rinses them, wrings them out (either by hand or with a mechanical wringer), then hangs them to dry and moves on to the oppressive task of ironing, using heavy flatirons that are heated continuously on the stove. By 1945 things had changed: About 60 percent of households had washing machines (though essentially none had dryers). How dramatically did that change affect women's lives? In 1945, government researchers undertook to find out. The researchers observed a farm wife named Mrs. Verett while she did a 38-pound load of laundry. Without electric appliances, Mrs. Verett spent 4 hours washing and 4 1/2 hours ironing, and she walked 6,303 feet along the way. After she got a washing machine and an electric iron, she spent 41 minutes washing and 1 3/4 hours ironing, walking only 665 feet along the way."

Source: "Microwave Oven Liberation"
Steven Landsburg
Slate, 01/03/2001

• American women didn't have full legal voting rights until 1920.

• Until the mid 20th century, a woman often had difficulty obtaining credit in her own name.

• In the 1970s, many American newspapers still ran separate "Help Wanted" sections for men and women.

Courtesy of the Boston Globe Newspaper Company, Inc.

Religious discrimination

In the 1950s, a number of country clubs, resort hotels, and even some housing developments were "restricted," which was code for "no Jewish members allowed."

Discrimination based on national origin

In the 1950s, we still had immigration quotas that heavily favored people from European countries. Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans had far less chance of being admitted to the United States as legal immigrants.

Disability rights

None of those pleasant, tree-shaded 1950s streets would have had curb cuts or any other provisions for people who depended on a wheelchair for mobility. Nor were there many (any?) legal safeguards to guarantee that persons with disabilities would have access to the same opportunities as everyone else.

So, if you're feeling nostalgic for the 1950s, go out and rent a Doris Day movie or restore an old Chevy. That way you can enjoy the fantasy without experiencing the full reality.

Reason 10

You have a safety net.

Although Americans don't have the same level of cradle-to-grave security available in a number of European countries, our social safety net offers us far more protection than our ancestors had.

Social Security

There's been a lot of discussion recently as to whether or not Social Security needs saving. We're not weighing in on that one, thank you. We'd just like to point out that in 1905, few Americans had the option of looking forward to retirement. For most, the retirement age was death or disability, and those who were unable to work had to rely completely on the kindness of family members or the benevolence of local politicians and philanthropists. And if you're feeling nostalgic for the days when family members "took care of their own," here's a reminder that relying on the kindness of relatives has its downside:

A Dog's Life

Even if you're not 100 percent sure whether or not we're happier or better off today than we were 100 years ago, one thing is certain: America's pets have never had it so good. In an article for *The Atlantic* (December 2003), Sandra Tsing Loh wrote that "83 percent of American pet owners call themselves 'Mommy' or 'Daddy' when talking to their pets." That's up from 55 percent in 1995. And "almost two-thirds celebrate their pets' birthdays."

And in a story that's music to dogs' ears, National Public Radio's Scott Simon interviewed musician and producer Skip Haynes, who created a CD for dogs, *Ask the Animals: Songs to Make Dogs Happy!* According to Mr. Haynes, "Squeaky-Deakey!" is the favorite track of most dogs. Some of the other tracks include "You're a Good Dog," "Scratch My Back," and "I Love Food."

Digital Vision/Getty Images

"Rich relations give you.
Crust of bread and such.
You can help yourself.
But don't take too much"
Billie Holiday, Singer
"God Bless the Child"

Federal insurance on bank deposits

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation has protected bank deposits since 1934. In all that time, no one has lost FDIC-insured funds. During the pre-FDIC 1920s, American banks failed at an average rate of 600 per year. At the slightest hint or rumor that a bank might be in difficulty, depositors often panicked and rushed to withdraw their money—and with good reason. If they weren't among the lucky few to get there fast enough to withdraw their funds, they risked losing everything, with little hope of ever recovering their loss.

Crime and Punishment

U.S Homicide Rate (per 100,00 of population)

1900	1980	2000
1.2	10.7	5.5

U.S. Incarceration Rate

(State and federal per 100,000 of population)

1980	2001
139	470

Source: The First Measured Century, Theodore Caplow, Louis Hicks, and Ben J. Wattenberg, AEI Press, 2001 and U.S. Department of Justice.

Money Facts

2003	
Real median household income (U.S./all)	$43,318
Real median household income (black)	$30,000
Real median household income (non-Hispanic white)	$48,000
Real median household income (Asian)	$55,500
Real median household income (Northeast/all)	$46,742
Official poverty threshold (individual)	$9,393
Official poverty threshold (family of four)	$18,810
Poverty rate (U.S.)	12.5 percent
Number of Americans below official poverty threshold	35.9 million

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Workplace safety regulations

Government regulations don't always make sense, nor do they always produce the desired outcome. But the government regulations intended to protect workers' health and safety have helped to make the workplace far less dangerous than it was.

Auto safety regulations

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that government-mandated safety equipment in automobiles helps save more than 25,000 lives a year (reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, 1/19/05). True, these regulations have added to the cost of a car. But your life is worth it, right? ■

What Is It?

Here are three clues:

- It dates back to early 19th century New England.
- It's made of iron.
- It's not a magazine rack. (The people that owned it probably wouldn't have had any magazines to put in it.)

The answer is on page 23.

Courtesy of Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.