

The Twentieth Century was the Greatest Century

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The Twentieth Century Generations

My father, M. C. Gardner, was born in 1895. Between the two of us, we spanned the twentieth century. The photograph below is my father's family—M. C. is the 15 year old at the back. The photo was taken in 1909.

My father was born into a world without airplanes, automobiles, trucks, paved road, refrigerators, closets, bathrooms, washing machines, telephones, radios, movies, phonographs, electricity, plastic, detergent, insecticides, lawn mowers, retirement plans, immunizations, hospitals, nursing homes, motels,



filling stations, supermarkets, subdivisions, skyscrapers, etc. In other words, he was born to world that is totally foreign to Americans today, but he also knew many things that we know nothing of today. He knew all about plow stocks, wagons, harnesses, crosscut saws, steam engines, woodstoves, churns, wash pots, wells, and springs. He knew how to build fences, hickory malls, water troughs, barns, bridges and gaps; he knew how to run a sawmill or a gin; how to raise animals, milk cows, can vegetables, dry fruit, and tend bee hives; he could castrate pigs, dock sheep and assist cows giving birth; and he could slaughter and dress hogs, chickens, and other animals. He could shoot accurately with rifle, shotgun and pistol; and as an adult he wore a shoulder holster with a Smith & Wesson 38 Special, and knew how to shoot to kill. The daily routine of his childhood would have few modern day counterparts. Days, weather and seasons had special names: washday, hog killing weather, planting time, canning time, spring-cleaning time, and growing season. There were daily chores: milking the cow, feeding the chickens, tending the garden, cooking (always cooking), mending clothes and shoes, walking the fence, gathering the eggs, going to the spring, washing dishes, and chopping wood. And there were always other jobs to be done, planting, hoeing, cultivating, corn pulling, cotton picking, hay

bailing, and so forth. Life revolved around the working the land and tending the livestock. In his childhood, he worked daylight to dark and beyond, and had no time to waste with the idle play. Few adults “had a job” in those days, but as a young man M. C. also got a job with Southern Railway as a fireman, and then was promoted to conductor. He was working a fast passenger train to Florida, when his younger brother went to New York to learn what was then called the “beauty business,” and when he returned he talked M.C. into going into business. Over the next few years M.C. opened several beauty shops and one beauty school. During the depression, the beauty business boomed. When he was 41, he married one of the students at his beauty school. She was 18. I was their second child. The following is a photograph of my father, my sister, and me. It was taken in around 1945.

I have lived to see even more change than did my father. I grew up in a constantly changing world with automobiles, highways, Jet airplanes, penicillin, vaccines, radios, phonographs, and nuclear bombs. And in my lifetime I saw the emergence of Jetliners, home air conditioning, man-made satellites, ICBMs, transistor radios, color televisions, cassette tape recorders, videocassette recorders, copying machines, fax machines, and cell phones. I learned how to program computers (in 1966), then I learned how to use statistical packages, drawing software, spreadsheets, word processing, and then software to navigate the Internet. I saw



the development of heart transplants, CAT scans, MRIs, and the mapping of the human genome.

Of course, we could point to the consistencies of human life over that Great Century: we still wear clothes, eat food, sign songs, and marry (sometimes). We live in houses and ride in vehicles with wheels. But our daily lives were totally changed by what I call The Greatest Century.

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We lived in the most extraordinary period in human history. A ten thousand year old man who died in the nineteenth century would have seen less world change than a someone who

lived to be a hundred and was born in 1900. The face of the earth changed more in that apocryphal century than it had in the previous ten thousand years.

Consider a picture of the earth at night with continents outlined by twentieth-century lights. It would have appeared almost dark in 1900. Consider the motion across the earth of thousands of planes, boats, and trains; and the daily movements of millions of cars. Consider the millions of miles of roadways crisscrossing the globe and the bridges, dams and skyscrapers, and endless tracts of houses that dot the twenty-first century landscape. And most importantly, consider the vast increase in the number of humans.



Many centuries were taken for the population of the earth to go from 300 million to 500 million. Then between 1700 and 1800 the population rose from 600 million to 900 million—to almost one billion. But world population had increased from .9 billion to 1.6 billion, a 75% increase in the nineteenth century, then the twentieth century rate of growth dwarfed the awesome population increase of the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century the human population grew by 380%, reaching 6.1 billion in 2000, and most of that growth took place in the last half of the twentieth century—within one lifetime. Moreover, another billion will be added by 2013.

Human life expectancy almost doubled in the twentieth century. Immunizations and antibiotics added significantly to life span, but there was an even more important development: Education about clean drinking water and water treatment technologies greatly increased average life span around the world. The percent of the world's population over 65 years-of-age nearly doubled. And, as

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are needed to see this picture.

the population increased at an unprecedented rate, human productivity and understanding increased on a pace that staggered the imagination.

The technological advances of the twentieth century are almost too vast to list, but let's consider a small sample. In less than one hundred years we went from the first human flight to the first trip to the moon, from locomotives to supersonic airliners, from stethoscopes to MRIs, and, yes, from cannons to nuclear ICBMs. Twentieth century citizens saw the commercial development of automobiles, refrigerators, radios, airplanes, air conditioning, televisions, tape recorders, color photography, computers, copiers, cell phones and the Internet. And because of rapid technological change, these products were discarded at an alarming pace.

Vastly more human products were trashed in the twentieth century than were produced by all of mankind prior to 1900. Among these products were ever advancing tools of war. The twentieth century brought a "World War"—a clash between huge armies equipped with machine guns, airplanes, submarines, long-range guns, and deadly chemicals—that cost 8 million lives. Then World War II soon followed, bringing a confrontation between aircraft carriers, motorized cavalries, bombers, tanks, and rockets—as well as "strategic" warfare on civilians. In the end, 60 million lives were lost, making all previous wars seem minor and almost civil by comparison.

How did all this change happen in just ten short decades? The educational foundation had been laid in the nineteenth century, so, in the new century, scientific and technical understanding could advance at a dizzying pace. Our lives were forever altered. The life styles that had endured for many centuries was erased and replaced overnight. Agrarian skills and knowledge for coping in nature were replaced by the ability to operate the devices and machines created in twentieth century factories.

In one lifetime in the modern world, the speed of daily travel rose from 15mph to 60mph, overland travel rose from 60+mph to 500+mph, employment moved from the sweatshop to the office, and the typical role for American children went from indentured farm workers to financially empowered and independent decision maker. And daily life in the American home shifted from doing chores to searching for entertainment and communication from across the globe. And the concept of "family" went from three-generation units in one household to single parents living with their children.

A person born in America in 1900 would see more social change in her lifetime than her predecessors would have experienced across 100 generations. If you compare a typical day in your life and a typical day in people's lives in 1900 (in the same town), you would realize that you could not cope in their world and they could not cope in yours. The last century, The Great Century, changed everything, and therein lies our problem. Never before has the past been more irrelevant in planning the future. Every thing is changing so fast, we cannot predict what will come next. We are like an airplane moving at Mach II, if we see a problem in front of us, it's too late to change directions.

Even though we cannot say what the world will be like tomorrow, we seem to be in a hurry to get there. We are hell-bent on the future even though we struggle to keep abreast of current technology and social change. We have a one-way ticket and a seat by the window, and we don't want to give it up, even though our destination is unknown.

We, the American children of the twentieth century, are the most fortunate generation. We are heirs to a fortune of knowledge and a wealth of services and goods. As we look to the new century, we must keep in mind that the rate of change verges on "out of control." And our technological power makes our decisions more critical. We face the most exciting, but most ominous, century the world has ever known.