The Good Old Days--they Were Terrible! Study Guide

The Good Old Days--they Were Terrible! by Otto Bettmann

Contents

Plot Summary

The Good Old Days - They Were Terrible! is archivist and historian's Otto Bettman lively romp through late 19th century America. Bettman intends to prove that this period of American history was not the idyllic "good old days" they have become in the minds of contemporary Americans. Bettman concentrates on several sections of everyday life, showing that reality does not paint nearly the same picture as the nostalgic imagination does. Focusing primarily on New York City and the working poor, Bettman demonstrates the injustice, filth, exploitation, poor housing conditions, and poor education that were standard in this period.

Rapid industrialization produced an unprecedented amount of air pollution. Industrial waste mixed with pig manure and garbage thrown in the streets to create an awful stench and unhealthy air. Massive amounts of horse-drawn streetcars packed people in like cattle and created gnarled traffic jams—not to mention the generation of massive amounts of manure. Primitive sanitation could not handle the massive amount of garbage produced by civilization.

Overpopulation resulted in cramped, dilapidated townhouses and tenements. Landlords, in absence of any renters' rights, charged exorbitant rents and engaged cruel evictions. The introduction of the apartment only served as a continuance of the problem, with the added tragedy that the vertically-oriented buildings, short of safety features, were deathtraps if a fire broke out.

The American worker was regarded as little more than another resource to be used up and tossed aside when exhausted. Workers worked 16-hour days for pittances in terms of wages. Dangerous workplace environments, such as the metal particle-filled air of the steel mill or the sawdust-filled air of the saw mill, caused severe health problems and deaths. Child, who would be worked just as hard and long as adults for less wages, were ruthlessly exploited.

Political machines controlled city governments, resulting in massive graft, corruption, and ineptitude at the local level. Bribery was common in the courts and in the ranks of the police force. Justice could be bought, and punishment and incarceration was brutally cruel, intended to punish rather than rehabilitate.

Fresh meat was a rarity, and grocers, bakers, and others would frequently adulterate their foods to increase profit, producing such favorites as "bogus butter," lethal candy, and "swill milk." Disease was poorly understood and ran rampant in both urban and rural communities. Doctors were little more than profit-hungry quacks, and hospitals little more than rat-infested poorhouses.

Education was farcical, featuring teachers without diplomas, thuggish students, corporal punishment, and teaching methods centered on mindless repetition rather than true learning.

Finally, travel via ocean liner, railroad, and ferry was a dangerous risk. Ferries were "floating bombs" with their corroded boilers, and the poor were stuffed below-decks in ocean liners while the rich relaxed in comfortable abodes above-deck.

Introduction, and Chapter 1, Air

Introduction, and Chapter 1, Air Summary and Analysis

Introduction: In the minds of some, the time between the end of the Civil War and the early-1900s are known as "the good old days," years thought of with nostalgia and benignity. Author Otto Bettman wishes to shatter this conception by demonstrating what everyday life was really like for average people. By this examination, Bettman will provide the reader with a fuller and truer understanding of this period in American history, which will in turn demonstrate the large amount of progress our civilization has made.

Chapter 1 - Air: Pollution was little understood in the time after the Civil War. For many it was good sign of industry (and thus commerce and a good economy); for others it was even seen as a curative for ailments.

Air pollutants took many forms. Pigs and horses were the source of massive amounts of manure in a large city like New York. Horses were the main transportation before cars, and pigs were tolerated because they ate garbage. However, their manure made for an awful stench and unhealthy conditions.

Industrial vapors in the form of smog caused lung irritation, vomiting, sickness, and depression. The worst offender in New York was a place called Hunter's Point where the industries all gathered, called by one observer a "nasal disaster."

Humans generated an amazing amount of trash. Lack of a true sanitation department, poor regulations, and overcrowded led to the streets being lined with filth. People would simply throw their trash on the street. Wind exacerbated the problem of the constant putrid stench, as did the heat of summers. Summers were particularly unbearable, as poor people sometimes had to sleep in alleyways, and tenement residents were cramped together in windowless rooms. Many deaths due to heat stroke and dehydration occurred every year.

Chapter 2, Traffic

Chapter 2, Traffic Summary and Analysis

Traffic in the large American city (author Bettman almost always uses New York) was hideous due to the prevalence of the horse and cart. In the winter the street car became freezing; in summer it was suffocatingly hot. It was also dangerous to take a street car; some advised a street car rider to bring a knife and small pistol (derringer) with him or her. Streetcars were crowded, for reasons of profit, as full as they could go, leading to massive overcrowding.

Railroads were built straight through towns. They added to the pollution and also the noise and danger. In one year, Chicago accounted for a record 330 grade-crossing depths.

The El Train was introduced in New York in 1868 to relieve massive crowding (mainly due to incoming immigrants) on Manhattan Island. The El created as many problems as it solved. It was terribly loud and poorly scheduled, meaning missed and late stops and thus even more traffic.

The electric trolley car, introduced to cities in 1887, was an improvement in transportation, but had its share of problems. It competed with horse-drawn streetcars for years, resulting in massive traffic jams. They were also built to run on the busiest streets, further clogging traffic. Moreover, the fare of five cents was quite expensive to the working-class. Streetcar fares accounted for 10% of a working man's income.

Chapter 3, Housing

Chapter 3, Housing Summary and Analysis

In New York City particularly, the contrast between rich and poor was nowhere more evident than in housing. Filthy, crowded tenements stood nearby to palatial mansions.

The popular brownstone townhouse was usually stuffy and hazardous. Windows were closed to keep out the stench from the street, leading to stagnant and dangerous air inside. Sewer gas from primitive drainage systems, along with air particles from the standard coal stove, created a deadly indoor air quality. That rarity of bathing only compounded the problem.

Tenants, not protected by the laws they are today, were at the mercy of cruel landlords. Due to overpopulation, there was usually a housing shortage, meaning the landlord had all the leverage in the landlord-tenant relationship. Unfair rent raising, completely dilapidated and untended tenements, and brutal evictions were commonplace. Boarding homes became the only refuge for the poorer residents who could not afford tenements.

As space continued to be a premium and population continued to increase, there became a need to go 'up' with buildings, and the apartment was born, starting with Richard M. Hunt and his Stuyvesant Apartments on 18th Street in New York. However, shoddy construction practices and usual cost-cutting turned apartments into simply vertical versions of tenements, featuring very poor sanitation, crowded tiny rooms, and no modern safety features like fire escapes or emergency exits. In fires, apartments became "blazing prisons," and the fatality rate for apartment fires was insanely high.

A shantytown grew up around the outskirts of New York, with homes made from discarded construction material and whatever else was available. Mostly the residents of shantytowns were newly-arrived immigrants, discriminated against. Slums, defined as the worst and most lawless blocks of major cities, also sprung up amid rapid industrialization. The author states that between 1868 and 1875 a half a million people lived in the slums of New York, or half its population. Filth, disease, drunkenness, crime, and rent gouging were regular features of the slums.

Chapter 4, Rural Life

Chapter 4, Rural Life Summary and Analysis

Rural living was hardly the idyllic, nostalgic, "clean living" way of life many thought it was.

Frontier women endured back-breaking labor, either over the ancient stove which required intensive labor in the form of constant feeding of wood, or laundry which required hours of scrubbing, stamping, and clobbering.

The local well soon became a cesspool of contamination, with drainage from the outhouse, animal waste, and kitchen slush. Insects were a constant, impossible annoyance, with window screening only introduced well into the 1880s.

Winter posed a health hazard when settlers huddled in their closed houses inhaled the smoky air from the iron stove. Tramps and various vagrants were a constant danger and fear on the open prairie and its relative lawlessness.

Children, as soon as they were physically able, were forced into the day-to-day drudgery of their parents, as a much-needed extra set of hands and extra body. Intellectual growth in the form of rudimentary schoolhouses were a clear second to the needs of the farm, and as a result education was an afterthought. Boys and girls' minds were not stimulated on the farm.

Financial hardship was all too common on the prairie. The need for plows and mechanical equipment put the poor farmer into debt; thirty percent of the farmers in the 1880s had to mortgage their land due to debt. Piling on was the railroad monopoly, which seduced farmers out west and then crushed them with exorbitant freight rates to haul their crops. Mother Nature was also a constant danger, be it in the form of fierce winds that could blow away seeds and ruin a season, unchecked prairie fires, or swarms of grasshoppers.

Perhaps the least-discussed aspect of life on the prairie was the extreme loneliness and desolation which ate away at the mental health of homesteaders. The bleak, endless prairie, long weeks away selling crops or going to a large town, and homesickness led to depression for many.

Many young people, especially girls who saw their mothers grow prematurely old with toil, left the country for the promise of the city, but were in the end despaired and disillusioned, trading farm drudgery for sweatshop drudgery.

Chapter 5, Work

Chapter 5, Work Summary and Analysis

Absent of any labor laws, the wedge between the rich and the poor was huge during the last half of the 19th century. By 1890 as few as one percent of the American population owned as much as the remaining 99 percent put together. Labor was treated as a commodity to be used up and replaced.

Many industrial jobs featured toxic inhalants the workers had to endure, including sawdust, coal dust, chemicals, and stone dust. Workers were kept on a demonic pace in a seven-day workweek. Many developed health problems and could not work past the age of forty.

Accidents were frequent, and largely ignored. The railroad industry and steel mills were the most dangerous places to work. In 1890, for example, one out of every 306 employed railroaders died from a work-related injury. There was no such concept as workman's compensation or life insurance; jobs were so relatively few that men could be simply replaced and forgotten if injured or killed. As a rule the courts ruled with employers in any case of a worker's death, calling the death the worker's bad luck.

While less dangerous, sweatshops for textiles featured the most brutal working conditions wage- and time-wise. The very worst sweatshop activity was "tobacco stripping" in which workers stripped tobacco leaves in a confined room. The tobacco in the air would daze them, and soon disease their lungs. Perhaps the most famous sewing-related sweatshop was the one run by A. T. Stewart in the 1870s. Though he kept a cleaner shop than most, Stewart ruled with an iron hand, doling out a low (even for the times) salary of $3 a week and working his girls from 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Bathroom facilities were intentionally inadequate in order to keep as many girls working at one time as possible.

Child labor was not only common, but encouraged by parents who looked forward to additional household income. Children were popular because they were more obedient and cheaper than adult labor. Most times, children had the same grueling hours and working conditions as adults.

Many strikes took place, but shrewd industrialists shaped public opinion, taking up the mantle of "law and order" against the "lawless and violent" strikers. Thus strikes were generally viewed in a poor light, no matter how severe the injustice being fought against. Police handled strikes ruthlessly, and violence in these events were all too common.

Chapter 6, Crime

Chapter 6, Crime Summary and Analysis

Between 1860 and 1890, crime rose a total of 445 percent according to one statistic. While the gun violence of the American West is well known, urban crime was just as damaging and commonplace.

Street crime, in a time when streets were very poorly lit, ran rampant, especially at night. There were no real gun laws, allowing any drunk or thug to carry a concealed weapon. The public was very pessimistic about this situation.

Juvenile delinquency was also common. Youth gangs terrorized neighborhoods. Arrested boys could become locked up with grown men convicts, with the convict acting as a further corrupting influence. Boys were widely regarded as troublemakers and could be arrested for the slightest perceived offense. As a result, many young men became suspicious of and disrespectful of the law, exacerbating the problem.

Police were hardly much help. Poorly trained and indiscriminately hired, many cops were little better than the thugs they were supposed to protect against. Corruption ran wild; graft in the form of "protection" of a business or "nonharassment" fees were a way of life and predicted tactics later appropriated by the mafia. Cops used their billy clubs without restraint or limit; killing a drunk who resisted arrest by beating him to death could be done without a second thought. Cops were in fact encouraged to beat up perpetrators so he would have "something to show in court."

At a higher level, city politics were as rotten as the police force. Local governments were oftentimes ruled by local bosses and the political machine they controlled. Most famous was New York City's Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall, but most major cities had similar rings. City positions would go to sycophants and political tricksters; pilfering the taxpayers' money was a permanent way of doing business. Political corruption extended to the courts; Bosses could exert influence and hardened criminals could be easily released back to the streets by bought judges.

Prostitution laws were in place but only loosely enforced. In fact, prostitution was practiced in many areas of New York city with a frank openness, something that astounded visitors to New York. Prostitution rings prospered under "police protection," in which the police would collect in the range of $30 to $50 monthly from the illicit earnings. In 1890, it was estimated that 40,000 prostitutes worked in New York City, compared with a population of 950,000. Prostitution presented more problems than just the vice itself; bordellos attracted ruffians and criminals and were often the scenes of violence, especially against the prostitutes themselves.

As opposed to a modern sense that prisons are meant for rehabilitation, prisons in the last half of the 19th century were solely regarded as places of punishment. Prisoners

were treated like subhuman species. And blacks were treated worst of all throughout the justice system, as evidenced in the unique horror of lynching.

Chapter 7, Food and Drink

Chapter 7, Food and Drink Summary and Analysis

The average citizen of the late 19th century was forced to subsist on a monotonous, simple diet that was oftentimes far from healthful.

There was no meat-packing industry. Meat arrived "on the hoof," that is, live, on rail. Many cows were dying of starvation or sick well before the slaughterhouse. Meat was often decayed, or left to hang outdoors, which meant very quick deterioration. One might think many citizens would turn to vegetables given this kind of meat, but in fact vegetables were widely blamed for a cholera epidemic in 1832, and people were still distrustful of fruit and vegetables.

Milk was not only diluted with water, but colored with chalk or plaster of Paris in cases when the milk was contaminated or spoiled. Swill milk, from cows fed waste, was a particularly nasty form of adulterated milk. Butter was also adulterated in the form of "bogus butter," in which everything from mashed potatoes to hog fat to bleach would be masqueraded as real butter. Bread, coffee, and candy were similarly manipulated and added to for profit. Food health was not helped by American eating habits, which usually emphasized gorging and speed.

The frontier diet was dominated by a single food, corn, which the average frontier family had nearly three times a day, seven days a week. Children especially suffered from such a monotonous diet.

Alcoholism, as can be expected was a common problem. On the frontier, liquor called mash made from corn was so abundant (given corn's own abundance) that whole families, including children, would degenerate into drunkards. In the cities, a combination of political corruption, immigrant traditions of liquor, and supply-and-demand as the poor sought refuge from their nasty existences. As on the frontier, child alcoholism was common. There were no societies or other support structures in place at this time. Alcoholics accounted for up to 50 percent of criminals in prison, and alcoholism usually meant an early death.

Chapter 8, Health

Chapter 8, Health Summary and Analysis

Medical advances did not keep pace with technological advances during the Victorian period. Yellow fever, a particularly agonizing disease, broke out in various epidemics during the South, and nothing could be done other than to let them run their course. In cities, the spraying of disinfectant by public health officials was merely a show rather than a medical practice that did any genuine good. In reality, public health officials usually had no knowledge of health or medicine. Many were the sycophantic hires of the local political machine. Quarantine, of ships sailing yellow flags coming into the New York City harbor for example, were more effective means of fighting disease but rarely stopped diseases like cholera and yellow fever from spreading.

On the frontier, country doctors were little more than worthless quacks. Smallpox, cholera, and ague were the chief diseases that ravaged country populations. Doctors in the city were little better. Having nowhere near the prestige the profession has now, medicine was relegated to "diploma-mill" type schools designed to make a quick buck off tuition. Doctors from these schools were taught very little correct information. Doctors sometimes administered "cures" that harmed more than helped, and many were outright frauds. Surgery also had the reputation for a "cure" that could kill. Ten percent of all surgeries in this time ended in death, due mostly to infection. Lister's prescriptions for an antiseptic environment and surgical tools went largely unheeded.

Hospitals were mostly filthy poorhouses run by religious institutions who could not afford the upkeep. Nurses with no medical training treated patients crowded close together in beds, a situation which spread more disease. Similarly, insane asylums were managed by prison guards rather than medical professionals. Insanity was largely regarded as a condition which could not be cured, and so little effort was made to combat mental illness. Instead, every effort was made within a family to keep mental illness a secret, to chain an insane family member in the basement rather than deal with him or her.

Drug addiction was rampant, perhaps rivaling alcoholism. Opium was introduced as early as 1840 and became widespread in the form of laudanum. Cough syrups, aspirin, and even medicine for babies routinely had such addictive drugs as morphine, heroine, and cocaine in them.

Chapter 9, Education

Chapter 9, Education Summary and Analysis

Rural 'one-room' schoolhouses featured low pay, low standards, and a high turnover rate. Education was entirely optional, the school year lasted only a couple of months. The 'one-room' aspect of early schoolhouses meant that all grades of children from many different surrounding villages shared the same class. This invariably led to violence and fighting (especially inter-village feuds) among the children and a lack of discipline, resulting in one famous case in Massachusetts in 1870 of a schoolmarm being stoned to death by her students.

To fight this lack of discipline, teachers turned to brutal corporal punishment, methods that were at the time encouraged by educators and parents alike. Education became about physical punishment more than learning.

Black education in this time was pitiful due to racism and the 'separate but equal' legislation being completely ignored. Many racists felt that any money put toward black education came at the expense of white education. In 1890, only 20 percent of black children received any education at all.

City schools fell victim to the same kind of political chicanery and Boss politics that affected the police force, public health, and other sections previously mentioned. Schools were ruinous, suffocating places, overcrowded sometimes by a ratio of two to one (as in, a school designed for 1,000 students would have 2,000 students). Poor lighting and poor air quality were other common qualities of these schools.

Finally, teaching methods emphasized recitation and complete obedience over any true learning. Some children were not even allowed to turn their heads during class or speak a word. Poorly educated teachers (and in this time one did not have to have a diploma to be a teacher) followed the prescribed curriculum rigidly and blindly.

Chapter 10, Travel

Chapter 10, Travel Summary and Analysis

Travel in the Victorian period was a dangerous proposition, and the difference between the rich and the poor in terms of travel was quite stark. Vast ocean liners were the occasion for a vacation for the rich, who enjoyed upper-deck luxuries, but a nightmare for the poor immigrants crossing from Europe to America. The poor were relegated to the "steerage," the lower decks which did not have proper ventilation. Immigrants slept on straw mats and suffered disease and sickness on the long passage through the Atlantic Ocean. These ocean liners were nicknamed "fever ships" and "floating coffins" for obvious reasons.

Train commuting was more common and had its own share of problems. As with streetcars, passengers were treated only slightly above luggage, being forced into overcrowded, wooden cars. These cars were a far cry from the luxurious private rail cars that might be preserved in a museum today. With windows open a car's occupants would choke on the smoke from the train engine; with windows closed, the air became putrid with tobacco and body odor. The introduction of the Pullman sleeping car afforded a little more comfort, although sleeping was akin to being inserted into a sardine tin.

Ferry accidents, such as on the Hudson River in New York, were much too common. In an era before radar, ferries had the chance to collide on foggy mornings and nights. Ferries themselves, poorly maintained, are compared to floating bombs due to their massive below-deck boilers. When corroded and aged, these boilers could simply blow up, taking a ferry and its passengers with it. The most infamous of these accidents occurred in 1904, when the ferry called General Slocum blew up, taking more than 1,000 passengers to a watery grave.

Chapter 11, Leisure

Chapter 11, Leisure Summary and Analysis

Leisure activities also suffered in this period. The American drive toward success and hard work left little time for leisure, and what leisure there was, especially in crowded New York City, was problematic. Gambling, though illegal, was hugely popular, leading to the financial ruin of many of its participants. Furthermore, gambling establishments became havens for crime and violence. Horse racing was controlled by crime syndicates and largely fixed at this time, and professional baseball also suffered from bribery and gambling rings. College football was brutal, and essentially an excuse to have a group of men fight each other in large scrums.

Children, unsupervised and bored, turned to petty vandalism as their form of entertainment. There was no such things as playgrounds. Along with this, there was a very curious acceptance of firearms during this period. Children were encouraged to play with guns, both toy and real, and many felt the path to manhood ended with owning a gun and learning to shoot. Guns were given out as promotions at drugstores. It was a bizarre culture from a modern perspective.

City parks were inaccessible to the majority of the poor (who could not afford fare to Central Park, for example), and havens for vagrants, criminals, and bums besides. Bums created an atmosphere and crime and fear in parks, and in Central Park's case, the 84-acre plot was too unwieldy and open to enforce curfew or police effectively. As a result, innocent genuine visitors to the park were met with suspicion and harassment.

City beaches, such as on Coney Island, were little better, choked with garbage from the city. Even getting to Coney Island was a chore, taking up to two and a half hours by streetcar from the city.

Characters

The Working Urban Poor

The working urban poor had nothing short of a miserable existence, especially those in New York. New York was a beacon for European immigrants, so during the Gilded Age an unprecedented amount of immigrants poured into New York, exacerbating the overpopulation that already created several problems for the working class. Industrialization combined with overpopulation in the city, and the results were disastrous.

Health was a major concern. Air quality was heinous because of manure and garbage in the streets, the coal-burning stove inside, and primitive, leaky sewer pipes underneath. Workers trudged through 16-hour work days and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. Diseases like cholera, yellow fever, and diphtheria ran their courses in occasional epidemics that no one really had the knowledge or tools to stop.

Living conditions in the city were awful. Because of the severe housing shortage, those in need of housing were exploited. Landlords price-gouged with rents, evicted without notice, and refused to render any repairs to insect-infected buildings with poor sanitation. A later addition, apartments, became only a vertical-style tenement, with the added danger of a tenant's inability to escape higher levels during a fire.

The urban poor could not even be promised American democracy. Political machines controlled city governments. The courts were bought and paid for, the police were corrupt, and political appointments were the result of cronyism.

The Working Rural Poor

While the working rural poor did not face the cramped conditions and overpopulation the urban poor suffered through, they had their own unique challenges. "The good old days" they were decidedly not, even for the American West that remains idealized in movies and television.

Country living involved almost non-stop work just to survive. The housewife toiled over laundry, cooking, mending, water fetching, and other endless tasks, developing a hunch and prematurely aging. The farming husband toiled over hard soil with plow and oxen, dug wells, dug ditches to protect from fires, and other sorts of drudgery. Children were also worked to the bone from a too-early age, viewed by parents as a much-needed extra set of hands. A child's education was poor and clearly secondary to the work needs of the home.

Natural disasters plagued the frontier family, from prairie fires to windstorms and tornadoes, to grasshopper infestations and deadly blizzards. The desolation of the plains and separation from civilization often caused loneliness and depression.

Cholera and the ague were common on the plains. Ague was so common that it was not even considered an illness: "he's not sick, he just has the ague." Country doctors were charlatans, and frontiersmen depended on a number of (mostly ineffective) homemade remedies of their own inventions.

The Landlord

Because of overpopulation and housing shortages, landlords in major cities exploited their tenants with high rents, unreasonable conditions, neglected properties, and heartless evictions.

The Police

In the police force of New York and other major cities, graft was more common than not. They extorted businesses with promises of "protection" and "nonharassment" similar to the mafia. Police were sometimes as thuggish as the criminals they were meant to combat, using their billy clubs to inflict sometimes lethal violence on a regular basis.

Boss Tweed and His Tammany Hall

Boss William Tweed and his Tammany Hall political machine ruled New York City throughout much of the late-19th century. A bureaucracy based upon cronyism and political favoritism, combined with constant pilfering of the city treasury, undermined local government and threatened the most basic of civil services.

The Doctor

Doctors had little of the prestige they command today. They were cranked out by "diploma mill" schools, and what little knowledge they had of medicine was probably wrongheaded. They were instead motivated by the profit of tonic-selling and housecall-making.

The Grocer

It was commonplace for grocers to "adulterate" their food products, meaning to add or swap ingredients in order to boost profit margins. Chalk could be added to spoiled milk to make it look better, mashed potatoes were added to butter, and toxic chemicals were added to candy to make it colorful.

The Teacher

Teachers were poorly paid and were hired without any diploma or educational requirements. They taught through repetition and physical punishment, forgoing any true learning. While in the classroom, they were given every right of a parent, and thus canings and slappings were commonplace in the name of discipline.

The Steel Worker

The steel worker of the late 19th century has the dubious distinction of the most dangerous job among the dangerous jobs available. Metal particles from shaping, and toxic fumes from molten metal, sent many steel workers to an early grave.

The Commuter

Commuters faced many challenges on their way, via railroad to work. Schedules for the El Train or traditional railway were barely kept. Ash and smoke would be poured over commuters by a train pulling in a station. Stations had little accommodation for passengers, and so during winters waiting for the train was an almost intolerable exercise. Onboard, commuters were shoved in to cars like cattle and subjected to noxious train engine smoke and tobacco fumes.

Objects/Places

Hunter's Point

A host of industries moved to the Hunter's Point area just outside the most populated portions of New York in the 1870s. The air, noise, and smell pollution these combined, concentrated industries emitted was truly noxious and harmful to the health. Air pollution was a major problem in the time period focused on in this book.

The Horse-drawn Streetcar

This primary means of transportation within a city had a host of problems. Freezing in the winter, sticky and suffocating in the winter, the streetcar was packed with as many passengers as possible, with people treated as little more than freight. The horse itself created an intense amount of manure, making for filthy and unhealthy streets.

The Rural Homestead

While the rural life is idealized in stories, life on the farm was in fact relentlessly dull and hard. Farmers had to contend with endless labor to keep up the farm, contaminated well water, mortgages and debt, and the inherent loneliness of the plains.

Tobacco Stripping

In the worst kind of sweatshop toil, workers worked endless hours stripping tobacco leaves for tobacco products. The tobacco in the air would put workers in a stupor. Later, lung disease was almost a certainty.

The Prison System

Rather than rehabilitation, the aim of the prison system of the 19th century was punishment. Starvation, floggings, chainings and torture were routine. The innocent and mentally ill were all too often victims of this system.

Swill Milk

Swill milk came from milking cows in distilleries that were fed distillery waste. These cows, suffering from advanced tuberculosis, sometimes had to be held up by a pulley to be milked because they couldn't stand. This milk caused babies to be tipsy, and caused an outrage when the source was uncovered.

Public Health Disinfection

Disinfection of public streets was usually an empty gesture made by officials who had no knowledge of health. During the Victorian period, disease was poorly understood. Disinfection did not kill the microorganisms bred in the garbage covering the streets of urban America, the real cause of the epidemics that often raged through the cities.

Opium

As early as 1840, opium became the drug of choice for most addicts in the Victorian period. In some towns, opium addicts outnumbered alcoholics. Opium was the drug of choice for artists and intellectuals, children, and the working poor. Drugstores openly sold opium either in pill form or in a form called laudanum, which was popular among Civil War veterans who had been administered laudanum for battlefield injuries and thereafter became addicted.

Corporal Punishment

In the undisciplined classroom, the teacher used physical punishment in the form of slapping, hitting, clubbing, and spanking to maintain an iron grip on students. This primitive form of education did more harm than good, and in fact bred the very juvenile delinquency it was meant to inhibit.

The General Slocum

The General Slocum was a ferry making regular trips across the Hudson River in New York City. In 1904, its boiler burst, causing the ferry to explode in flames and killing over a 1,000 of the ferry's 1,350 passengers. Tragedies like this were far too frequent, as ferries are described as "floating bombs" because of their poorly-maintained boilers.

Themes

The Rich Versus The Poor

In the Victorian era as Bettmann reimagines it, there is a clear dichotomy between the rich and the poor. He cites a startling statistic: late in the 19th century, one percent of the American population owned as much as the remaining 99 percent put together. This imbalance had a variety of consequences for the working poor; it is clear a portion of Bettmann's mission in publishing the book is to bring the light class-based inequalities and injustices based upon socio-economic status.

A primary disadvantage suffered by the poor was overpopulation, brought about by population spurts in the late 19th century as well as the massive influx of European immigrants. Overpopulation in and of itself had several ramifications. Housing shortages provided the opportunity for unscrupulous landlords to charge exorbitant rates and execute heartless evictions, while the rich rested comfortably in mansions located sometimes very near dilapidated tenement houses. Also, with such a large labor population and no laws to protect workers, rich industrialists could treat the working poor as little more than resources to be used up, subjecting them to 16-hour work days, very poor wages, and dangerous work conditions like coal mines and steel mills that resulted in premature deaths.

The suffering of the impoverished is a theme that surfaces in nearly every chapter. The rich had luxury cruises on majestic ocean liners while immigrants below-decks in the steerage slept on floors and developed diseases because of lack of ventilation. Plus, much-needed leisure activity and vacation time were reserved for the rich that could afford streetcar or train fare to places of leisure; those in the city simply could not afford to get away.

The Consequences of the Political Machine

Boss William Tweed and his political machine known as Tammany Hall is the most famous example of the Boss or political machine system of politics. This system maintained the illusion of a democratic and freely-elected local government, but in fact fraud, graft, and corruption ran rampant. A bureaucracy both parallel to and intertwined with elected offices developed, whereby an elaborate system of favors and favoritism emerged. Judges, policeman, and a host of other city officials were hired or "elected" based on "pay for play" politics and other dirty, illegal, and unethical tactics.

More to the matter at hand, this system had several repercussions in regards to the working poor who suffered at the hands of such a corrupt government. Ineptitude, uncaring, and incompetence were common qualities among the political machine's cronies. Without any real danger of being booted out of office via a fair election, officials could perform as badly as they liked. Public health officials had no knowledge of public

health. Judges could release obviously guilty criminals due to a pay-off. Policemen responded more to money than injustice in the carrying out of their duties, mirroring later mafia tactics in promising "protection." Those with money could literally "buy" justice because of graft and corruption at all levels of government due to the Boss system; those without suffered brutality and indignity.

The political machine's chief aim was to keep itself in power; thus, true reform or progress became an impossibility. Strikes for workers' rights were violently quashed, industrialists remained unfettered in their exploitation of workers, and tenements and apartments remained rat-infested death traps because there was no true impetus to serve the people and their needs.

Children in the Gilded Age

Children are a special consideration in the book and appear in several chapters. Given their innocence and status as "the future," their plight is especially unjust. The first injustice is the labor system in the Gilded Age. With very few labor laws in place, and impoverished parents desperate to add a little coin to the household, children were exploited by industrialists to a criminal degree. They were paid substantially less than the equivalent adult worker and so were especially coveted in an age where pure profit was the only consideration. This, despite having to do the same jobs (or, worse, the jobs the men refused to do) and work the same hours as grown men. These children would naturally develop a host of poorly-understood medical conditions that would chase them into an early grave.

A lack of supervision and stimulation caused children to act out in the form of vandalism and local youth gangs. A peculiar gun culture in which children were encouraged to play with guns led to unprecedented levels of crime and violence. In the country, children worked long, suffering hours on the farm as soon as they were physically able, stunting their development and mental growth. School (when it could be attended between work) was a cramped, suffocating place where corporal punishment reigned and children were treated by wild beasts

Perhaps the root cause of several of these evils was the perception held in the minds of most adults, whether warranted or not, that children were born sinful thugs that needed harsh, unyielding discipline; "spare the rod, and spoil the child." Such harsh treatment—be it in the home, at school, in the justice system, or at the workplace—served as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Beaten children learned that violence was the way to communicate and accomplish things.

Style

Perspective

Author Otto Bettman is a German curator who emigrated to the United States in 1935. He started what would become the famous Bettman collection in Manhattan, a large collection of images. As an image archivist and someone deeply steeped in history, Bettman commands the sort of authority necessary for a history book of this type. Bettman was born in 1903, putting him in the generation just after the Victorian period he is dealing with. This close chronological connection also lends a sort of authority.

Bettman's prejudice, or at least authorial focus, is clearly stated in his introduction. Bettman has set out with this book to debunk the popular misconception that the American Victorian period (the 1860s to early-1900s) was a time of great culture, prosperity and achievement. Bettman argues that this period is not a Golden Age or "the good old days," but in fact the haze of time and nostalgia has disguised how very difficult and miserable it actually was, especially for the working poor. Bettman actively seeks to take the focus away from the rich and privileged in order to explore how the average man and family truly experienced the era. By doing so, Bettman seeks to shed much-needed light on the plight of the working man during this time. He also hopes that this re-examination of history may cause the reader to view the present time differently, insofar that civilization has come a very long way from the relative wretchedness of the Victorian period in America.

Tone

Bettman uses a wry, sardonic tone in his "demythification" of the Victorian era in America. This lively style is appropriate for a history book that is more perfunctory than exhaustive, more summary than detailed account. However, this is not to say that Bettman is not capable of outrage, especially in more serious moments such as child labor, lynching, and the mistreatment of the mentally ill. By being wry and flippant, Bettman is ingratiating himself with the reader, getting the reader on his side. Through this alliance between author and reader, Bettman is more likely to persuade the reader to accept his thoroughly revisionist history.

Bettman also has capacity for sensationalism and hyperbole. In a section on the Mentally Ill, a heading reads, "Maltreated and caged like wild beasts," while a horse-drawn street car is called "Inferno on wheels" by another heading. This sensationalism works well with his wry, vivacious style, but also serves to state Bettman's revisionist arguments bluntly and obviously. There is little gray area for Bettman in his quest to prove that the "good old days" were terrible. Bettman wishes to lead his reader to the pole exactly opposite the "good" myth. He presents a uniformly bleak vision of the Victorian era, perhaps in some ways as biased as the "good old days" mythology.

Structure

The book is divided into eleven chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of Victorian-era life, such as travel, leisure, medicine, and food and drink. Though the primary focus is urban living, and especially New York City, the Western frontier and farm living are also touched upon. Rather than chronological order, chapters proceed conceptually, and in no discernible order. That is to say, chapters could be interchanged without any loss of meaning or confusion; each chapter stands on its own.

Every chapter begins with a brief introduction, which outlines and summarizes the material to be covered in that chapter. Each chapter is further divided into sub-chapters. For example, Chapter 9, "Education," is subdivided into sections on "Country Teacher," "Corporal Punishment," "Negro Education," and "City Schools" among others.

Throughout the entire book, tucked alongside or in-between columns of texts, are photographs and drawings which relate to the written content. For example, sections on political corruption and the Boss system are accompanied by political cartoons from that time about those topics. Author Bettman states that many images from the time reinforce the "good old days" myth about the Victorian period; the book is thus Bettman's chance to choose images that serve as counterpoints to more conventional images, in line with the overall purpose of the book - that the "good old days" were in fact terrible in many ways.

Quotes

"The good old days - were they really good? On the surface they appear to be so - especially the period to which this term is most often applied, the years from the end of the Civil War to the early 1900s. This period of history has receded into a benevolent haze, leaving us with the image of an ebullient, carefree America, the fun and charm of the Gilded Age, the Gay Nineties.
But this gaiety was only a brittle veneer that covered widespread turmoil and suffering. The good old days were good for but the privileged few. For the farmer, the laborer, the average breadwinner, life was an unremitting hardship. This segment of the populace was exploited and lived in the shadow of total neglect. And youth had no voice. These are the people, the mass of Americans, whose adversities this book attempts to chronicle." (Introduction, page xi)

"In terms of refuse, the human is the richest animal, a fact that is hardly concealed even today by an efficient sanitation system. It was most clearly evident, however, in American cities of the 1860s through the 1880s, where man was surrounded by his own litter much as a champion is surrounded by his trophies. What garbage pickup did exist was capricious and inept.
Again we turn to New York as our 'model' city to describe the Golden Age of rubbish. The wastes of daily life, including kitchen slops, cinders, coal dust, horse manure, broken cobblestones and dumped merchandise, were piled high on the sidewalks. There was hardly a block in downtown Manhattan that a pedestrian could negotiate without climbing over a heap of trash or, in rain, wading through a bed of slime." (page 7)

"The horse-drawn streetcar was a passenger's inferno and a pickpocket's paradise. A precaution suggested by one traveler: 'Before boarding a car, prudent persons leave their purses and watches in the safe deposit company and carry bowie knives and derringers.'
In winter the street became a rolling icebox, the stone on board more a symbol than a threat to the frigid temperatures. Like the horses up front, the stove was chronically underfed.
In summer the atmosphere was even more disagreeable. Fumes from unwashed bodies and beery breath thickened the ambient stench of tobacco juice to a porridge of nausea." (page 20)

"The rags-and-riches paradox of America was nowhere more visible than in New York City. The poor lived close by the rich, and the contrast in their housing embarrassed those of sensitivity, troubled those of conscience, and mocked those of faith. Tenements huddled pitifully in the shadow of mansions, and next to the splendors of Fifth Avenue were the rocky wastes of a shantytown that in the 1880s extended from 42nd to 110th Street. This counterpoint of squalor and luxury was compared, by a

British traveler, to a lady with diamonds around her neck and her toes sticking out of shabby shoes." (page 33)

"One aspect of the frontier has been dodged persistently to satisfy the vagaries of folk drama: the isolation and loneliness of families who lived there. There was no place lonelier than the frontier. The legal proviso that a homesteader stay on his claim - often extending for miles around - practically excluded human contacts. There was nowhere to go, no one to see; no casual visitors, no passers-by. The prairie itself, a bleak flat expanse unrelieved by so much as a single tree, emphasized the settlers' sense of physical separation from the human community." (page 62)

"History offers a yardstick by which to measure the status of the American worker. Today he has dignity and protection; less than a hundred years ago he was poor, debased and unprotected. Industrialists of the period regarded labor as a commodity - a raw material like ore or lumber to be mined of its vitality and flushed away. Profits were enormous against meager wages - 'Never before have the rich been so rich and the poor been so poor' - an imbalance that helped 1 percent of the population by 1890 to own as much as the remaining 99 percent put together." (page 67)

"The bosses maintained control by diligently currying favor with the 'little people' to whom they appeared as heroes from their own social class who protected them from the tyranny of the rich and powerful. There was always the glad hand, the free liquor, the little gifts of cash and coal, the job for a new immigrant and hasty naturalization. 'Every good man takes care of his friends,' pronounced George Washington Plunket, who fully expected that in the next election they would vote for him 'early and often.' Such subtle pressures made 'reform' a dirty word, and there were times when reasonable men doubted whether a majority of its residents really wanted their city to be cleansed of evil." (page 101)

"Dairy by-products, it appeared to the Victorian manufacturers, provided a fine opportunity to improvise; here imagination was needed, not scruples. And the butter they produced demonstrated a remarkable talent - not for making butter but for making money. Selling in the 1880s for a respectable average of 19 cents a pound, it was often rancid, and either a mixture of casein and water or of calcium, gypsum, gelatin fat and mashed potatoes." (Pages 116-117)

"[I]t was the age of Pasteur and Lister, but it took decades for their discoveries to affect public health. Meanwhile, endemic diseases fed by the dirt and overcrowding of cities ran their course, and a people growing accustomed to electricity remained frightened by the threat of smallpox, (although preventable since the discovery of vaccination by Jenner in 1796) diphtheria, typhoid and yellow fever.
Epidemics were attributed to the 'Miasma,' some unknown intangible effluvium that crept

into the air, and whether rich or poor, one could be well of a morning and dead that night." (page 135)

"The little schoolhouse was the dispensary of only limited information - much of it questionable - that was force-fed to pupils. Thinking was discouraged in favor of memorizing prepackaged 'noble' thoughts, and the three R's were imparted with a painful repetition associated more with the training of a dog. Good spelling was a major goal - more even than word meaning - and the classroom resounded like a parade ground to the monotonous cadence of vowels and consonants." (page 155)

"Train wrecks due to broken trestles, poor track, exploding boilers, faulty signals, and careless engineers and switchmen were a daily occurrence, producing an accident rate in the United States five times that of England. In 1890 railroad-connected accidents caused 10,000 deaths and 80,000 serious injuries. And while the primitive technology had built-in dangers, railroad management was the real villain, prompting George T. Strong to diarize: 'We shall never travel safely till some pious, wealthy, and much beloved railroad director has been hanged for murder. . . .'" (page 171)

"No doubt the framers of the Constitution did not intend it, but the gun became an integral part of America's household hardware and the all-time favorite toy of her children. Today there is widespread disapproval of firearms, but during the Victorian period even the most gentle families saw nothing immoral in allowing their children to play with guns - both real and the toy kind. In rural America it was almost a rite of puberty to give a boy his own gun, and marksmanship with a rifle and revolver was considered a highly desirable preparation for manhood." (page 192)

Topics for Discussion

What factors contributed to poor air quality in the Victorian era, especially in New York City?

What challenges did the working poor face in tenement living? In apartment living?

A common saying in the Victorian era was "Our last prop is a cop," meaning a policeman was the last person to resort to. Why did policemen have this reputation? How does author Otto Bettman characterize the majority of policemen during this period?

What is the author's purpose in writing this book? Does the author have a bias?

Discuss some of the ways in which workers were exploited during this period, in the absence of modern labor laws and safety regulations.

Describe teaching methods as examined in the book. What was a teacher's relationship to students? How are teachers characterized?

Discuss the political machine or Boss system of politics, and the consequences it had to the well-being and welfare of the urban populace.