

“Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" -- these famous words, written by Thomas Jefferson nearly a quarter millennium ago hold a high value as an American. The way one interprets these seven words today is considerably different than one would interpret them a hundred and fifty years ago, largely depending on your race or sex. The rapid expansion of industrialism in the late 19th and early 20th century positively influenced the United States as we know it today through more equal rights, innovation and an increased focus on health. As America focused on obtaining equal rights regardless of gender or race, innovation in manufacturing, and a focus on health the quest for "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" became more aligned with how America is today.

Only a few generations ago it was considered to be commonplace to "own" another human being. As we reflect on slavery, we must confront the atrocities that America participated in. If it were not for the Civil War, a strong-willed President Abraham Lincoln, and the preservation of the Union we may have continued treating other humans as property. A recent study by Binghamton University professor Dr. J. David Hacker showed the Civil War claimed upwards of 850,000 lives.¹ A defining moment in United States history was made when the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was adopted on December 6, 1865. Just over a decade after the signing of

¹ J. David Hacker. "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead." *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (2011): 307-348. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed October 6, 2014).

the Thirteenth Amendment, the Jim Crow laws were enacted in 1877. Society thought slavery was “abolished” in 1865 or so society thought, but that was far from the truth. Jim Crow laws relegated blacks to second-class citizens; segregating them from the whites and minimizing African Americans’ rights to pursue the American dream. It is difficult to fathom how African Americans lived under these “rigid anti-black laws.” All facets of their lives were affected: social, spiritual, and politically.² It was commonplace during this time to find laws in most states that “forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated.”³ The dark times of which the Jim Crow laws were in effect extended for decades after the reconstruction period before being repealed.

When people think about the Civil War, one common thought is the casualties that occurred. Albeit there were mass casualties, there were positive outcomes to the war. As the Civil War ended in 1865 it paved the way for extensive growth, which lead to what we know as the Gilded Age. The Gilded Age was a period of expansive economic growth. Real wages were increasing which caught the eye of European immigrants. As the American economy flourished, Europeans did whatever it took to immigrate to the United States. “The rise of industrialism and the corrupt interplay of business and politics

² Pilgrim, David, Dr. "What Was Jim Crow?" What was Jim Crow. Last modified December 2000. Accessed November 22, 2014. <http://www.ferris.edu/Jimcrow/what.htm>.

³ National Park Service. "Jim Crow Laws." Martin Luther King Jr. Accessed October 5, 2014. http://www.nps.gov/malu/forteachers/jim_crow_laws.htm.

strike the key themes in the Gilded Age”⁴ as the authors of *The American Promise: A Concise History, Volume 2* point out. Just as elementary physics, thanks to Newton, has taught us that there is an equal and opposite reaction, there was just that for the Gilded Age. The Jim Crow laws extended beyond blacks, and affected women and immigrants, too. When a country or business experiences rapid growth there can be some negative affects, but in the end it can help make a stronger and more resilient people. In the garment industry “there is always liability of getting the fingers jammed or caught. For the first three times the wounds are dressed without charge. After that the person injured must pay expenses.”⁵ Garment industry workers were predominantly women who worked for low wages and endured poor working conditions. As the government took a stronger look at occupational safety, they uncovered concerning issues, but these issues are the reason today we have safer work environments, and in turn, safer products. For America, it defined its path that is seen today.

There was considerable innovation, most notably in high volume products. It was during this period Henry Ford started producing the historic Ford Model T. Henry Ford with the Model T, Samuel Insull with the introduction of electrical transmission, amongst a plethora of others, created disruptive products that interconnected individuals spanning farther than ones mind could imagine. No longer was an individual limited to nearby

⁴ Roark, James L.; Johnson, Michael P.; Cohen, Patricia Cline; Stage, Sarah; Hartmann, Susan M. (2013-08-16). *The American Promise: A Concise History, Volume 2* (Page 477). Bedford/St. Martin's. Kindle Edition.

⁵ John Hollitz, comp., *Thinking Through the Past: A Critical Thinking Approach to U.S. History* (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2014), Page 41.

geographic areas; one could travel further than they ever imagined. This transcended beyond transportation to how people sent and received information.

Most individuals receive their information from major publications but what does one do when they cannot trust the view that is represented? Muckrakers, such as Jacob Riis, provided through investigative journalism the raw facts of what was happening. The muckrakers of the day had a large influence on how labor laws, public health and public perception changed over the years. Jacob Riis, for example, made the startling facts of tenements in New York back in the early 1900s among other things as well. The tenements that the poor, often women, children and immigrants stayed in were cramped, dark and lacked proper ventilation.⁶ The points brought up by Riis about tenements raises health concerns, among a variety of other things. There was as an increase in alcoholism among the poor, in turn violence towards children and women. The end result was an increase in public expenditure in the justice system. This vicious cycle was unseen by most during this period; however, if it were not for muckrakers, such as Riis, than the public opinion may not have outcried towards better health and standards of living.

America has made great strides towards following through with Thomas Jefferson's famous quote of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." As one would expect, during in great time of growth there mistakes will be made along the way. In the end, the period of the late 19th and early 20th century positively influenced the United

⁶ Riis, Jacob. "How The Other Half Lives, by Jacob Riis." How The Other Half Lives, by Jacob Riis. Last modified July 11, 2012. Accessed October 5, 2014. <http://www.authentichistory.com/1898-1913/2-progressivism/2-riis/>.

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October 5, 2014

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