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The Secret Life Of A Developing Country (Ours)

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Forget your conventional picture of America in 1810. In the first half of the nineteenth century, we were not at all the placid, straitlaced, white-picket-fence nation we imagine ourselves to have been. By looing at the patterns of everyday life as recorded by contemporary foreign and native observers of the young republic and by asking the questions that historians don't think to ask of another time—what were people really like? how did they greet one another in the street? how did they occupy their leisure time? what did they eat?—Jakc Larking brings us a portrait of another Americna, an America that was so different from both our conception of its past life and its present-day reality as to seem a foreign country.

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WE LOOKED DIFFERENT

Contemporary observers of early-nineteenth-century America left a fragmentary but nonetheless fascinating and revealing picture of the manner in which rich and poor, Southerner and Northerner, farmer and city dweller, freeman and slave presented themselves to the world. To begin with, a wide variety of characteristic facial expressions, gestures, and ways of carrying the body reflected the extraordinary regional and social diversity of the young republic.

When two farmers met in early-nineteenth-century New England, wrote Francis Underwood, of Enfield, Massachusetts, the author of a pioneering 1893 study of small-town life, “their greeting might seem to a stranger gruff or surly, since the facial muscles were so inexpressive, while, in fact, they were on excellent terms.” In courtship and marriage, countrymen and women were equally constrained, with couples “wearing all unconsciously the masks which custom had prescribed; and the onlookers who did not know the secret would think them cold and indifferent.”

Underwood noted a pervasive physical as well as emotional constraint among the people of

Enfield; it was rooted, he thought, not only in the self-denying ethic of their Calvinist tradition but in the nature of their work. The great physical demands of unmechanized agriculture gave New England men, like other rural Americans, a distinctively ponderous gait and posture. Despite their strength and endurance, farmers were “heavy, awkward and slouching in movement” and walked with a “slow inclination from side to side.”

Yankee visages were captured by itinerant New England portraitists during the early nineteenth century, as rural storekeepers, physicians, and master craftsmen became the first more or less ordinary Americans to have their portraits done. The portraits caught their caution and immobility of expression as well as recording their angular, long-jawed features, thus creating good collective likenesses of whole communities.

The Yankees, however, were not the stiffest Americans. Even by their own impassive standards, New Englanders found New York Dutchmen and Pennsylvania German farmers “clumsy and chill” or “dull and stolid.” But the “wild Irish” stood out in America for precisely the opposite reason. They were not “chill” or “stolid” enough, but loud and expansive. Their expressiveness made Anglo-Americans uncomfortable.

The seemingly uncontrolled physical energy of American blacks left many whites ill at ease. Of the slaves celebrating at a plantation ball, it was “impossible to describe the things these people did with their bodies,” Frances Kemble Butler, an Englishborn actress who married a Georgia slave owner, observed, “and above all with their faces....” Blacks’ expressions and gestures, their preference for rhythmic rather than rigid bodily motion, their alternations of energy and rest made no cultural sense to observers who saw only “antics and frolics,” “laziness,” or “savagery.” Sometimes perceived as obsequious, childlike, and dependent, or sullen and inexpressive, slaves also wore masks—not “all unconsciously” as Northern farm folk did, but as part of their self-protective strategies for controlling what masters, mistresses, and other whites could know about their feelings and motivations.

American city dwellers, whose daily routines were driven by the quicker pace of commerce, were easy to distinguish from “heavy and slouching” farmers attuned to slow seasonal rhythms. New Yorkers, in particular, had already acquired their own characteristic body language. The clerks and commercial men who crowded Broadway, intent on their business, had a universal “contraction of the brow, knitting of the eyebrows, and compression of the lips...and a hurried walk.” It was a popular American saying in the 1830s, reported Frederick Marryat, an Englishman who traveled extensively in the period, that “a New York merchant always walks as if he had a good dinner before him, and a bailiff behind him.”

Northern and Southern farmers and city merchants alike, to say nothing of Irishmen and blacks, fell well short of the standard of genteel “bodily carriage” enshrined in both English and American etiquette books and the instructions of dancing masters: “flexibility in the arms...erectness in the spinal column...easy carriage of the head.” It was the ideal of the British aristocracy, and Southern planters came closest to it, expressing the power of their class in the way they stood and moved. Slave owners accustomed to command, imbued with an ethic of honor and pride, at ease in the saddle, carried themselves more gracefully than men hardened by toil or preoccupied with commerce. Visiting Washington in 1835, the Englishwoman Harriet Martineau contrasted not the politics but the postures of Northern and Southern congressmen. She marked the confident bearing, the “ease and frank courtesy...with an occasional touch of arrogance” of the slaveholders alongside the “cautious...and too deferential air of the members of the North.” She could recognize a New Englander “in the open air,” she claimed, “by his deprecatory walk.”

Local inhabitants’ faces became more open, travelers observed, as one went west. Nathaniel Hawthorne found a dramatic contrast in public appearances only a few days’ travel

west of Boston. “The people out here,” in New York State just west of the Berkshires, he confided to his notebook in 1839, “show out their character much more strongly than they do with us,” in his native eastern Massachusetts. He compared the “quiet, silent, dull decency...in our public assemblages” with Westerners’ wider gamut of expressiveness, “mirth, anger, eccentricity, all showing themselves freely.” Westerners in general, the clergyman and publicist Henry Ward Beecher observed, had “far more freedom of manners, and more frankness and spontaneous geniality” than did the city or country people of the New England and Middle Atlantic states, as did the “odd mortals that wander in from the western border,” that Martineau observed in Washington’s political population.

WE WERE DIRTY AND SMELLY

Early-nineteenth-century Americans lived in a world of dirt, insects, and pungent smells. Farmyards were strewn with animal wastes, and farmers wore manure-spattered boots and trousers everywhere. Men’s and women’s working clothes alike were often stiff with dirt and dried sweat, and men’s shirts were often stained with “yellow rivulets” of tobacco juice. The locations of privies were all too obvious on warm or windy days. Unemptied chamber pots advertised their presence. Wet baby “napkins,” today’s diapers, were not immediately washed but simply put by the fire to dry. Vats of “chamber lye”—highly concentrated urine used for cleaning type or degreasing wool—perfumed all printing offices and many households. “The breath of that fiery bar-room,” as Underwood described a country tavern, “was overpowering. The odors of the hostlers’ boots, redolent of fish-oil and tallow, and of buffalo-ropes and horse-blankets, the latter reminiscent of equine ammonia, almost got the better of the all-pervading fumes of spirits and tobacco.”

Densely populated, but poorly cleaned and drained, America’s cities were often far more noisome than its farmyards. Horse manure thickly covered city streets, and few neighborhoods were free from the spreading stench of tanneries and slaughterhouses. New York City accumulated so much refuse that it was generally believed the actual surfaces of the streets had not been seen for decades. During her stay in Cincinnati, the English writer Frances Trollope followed the practice of the vast majority of American city housewives when she threw her household “slops”—refuse food and dirty dishwater—out into the street. An irate neighbor soon informed her that municipal ordinances forbade “throwing such things at the sides of the streets” as she had done; “they must just all be cast right into the middle and the pigs soon takes them off.” In most cities hundreds, sometimes thousands, of free-roaming pigs scavenged the garbage; one exception was Charleston, South Carolina, where buzzards patrolled the streets. By converting garbage into pork, pigs kept city streets cleaner than they would otherwise have been, but the pigs themselves befouled the streets and those who ate their meat—primarily poor families—ran greater than usual risks of infection.

PRIVY MATTERS

The most visible symbols of early American sanitation were privies or “necessary houses.” But Americans did not always use them; many rural householders simply took to the closest available patch of woods or brush. However, in more densely settled communities and in regions with cold winters, privies were in widespread use. They were not usually put in out-of-the-way locations. The fashion of some Northern farm families, according to Robert B. Thomas’s *Farmer’s Almanack* in 1826, had long been to have their “necessary planted in a garden or other conspicuous place.” Other countryfolk went even further in turning human wastes to agricultural account and built their outhouses “within the territory of a hog yard, that the swine may root and ruminant and devour the nastiness thereof.” Thomas was a long-standing critic of primitive manners in the countryside and roundly condemned these

traditional sanitary arrangements as demonstrating a “want of taste, decency, and propriety.” The better-arranged necessities of the prosperous emptied into vaults that could be opened and cleaned out. The dripping horse-drawn carts of the “nocturnal goldfinders,” who emptied the vaults and took their loads out for burial or water disposal—“night soil” was almost never used as manure—were a familiar part of nighttime traffic on city streets.

The humblest pieces of American household furniture were the chamber pots that allowed people to avoid dark and often cold nighttime journeys outdoors. Kept under beds or in corners of rooms, “chambers” were used primarily upon retiring and arising. Collecting, emptying, and cleaning them remained an unspoken, daily part of every housewife’s routine.

Nineteenth-century inventory takers became considerably more reticent about naming chamber pots than their predecessors, usually lumping them with miscellaneous “crockery,” but most households probably had a couple of chamber pots; genteel families reached the optimum of one for each bedchamber. English-made ceramic pots had become cheap enough by 1820 that few American families within the reach of commerce needed to go without one. “Without a pot to piss in” was a vulgar tag of long standing for extreme poverty; those poorest households without one, perhaps more common in the warm South, used the outdoors at all times and seasons.

We were not “clean and decent” by today’s standards; washing was difficult.

The most decorous way for householders to deal with chamber-pot wastes accumulated during the night was to throw them down the privy hole. But more casual and unsavory methods of disposal were still in wide use. Farm families often dumped their chamber pots out the most convenient door or window. In densely settled communities like York, Pennsylvania, the results could be more serious. In 1801, the York diarist Lewis Miller drew and then described an event in North George Street when “Mr. Day an English man [as the German-American Miller was quick to point out] had a bad practice by pouring out of the upper window his filthiness...one day came the discharge...on a man and wife going to a wedding, her silk dress was fouled.”

LETTING THE BEDBUGS BITE

Sleeping accommodations in American country taverns were often dirty and insect-ridden. The eighteenth-century observer of American life Isaac Weld saw “filthy beds swarming with bugs” in 1794; in 1840 Charles Dickens noted “a sort of game not on the bill of fare.” Complaints increased in intensity as travelers went south or west. Tavern beds were uniquely vulnerable to infestation by whatever insect guests travelers brought with them. The bedding of most American households was surely less foul. Yet it was dirty enough. New England farmers were still too often “tormented all night by bed bugs,” complained *The Farmer’s Almanack* in 1837, and books of domestic advice contained extensive instructions on removing them from feather beds and straw ticks.

Journeying between Washington and New Orleans in 1828, Margaret Hall, a well-to-do and cultivated Scottish woman, became far more familiar with intimate insect life than she had ever been in the genteel houses of London or Edinburgh. Her letters home, never intended for publication, gave a graphic and unsparing account of American sanitary conditions. After sleeping in a succession of beds with the “usual complement of fleas and bugs,” she and her party had themselves become infested: “We bring them along with us in our clothes and when I undress I find them crawling on my skin, nasty wretches.” New and distasteful to her, such discoveries were commonplace among the ordinary folk with whom she lodged. The American children she saw on her Southern journey were “kept in such a state of filth,” with

clothes “dirty and slovenly to a degree,” but this was “nothing in comparison with their heads...[which] are absolutely crawling!” In New Orleans she observed women picking through children’s heads for lice, “catching them according to the method depicted in an engraving of a similar proceeding in the streets of Naples.”

BIRTH OF THE BATH

Americans were not “clean and decent” by today’s standards, and it was virtually impossible that they should be. The furnishings and use of rooms in most American houses made more than the most elementary washing difficult. In a New England farmer’s household, wrote Underwood, each household member would “go down to the ‘sink’ in the lean-to, next to the kitchen, fortunate if he had not to break ice in order to wash his face and hands, or more fortunate if a little warm water was poured into his basin from the kettle swung over the kitchen fire.” Even in the comfortable household of the prominent minister Lyman Beecher in Litchfield, Connecticut, around 1815, all family members washed in the kitchen, using a stone sink and “a couple of basins.”

Southerners washed in their detached kitchens or, like Westerners in warm weather, washed outside, “at the doors...or at the wells” of their houses. Using basins and sinks outdoors or in full view of others, most Americans found anything more than “washing the face and hands once a-day,” usually in cold water, difficult, even unthinkable. Most men and women also washed without soap, reserving it for laundering clothes; instead they used a brisk rubbing with a coarse towel to scrub the dirt off their skins.

Gradually the practice of complete bathing spread beyond the topmost levels of American society and into smaller towns and villages. This became possible as families moved washing equipment out of kitchens and into bedchambers, from shared space to space that could be made private. As more prosperous households furnished one or two of their chambers with washing equipment—a washstand, a basin, and a ewer, or largemouthed pitcher—family members could shut the chamber door, undress, and wash themselves completely. The daughters of the Larcom family, living in Lowell, Massachusetts, in the late 1830s, began to bathe in a bedchamber in this way; Lucy Larcom described how her oldest sister started to take “a full cold bath every morning before she went to her work...in a room without a fire,” and the other young Larcoms “did the same whenever we could be resolute enough.” By the 1830s better city hotels and even some country taverns were providing individual basins and pitchers in their rooms.

At a far remove from “primitive manners” and “bad practices” was the genteel ideal of domestic sanitation embodied in the “chamber sets”—matching basin and ewer for private bathing, a cup for brushing the teeth, and a chamber pot with cover to minimize odor and spillage—that American stores were beginning to stock. By 1840 a significant minority of American households owned chamber sets and washstands to hold them in their bedchambers. For a handful there was the very faint dawning of an entirely new age of sanitary arrangements. In 1829 the new Tremont House hotel in Boston offered its patrons indoor plumbing: eight chambers with bathtubs and eight “water closets.” In New York City and Philadelphia, which had developed rudimentary public water systems, a few wealthy households had water taps and, more rarely, water closets by the 1830s. For all others flush toilets and bathtubs remained far in the future.

The American people moved very slowly toward cleanliness. In “the backcountry at the present day,” commented the fastidious author of the *Lady’s Book* in 1836, custom still “requires that everyone should wash at the pump in the yard, or at the sink in the kitchen.” Writing in 1846, the physician and health reformer William Alcott rejoiced that to “wash the surface of the whole body in water daily” had now been accepted as a genteel standard of

personal cleanliness. But, he added, there were “multitudes who pass for models of neatness and cleanliness, who do not perform this work for themselves half a dozen times—nay once—a year.” As the better-off became cleaner than ever before, the poor stayed dirty.

WE DRANK AND FOUGHT WHENEVER WE COULD

In the early part of the century America was a bawdy, hardedged, and violent land. We drank more than we ever had before or ever would again. We smoked and chewed tobacco like addicts and fought and quarreled on the flimsiest pretexts. The tavern was the most important gateway to the primarily male world of drink and disorder: in sight of the village church in most American communities, observed Daniel Drake, a Cincinnati physician who wrote a reminiscence of his Kentucky boyhood, stood the village tavern, and the two structures “did in fact represent two great opposing principles.”

The great majority of American men in every region were taverngoers. The printed street directories of American cities listed tavernkeepers in staggering numbers, and even the best-churched parts of New England could show more “licensed houses” than meetinghouses. In 1827 the fast-growing city of Rochester, New York, with a population of approximately eight thousand, had nearly one hundred establishments licensed to sell liquor, or one for every eighty inhabitants.

America’s most important centers of male sociability, taverns were often the scene of excited gaming and vicious fights and always of hard drinking, heavy smoking, and an enormous amount of alcohol-stimulated talk. City men came to their neighborhood taverns daily, and “tavern haunting, tipping, and gaming,” as Samuel Goodrich, a New England historian and publisher, remembered, “were the chief resources of men in the dead and dreary winter months” in the countryside.

City taverns catered to clienteles of different classes: sordid sailors’ grogshops near the waterfront were rife with brawling and prostitution; neighborhood taverns and liquor-selling groceries were visited by craftsmen and clerks; well-appointed and relatively decorous places were favored by substantial merchants. Taverns on busy highways often specialized in teamsters or stage passengers, while country inns took their patrons as they came.

In the 1820s America was a bawdy and violent land. We drank more than we ever would again.

Taverns accommodated women as travelers, but their barroom clienteles were almost exclusively male. Apart from the dockside dives frequented by prostitutes, or the liquor-selling groceries of poor city neighborhoods, women rarely drank in public.

Gambling was a substantial preoccupation for many male citizens of the early republic. Men played billiards at tavern tables for money stakes. They threw dice in “hazard,” slamming the dice boxes down so hard and so often that tavern tables wore the characteristic scars of their play. Even more often Americans sat down to cards, playing brag, similar to modern-day poker, or an elaborate table game called faro. Outdoors they wagered with each other on horse races or bet on cockfights and wrestling matches.

Drink permeated and propelled the social world of early-nineteenth-century America—first as an unquestioned presence and later as a serious and divisive problem. “Liquor at that time,” recalled the builder and architect Elbridge Boyden, “was used as commonly as the food we ate.” Before 1820 the vast majority of Americans considered alcohol an essential stimulant to exertion as well as a symbol of hospitality and fellowship. Like the Kentuckians with whom

Daniel Drake grew up, they “regarded it as a duty to their families and visitors...to keep the bottle well replenished.” Weddings, funerals, frolics, even a casual “gathering of two or three neighbors for an evening’s social chat” required the obligatory “spirituous liquor”—rum, whiskey, or gin—“at all seasons and on all occasions.”

Northern householders drank hard cider as their common table beverage, and all ages drank it freely. Dramming—taking a fortifying glass in the forenoon and again in the afternoon—was part of the daily regimen of many men. Clergymen took sustaining libations between services, lawyers before going to court, and physicians at their patients’ bedsides. To raise a barn or get through a long day’s haying without fortifying drink seemed a virtual impossibility. Slaves enjoyed hard drinking at festival times and at Saturday-night barbecues as much as any of their countrymen. But of all Americans they probably drank the least on a daily basis because their masters could usually control their access to liquor.

To get through a long day’s haying without drink seemed an impossibility.

In Parma, Ohio, in the mid-1820s, Lyndon Freeman, a farmer, and his brothers were used to seeing men “in their cups” and passed them by without comment. But one dark and rainy night they discovered something far more shocking, “nothing less than a woman beastly drunk...with a flask of whiskey by her side.” American women drank as well as men, but usually much less heavily. They were more likely to make themselves “tipsy” with hard cider and alcohol-containing patent medicines than to become inebriated with rum or whiskey. Temperance advocates in the late 1820s estimated that men consumed fifteen times the volume of distilled spirits that women did; this may have been a considerable exaggeration, but there was a great difference in drinking habits between the sexes. Americans traditionally found drunkenness tolerable and forgivable in men but deeply shameful in women.

By almost any standard, Americans drank not only nearly universally but in large quantities. Their yearly consumption at the time of the Revolution has been estimated at the equivalent of three and one-half gallons of pure two-hundred-proof alcohol for each person. After 1790 American men began to drink even more. By the late 1820s their imbibing had risen to an all-time high of almost four gallons per capita.

Along with drinking went fighting. Americans fought often and with great relish. York, Pennsylvania, for example, was a peaceable place as American communities went, but the Miller and Weaver families had a long-running quarrel. It had begun in 1800 when the Millers found young George Weaver stealing apples in their yard and punished him by “throwing him over the fence,” injuring him painfully. Over the years hostilities broke out periodically. Lewis Miller remembered walking down the street as a teenaged boy and meeting Mrs. Weaver, who drenched him with the bucket of water she was carrying. He retaliated by “turning about and giving her a kick, laughing at her, this is for your politeness.” Other York households had their quarrels too; in “a general fight on Beaver Street,” Mistress Hess and Mistress Forsch tore each other’s caps from their heads. Their husbands and then the neighbors interfered, and “all of them had a knock down.”

When Peter Lung’s wife, Abigail, refused “to get up and dig some potatoes” for supper from the yard of their small house, the Hartford, Connecticut, laborer recalled in his confession, he “kicked her on the side...then gave her a violent push” and went out to dig the potatoes himself. He returned and “again kicked her against the shoulder and neck.” Both had been drinking, and loud arguments and blows within the Lung household, as in many others, were routine. But this time the outcome was not. Alice Lung was dead the next day, and Peter Lung was arrested, tried, and hanged for murder in 1815.

In isolated areas it was not uncommon to meet men who had lost an eye in a fight.

In the most isolated, least literate and commercialized parts of the United States, it was “by no means uncommon,” wrote Isaac Weld, “to meet with those who have lost an eye in a combat, and there are men who pride themselves upon the dexterity with which they can scoop one out. This is called gouging.”

THE SLAVE’S LOT

Slaves wrestled among themselves, sometimes fought one another bitterly over quarrels in the quarters, and even at times stood up to the vastly superior force of masters and overseers. They rarely, if ever, reduced themselves to the ferocity of eye gouging. White Southerners lived with a pervasive fear of the violent potential of their slaves, and the Nat Turner uprising in Virginia in 1831, when a party of slaves rebelled and killed whites before being overcome, gave rise to tighter and harsher controls. But in daily reality slaves had far more to fear from their masters.

Margaret Hall was no proponent of abolition and had little sympathy for black Americans. Yet in her travels south she confronted incidents of what she ironically called the “good treatment of slaves” that were impossible to ignore. At a country tavern in Georgia, she summoned the slave chambermaid, but “she could not come” because “the mistress had been whipping her and she was not fit to be seen. Next morning she made her appearance with her face marked in several places by the cuts of the cowskin and her neck handkerchief covered with spots of blood.”

Southern stores were very much like Northern ones, Francis Kemble Butler observed, except that they stocked “negro-whips” and “mantraps” on their shelves. A few slaves were never beaten at all, and for most, whippings were not a daily or weekly occurrence. But they were, of all Americans, by far the most vulnerable to violence. All slaves had, as William Wells Brown, an ex-slave himself, said, often “heard the crack of the whip, and the screams of the slave” and knew that they were never more than a white man’s or woman’s whim away from a beating. With masters’ unchecked power came worse than whipping: the mutilating punishments of the old penal law including branding, ear cropping, and even occasionally castration and burning alive as penalties for severe offenses. In public places or along the road blacks were also subject to casual kicks, shoves, and cuffs, for which they could retaliate only at great peril. “Six or seven feet in length, made of cowhide, with a platted wire on the end of it,” as Brown recalled it, the negro-whip, for sale in most stores and brandished by masters and overseers in the fields, stood for a pervasive climate of force and intimidation.

PUBLIC PUNISHMENT

The penal codes of the American states were far less bloodthirsty than those of England. Capital punishment was not often imposed on whites for crimes other than murder. Yet at the beginning of the nineteenth century many criminal offenses were punished by the public infliction of pain and suffering. “The whipping post and stocks stood on the green near the meetinghouse” in most of the towns of New England and near courthouses everywhere. In Massachusetts before 1805 a counterfeiter was liable to have an ear cut off, and a forger to have one cropped or partially amputated, after spending an hour in the pillory. A criminal convicted of manslaughter was set up on the gallows to have his forehead branded with a letter M. In most jurisdictions town officials flogged petty thieves as punishment for their crime. In New Haven, Connecticut, around 1810, Charles Fowler, a local historian, recalled seeing the “admiring students of [Yale] college” gathered around to watch petty criminals receive “five or ten lashes...with a rawhide whip.”

Throughout the United States public hangings brought enormous crowds to the seats of justice and sometimes seemed like brutal festivals. Thousands of spectators arrived to pack the streets of courthouse towns. On the day of a hanging near Mount Holly, New Jersey, in the 1820s, the scene was that of a holiday: “around the place in every direction were the assembled multitudes—some in tents, and bywagons, engaged in gambling and other vices of the sort, in open day.” In order to accommodate the throngs, hangings were usually held not in the public square but on the outskirts of town. The gallows erected on a hill or set up at the bottom of a natural amphitheater allowed onlookers an unobstructed view. A reprieve or stay of execution might disappoint a crowd intent on witnessing the deadly drama and provoke a riot, as it did in Pembroke, New Hampshire, in 1834.

RISE OF RESPECTABILITY

At a drunkard’s funeral in Enfield, Massachusetts, in the 1830s—the man had strayed out of the road while walking home and fallen over a cliff, “his stiffened fingers still grasping the handle of the jug”—Rev. Sumner G. Clapp, the Congregationalist minister of Enfield, mounted a log by the woodpile and preached the town’s first temperance sermon before a crowd full of hardened drinkers. In this way Clapp began a campaign to “civilize” the manners of his parishioners, and “before many years there was a great change in the town; the incorrigible were removed by death, and others took warning.” Drinking declined sharply, and along with it went “a general reform in conduct.”

Although it remained a powerful force in many parts of the United States, the American way of drunkenness began to lose ground as early as the mid-1820s. The powerful upsurge in liquor consumption had provoked a powerful reaction, an unprecedented attack on all forms of drink that gathered momentum in the Northeast. Some New England clergymen had been campaigning in their own communities as early as 1810, but their concerns took on organized impetus with the founding of the American Temperance Society in 1826. Energized in part by a concern for social order, in part by evangelical piety, temperance reformers popularized a radically new way of looking at alcohol. The “good creature” became “demon rum”; prominent physicians and writers on physiology, like Benjamin Rush, told Americans that alcohol, traditionally considered healthy and fortifying, was actually a physical and moral poison. National and state societies distributed anti-liquor tracts, at first calling for moderation in drink but increasingly demanding total abstinence from alcohol.

Liquor consumption provoked a powerful reaction: an unprecedented attack on drinking.

To a surprising degree these aggressive temperance campaigns worked. By 1840 the consumption of alcohol had declined by more than two-thirds, from close to four gallons per person each year to less than one and one-half. Country storekeepers gave up the sale of spirits, local authorities limited the number of tavern licenses, and farmers even abandoned hard cider and cut down their apple orchards. The shift to temperance was a striking transformation in the everyday habits of an enormous number of Americans. “A great, though silent change,” in Horace Greeley’s words, had been “wrought in public sentiment.”

But although the “great change” affected some Americans everywhere, it had a very uneven impact. Organized temperance reform was sharply delimited by geography. Temperance societies were enormously powerful in New England and western New York and numerous in eastern New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. More than three-fourths of all recorded temperance pledges came from these states. In the South and West, and in the laborers’ and artisans’ neighborhoods of the cities, the campaign against drink was much weaker. In many places drinking ways survived and even flourished, but as individuals and families came under the influence of militant evangelical piety, their “men of business and sobriety” increased gradually in number. As liquor grew “unfashionable in the country,” Greeley noted,

Americans who wanted to drink and carouse turned increasingly to the cities, "where no one's deeds or ways are observed or much regarded."

Closely linked as they were to drink, such diversions as gambling, racing, and blood sports also fell to the same forces of change. In the central Massachusetts region that George Davis, a lawyer in Sturbridge, knew well, until 1820 or so gaming had "continued to prevail, more and more extensively." After that "a blessed change had succeeded," overturning the scenes of high-stakes dice and card games that he knew in his young manhood. Impelled by a new perception of its "pernicious effects," local leaders gave it up and placed "men of respectable standing" firmly in opposition. Racecourses were abandoned and "planted to corn." Likewise, "bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and other cruel amusements" began to dwindle in the Northern countryside. Elsewhere the rude life of the tavern and "cruel amusements" remained widespread, but some of their excesses of "sin and shame" did diminish gradually.

Over the first four decades of the nineteenth century the American people increasingly made churchgoing an obligatory ritual. The proportion of families affiliated with a local church or Methodist circuit rose dramatically, particularly after 1820, and there were fewer stretches of the wholly pagan, unchurched territory that travelers had noted around 1800. "Since 1830," maintained Emerson Davis in his retrospect of America, *The Half Century*, "...the friends of the Sabbath have been gaining ground....In 1800, good men slumbered over the desecration of the Sabbath. They have since awoke...." The number of Sunday mails declined, and the campaign to eliminate the delivery of mail on the Sabbath entirely grew stronger. "In the smaller cities and towns," wrote Mrs. Trollope in 1832, worship and "prayer meetings" had come to "take the place of almost all other amusements." There were still communities near the edge of settlement where a traveler would "rarely find either churches or chapels, prayer or preacher," but it was the workingclass neighborhoods of America's larger cities that were increasingly the chief strongholds of "Sunday dissipation" and "Sabbath-breaking."

Whipping and the pillory, with their attentive audiences, began to disappear from the statute book, to be replaced by terms of imprisonment in another new American institution, the state penitentiary. Beginning with Pennsylvania's abolition of flogging in 1790 and Massachusetts's elimination of mutilating punishments in 1805, several American states gradually accepted John Hancock's view of 1796 that "mutilating or lacerating the body" was less an effective punishment than "an indignity to human nature." Connecticut's town constables whipped petty criminals for the last time in 1828.

Slaveholding states were far slower to change their provisions for public punishment. The whipping and mutilation of blacks may have become a little less ferocious over the decades, but the whip remained the essential instrument of punishment and discipline. "The secret of our success," thought a slave owner, looking back after emancipation, had been "the great motive power contained in that little instrument." Delaware achieved notoriety by keeping flogging on the books for whites and blacks alike through most of the twentieth century.

Although there were important stirrings of sentiment against capital punishment, all American states continued to execute convicted murders before the mid-1840s. Public hangings never lost their drawing power. But a number of American public officials began to abandon the long-standing view of executions as instructive communal rituals. They saw the crowd's holiday mood and eager participation as sharing too much in the condemned killer's own brutality. Starting with Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts in the mid-1830s, several state legislatures voted to take executions away from the crowd, out of the public realm. Sheriffs began to carry out death sentences behind the walls of the jailyard, before a small assembly of representative onlookers. Other states clung much longer to tradition and continued public executions into the twentieth century.

SEX LIFE OF THE NATIVES

Early-nineteenth-century Americans were more licentious than we ordinarily imagine them to be.

“On the 20th day of July” in 1830, Harriet Winter, a young woman working as a domestic in Joseph Dunham’s household in Brimfield, Massachusetts, “was gathering raspberries” in a field west of the house. “Near the close of day,” Charles Phelps, a farm laborer then living in the town, “came to the field where she was,” and in the gathering dusk they made love—and, Justice of the Peace Asa Lincoln added in his account, “it was the Sabbath.” American communities did not usually document their inhabitants’ amorous rendezvous, and Harriet’s tryst with Charles was a commonplace event in early-nineteenth-century America. It escaped historical oblivion because she was unlucky, less in becoming pregnant than in Charles’s refusal to marry her. Asa Lincoln did not approve of Sabbath evening indiscretions, but he was not pursuing Harriet for immorality. He was concerned instead with economic responsibility for the child. Thus he interrogated Harriet about the baby’s father—while she was in labor, as was the long-customary practice—in order to force Charles to contribute to the maintenance of the child, who was going to be “born a bastard and chargeable to the town.”

Some foreign travelers found that the Americans they met were reluctant to admit that such things happened in the United States. They were remarkably straitlaced about sexual matters in public and eager to insist upon the “purity” of their manners. But to take such protestations at face value, the unusually candid Englishman Frederick Marryat thought, would be “to suppose that human nature is not the same everywhere.”

The well-organized birth and marriage records of a number of American communities reveal that in late-eighteenth-century America pregnancy was frequently the prelude to marriage. The proportion of brides who were pregnant at the time of their weddings had been rising since the late seventeenth century and peaked in the turbulent decades during and after the Revolution. In the 1780s and 1790s nearly one-third of rural New England’s brides were already with child. The frequency of sexual intercourse before marriage was surely higher, since some couples would have escaped early pregnancy. For many couples sexual relations were part of serious courtship. Premarital pregnancies in late-eighteenth-century Dedham, Massachusetts, observed the local historian Erastus Worthington in 1828, were occasioned by “the custom then prevalent of females admitting young men to their beds, who sought their company in marriage.”

Pregnancies usually simply accelerated a marriage that would have taken place in any case, but community and parental pressure worked strongly to assure it. Most rural communities simply accepted the “early” pregnancies that marked so many marriages, although in Hingham, Massachusetts, tax records suggest that the families of well-to-do brides were considerably less generous to couples who had had “early babies” than to those who had avoided pregnancy.

“Bundling very much abounds,” wrote the anonymous author of “A New Bundling Song,” still circulating in Boston in 1812, “in many parts in country towns.” Noah Webster’s first Dictionary of the American Language defined it as the custom that allowed couples “to sleep on the same bed without undressing”—with, a later commentator added, “the shared understanding that innocent endearments should not be exceeded.” Folklore and local tradition, from Maine south to New York, had American mothers tucking bundling couples into bed with special chastity-protecting garments for the young woman or a “bundling board” to separate them.

In actuality, if bundling had been intended to allow courting couples privacy and emotional

intimacy but not sexual contact, it clearly failed. Couples may have begun with bundling, but as courtship advanced, they clearly pushed beyond its restraints, like the “bundling maid” in “A New Bundling Song” who would “sometimes say when she lies down/She can’t be cumbered with a gown.”

Young black men and women shared American whites’ freedom in courtship and sexuality and sometimes exceeded it. Echoing the cultural traditions of West Africa, and reflecting the fact that their marriages were not given legal status and security, slave communities were somewhat more tolerant and accepting of sex before marriage.

Gradations of color and facial features among the slaves were testimony that “thousands,” as the abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass wrote, were “ushered into the world annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.” Sex crossed the boundaries of race and servitude more often than slavery’s defenders wanted to admit, if less frequently than the most outspoken abolitionists claimed. Slave women had little protection from whatever sexual demands masters or overseers might make, so that rapes, short liaisons, and long-term “concubinage” all were part of plantation life.

As Nathaniel Hawthorne stood talking with a group of men on the porch of a tavern in Augusta, Maine, in 1836, a young man “in a laborer’s dress” came up and asked if anyone knew the whereabouts of Mary Ann Russell. “Do you want to use her?” asked one of the bystanders. Mary Ann was, in fact, the young laborer’s wife, but she had left him and their child in Portland to become “one of a knot of whores.” A few years earlier the young men of York, Pennsylvania, made up a party for “overturning and pulling to the ground” Eve Geese’s “shameful house” of prostitution in Queen Street. The frightened women fled out the back door as the chimney collapsed around them; the apprentices and young journeymen —many of whom had surely been previous customers—were treated by local officials “to wine, for the good work.”

From medium-sized towns like Augusta and York to great cities, poor American women were sometimes pulled into a darker, harsher sexual world, one of vulnerability, exploitation, and commerce. Many prostitutes took up their trade out of poverty and domestic disaster. A young widow or a country girl arrived in the city and, thrown on her own resources, often faced desperate economic choices because most women’s work paid too poorly to provide decent food, clothing, and shelter, while other women sought excitement and independence from their families.

As cities grew, and changes in transportation involved more men in longdistance travel, prostitution became more visible. Men of all ages, married and unmarried, from city lawyers to visiting country storekeepers to sailors on the docks, turned to brothels for sexual release, but most of the customers were young men, living away from home and unlikely to marry until their late twenties. Sexual commerce in New York City was elaborately graded by price and the economic status of clients, from the “parlor houses” situated not far from the city’s best hotels on Broadway to the more numerous and moderately priced houses that drew artisans and clerks, and finally to the broken and dissipated women who haunted dockside grogshops in the Five Points neighborhood.

From New Orleans to Boston, city theaters were important sexual marketplaces. Men often bought tickets less to see the performance than to make assignations with the prostitutes, who sat by custom in the topmost gallery of seats. The women usually received free admission from theater managers, who claimed that they could not stay in business without the male theatergoers drawn by the “guilty third tier.”

Most Americans—and the American common law—still did not regard abortion as a crime until the fetus had “quickened” or began to move perceptibly in the womb. Books of medical advice actually contained prescriptions for bringing on delayed menstrual periods, which would also produce an abortion if the woman happened to be pregnant. They suggested heavy doses of purgatives that created violent cramps, powerful douches, or extreme kinds of physical activity, like the “violent exercise, raising great weights...strokes on the belly...[and] falls” noted in William Buchan’s *Domestic Medicine*, a manual read widely through the 1820s. Women’s folklore echoed most of these prescriptions and added others, particularly the use of two American herbal preparations—savin, or the extract of juniper berries, and Seneca snakeroot—as abortion-producing drugs. They were dangerous procedures but sometimes effective.

REINING IN THE PASSIONS

Starting at the turn of the nineteenth century, the sexual lives of many Americans began to change, shaped by a growing insistence on control: reining in the passions in courtship, limiting family size, and even redefining male and female sexual desire.

Bundling was already on the wane in rural America before 1800; by the 1820s it was written about as a rare and antique custom. It had ceased, thought an elderly man from East Haddam, Connecticut, “as a consequence of education and refinement.” Decade by decade the proportion of young women who had conceived a child before marriage declined. In most of the towns of New England the rate had dropped from nearly one pregnant bride in three to one in five or six by 1840; in some places prenuptial pregnancy dropped to 5 percent. For many young Americans this marked the acceptance of new limits on sexual behavior, imposed not by their parents or other authorities in their communities but by themselves.

These young men and women were not more closely supervised by their parents than earlier generations had been; in fact, they had more mobility and greater freedom. The couples that courted in the new style put a far greater emphasis on control of the passions. For some of them—young Northern merchants and professional men and their intended brides—revealing love letters have survived for the years after 1820. Their intimate correspondence reveals that they did not give up sexual expression but gave it new boundaries, reserving sexual intercourse for marriage. Many of them were marrying later than their parents, often living through long engagements while the husband-to-be strove to establish his place in the world. They chose not to risk a pregnancy that would precipitate them into an early marriage.

Many American husbands and wives were also breaking with tradition as they began to limit the size of their families. Clearly, married couples were renegotiating the terms of their sexual lives together, but they remained resolutely silent about how they did it. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, they almost certainly set about avoiding childbirth through abstinence; coitus interruptus, or male withdrawal; and perhaps sometimes abortion. These contraceptive techniques had long been traditional in preindustrial Europe, although previously little used in America.

As they entered the 1830s, Americans had their first opportunity to learn, at least in print, about more effective or less self-denying forms of birth control. They could read reasonably inexpensive editions of the first works on contraception published in the United States: Robert Dale Owen’s *Moral Physiology* of 1831 and Dr. Charles Knowlton’s *The Fruits of Philosophy* of 1832. Both authors frankly described the full range of contraceptive techniques, although they solemnly rejected physical intervention in the sexual act and recommended only douching after intercourse and coitus interruptus. Official opinion, legal and religious, was deeply hostile. Knowlton, who had trained as a physician in rural

Massachusetts, was prosecuted in three different counties for obscenity, convicted once, and imprisoned for three months.

But both works found substantial numbers of Americans eager to read them. By 1839 each book had gone through nine editions, putting a combined total of twenty to thirty thousand copies in circulation. An American physician could write in 1850 that contraception had “been of late years so much talked of.” Greater knowledge about contraception surely played a part in the continuing decline of the American birthrate after 1830.

New ways of thinking about sexuality emerged that stressed control and channeling of the passions. Into the 1820s almost all Americans would have subscribed to the commonplace notion that sex, within proper social confines, was enjoyable and healthy and that prolonged sexual abstinence could be injurious to health. They also would have assumed that women had powerful sexual drives.

Starting with his “Lecture to Young Men on Chastity” in 1832, Sylvester Graham articulated very different counsels about health and sex. Sexual indulgence, he argued, was not only morally suspect but psychologically and physiologically risky. The sexual overstimulation involved in young men’s lives produced anxiety and nervous disorders, “a shocking state of debility and excessive irritability.” The remedy was diet, exercise, and a regular routine that pulled the mind away from animal lusts. Medical writings that discussed the evils of masturbation, or “solitary vice,” began to appear. Popular books of advice, like William Alcott’s *Young Man’s Guide*, gave similar warnings. They tried to persuade young men that their health could be ruined, and their prospects for success darkened, by consorting with prostitutes or becoming sexually entangled before marriage.

The sexual lives of Americans began to change, reshaped by a new emphasis on self-control.

A new belief about women’s sexual nature appeared, one that elevated them above “carnal passion.” Many American men and women came to believe during the nineteenth century that in their true and proper nature as mothers and guardians of the home, women were far less interested in sex than men were. Women who defined themselves as passionless were in a strong position to control or deny men’s sexual demands either during courtship or in limiting their childbearing within marriage.

Graham went considerably farther than this, advising restraint not only in early life and courtship but in marriage itself. It was far healthier, he maintained, for couples to have sexual relations “very seldom.”

Neither contraception nor the new style of courtship had become anything like universal by 1840. Prenuptial pregnancy rates had fallen, but they remained high enough to indicate that many couples simply continued in familiar ways. American husbands and wives in the cities and the Northern countryside were limiting the number of their children, but it was clear that those living on the farms of the West or in the slave quarters had not yet begun to. There is strong evidence that many American women felt far from passionless, although others restrained or renounced their sexuality. For many people in the United States, there had been a profound change. Reining in the passions had become part of everyday life.

SMOKING AND SPITTING

Everyone smokes and some chew in America,” wrote Isaac Weld in 1795. Americans turned tobacco, a new and controversial stimulant at the time of colonial settlement, into a crucially important staple crop and made its heavy use a commonplace—and a never-ending source

of surprise and indignation to visitors. Tobacco use spread in the United States because it was comparatively cheap, a homegrown product free from the heavy import duties levied on it by European governments. A number of slave rations described in plantation documents included “one hand of tobacco per month.” Through the eighteenth century most American smokers used clay pipes, which are abundant in colonial archeological sites, although some men and women dipped snuff or inhaled powdered tobacco.

Where the smokers of early colonial America “drank” or gulped smoke through the short, thick stems of their seventeenth-century pipes, those of 1800 inhaled it more slowly and gradually; from the early seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, pipe stems became steadily longer and narrower, increasingly distancing smokers from their burning tobacco.

In the 1790s cigars, or “segars,” were introduced from the Caribbean. Prosperous men widely took them up; they were the most expensive way to consume tobacco, and it was a sign of financial security to puff away on “longnines” or “principe cigars at three cents each” while the poor used clay pipes and much cheaper “cut plug” tobacco. After 1800 in American streets, barrooms, stores, public conveyances, and even private homes it became nearly impossible to avoid tobacco chewers. Chewing extended tobacco use, particularly into workplaces; men who smoked pipes at home or in the tavern barroom could chew while working in barns or workshops where smoking carried the danger of fire.

“In all the public places of America,” wrote Charles Dickens, multitudes of men engaged in “the odious practice of chewing and expectorating,” a recreation practiced by all ranks of American society. Chewing stimulated salivation and gave rise to a public environment of frequent and copious spitting, where men every few minutes were “squirting a mouthful of saliva through the room.”

Spittoons were provided in the more meticulous establishments, but men often ignored them. The floors of American public buildings were not pleasant to contemplate. A courtroom in New York City in 1833 was decorated by a “mass of abomination” contributed to by “judges, counsel, jury, witnesses, officers, and audience.” The floor of the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1827 was “actually flooded with their horrible spitting,” and even the aisle of a Connecticut meetinghouse was black with the “ejection after ejection, incessant from twenty mouths,” of the men singing in the choir. In order to drink, an American man might remove his quid, put it in a pocket or hold it in his hand, take his glassful, and then restore it to his mouth. Women’s dresses might even be in danger at fashionable balls. “One night as I was walking upstairs to valse,” reported Margaret Hall of a dance in Washington in 1828, “my partner began clearing his throat. This I thought ominous. However, I said to myself, ‘surely he will turn his head to the other side.’ The gentleman, however, had no such thought but deliberately shot across me. I had not courage enough to examine whether the result landed in the flounce of my dress.”

The segar and the quid were almost entirely male appurtenances, but as the nineteenth century began, many rural and lower-class urban women were smoking pipes or dipping snuff. During his boyhood in New Hampshire, Horace Greeley remembered, “it was often my filial duty to fill and light my mother’s pipe.”

After 1820 or so tobacco use among women in the North began to decline. Northern women remembered or depicted with pipe or snuffbox were almost all elderly. More and more Americans adopted a genteel standard that saw tobacco use and womanliness—delicate and nurturing—as antithetical, and young women avoided it as a pollutant. For them, tobacco use marked off male from female territory with increasing sharpness.

After 1800, in public and private it became nearly impossible to avoid tobacco chewers.

In the households of small Southern and Western farmers, however, smoking and snuff taking remained common. When women visited “among the country people” of North Carolina, Frances Kemble Butler reported in 1837, the “proffer of the snuffbox, and its passing from hand to hand, is the usual civility.” By the late 1830s visiting New Englanders were profoundly shocked when they saw the women of Methodist congregations in Illinois, including nursing mothers, taking out their pipes for a smoke between worship services.

FROM DEFERENCE TO EQUALITY

The Americans of 1820 would have been more recognizable to us in the informal and egalitarian way they treated one another. The traditional signs of deference before social superiors—the deep bow, the “courtesy,” the doffed cap, lowered head, and averted eyes—had been a part of social relationships in colonial America. In the 1780s, wrote the American poetess Lydia Huntley Sigourney in 1824, there were still “individuals...in every grade of society” who had grown up “when a bow was not an offense to fashion nor...a relic of monarchy.” But in the early nineteenth century such signals of subordination rapidly fell away. It was a natural consequence of the Revolution, she maintained, which, “in giving us liberty, obliterated almost every vestige of politeness of the ‘old school.’” Shaking hands became the accustomed American greeting between men, a gesture whose symmetry and mutuality signified equality. Frederick Marryat found in 1835 that it was “invariably the custom to shake hands” when he was introduced to Americans and that he could not carefully grade the acknowledgment he would give to new acquaintances according to their signs of wealth and breeding. He found instead that he had to “go on shaking hands here, there and everywhere, and with everybody.” Americans were not blind to inequalities of economic and social power, but they less and less gave them overt physical expression. Bred in a society where such distinctions were far more clearly spelled out, Marryat was somewhat disoriented in the United States; “it is impossible to know who is who,” he claimed, “in this land of equality.”

Well-born British travelers encountered not just confusion but conflict when they failed to receive the signs of respect they expected. Margaret Hall’s letters home during her Southern travels outlined a true comedy of manners. At every stage stop in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama, she demanded that country tavernkeepers and their households give her deferential service and well-prepared meals; she received instead rancid bacon and “such an absence of all kindness of feeling, such unbending frigid heartlessness.” But she and her family had a far greater share than they realized in creating this chilly reception. Squeezed between the pride and poise of the great planters and the social debasement of the slaves, small Southern farmers often displayed a prickly insolence, a considered lack of response, to those who too obviously considered themselves their betters. Greatly to their discomfort and incomprehension, the Halls were experiencing what a British traveler more sympathetic to American ways, Patrick Shirreff, called “the democratic rudeness which assumed or presumptuous superiority seldom fails to experience.”

LAND OF ABUNDANCE

In the seventeenth century white American colonials were no taller than their European counter-parts, but by the time of the Revolution they were close to their late-twentieth-century average height for men of slightly over five feet eight inches. The citizens of the early republic towered over most Europeans. Americans’ early achievement of modern stature—by a full century and more—was a striking consequence of American abundance. Americans were taller because they were better nourished than the great majority of the world’s peoples.

Americans were better nourished than the great majority of the world’s peoples.

Yet not all Americans participated equally in the nation's abundance. Differences in stature between whites and blacks, and between city and country dwellers, echoed those between Europeans and Americans. Enslaved blacks were a full inch shorter than whites. But they remained a full inch taller than European peasants and laborers and were taller still than their fellow slaves eating the scanty diets afforded by the more savagely oppressive plantation system of the West Indies. And by 1820 those who lived in the expanding cities of the United States—even excluding immigrants, whose heights would have reflected European, not American, conditions—were noticeably shorter than the people of the countryside, suggesting an increasing concentration of poverty and poorer diets in urban places.

Across the United States almost all country households ate the two great American staples: corn and "the eternal pork," as one surfeited traveler called it, "which makes its appearance on every American table, high and low, rich and poor." Families in the cattle-raising, dairying country of New England, New York, and northern Ohio ate butter, cheese, and salted beef as well as pork and made their bread from wheat flour or rye and Indian corn. In Pennsylvania, as well as Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia, Americans ate the same breadstuffs as their Northern neighbors, but their consumption of cheese and beef declined every mile southward in favor of pork.

Farther to the south, and in the West, corn and corn-fed pork were truly "eternal"; where reliance on them reached its peak in the Southern uplands, they were still the only crops many small farmers raised. Most Southern and Western families built their diets around smoked and salted bacon, rather than the Northerners' salt pork, and, instead of wheat or rye bread, made cornpone or hoecake, a coarse, strong bread, and hominy, pounded Indian corn boiled together with milk.

Before 1800, game—venison, possum, raccoon, and wild fowl—was for many American households "a substantial portion of the supply of food at certain seasons of the year," although only on the frontier was it a regular part of the diet. In the West and South this continued to be true, but in the Northeast game became increasingly rare as forests gave way to open farmland, where wild animals could not live.

Through the first half of the eighteenth century, Americans had been primarily concerned with obtaining a sufficiency of meat and bread for their families; they paid relatively little attention to foodstuffs other than these two "staffs of life," but since that time the daily fare of many households had grown substantially more diverse.

COMING TO THE TABLE

Remembering his turn-of-the-century Kentucky boyhood, Daniel Drake could still see the mealtime scene at the house of a neighbor, "Old Billy," who "with his sons" would "frequently breakfast in common on mush and milk out of a huge buckeye bowl, each one dipping in a spoon." "Old Billy" and his family were less frontier savages than traditionalists; in the same decade Gov. Caleb Strong of Massachusetts stopped for the night with a country family who ate in the same way, where "each had a spoon and dipped from the same dish." These households ate as almost all American families once had, communally partaking of food from the same dish and passing around a single vessel to drink from. Such meals were often surprisingly haphazard affairs, with household members moving in and out, eating quickly and going on to other tasks.

But by 1800 they were already in a small and diminishing minority. Over the eighteenth century dining "in common" had given way to individualized yet social eating; as families acquired chairs and dining utensils, they were able to make mealtimes more important social

occasions. Most Americans expected to eat individual portions of food at a table set with personal knives, forks, glasses, bowls, and plates. Anything that smacked of the old communal ways was increasingly likely to be treated as a sin against domestic decency. The clergyman Peter Cartwright was shocked at the table manners of a “backward” family who ate off a “wooden trencher,” improvised forks with “sharp pieces of cane,” and used a single knife, which they passed around the table.

“One and all, male and female,” the observant Margaret Hall took note, even in New York’s best society, ate “invariably and indefatigably with their knives.” As a legacy of the fork’s late arrival in the colonies, Americans were peculiar in using their “great lumbering, long, two-pronged forks,” not to convey food to the mouth, as their English and French contemporaries did, but merely to keep their meat from slipping off the plate while cutting it. “Feeding yourself with your right hand, armed with a steel blade,” was the prevalent American custom, acknowledged Eliza Farrar’s elaborate *Young Lady’s Friend* of 1836. She added that it was perfectly proper, despite English visitors’ discomfort at the sight of a “prettily dressed, nice-looking young woman ladling rice pudding into her mouth with the point of a great knife” or a domestic helper “feeding an infant of seventeen months in the same way.”

Mrs. Farrar acknowledged that there were stirrings of change among the sophisticated in the 1830s, conceding that some of her readers might now want “to imitate the French or English...and put every mouthful into your mouth with your fork.” Later in the nineteenth century the American habit of eating with the knife completely lost its claims to gentility, and it became another relic of “primitive manners.” Americans gradually learned to use forks more dexterously, although to this day they hold them in the wrong hand and “upside down” from an Englishman’s point of view.

Primitive manners succumbed to campaigns for temperance and gentility.

The old ways, so startlingly unfamiliar, to the modern reader, gradually fell away. Americans changed their assumptions about what was proper, decent, and normal in everyday life in directions that would have greatly surprised most of the men and women of the early republic. Some aspects of their “primitive manners” succumbed to campaigns for temperance and gentility, while others evaporated with the later growth of mass merchandising and mass communications.

Important patterns of regional, class, and ethnic distinctiveness remain in American everyday life. But they are far less powerful, and less central to understanding American experience, than they once were. Through the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the United States became ever more diverse, with new waves of Eastern and Southern European immigrants joining the older Americans of Northern European stock. Yet the new arrivals—and even more, their descendants—have experienced the attractiveness and reshaping power of a national culture formed by department stores, newspapers, radios, movies, and universal public education. America, the developing nation, developed into us. And perhaps our manners and morals, to some future observer, will seem as idiosyncratic and astonishing as this portrait of our earlier self.

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