



The America We Knew and Loved

The article jogged memories of how things used to be in America, bringing up such questions as: when did the smallest endeavor become so maddeningly inconvenient?

In the era of whiz-bang technologies, few tasks are simple: a phone call to your doctor, plugging the vacuum into an electrical outlet, opening a container, grocery shopping. Everything is a Really Big Deal!

Take plugging in the vacuum: by the time you have lugged the instrument from basement to bedroom, you will have been down on all fours, plugging the different-size prongs in reverse at every outlet, as many as 15 times!



Who started this idiotic “safety” idea? How was it supposed to “save” us? By keeping children from fooling with outlets? No, plastic inserts exist for that. Efficient wiring? No, most houses still accommodate old-style prongs. What, then?

Try opening any jar, bottle, or package. Sure, you can ask a pharmacist for non-childproof bottles. But it doesn't stop there. Every single item — from milk to mouthwash — is shrink-wrapped or otherwise re-enforced. Plastic strips and notches must be broken. So you bring out the scissors, then a knife — or call in somebody with the strength of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Don't you wish you had a dime for every cut or other injury suffered trying to accomplish in 10 minutes what it took your mother to do in 10 seconds? And all because some crank in 1982 laced Tylenol capsules with cyanide, killing seven people. Once caught, there was not (and rarely is, of course) quite enough evidence to assure the culprit gets “life.” The cyanide killer is set for release from prison, along with countless other home-grown terrorists — William Ayers and his wife, Bernadette Dorn, come to mind — most of whom, beginning in the 1960s, obtained free passes for random acts of viciousness.

Remember when trash was simply ... trash? You threw it in a bin, and set it beside your garage. You didn't separate anything. You didn't haul it to the curb. Today, the recycling police examine people's throwaways, making sure that paper (without cellophane wrapping) is placed in one crate, plastic milk cartons in another, and aluminum cans elsewhere, even though government expends more energy (and cost) in the process. Trash barrels are lugged to the street, meaning the elderly and handicapped now heft much more than they should.

Pre-1970, expensive headgear was not required to ride a bicycle. Gone are Mother's memories of the wind blowing through her hair while biking to the local movie or grocery. Perhaps brain injuries owing to falls occasionally occurred, but enough to saddle every cyclist with the equivalent of a football helmet?

Doors were left unlocked; kids and dogs ran in and out. In fact, doors were left unlocked even when no



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one was home — so low was the crime rate. We grabbed a soda or ice-cream bar from the neighbor's fridge; no one cared. Whoever heard of "sugar highs," much less teens going on a shooting spree after ingesting Frosted Flakes?

If Mom wasn't home after school, there were "chores" that better-by-gosh be done: trimming grass around trees with a hand-trimmer, washing and folding laundry, dusting furniture and knickknacks, collecting and taking out garbage, washing the dog and younger children, setting the table, vacuuming, light ironing, sweeping the sidewalk. These uncomplicated, if time-consuming, tasks were spread throughout the week. They prepared children to be responsible members of the family and community. No time for online porn (had there been any), text-messaging, vandalizing property, or "hanging" at the mall. "Latchkey kids"? Hardly.

Childhood did, however, come with significant amounts of homework, most of it tedious "busywork" that nevertheless reinforced the day's lessons. Those "skill-drills" were abandoned in the 1970s, and remedial classes spiked. Schools began commanding huge expanses of time for extracurricular activities that compromised both the child's family-time and learning. Childrearing deteriorated into an unending cycle of chauffeuring, impersonal drop-offs, and tutoring.

Kiddie entertainment did not necessitate a V-Chip. Not even the scariest fare pre-1960 amounted to a calculated assault on our psyches. Parents determined which shows were appropriate. Most knew just how much their offspring could "handle" without nightmares, copycat behaviors, and sleeplessness. Assaults on our future political views, sadly, were more subtle. Even so, a pinball machine was an innocent pastime; a Merry-go-Round harbored no ulterior motives. Board games served up no hidden "gotchas" among the "Chance" cards and the play money. Today, universities air porn flicks to instill students with a love for free speech. (The latest such controversy comes from the Univ. of Maryland over *Pirates II: Stagnetti's Revenge*. The hard-core, XXX movie produced by Digital Playground, has been marketed to colleges and shown at several colleges across the country, including at the University of California, Davis. The *Fresno Bee* reported (predictably) that an overflow crowd was turned away for lack of space.)

Parents could send a child to the grocery without Britney Spears' latest excesses being hawked in the checkout line. No one analyzed every product for "fat-free," "reduced-fat," "organic," "sugar-free," "caffeine," and dozens of other options in fine print that comprise today's "shopping experience," forcing customers to spend more in dollars and time, only to find many food purchases virtually indigestible.

Thanks to a scarcity of "health freaks," tissue came in colors besides "white." Grocery stores were not the breadth of 10 football fields that encourage modern shoppers to haul vans full of unneeded merchandise — often to avoid making another trip to the store!

Television was different, too, and not all for the worse. True, the picture quality was not great, and there were few remote controls. But neither were children and TV-addicted relatives channel-surfing for hours on end, driving everyone else crazy. Newscasters actually delivered news, not a nonstop diatribe of irrelevancies and sordid particulars. Commercials were cute and mostly tasteful. They did not serve up everything from Viagra to vomit.

Dinner was served at the dining table, and the family actually gathered around the table and ate together. TV executives were sensitive to the family. Adult dramas revolved around themes that were mostly uplifting or reflective, whereas today's offerings are smorgasbords of depressing, worst-case-



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scenarios — incredibly obese people competing to lose weight; “infotainment” masquerading as documentaries, with misleading special-effects; tales of bio-weapons, child torture-rapes, and mass extinction. Talent contests and game shows did not insult viewers or contestants. The *Gong Show* in the mid-1970s was the first to break that tradition, but audiences rejected it. Cartoons were for children; *Tom & Jerry*, *Lady and the Tramp* have been replaced with prime-time grime like *Family Guy* and *King of the Hill*.

Comedies were sophisticated (e.g., Peter Sellers) and slapstick (e.g., Lucy), but always comprehensible. Viewers laughed with the characters in *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie & Harriet*, not at them. By the late 1970s, a new breed of “sitcom” revolved around put-downs, sexual innuendos, and bathroom humor. Families were depicted as dysfunctional, and children were in charge — forced into adult situations featuring birth-control patches instead of Mommy’s high heels.

If today’s “experts” wonder why so many people complain of depression, they might want to study the correlation between public angst and the number of hours spent watching taunts, trash, and terror.

Singers were expected to carry a tune. Wild gesticulations, menacing facial expressions, and screeching through the microphone were not career-enhancers. The brouhaha over Great Britain’s Susan Boyle proves that even pre-teens know perfect pitch when they hear it.

One could count on the “Star-Spangled Banner” and Christmas carols not being mangled. Dancers like Sammy Davis, Jr., Bob Fosse, Ben Vereen, Ann Miller, and Gwen Verdon dazzled us with their footwork; they didn’t need to “shake their booty.” Today, “greats” like Josh Grobin, Andrea Boccelli, and “Celtic Woman” are mostly out of reach for middle-class fans, with tickets ranging from \$280 to \$360 for a decent seat. Back in the 1950s and ’60s, prices were reasonable, and talented headliners did not perform in stadium-sized arenas.

The family vacation once presented opportunities not only for togetherness but for uplifting cultural pursuits. However, with so many toddlers in day care, parents are ill-equipped to transmit what was once called “decorum.” The old “Sunday drive” is passé, too, since what used to be known as “rush hour” is now a multi-hour nightmare. The thought of transporting little ones in a vehicle on weekends is abhorrent. Outings, therefore, are limited mostly to the beach — except that such excursions now cost a fortune, even within a 50-mile radius.

In the mid ’50s and ’60s, a middle-class family rented a room or bungalow that smelled of salt air and mold. They didn’t even think about air conditioning. Nobody cared if kids tracked in sand, or whether food consisted of fries and burgers. Today, mere proximity to the beach is a luxury. A week with two children will set one back some \$2,000 — plus, the boarding of any pets. Gone, too, are the days of the stylish swimsuit. Kids today are subjected not merely to the itsy-bitsy bikini, but to peek-a-boo thongs, virtual pasties, and implied athletic supporters.

And let’s not forget the telephone. Yesterday’s less-convenient rotary phone, sans answering machine, was hardly an art object, or convenient. But was it more time-consuming? Nobody rushed to answer soliciting calls, donation seekers, and robo-calls as often as 10 times a day — “Don’t be alarmed, but this is an important health/mortgage/credit [take your pick] alert...” Nor was one treated to 10 minutes of options, website information, and number-punching (even to one’s doctor) every time the instrument was used, only to be disconnected for an incorrect digit. Caller-ID and “call-blocking” are marginally helpful, but one still must physically examine the number in the unlikely event a call is legitimate. Together with unsolicited e-mails, mailboxes full of catalogues, and urgent knocks at the door from



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petitioners, one is lucky to get anything done. Might as well go to work!

Speaking of which: the workplace once was safe, even if a few ladies missed out on interesting careers. Women didn't have to juggle a purse, briefcase, coat, and key just to enter the restroom. She just walked in. A man hiding in a stall to ambush some unsuspecting female was almost unheard-of. Sexual harassment amounted to flirting, with the occasional swimsuit-clad photo on the wall.

Sex was a lot sexier when it was downplayed and subtle, something that bewilders modern 30-somethings. Prior to 1970, young women who primped around with their underwear showing were deemed tacky or "troubled." Today, they are called "self-confident." No wonder teens pose nude for cellphone cameras! Yet, men are supposed to respond with '50s-era self-control!

Certain expressions were not acceptable in public, and society was better for it. My personal favorite comeback is from *Butterflies Are Free*. A much younger Goldie Hawn snipes that "reality" is the "in" thing; Lauren Bacall's character replies: "So is diarrhea, but I don't consider it entertainment."

Compare that with *The Vagina Monologues*.

Even sixties-era Boomers remember dating as fun and romantic. Today, sex is the expected currency of courtship — hardly anxiety-free! Girls are encouraged to carry condoms in their purses for recalcitrant "partners," to be vaccinated against sexually transmitted diseases, and come packaged with backup birth control, just in case. "Hooking up" begins in junior high. Males compete on the dating circuit with the expectation they will "perform" on-demand. Then, they are compared with "performances" from previous "relationships." Dr. Melvin Anshell (*Sex and Insanity*, 1983), once quipped that if "reality" was the key, we'd be seeing men becoming impotent when forced into such a role. Hmm... could that be what the Cialis, Levitra, and Viagra commercials are telling us?

A house call and a private hospital room used to be equated with patient "privacy." Today, the ill are trotted out in backless gowns in front of dozens of other patients, all watching, and silently (or loudly) cringing. "Dignity" is a joke. When my mother gave birth in 1946 at Doctor's Hospital in Washington, D.C., she says the nurse's aide gave her a rub-down with perfumed lotion the next morning. She wasn't "rich," and she wasn't discharged before she was able to get around.

Today, patients are ejected with tubes protruding from their bodies, which they are then expected to clean and empty. After a fall and head injury requiring stitches in 2008, my mother was sent home still bloodied from head to foot.

Health bills once were straightforward. Today, you receive a separate sheet of paper for every facet of your care: use of hospital facilities, anesthesia, doctor, tech support, medications, procedures, lab work, etc. Built-in delays are legend. Pre-authorization for expensive medications, even non-narcotics, ensure hours of paperwork, which is subsequently "lost." At hospitals, fingers fly non-stop over computer keyboards. Yet the same workers spend hours recovering absent X-rays, doctors' explanations and information vital to a patient's health.

No wonder stock investors love health-insurance companies: the process is so onerous that many patients file only a fraction of their eligible bills. Every procedure is questioned — and often denied the first time around. My favorite is from Cigna, denying payment for hearing aids: "You have no medical need to hear."

Increasing numbers of physicians refuse to participate in health plans and focus solely on "high-end" clientele — people who will pay enormous sums up front. Yet, costs have vastly outstripped salaries.



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Part of the problem can be traced to the computerized minutiae of billing departments. Asinine constraints also are placed on health workers by government entities ranging from the Drug Enforcement Agency to Congress, which pretends to protect privacy. Illegal aliens use hospital emergency rooms for sniffles and fever blisters. Legitimate technologies, like magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs), are usually covered but, oddly, conditions revealed through these marvels never seem to remain in computer systems.

My doctor appointment over, along with musings stirred by the magazine in the waiting room, I shut the car door and flipped to “Golden Oldies” on the radio. “Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie” was playing.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

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