

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Thanksgiving then and now

Pottstown was an industrial giant a century ago.

McClintic-Marshall, forerunner of Bethlehem Steel, was fabricating bridges and skyscrapers. Chadwick Engineering Co. was making cars, and a score of other manufacturers were turning out everything from farm machinery to silk thread.

Pottstown's High Street was the retail hub of the region, and our downtown area was dotted with professional offices and homes of distinction.

No more.

It's easy to think Pottstown is worse off now than for previous generations, but this ignores the enormous improvements in daily life we quickly take for granted.

A century ago, many Pottstown homes lacked electricity and running water.

Outhouses were common because much of the town lacked sewers. Many streets were unpaved.

The typical work week was about 50 hours, and there was no worker's compensation. If you were injured on the job, it was your own tough luck.

There was no health insurance until the 1920s, and even that was nothing like the comprehensive plans most people enjoy today.

Social Security was enacted in 1935, rescuing millions of elderly people from dire poverty. The retirement age was set at 65 because that was the average lifespan.

Radios didn't exist until the

1920s, and televisions didn't arrive until the late 1940s. Many didn't have phones. Calling long distance was enormously expensive, and most long-distance travel was by train. Antibiotics were unknown prior to World War II. The development of penicillin during the war cut infant mortality dramatically and eliminated many life-threatening infections.

Cars were a luxury until the 1950s, and few houses were the single family detached homes on large lots that predominate now.

Today, 63 percent of Americans own their own homes, up from 44 percent in the early 1940s.

As late as the 1940s, hand-laundering was common.

Since then, houses have gained washers and dryers, then dishwashers, color televisions, and microwaves.

As late as the 1970s, few houses and cars were built with air conditioning. Now it's everywhere.

Computers, smart phones and the rise of the internet have been transformative. Email allows anyone with a computer to send and receive messages to people all over the globe — practically free.

Cell phones allow people to talk to others anywhere, any time, and these evolved into smart phones that enable users to also send text messages or emails, or to look up information on the web from anywhere.

So there are plenty of reasons to be thankful. But, curiously, Americans are no happier than they were when surveys were first taken in the 1950s.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



THANKSGIVING OF A CENTURY AGO is idealized in the Doris Day—Gordon MacRae movie, *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*.