We’ve come a long way

My house in downtown Pottstown was already 20 years old when the photo, below, was taken of the workers at the Sotter Brothers boiler works at Beech and York streets (long gone).

My wife and I wouldn’t trade our home for a new one, anywhere, but in most other respects, I’m grateful for the amazing progress we’ve made in the last century.

You’ll note in the photo at least three elementary school-aged children. Amazingly, when this photo was taken, about 20 percent of all workers were under the age of 18.

The typical work week was more than 50 hours in 1895, 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. Lawmakers were persuaded the program would be economical because most people wouldn’t live long enough to receive a benefit check.

Now, of course, the average lifespan is the late 70s, and the elderly enjoy government-paid health insurance until death.

In 1900, there was no indoor plumbing at the boiler works (or my house, most likely). Outhouses were common everywhere, and Pottstown’s first sewer lines simply dumped raw sewage into the many creeks that ran through the borough (since covered over).

And it was only in the 1930s that Pottstown began paving most of its streets.

Electricity and communications were in their infancy in 1895. Now we have myriad electrical appliances, wired and wireless communications, instant access to people the world over, cars that can take us anywhere, night or day, in any kind of weather, and an abundance of every kind of food and merchandise within easy reach.

We all love to complain, but we lead comfortable lives that would amaze our Pottstown ancestors.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

These 1895 Pottstown workers — which included children — would be astonished at the progress we’ve made in the last century.

Courtesy Pottstown Historical Society