

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Technological progress, yes, but...

On Tuesday we noted the transformation of Pottstown over the last hundred years from a town of mostly dirt streets and backyard outhouses to one of paved streets, a modern water and sewer system, and professional government.

The revolution in the length and quality of our lives has been even more astonishing.

In the 1920s, life expectancy for men and women was in the mid to high 50s; now it ranges from 76 for men to 81 for women.

When Social Security was enacted in 1935, the retirement age was set at 65 because most people weren't expected to live that long.

Now a major challenge in keeping Social Security solvent is the ever-increasing lifespan of elderly people.

Social Security rescued millions of people from impoverished old age. Medicare, enacted in 1965, ensured robust medical care for the elderly as well.

In the 1920s, just 20 percent of Americans owned their own homes. Now two-thirds of Americans enjoy home ownership.

Homes have increased in size as well. In the initial suburban boom after World War 2, the typical tract home had 1,100 square feet, with two bedrooms and a bathroom. Now the average new home is twice that size, with at least two baths.

Central air conditioning, virtually unheard of as recently as the 1950s, is now standard in most new single family homes.

Of course, homes today are loaded with all kinds of labor-saving appliances that were barely imaginable in the 1920s. At that, 90 percent of women spent at least four hours a

day doing primary housework like cooking and cleaning.

Today, both men and women have more leisure time than ever. One expert estimated men have 40 more hours of leisure a week than a century ago, and women 30 hours more, even with most women now in the workforce.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Cars were in their infancy in the 1920s, and their growth was cut off by the Great Depression and World War 2.

But ownership and road building soared after the war. In 1950, a household was thrilled to own one car; now 90 percent of Americans have access to a car, and there are more households with two cars than just one.

Almost all new cars sold in the United States are air conditioned; in 1970, just 20 percent were.

Cars have given people freedom of movement unthinkable 100 years ago. Cars allow people to go anywhere, any time, and work daily far from home.

The rise of the Internet was truly transformative. By the end of the 1990s, an enormous amount of information could be found on the web, facilitated by powerful search engines like Google.

Email allowed anyone with a computer to send and receive messages to people all over the globe — practically free.

Cell phones allowed people to talk to others anywhere, any time, and these evolved into smart phones that enabled users to also send text messages or emails, or to look up a cornucopia of information on the web.

And yet. The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as "happy" has not budged since the 1950s, although the typical person's

real income more than doubled through that period.

Civil discourse has almost completely broken down, political polarization is the worst since the Civil War, and science is constantly under assault.

Does technology make us better, more virtuous people? It doesn't appear so.



TECHNOLOGY HAS TRANSFORMED OUR LIVES, mostly for the better. But not always.