

Handout 1. Life at the Turn into the Twentieth Century (teacher reference)

What was life like in small-town America during the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century? As this is the time period Sherwood Anderson chose for *Winesburg, Ohio*, it may be helpful to provide students with background information as an introduction to their study of the text.

General statements on aspects of life at the turn of the century in America are provided under topical categories in a question and answer format below:

The economy

1. Were the 1890s generally a time of prosperity?

The 1890s were a time of serious economic depression, a fact that had enormous impact on the lives of ordinary people. A real economic upturn did not come until after World War I, and that ceased with economic collapse in 1929.

2. How did ordinary people in small towns in America's heartland make a living?

Work included agriculture-related activities, small factories, shop-keeping, and service occupations still in evidence today.

Transportation

3. How did people make their way around and between small towns?

Horses and travel by foot were main means of travel, as the automobile did not emerge as a means of popular transportation until the production of the Model-T by Henry Ford in 1908. The train was an important vehicle for travel over longer distances, especially to large towns and cities, and river traffic was important to towns near ports.

4. When did paved roads and sidewalks become commonplace? Why?

When cars became a prominent means of travel, extensive road paving became necessary and sidewalks eventually came to be commonplace in towns. Before that, dirt roads into and through small towns were common.

Food prices

5. How does the value of an American dollar then compare with its value now?

A nickel then was a lot more valuable than it is today, and to most people five hundred dollars seemed like a lot of money.

6. Give some specific examples of the ways prices have changed since then.

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These can vary, but it helps to know that eight hundred dollars then is equivalent to more than ten thousand dollars now. Restaurant bills of fare show that one could buy a substantial meal, including dessert, for a few dollars.

Town and city newspapers

7. What city newspapers still in print can trace their history back that far?

Many major newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and Cleveland's *Plain Dealer*, were founded during the nineteenth century.

8. How important were newspapers to ordinary people?

Newspapers were the main means of learning about local events, as well as about things happening in a wider geographical area. The telegraph made it possible for newspaper editors and writers to acquire information fairly quickly. Television and Internet, which we take for granted today, would have seemed the stuff of science fiction.

Clothing fashions

9. What sorts of clothing did ordinary girls and women usually wear?

Skirts were long and blouses demure. Hats were common.

10. How did ordinary men and boys usually dress?

Manual laborers would wear work clothes such as flannel shirts and jeans. Professional people generally wore three-piece suits and hats.