

## 2011 and Beyond: Happy New Year

The New Year can bring new thoughts but also some old ones that contrast dramatically. I was thinking of change and how we adapt to it.

There can be many changes over the course of one's life. Adapting to change seems to be one of the requirements of living but also one of the human strengths.

Horses and cars. When my father August Birren was age 20 he drove a wagon with two horses to deliver bread in the Chicago area. That was in the year 1900. He said that in the early morning he loaded his bread wagon and reined in the horse and started out to an outlying area to deliver the bread. There he changed his horses so they could rest while he delivered the bread on his route. He changed his horses after delivering bread and came back into the central city.

When he was not yet 21 he ran to be an elected officer of the teamsters union but was defeated. Soon automobiles and small trucks were introduced and he drove a laundry truck. Laundries became the 7<sup>th</sup> largest business in the USA. Families left their large bags of laundry at their front doors and were picked up and delivered washed the next day. Then after World War II home laundry machines were developed and families washed their laundry at home and the laundry business collapsed. Change.

In 1900 the largest labor force in America was in farming, 47%. That didn't include all the children in large families in farms where children were useful. Families were large, ten children in a family was common. A woman neighbor here grew up in a family with 8 children on a farm in West Virginia. Now the average number of children per family is slightly less than 2. change

When railroad trains were developed that ran from Chicago to Minneapolis a salesman on the trains sold food and other items that became popular. That led to the creation of the Sears Roebuck department store that sold things by mail to the large number of farm families. Sears Roebuck became the World's Largest Store serving the huge farm areas.

I have a copy of the Sears Roebuck catalogue of 1902 and one from 1927. In a sense they are "natural history books". They reflect the styles of the times and provide pictures of the past, clothing, tools, telegraph instruments, jewelry, home furnishings horse saddles and many other things.

Men and women wore hats and women's dresses had narrow waists and long skirts. Corsets were worn to narrow women's waists. Boys wore knicker pants to their knees with long stockings to their shoes. About age 13

they got long pants as they went into the last grade of elementary school a sign of growing up. In 1902 a wood or coal burning stove could be bought from the catalogue for \$17 or \$18. They had top ranges for frying and ovens for baking and also for heating kitchens since there was no central household heating. Cooking in the kitchen meant that you had to judge the heat in the oven when baking bread or a cake. The least expensive room heater was \$2.98. It could be returned at no cost if it was not satisfactory. There were 15 pages in the 1902 catalogue on stoves. Change.

A next change was people moving into the cities to begin to make steam engines to work on farms and making roads. Soon after came the automobile and the shift from the Agricultural Age to the Industrial Age spread. People moved from rural areas into cities. This occurred when I was a little boy and I still remember horse and wagons on the streets of Chicago delivering dairy products, ice, groceries, and other products.

Money: When I was in elementary school my mother would send me to do the shopping on Saturday. I recall that a quart of milk cost 7 cents and a bag of green groceries to make soup would cost 10 cents. The shops were all small and independent and the shop owners were behind the counters and wrapped the purchases. Now we have shopping malls and you can go through a large store and buy almost everything without speaking to a single employee, much less to a shop owner.

My father was focused on earning money and saving it. He taught my brother and me how to earn money by selling him packs of cigarettes. My brother and I would alternate buying a carton of cigarettes a week and selling them to him at 15 cents a pack. At age 8 I would go to the corner drug store and buy a carton of cigarettes for \$1.25. Selling the cigarettes to my father would earn me 25 cents week, a large amount of money then. A penny then would buy a large Tootsie Roll at a candy store. My father died of lung cancer at age 72. I wonder how long he would have lived if he wasn't a smoker.

The great economic depression hit about 1929 and banks closed with long lines of depositors on the sidewalks trying to get in to withdraw money. My father survived well and we ate well since the laundry business was still strong and he had moved inside to become a manager or superintendent as it was called. I remember that about 1936 he bought a new Dodge car for \$730. Imagine that cost today.

Chasing the dollar, two friends and I rented a Shell gas station when I was age 20 and in college. I had saved the most money, \$400, so I was the lease holder. We sold gasoline for 14 cents a gallon a paid ourselves 25 1/2 cents an hour for our work. We could buy a hamburger for a dime and at a

restaurant across the street from the gas station we could buy a roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and gravy for 25 cents.

I bought a used car from one of the customers of the gas station for \$50. It was a model A Ford that I used to drive to college. I also had three other school passengers and I charged them fares and that paid for my gas and oil. Oil was 15 cents a quart.

So much has changed during my life time, politics included. The father of one of my friend's who ran the gas station with me was a police desk sergeant. One day I asked him why he was not a captain and he said it would cost too much. He told me how much it would cost, I think it was about a year's salary. He would have to pay it to the local political precinct captain to buy the promotion. His son, my friend and partner, ran the gas station during the day and went to college at night. He graduated and became radio engineer for Motorola then a radio manufacturer.

An earlier political scam I became I aware of during the prohibition days was the relation of the "speakeasys" that sold illegal liquor during prohibition and the police. When I was in third grade in school very near my family's apartment was a speakeasy on the main street, a street car line. Perhaps once a month, a Cadillac police car would stop in front of the speakeasy and the officer would go in. I was told he would collect the pay-offs so the place could stay open. Why the Cadillac police car? There were two levels of police cars, Fords for general officers and Cadillacs for senior officers. The latter were the ones to collect the pay offs. Grafts and payoffs must still be going on but not as obviously as they did when I was growing up.

All things seem to have changed during my lifetime, culture, agricultural to the industrial to the information age, money, and more things will change and humans will have to adapt to them. One positive change is that people are living longer and have more active lives. The age wave or the agequake is interacting with our customs and pension plans but it is opening new facets of life. Retirees are going back to school, families can have five generations alive with grandparents having a role in raising the young.

The status and roles of women have changed a lot during my life time. There have been six or seven women prime ministers in the developed countries. Betty's grandmother, Hannah Solomon, helped to organize a women's exhibit for the Worlds Fair in Chicago in 1893 and went on to attend a world conference on women held in Berlin before World War II. Women in America got their right to voted in 1920. What a fast change, although all things didn't change that fast. When I was in high school only boys were in the tech classes. We took a bus trip to Detroit from Chicago

when I was in high school and stayed several days. The assembly line was the new technology development but there were no women on the assembly line. Men were still hired for their physical strength. Now robotics have buttons to control heavy machines. Women's hiring appears to be going up while men's is going down although men's hiring is still a few percentage points above that of women. Reflecting on my family I recall that my mother never worked outside the home nor did my grandmothers and aunts.

There is a long list of things I could mention that reflect changes in society and the way we live. I remember gas lights in houses and in street lights. When I was in college we had adding machines, after WW II we got calculators, then main frame computers came in followed by desk top computers. Now cell phones and other devices are replacing land line phones and connections. Jobs have been lost and jobs have been gained in the transitions. Credit cards have replaced cash in many transactions. What changes are next?

More unforeseen changes will occur that we will have to adapt to. So far humans have been adaptable, unlike the dinosaurs and some other species.

We still need to replace some of our long standing beliefs that may go back to the days of the Greeks and beyond with evidence based ideas. Change is the big word for 2011 and beyond. It requires creativity, wisdom and a sense of humor. Adapt to it well and have many good years.

James E. Birren, January 9, 2011