

*America  
in the  
Twenties  
The Beginnings of  
Contemporary America*

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## *Chapter One*

# *The Age of Mass Consumption*

The United States entered the twentieth century the world's richest nation. In the first thirty years of the new century (1900–1930), affluence transformed the daily lives of Americans more profoundly than in the preceding three hundred years. Technological advances created new industries and revolutionized existing ones. By 1930, Americans communicated by telephone, drove to work in cars, ate canned food, bought national brands under the hypnotic influence of multimedia advertising, and spent evenings beside the radio or in the movie theater. A generation earlier they had communicated by mail, traveled to work on foot or by streetcar, ate homemade food (even at lunch time), bought loose soap and crackers from the grocer's barrels, and looked forward to the infrequent visits of a traveling circus or vaudeville show. Good or bad, the Big Change had come.

This transformation of life-styles depended on enormous advances in basic industry in the late nineteenth century. In 1900 steel was the leading manufacturing industry; thirty years later, automobile making was king. But the mass production of consumer durables such as cars could not have come without existing capacity for the mass production of steel, rubber, glass, paint, and gasoline. Nor would the early car makers have found many customers had not rising family incomes created a mass market for their product. Yet new industries (like autos, electric power,

salary will be unable to own one—and enjoy with his family the blessings of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces."

By exploiting the economies of standardization, division of labor, and mechanization through the introduction of the moving assembly line, Ford dramatically reduced the cost of manufacturing this highly complex product. By the 1920s, Ford made good his boast. The price of Ford's Model T had fallen from \$850 to \$310, and the Ford Motor Company became one of the most profitable business enterprises in history.

At the outset, many car manufacturers competed for the new markets. Initial capital requirements were small (Ford started with \$28,000). Wall Street and Big Business all but ignored this small, unproved, risky business. By the 1920s, however, cars had become the biggest business of all. Three firms, then as now, dominated the industry—Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler—and Wall Street became deeply involved in their finance and management, especially with General Motors. The advantages of large-scale manufacture and enormous capital requirements now effectively excluded small manufacturers, a pattern that had developed earlier in heavy industry during the late nineteenth century.

Yet Ford's early methods proved inappropriate once the cars had become widely diffused. In the 1920s, General Motors seized the auto industry's leadership and has maintained it ever since. Founded in 1908 by William C. Durant, a manufacturer of horse-drawn carriages, General Motors started as a conglomeration of loosely integrated auto companies such as Buick, Oldsmobile and Chevrolet, and of several auto parts suppliers. Durant was a master salesman and empire builder but, like Ford, he failed to weld his company into an effectively administered unit. The postwar recession (1921–1922) severely hurt General Motors and brought in new management with fresh strategies, infusions of Wall Street money, and methods which soon made General Motors the industry leader.

By the mid-1920s the market for new cars was becoming saturated at existing levels and distribution of national income. The problem then was to sell cars to people who already owned them. General Motors began innovations in marketing. It de-

veloped a wide line of cars appealing to different tastes and pocketbooks, from the phenomenally successful and low-cost Chevrolet to the luxurious Cadillac. It stressed style and comfort, relying heavily on advertising, and offered customers annual model changes, trade-in allowances and installment credit. And General Motors developed efficient structures and procedures for administering a large corporation, realizing that it could no longer depend on expanding output to lower costs and assure satisfactory profit margins.

Because General Motors was so large and complex, top management freed itself from day-to-day operational responsibilities. It concentrated on coordinating product flow, maximizing use of resources, developing statistical and financial controls vital to planning intelligently for the future. Operational responsibilities, however, were decentralized in the various divisions involved in the manufacture of parts and accessories or assembly under the overall supervision of the general offices. These reforms of internal management provided the solution for efficiently managing this giant enterprise and they became a model for other Big Businesses.

Innovation meant profits for General Motors. Ford's failure to adjust to changing conditions had made that company No. 2. Previously, Ford succeeded by building a simple, standardized single product, the Model T. When few persons owned cars, everyone wanted the utilitarian Ford flivver which came in only one color—black. Ford's strategy was to achieve maximum cost-savings through standardization. In the 1920s, however, Americans became increasingly willing to sacrifice economy and utility for styling and glamor, but Henry Ford refused to change: "We want to construct some kind of machine," he insisted stubbornly, "that will last forever. . . . We never make an improvement that renders any previous model obsolete." Ford ruled his great empire single-handedly, but severe losses ultimately convinced him of the obsolescence of his own strategy. Ford finally changed and brought out new models; but not until after he died did the Ford Motor Company in the 1940s undergo the basic transformation that had helped make General Motors the world's largest corporation.

Ford became the greatest of the businessmen heroes. An amused but impressed British traveller observed: "Just as in Rome one goes to the Vatican and tries to get audience of the Pope, so in Detroit one goes to the Ford Works and endeavours to see Henry Ford." People listened to Ford's opinions and indulged his crotchets even on subjects he knew nothing about; and there were many of these, since Ford's genius did not extend beyond auto mechanics. His enormous wealth and status as folk hero assured him an audience for whatever ideas he wished to propound—including anti-Semitism. Ford was both naïve and shrewd, simultaneously the architect of the new technological America and the high priest of the American cult of nostalgia for a simpler, rural America. He spent millions on constructing a mythical small town, Greenfield Village, which when contrasted with his mammoth River Rouge assembly plant reveals him as a man of divided loyalties, a cultural schizophrenic. More than any other single individual, Ford helped to modernize America, yet this supreme innovator could lament with apparent sincerity: "It was an evil day when the village flour mill disappeared."

The automobile industry provides a dramatic example of a common process of economic development. New technologies increased productivity, reduced costs, and expanded markets in a self-generating cycle. New machines powered either by gasoline engines or run by electricity intensified and diffused the advantages of mechanization. A new textile loom enabled a worker to tend three times as many machines; new machinery mechanized bottle production, put farmers on tractors, and drastically reduced the cost of steel and cement. Between 1900 and 1930 urban America also became electrified, as new inventions sharply cut the costs of electricity.

Developments in one industry revolutionized others. The internal-combustion engine, for instance, transformed oil, rubber manufacturing, and agriculture. Entrepreneurs now systematically began to finance research to develop new products and manufacturing methods. Companies in the more advanced industries were the first to appreciate the possibilities of institutionalizing technological progress. Thus General Electric which began primarily as a manufacturer of electric motors, generating

equipment and light bulbs, developed electric appliances, plastics and metal alloys. Du Pont moved from explosives into dyes, paint, and cellulose. In this way, divisions of research and development in the modern, large corporation systematized technological change upon which rapid economic growth depended.

### *The Structure of Mass Marketing*

With manufacturing output growing three times faster than population, business had to develop new techniques of distributing and advertising products and, just as important, new ways to finance consumer purchases. Chain stores began garnering larger shares of the retail dollar, especially in foods and drugs. Woolworth's and other "five-and-dime" stores took business away from specialty shops, and the mail-order houses opened large retail outlets in the new suburban neighborhoods, at the expense of downtown department stores. As in manufacturing, so in retailing, Big Business could undersell small business because it enjoyed economies of scale. Sears, Roebuck & Company, for instance, manufactured some of the merchandise it sold or put its own label on goods while dictating the price and quality to its suppliers.

When food, clothing and rent had used up most of the consumer's budget, people needed little credit. By the 1920s, however, consumers were purchasing expensive, durable goods produced by the new industries, and they were buying them on time. Installment credit enabled people to buy now and pay later, instead of saving until they could afford a washing machine or a car. As people went into debt to acquire consumer durables, they had to allocate larger and larger portions of their income to pay their debts, rather than spend impulsively on small purchases at the grocery or clothing store.

Together with chain stores and installment credit, national advertising played a major role in creating a mass consumption society. Businessmen had begun to realize the advantages of advertising in the late nineteenth century but in the 1920s advertising expenditures tripled and Madison Avenue assumed its present-day importance. Manufacturers initially used national advertising to reach consumers directly and to stimulate demand

without having to rely on jobbers and retailers to push their products. By familiarizing shoppers with the alleged advantages of national brands, manufacturers broadened their markets and tried to stabilize the market by cultivating brand loyalty. As consumers came to desire Brand X, for instance, retailers began to stock it; the stimulation and the demand reinforced each other.

At first advertising appeals were simple, though exaggerated. "Not truth but credibility," claimed an ad man, was the key to success. One manufacturer informed an unsuspecting but believing public that it had bad breath; California lemon growers claimed their product cleaned teeth, shampooed hair, removed stains, polished glass, and loosened cuticles for manicuring. As advertising men became more sophisticated, they added irrational appeals to exaggerated claims. Cars, they insisted, gave people status, and toothpaste gave them sex appeal. The successful ad man, J. Walter Thompson, revealing a basic assumption of the industry, explained that the average consumer had the mentality of a "fourteen-year-old human animal," a creature of whim, infinitely gullible and infinitely capable of being manipulated. George Washington Duke, irascible and shrewd founder of the American Tobacco Company, acknowledged that his firm relied on repetitive and annoying advertising.

A few people, alarmed by dishonesty in advertising and the difficulty of getting one's money's worth because of a bewildering variety of merchandise, demanded regulation of the business. These anxieties led to an organized consumers' movement to test goods scientifically and help people spend their money more rationally, but most consumers remained indifferent to such efforts and businessmen were hostile. Business denounced any interference with free enterprise as un-American and a communist plot. The second charge proved a convenient though preposterous way to discredit critics of advertising; the first charge may have had much validity in the America of the 1920s.

National advertising had become vital in an age of mass consumption. It created new desires, informed the public about existing products and most of all it persuaded people to buy a certain brand. Businessmen much preferred to compete through marketing appeals than through price wars, especially in industries such

as soap, tobacco, cosmetics, and patent medicines in which little real difference existed among rival brands except the differences invented by the ad men.

Advertising served a larger function besides publicizing specific products. During the First World War the government used advertising to sell patriotism and Liberty Bonds, and in the 1920s Big Business turned to public relations to assure a favorable climate of opinion. Institutional ads depicted corporations as friendly, humane organizations, not soulless monsters. Americans learned that "Big Business is your Big Brother." But even more important, advertising trained people in new habits and values appropriate for a mass society. "Advertising," claimed one of its boosters, "is almost the only force at work against puritanism in consumption." It encouraged people "to live and enjoy—that is the basis of modern economics."

### *The Welfare of the American People*

Economic growth produced remarkable improvements in the standard of living. The gains of productivity resulting from the achievements of basic industrialization and technological advance began to trickle down to working people. Real wages, which had grown slowly before 1914, surged ahead in the next fifteen years, while the average work week decreased from 60 hours in 1900 to just over 40 hours by 1930. As technology multiplied labor's efficiency, it simultaneously cut labor costs. Employers could improve wages and working conditions, and require fewer hours without cutting sharply into profits or raising prices. Both the climate of opinion generated by reformers and the pressure of unionization induced business to share more of the benefits of industrialization with the working classes.

No previous generation of Americans had experienced visible advances of such magnitude in its material well-being. Higher per capita income allowed people to spend a smaller portion of their income on food, clothing and housing. They could now afford more expensive items such as meat, dairy products, and fresh fruits and vegetables; and they had more money for medical care, entertainment, and gadgets. By the late 1920s many Americans spent more on cars than on clothing. At the

same time family size was shrinking so that a larger family income supported a smaller household.

The health of the American people improved dramatically. Life expectancy increased more in the first three decades of the twentieth century than in the preceding one hundred years. Males born in 1900 could expect to live forty-eight years; by 1930 life expectancy had reached almost sixty. Infant mortality dropped sharply especially in the 1920s, and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, and pneumonia took a much lower toll. Improvements in health resulted largely from better diet, housing, and sanitation. Cities purified water supplies and enforced requirements for pasteurization of milk. But as people lived longer, the afflictions of aging, such as cancer and heart disease, became increasingly important causes of death. And by 1930 automobile accidents joined the list of major killers.

The quality of medical care also advanced, especially through mass vaccination against infectious diseases. Until the latter half of the nineteenth century medical science remained relatively primitive. Competing schools of medicine confused the public and created a field day for what later generations regarded as quackery. As medicine became more experimental and empirical, and less theoretical and speculative, breakthroughs in fundamental knowledge occurred with increasing rapidity particularly after Louis Pasteur demonstrated the germ theory of disease. Discoveries of the specific causes and cures of many infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, yellow fever, malaria, diphtheria, typhoid and syphilis soon followed. At the same time the perfection of anesthesia opened up enormous new possibilities for the development of surgery. As the new knowledge seeped down, people became less inclined to accept disease and death as inevitable. They began consciously to conserve health, observe preventive measures, and seek professional care when illness struck.

An improvement in medical education had to precede the diffusion and wide application of this new knowledge. As medicine became more scientific, standards for practice tightened through tougher licensing requirements and radical improvement in the quality of medical schools. Although fewer medical

schools and doctors per capita existed in 1930 than in 1900, the quality of medical care had advanced decisively. The number of hospital beds per capita almost doubled between 1900 and 1930, representing substantial investments in health facilities. And government, through city and county health departments, clinics and health centers, played a vital role. These agencies, together with philanthropic foundations and organizations such as the National Tuberculosis Association (1904), and the launching of industrial medicine by business, helped to diffuse new medical knowledge.

Yet advanced medical care remained too expensive or unavailable for most people. America, fast becoming a land of large-scale organizations of resources and services, still lived with a medical system largely in the hands of doctors maintaining individual practices—operating much like small businessmen. Health resources were unevenly distributed across the country, serving the city better than the country, the rich far better than the middle and lower classes. “We know how to do a lot of things which we don’t do or do on a wretchedly small scale,” complained Dr. William H. Welch, a medical reformer, in 1925. But organized medicine, speaking through the American Medical Association, fought, usually with success, the first, tentative steps towards bringing the benefits of modern medicine to all Americans regardless of wealth. Besides opposition from organized medicine to an adequate health care delivery system, millions of Americans were ignorant and even skeptical of modern medicine. “It’s ridiculous to frighten people by talking about these millions of germs in our food, air, and water,” said a midwesterner in the 1920s. “I went to school in a small room with lots of other children, and we were all rosy-cheeked and healthy and didn’t know a thing about germs. There wasn’t any of this foolishness of weighing children and frightening them to death because they may be underweight.”

### *The Other Side of the Boom*

Although most Americans fared better than ever before, economic gains had been distributed unevenly. Over half the income received by families and unattached individuals in 1929

went to the top 20 percent of the population, and only a quarter went to the bottom 40 percent. The Twenties produced *more* rather than less inequality in the distribution of income. Unemployment remained chronic. Between 1900 and 1930, the average annual rate of unemployment exceeded four percent (the currently "acceptable" minimum) in two out of every three years, and the average during the Twenties reached almost five percent. Since there was no unemployment insurance then, people thrown out of work often became destitute.

Millions of Americans lived below the poverty line. In 1915 the United States Industrial Commission reported that a third of the workers employed in mining and manufacturing lived at or below a subsistence level. A poor child was three times as likely to die before adulthood than a middle class child. And poverty and disease took a still greater toll among blacks, the poorest of the poor, than among poor whites. Two decades of progressive reform and three decades of rapid economic advance had not eliminated serious imbalances in the distribution of wealth. The contrast between those few enjoying the delights of affluence and the millions left in squalor was sharper than ever.

Imbalance characterized most of the booming Twenties. Some of the older industries, such as agriculture, soft-coal mining, and textiles experienced continuous hard times. In each case the markets for their products grew slowly in a maturing economy and an excess of supply over demand depressed prices. Nor were producers in these industries, made up of thousands of small units, able to adjust output to the market, whereas in steel and autos a handful of giants dominated and influenced supply and price.

The agricultural depression of the 1920s engulfed millions of Americans. The cities had been growing much more rapidly than rural America for decades but not until 1920 did the number of urban dwellers exceed the rural population. Although about 45 percent of the people still lived in rural areas in the 1920s, agriculture received only about 12 percent of the national income and its share continued to fall rapidly.

Farmers had traditionally lagged behind the urban sectors, where the *big* money could be made, but agriculture had en-

joyed relative prosperity during the first two decades of the twentieth century (1900–1919). The depression of the 1890s and the closing of the frontier slowed the heady expansion of agricultural production that had resulted in supply outdistancing demand and plummeting prices. From 1900 to 1919 the terms of trade shifted. Domestic demand caught up with supply and pushed farm prices up more rapidly than the general price level. The outbreak of the First World War sustained and accelerated agricultural prosperity, as the United States became a major source of food for the Allies. Later, the government encouraged farmers to expand production with the patriotic slogan, "Food Will Win the War," and the even more convincing persuasion of guaranteed high prices.

Though rural America did not share in affluence to the same extent as urban America, agricultural productivity advanced in the early twentieth century. The gasoline engine promoted mechanization at a time when much of the countryside still had no electricity. By 1930 there were almost a million tractors and almost as many trucks on the farms, and the wealthier farmers had begun to buy grain combines, corn pickers and milking machines. But low farm income deprived small-scale farmers of the benefits of such mechanization.

Modernization of the American farm received an additional boost from the diffusion of scientific research. The normally conservative farmers at first resisted new methods, fearful of risking their resources on the advice of government officials, university experts and businessmen who were not themselves "dirt" farmers. But gradually, under prodding from the state agriculture colleges (which educated many of the farmers' sons) and businessmen who exerted economic pressure, the Agriculture Department officials gained their trust, and farmers began to innovate and achieve a modest growth in efficiency. Agriculture, however, did not benefit from lower prices, made possible by lower costs through expanded sales, to the same extent as other industries. Consumers who could already buy most of the food they wanted did not buy much more because prices fell.

Agriculture entered the 1920s with enlarged capacity but diminishing markets. Europe no longer relied as much on the

United States as during wartime and the domestic market grew too slowly to take up the slack. The decline hit hardest the wheat growers, hurt by the shift in consumer preference for more meat, and the cotton growers who supplied raw material for the "sick" textile industry.

These imbalances in the productive system, the widespread poverty amid plenty, the prevalence of "sick" industries in a rapidly growing economy, paralleled conflicting American lifestyles. The ethic of production and work, the basis for the fast-receding rural society, now collided squarely with a new emphasis on consumption and leisure as mass Society began to emerge in the 1920s.

### **Document: The Coming of the Automobile**

#### **Henry Ford, My Life and Work**

#### **Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., My Years with General Motors**

Two of the great movers of modern America were Henry Ford and Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., founding fathers of the automobile industry, keystone of the American economy in the twentieth century. Henry Ford was born on a Michigan farm in 1863. He left school at 15 to become an apprentice in a machine shop and later became chief engineer of the Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit in 1893. Experimenting with the design of automobiles in the 1890s, Ford founded the Ford Motor Company in 1903. One of a number of early car manufacturers, Ford seized the leadership and transformed the industry by reaching out to capture a mass market with a car that sold for under \$1,000. In the following selection, Ford describes the strategy that made his company in its heyday the most profitable business in history and moved the United States into the Age of Mass Consumption.

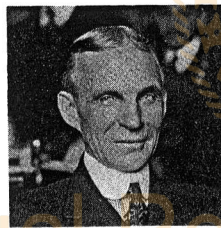
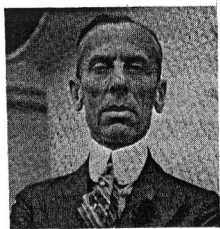
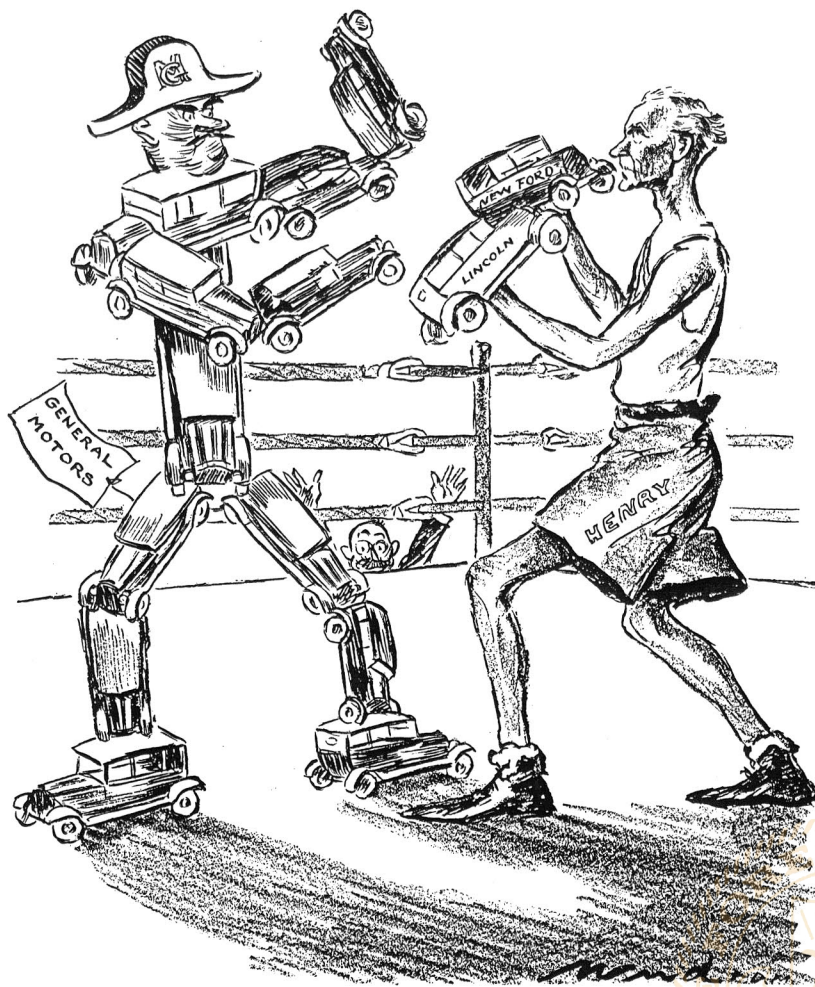
In the 1920s the Ford Motor Company lost the leadership in the automobile industry to General Motors, a large con-

glomerate of car companies and parts manufacturers put together by William C. Durant, who entered the auto industry about the same time the Ford Motor Company was established. General Motors, though it was to become the industry leader in the 1920s and the largest corporation in the world, struggled during its first decade with seemingly intractable problems of internal management: could a large and complex business made up of many companies be efficiently administered? One of Durant's acquisitions was a parts manufacturing firm headed by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., (1875–1966) the man who became an architect of GM's ascendancy. Sloan, unlike the largely self-taught Ford, was a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. With help from his father, he purchased a roller bearing company which became part of General Motors in 1916. From the outset, Sloan demonstrated an original talent for administration. He rationalized the management of the parts division of GM and then turned his attention to creating an efficient internal organization for the entire firm. Becoming president of General Motors in 1923, Sloan presided over a critical transformation in the company's administrative structure and in its production and marketing strategy which enabled GM to displace Ford. In his memoirs, *My Years with General Motors*, a chapter of which is reprinted below, Sloan describes his strategy.

#### **Henry Ford, My Life and Work**

... From the day the first motor car appeared on the streets it had to me appeared to be a necessity. It was this knowledge and assurance that led me to build to the one end—a car that would meet the wants of the multitudes. All my efforts were then and still are turned to the production of one car—one model. And, year following year, the pressure was, and still is, to improve and refine and make better, with an increasing reduction in price. The universal car had to have these attributes:

Source: Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work*, (New York, Doubleday & Co., 1923), 68–75, 78–79, 80–84, 145–149. Reprinted by permission of Mrs. Samuel Crowther.



"The Battle of the Century," 1927. Alfred P. Sloan (left) and Henry Ford (right).

All photos on this page, courtesy of Culver Pictures, Inc.

## Chapter Two

# Emerging Life Styles in Mass Society

Greater affluence generated new life-styles. Mass society, rooted in an advanced, industrial economy and in urbanization, put its trust in large organizations and science rather than in individual enterprise and animistic religions. The process of constructing a secular "religion" began before the 1920s, but in that decade its consequences spread so widely that few Americans escaped its impact. New patterns of family life, interpersonal relations, and leisure, as well as new cultural directions and codes, reflected changes in American thought and life. Science and technology, schools and universities, movies and radio challenged the validity of older beliefs and the power of institutions nourished by them, especially the churches whose traditional pieties flourished in a rural society.

People left family farms and small towns for the exciting, impersonal city. They now lived far from relatives and old friends, working for unseen bosses, performing endlessly repetitive tasks as the clerks and production workers required by a complex division of labor. They thereby lost a sense of personal achievement, and the dignity and self-esteem that came from running a farm or small business, or practicing a craft.

Two decades of "reform" left unsolved the problems of humanizing an industrial society, and the disillusioning experience of the First World War left the United States and the rest

of the world less safe than ever for democracy. Americans, in their pursuit of happiness, became confused and bewildered. Nothing seemed the same; even one's neighbors had changed. "I have no best friends," complained the wife of a working man in a medium-size midwestern town, one of thousands of such hamlets fabled in song and story for their friendliness. "It doesn't pay to be too friendly," warned another woman. People worked hard to buy things but, reported sociologists, they "seem to be running for dear life in the business of making money." Desires always outpaced means and "everyone seemed to run intent upon his own business as though one feared to stop lest those behind trample him down."

Artists, writers, architects and musicians were the most sensitive barometers of change. They, more than others, lived at the intersection of old and new cultures. They probed critically and experimented ingeniously to find fresh ways of expressing authentically what life meant in an emerging mass society. They spoke for the silent millions experiencing the painful process of social change which undermined the old and nourished new lifestyles, a process which betrayed the verities of the past yet seemed irresistibly attractive.

### ***Men, Women, and Children: Shifts in Interpersonal Relations***

The family underwent changes that altered its function and redefined the relationship of its members. While most Americans lived on farms, the family functioned as a cohesive economic unit. On the farm, large families were an advantage, and women worked all day. The children's responsibilities in helping their fathers run the homestead made a strong patriarchal authority essential. Farm families before the age of the automobile were isolated; they spent most of their time at home, working, with little but the visits of neighbors and peddlers to relieve the monotony.

Urbanization weakened the family's economic function. Men worked in factories and offices and sometimes their wives and older children had to find jobs to supplement the breadwinner's wages. In the city large families became more of an

economic burden than a blessing. A child a year meant more mouths to feed, whereas on the farm children enlarged the labor force. Living space was scarce and expensive in the city whereas on the farm there had always been room for more children and dependent, older relatives, such as aged grandparents. Though the urban working classes in the late nineteenth century continued to raise large families, the urban middle classes began to curb family size, and by the 1920s the limiting trend had spread to other groups. Between 1900 and 1930 the size of the average household fell from 4.6 persons to 3.8, though people now married younger. Contraception allowed for earlier marriage and smaller family size, and contributed to the rising standard of living. The middle classes, fearful of loss of status, were especially eager to ensure that their children had ample opportunity to "get ahead" by means of a "good education."

The reduction in the size of families depended on the adoption of birth control and of new attitudes towards sexuality. Some people approached sex with fear and guilt, most with ignorance. Conventional morality based on the teaching of the churches, Protestant and Catholic, insisted that procreation, not pleasure, was the sole legitimate function of sex, and urged the repression of sexual appetites. Sexual intercourse was moral only within marriage and for purposes of procreation. Sex itself was a forbidden subject, unfit for frank discussion among the decent and upright. "I believe children ought to be taught such things," said a midwestern mother of a sixteen-year-old in the 1920s but "I'm not much for talking about them. I've never talked to my daughter at all, though I suppose she knows more than I think she does. She's the only one I've got and I just can't bear to think of things like that in connection with her. I guess I wouldn't even talk to her if she was going to get married—I just couldn't!"

Yet birth control and new attitudes toward sex continued to spread, first among the middle classes, and then among the working classes. Techniques of contraception were as old as antiquity. Their widespread adoption, however, waited upon the industrialization and urbanization which made many people wish to limit family size. Self-appointed guardians of public morality,

especially the Protestant clergy, tried to block change. In 1873 Congress barred contraceptives from interstate commerce and birth control information from the mails, and states such as Connecticut adopted repressive policies making it illegal to use contraceptives.

Court decisions eventually liberalized federal law, the medical profession encouraged birth control for reasons of health, and a militant movement led by Margaret Sanger organized to spread the new gospel and to fight government repression. Science lent the weight of its growing authority, especially the discoveries of Sigmund Freud, father of psychiatry. Freud's ideas, once popularized, undermined the view that sex was "dirty" or that a sensual appetite was normal among beasts but not among men. Freud interpreted the sex drive as natural and healthy, one that required satisfaction; repression of the sex drive only produced guilt, anxiety, and mental illness. The new outlook regarded sex as a means of expressing love and it needed neither the shelter of marriage nor the aim of procreation to give it moral legitimacy.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, millions of Americans moved haltingly toward the new sexual morality. The continued decline of orthodox religion weakened the most powerful moral force standing in the way of such change. And the anonymity of urban life and the convenience of the automobile facilitated experimentation, especially among the young. Meanwhile the mass media, especially sensational magazines, newspapers and movies, diffused and glamorized naturalistic attitudes toward sex. Hollywood particularly catered to the climate of opinion and produced movies like *Sinners in Silk*, *Women Who Give*, *The Price She Paid* and other films "with burning heart interest" such as *Alimony* about "brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp." Popular magazines chipped in with stories of "The Primitive Lover" who "wanted a caveman husband," and advice about "How to Keep the Thrill in Marriage."

Thus began a sexual revolution stimulated by the availabil-

ity of more leisure. People worked less hard and thus had more time and more energy to channel into other outlets. For millions this led to more premarital sexual activity and a consequent decrease in the frequency with which men resorted to prostitutes. For the first time, American women were becoming sexual partners, not merely sexual objects—a process of emancipation still largely uncompleted, but which was transforming the life of the American woman.

### *The New Woman*

American morality put women on a pedestal. The special function of females was to uphold virtue, serve as guardians of culture, and restrain the animal instincts of their mates. Men regarded wives as creatures not only "purer and morally better" than themselves, but as "relatively impractical, emotional, unstable, . . . incapable of facing facts or doing hard thinking." Man's arena was the factory and the marketplace, where aggressiveness and drive paid off. The home, the woman's responsibility, provided a refuge from the harsh, workaday world ruled by force and power. It was a civilized and genteel atmosphere. Women were so idealized that they faced the danger of becoming unreal. "There is a being," said one typical celebrator of womanhood, "the image and reflection of whom is ever present in the mirror of my soul. Her works are like charmed echoes in a beautiful dell and her laughter like the sweetness of the bursting magnolia and her beauty like the smiling violets and the laughing morning glory . . . heaven's divinest gift to the world—womanhood."

Until the twentieth century, nearly all women accepted their role. Child rearing and housekeeping in large families absorbed their energies. With both partners preoccupied with work, within and outside the home, marriage was less a setting for intimate companionship than a practical arrangement. Women regarded sex as an obligation, associating it with the endless cycle of child bearing that wore them out and killed thousands. Twentieth century mores, however, redefined the role of women. A century earlier married women had almost no legal rights. During the nineteenth century they acquired rights to their own property,

even after marriage, and in 1919 after almost a century of struggle they won the right to vote under the Eighteenth Amendment, a victory that symbolized the changes occurring in the status of women.

When the founding fathers in 1776 proclaimed that "all men are created equal" they did not see fit to include women. At the beginning of the nineteenth century wives were legal wards of their husbands and they had few legal rights over their property or their earnings. In practice, however, women were better treated in America than in Europe because there were relatively more men, and women were indispensable for running a farm household. But this demographic advantage did not immediately improve women's legal status nor open educational opportunity. Regarded as inferior to men, in mind as well as in body, women were declared unsuited for intellectual development. Instruction in painting, music and embroidery seemed sufficient. Women, unfit for "the turmoil and battle of public life," should merely exert a "mild, dependent, softening influence upon the sternness of man's opinion."

A few especially gifted women and their male sympathizers thought otherwise. "Remember," Abigail Adams reminded her husband, John, the revolutionary leader who professed to oppose tyranny from whatever source, "all men would be tyrants if they could." Women, barely educated, appeared mentally inferior because—as Dr. Benjamin Rush, the scientist-statesman of the revolutionary era, explained—they were denied a chance to develop their minds and personalities; men were "taught to aspire, but women were early confined and limited."

Eventually a few women began to insist that a nation founded on the principles of human equality respect their humanity too. The early feminists established grammar schools, then colleges, so that at least a few women could develop their potential. A small cadre of educated women became the shock troops in the struggle for female rights, a struggle that flourished after the 1850s as one of the galaxy of reforms, including anti-slavery and temperance, that sought to rescue the weak and oppressed. Women advanced their own cause as they became prominent in crusades for the rights of others, especially the

slaves. They forged alliances with males, learned skills in organization and in molding public opinion, and by expressing themselves on public issues, the reformers demonstrated their moral fitness for civic responsibility.

Women's entrance into man's world—schools, colleges, and finally the political arena—alarmed conservatives who saw a threat to society's most basic institution, the patriarchal family. Ignoring critics, feminists and suffragists by the middle of the nineteenth century had won improvements in their legal status, an advance achieved in part because the wealthy wished to protect female heirs from husbands who might squander their wife's inheritance. The struggle for freedom and equality for the black man in the 1860s encouraged women to press further but the Civil War enfranchised Negro males, not women.

Meanwhile, industrialization and urbanization more effectively changed the status of women than revolutionary ideology and protest, the principal forces of change until then. During the late nineteenth century in the cities of America and Europe, thousands of women left the home to work in factories and shops. By 1880 women constituted 15 percent of the American labor force, and by the 1920s over 20 percent. Mechanization created jobs which required less physical strength, jobs as suitable for women as men, and women were willing to work for less money. The growing importance of service industries and communications also created thousands of jobs for women as office workers, retail clerks, and telephone operators. At the same time the diffusion of mass education enlarged the demand for teachers; by 1890 a quarter million women were staffing the nation's schools. A few also began to find careers in other professions, including medicine and social work.

At the same time that women entered the labor force, increasing technological changes especially by the 1920s were revolutionizing housekeeping. Electric lighting, gas cooking and new household appliances such as refrigerators, electric irons, and washing machines lightened household chores in middle-class and some working-class homes. So too did the shift to factory-made clothing, store-bought bread and canned foods which came into wide use during the 1920s.

Once women became an integral part of the work force, they gained new status. As working wives they helped support the family, or they could be self-supporting though unmarried. Spending much of their time outside the home, economically they formed part of a previously all-male world. Eventually, they joined the reformers in demanding the political and social rights appropriate to first-class citizens.

The leadership in the movement for women's rights received fresh impetus from the growing number of educated, middle-class women who were the first to benefit from the new leisure and the newer permissible forms of female behavior. In the late nineteenth century women played a more important role than ever in national reform movements. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, for example, stood at the forefront of the crusade against liquor; and women were active in campaigns to clean up politics and improve living conditions in the slums.

During the progressive period a favorable climate existed for renewal of the struggle for the right to vote. "Suffragettes" argued that women would strengthen the moral forces in American politics in the battle against the liquor interests, urban squalor and political corruption. Their organizations, resembling professional political machines, won the vote in enough states by 1916 to create a female bloc vote in national elections. The final push came during the First World War. Reluctantly, President Wilson accepted the inevitable: "Democracy means that women shall play their part in affairs alongside men and upon an equal footing with them. . . . We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and not to a partnership of privilege and right?" Resistance stiffened, especially among southerners, the liquor interests, the Catholic church, and eastern industrialists who feared that women social workers would strengthen the movement to curb business. To the charge that giving women the vote would rob them of femininity, Rose Schneiderman replied: "We have women working in the foundries, stripped to the waist, if you please, because of the heat. Yet the Senator says nothing about these women losing their charm. . . . Women in the laundries . . . stand for thirteen or fourteen hours in the terrible steam

and heat with their hands in hot starch. Surely these women won't lose any more of their beauty and charm by putting a ballot in a box once a year. . . ."

The Amendment carried in 1919, but the outcome of the battle for the vote proved disappointing. Women's suffrage had little immediate effect on American politics since wives tended to be politically uninformed and few exercised a political judgment independent of their husbands. Nor did the vote resolve the tensions in the American family. Leisured, middle-class women wanted to be more than homemakers but they were not attracted to the physically tiring and intellectually unchallenging jobs then available to working women. These women insisted that they, no less than men, had a right to happiness through freedom for personal development and individual expression.

Women began to breach the double standard. They smoked and drank in public; they alternately shimmied and slithered as they danced the charleston and the tango; and they insisted upon greater satisfactions (even romantic love!) in marriage as well as liberation from the endless cycle of child rearing that birth control made possible. In the past women had suffered through unhappy marriages. Now couples separated more often when marriage failed to offer emotional fulfillment and companionship. At the same time that women were demanding more of marriage than in the past, many men were unable or unprepared to adjust to the women's new demands and attitudes. As a result the divorce rate soared. In the 1920s the United States had the highest divorce rate in the world, except possibly for the Soviet Union.

In the 1920s widespread anxiety existed over the stability of the American family. Not only the high divorce rate, but also the changing relationship between parents and children, generated those fears. "We seem to be drifting away from the fundamentals in our home life," a midwesterner complained in the 1920s. "The home was once a sacred institution where the family spent most of its time. Now it is a service station except for the old and infirm." Members of the family spent less time with one another and more with their peers outside the home. Poverty had driven tens of thousands of children into the fac-

tories—almost 20 percent of the male population between 10 and 15 worked in 1900—but after 1910 child labor declined as rising family income levels eliminated some of the need.

Compulsory school attendance laws, longer school terms, and the diffusion of secondary education on a mass scale meant that children spent much of their time during their formative years in the classroom. The child's peer group—his fellow students and friends—competed with his parents for his attention and loyalty. In the densely packed cities, children were far less isolated from one another than they had been on the farm. As a result young people born into an urbanized, mass society began to form a "youth culture" with distinctive life-styles. Their parents still cherished many of the values and attitudes of the past and the Old World, but these youngsters were more prone to experiment. Especially among the middle classes, the automobile gave teen-agers new privacy and intimacy, and the telephone put them in instant communication with one another. Thus the young were more open in their attitudes toward sex and pleasure, and they often found themselves in conflict with the traditional mores of their parents.

The social life of the family centered around the evening meal but the rest of the time family members were off in different directions: children at school, fathers at their jobs, mothers doing the household chores. Not only did they work separately, they played separately as well. Each had his routine of leisure-time activities, especially clubs, sports, and other entertainment. "Folks today want to eat in a hurry," complained a butcher in the 1920s, "and get out in the car." The family car, a convenience and source of recreation, became something more, too. "I never feel as close to my family as when we are all together in the car," confided a midwesterner in the 1920s. "We save every place we can and put the money into the car," another explained hopefully. "It keeps the family together." People mortgaged their homes to buy autos before they had acquired bathtubs. "I'll go without food before I'll see us give up the car," was a common attitude. The car became a family symbol, often a pathetic and counterproductive one, and since families without autos did not amount to much, people desperately sought them—but the

car could not supply the cohesion missing in family life in mass society. As the family became less important in the urban setting, formal education came to mean more to young people.

### ***The Expansion of Education***

The coming of the common school during the two decades preceding the Civil War (1840–1860) made basic education available to most white Americans. But quality trailed far behind educational quantity and until this century few received more than eight years of primary schooling. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, however, developments already under way earlier began to bear fruit. Americans stayed in school longer. Over 80 percent of the population between the ages of 5 and 17 attended schools in 1930, a considerable jump since 1890. The school year lengthened, increasing almost forty days between 1890 and 1930, and compulsory school attendance laws began to ensure that potential pupils were not kept home or sent to work prematurely.

Advances in educational participation also came through the spread of high schools. In 1890 few but the children of the rich and upper middle class could study beyond elementary school. By the 1930s the sons and daughters of farmers and working people joined them. As the high school became nearly universal, colleges became the next target for the educational explosion. The percentage of people 18 to 21 enrolled in colleges and universities quadrupled in the period from 1890 to 1930, much of the growth occurring during the 1920s. At the end of that decade a million students attended institutions of higher learning, compared to half that number a dozen years earlier. While these extraordinary advances in the diffusion of education took place, other changes occurred which altered the style and substance of learning in primary and high schools and transformed the old colonial college into the modern university.

The expansion and extension of public education stemmed from several interrelated pressures. Urban growth shifted responsibilities for the socialization and education of children from the home to the school because city families counted less on the labor of their children than did rural families. The man-

agement of large numbers of children in crowded urban settings created problems. There was less room for play than rural children had, and overcrowding strained family life, producing demands that the state assume more of the burden of child rearing. Industrialization also made new demands on the schools to train a labor force in the habits and skills of factory and office. And in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social reformers looked to the schools to promote more equal opportunity for the disadvantaged, to equalize conditions of life, abolish child labor, and to instill social discipline in a society increasingly divided by the tensions of labor violence and urban unrest. The cities filled up with "exotic" immigrants with their different customs and beliefs, their "un-American" styles of life. Some thought they threatened the dominant position of the WASPS, the native-born Anglo-Saxon elements, and they expected the schools to Americanize the newcomers.

Until the twentieth century, high schools and private academies, catering mainly to more prosperous families, prepared adolescents for admission to college. By the 1920s the mission of high schools had changed as their enrollments soared and their doors opened to all income levels. High schools still prepared some for college, an ever-growing percentage, but most of their graduates went directly to work. Vocational training edged its way into the curriculum, under pressure from businessmen for practical courses in typing, bookkeeping, business English and arithmetic, homemaking, and the mechanical arts such as carpentry and auto repair. To make room for these new subjects, students spent less time studying the traditional classical curriculum which had emphasized Latin, mathematics, and history. By the 1920s science also had made heavy inroads into the academic course of study, reflecting the growing tendency for a society, so obviously enjoying the fruits of applied technology, to value scientific knowledge and its applications.

The new curriculum was one of several changes instituted by educational reformers seeking to transform the beleaguered schools. In the 1890s discontent first emerged in sustained form in muckraking attacks on the quality of common schools. Overwhelmed by hundreds of thousands of students, inadequately

financed, committed to a socially conservative mission of imposing on children "a life of order, self discipline, civic loyalty, and respect for private property," the nineteenth-century school system turned to the bureaucratic principles of centralization and standardization. The result was the graded school, frequent examinations, mass-produced textbooks, standardized buildings and salary schedules for teachers. School facilities were run-down, classes overcrowded, teachers overworked and poorly paid, and rote learning the norm. There was little regard to individual differences among children and little attempt to motivate learning by exploiting student interests and unleashing their imaginations. Above all, fear and repression pervaded the classroom. "Why should they look behind when the teacher is in front of them" insisted a principal, explaining why his school did not permit students to move their heads during recitation. "How can you learn anything with your knees and toes out of order," scolded another educator.

Educational progressives believed there were better ways the schools could serve the needs of an industrial society than as "grim factories deadened by routine." They attempted to break down the wall between the school and society by enlarging its functions. In addition to providing vocational instruction, incorporating the pioneering work of settlement houses in the urban ghettos, the schools broadened their mission and looked after children's health, instructed them in hygiene, cultivated taste for music and the fine arts, introduced nature study and organized recreational activities. In these ways reformers thought education could better serve the needs of an urban society. The millions of immigrants arriving from Europe and the rural Americans who now lived in crowded cities had to be schooled in "proper"—that is, middle class—standards of morality, behavior, and deportment. Reformers thus invested the schools with responsibilities for accommodating potentially disruptive elements into the existing order.

A philosopher, John Dewey, pioneered in constructing a theory of progressive education. The schools, he urged, must undertake what the family, neighborhood, shop and farm had previously done. They must train citizens to assume civic

responsibilities for improving society through the application of science and intelligence to social problems, while trying to cultivate the fullest potential for human development in every child. Exploiting new psychological insights, progressive educators insisted that children be regarded, not as miniature adults, but as a distinctive age group with needs which educators must understand and adapt to. Traditional educational doctrine held that subjects such as Latin and mathematics disciplined the mind and personalities of children. The progressives insisted that mathematics did not train people to think more logically, nor did memorization of Latin or English grammar teach students how to write and speak grammatically.

Dewey and other advocates of progressive education inspired dozens of experiments to exploit the student's natural curiosity and encourage learning as a means of self-gratification instead of arbitrarily imposing on children a body of subject matter which—like it or not—they had to assimilate. Thus a student's natural curiosity about experiences in his own life would provide a springboard into the study of nature and society, and the cultivation of the arts. At the same time, progressives tried to replace the coercive atmosphere of the classroom with a more informal, spontaneous environment that encouraged student initiative. Teachers were to become guides rather than taskmasters, and would pay greater attention to individual differences among children.

Progressive education promised more than it delivered. As Dewey's ideas became translated into popular practice only a few teachers had the knowledge, imagination and training to make progressivism work fully. Nor would conservatives tolerate Dewey's idea that the schools should turn out citizens who would become social critics and social reformers, rather than conformists. And few communities were willing to finance the schools with the generosity necessary to implement a truly progressive system. Yet a marked improvement took place in the schools: the classroom atmosphere did become less repressive, the curriculum was broadened, and teachers received better training and better salaries. Education, if not revolutionized, had

at least been revitalized—and the country spent a greater share of its income on education in 1930 than thirty years earlier.

### *The Emergence of the University*

A revolution in higher education paralleled the developments in basic and secondary education. Although in the 1930s only 12 percent of Americans between 18 and 22 were in college, enrollment between 1890 and 1925 had grown almost five times faster than the population. An advanced, industrial economy generating ever higher per capita income required more professionally trained people: doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers. The colleges and universities provided them, but to do so required an overhaul in the structure of higher education, a process that occurred in the half-century following the Civil War.

Seven hundred colleges were founded in America before 1860, partly because of the competitive enterprise of the religious denominations which controlled most of them. Established to promote the interests of a particular denomination by training future ministers and providing an appropriate sectarian environment for the sons of the upper classes, the colleges served the few. As conservators and transmitters of traditional culture, the colleges relied on the classical curriculum and neglected science and other modern disciplines. Most also rejected free inquiry and expensive research, since these might threaten established doctrine. Their mission was to promote sound morals, not to stimulate intellectual inquiry or the advancement of knowledge.

The teachers, mostly clergymen, taught piety. But young men seemed more interested in "getting on" in the world, and in Greek letter fraternities. Originating in the 1820s and 1830s, these clubs filled a gap in college life and "institutionalized various escapes—drinking, smoking, card playing, and seducing" as well as "the new prestige values of worldly success, for they recognized good looks, wealth, good family, income, clothing, good manners." Officially, however, the colleges remained committed to the preeminence of spiritual values.

After the Civil War, science, secularism, and utilitarianism transformed the old liberal arts college into the modern univer-

sity. Before that, the great scientific advances of the preceding two centuries had made limited inroads in higher education. The triumph of Darwinism in the late nineteenth century opened the way for change. Darwinism did more than substitute the theory of evolution for the biblical account of creation. It fostered the feeling that science held the key to the universe. This breakthrough in human knowledge also represented a triumph for the scientific method. It assumed that truth was not fixed, but something man discovered by formulating tentative explanations of puzzling phenomena and then testing the theories experimentally. At the same time that naturalistic explanations of creation were challenging supernatural accounts, medical science discovered the causes of several killer diseases such as tuberculosis. As a result, a dramatic, visible improvement in human welfare took place, giving science enormous prestige among ordinary Americans, further strengthened by such applications of scientific knowledge as the use of electricity in lighting.

In the late nineteenth century, Americans learned that science meant power, and the university became the center for the diffusion and advancement of scientific knowledge. Though some managed to reconcile religion and science, Darwinism convinced many that man, through the use of the scientific method, could understand the impersonal forces governing the world. This belief undermined the religious character of the American college and redefined its mission.

Leading colleges became universities by emphasizing the centrality of research and providing scholars with the resources and conditions to engage in free inquiry. Harvard led the way in 1869 when it chose a scientist, Charles W. Eliot, rather than a clergyman as president. Eliot placed science on an equal footing with the humanities in the curriculum, and he introduced the elective system, giving students considerable leeway in choosing their course of study. The elective principle proved revolutionary because it reawakened intellectual curiosity: undergraduates could pursue their interests and professors could offer specialized instruction in areas in which they did research and had gained expertise.

The old colleges had been financed on a shoestring but the

new universities were far more expensive to run. The university required laboratories and libraries—and a large faculty, many of whom spent much of their time engaged in research and in training apprentice faculty. Increasing knowledge resulted in fragmentation and ushered in the age of the academic specialist. Science split into separate disciplines, such as physics, chemistry, zoology and geology, and specialization eventually reached the more traditional disciplines as well. History, for example, also became “scientific” and specialized. Historians became experts by concentrating on a particular period such as ancient, medieval or modern history, or the history of a particular country.

While science worked to transform the college, new wealth, generated by the industrial development of the late nineteenth century, provided the money. Tycoons such as John D. Rockefeller (benefactor of the University of Chicago) donated millions as tokens of their philanthropic spirit and as a means of winning public approval.

Paralleling an enormous increase in private support for higher education was the emergence of the state university. The first state universities were founded before the Civil War in the South and West, where private colleges were much weaker than in the East. The Morrill Act (1862) created the land-grant state university and provided federal funding for state institutions that offered instruction in agriculture and in the mechanical arts. As the state universities enlarged in the late nineteenth century, they imitated the older institutions but they also developed new functions to serve the people on whose support they depended. They engaged in agricultural research and also established professional schools. Free from sectarian control, the state universities were hospitable to science and to modern curriculums and together with the leading private universities they established graduate schools. Their special contribution was to make college available to thousands who could not afford private institutions and to make public service, together with research and the transmission of liberal education, one of the missions of the modern university.

A precondition of the modern university was academic free-