

Our Changing Economy

New Leisure Class Reverses Tradition

By Philip Stoddard Brown

FOR thousands of years, people young and old had to labor from dawn until dark, with no vacation and few holidays. Only in recent decades—a tiny fraction of recorded history—have people had much respite from work, except on Sundays.



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George Washington, writing to John Fairfax in 1789 regarding work on his several plantations, said that he expected his people to be "at their work as soon as it is light, work till it is dark, and be diligent while they are at it."

As recently as 1922, employees of the United States Steel Corporation worked, on the average, 64½ hours a week. Before and during World War I, the average was 68 to 69 hours. By contrast, in July of this year, 72 per cent of persons with nonfarm jobs worked 40 hours a week or less.

Not long ago, only the boss and a few salaried employees took vacations. Today, every regular employee of most firms gets a vacation, and usually it's with pay.

Problems Different From Those in 1882

In the past, most societies had small leisure classes. In many societies, the division was sharp: gentlemen did no work and workers had no leisure. So it was in England in the 17th century. So, too, in Virginia during the first years of English settlement, but not for long. Idleness and long fingernails have never afforded much social prestige in North America.

Today, in capitalistic America, work habits are the reverse of what they were throughout all the past we know about. Workers have more leisure than their bosses.

Our economy has changed almost beyond recognition since 1882, when the Knights of Labor inaugurated Labor Day and when the ordinary laborer had little leisure and no security.

- Today leisure is often a problem. Those who have the most leisure tend to be least equipped to use it profitably and pleasurably; those who have little, to be best equipped.

- Today, it's difficult to see how the managerial and professional classes can ever achieve the 3- or 4-day work-week that wage-earners may enjoy by the end of the 20th century.

The responsibilities of executives in business and government have increased so greatly that they can't, in most cases, be fulfilled even in a 40-hour week. Success in professional life demands what George Washington demanded of his laborers: "Every labourer (male and female) do as much in the 24 hours as their strength without endangering the health, or constitution will allow."

How can any manager of a big business, any department head of government, any truly professional lawyer or doctor, or any competent newspaperman shorten his work-week to 20 hours? It takes this much time for these men simply to keep abreast of what their colleagues are doing and what goes on in the world about them. Take away a few hours of working time from most of them and their productivity would fall sharply.

- Today, more than in the past, there is also the problem of how to preserve our gains in purchasing power and leisure—or, rather, how to preserve the satisfactions they initially create.

Gains Are Dissipated

The past is quickly past. Former hardships are soon forgotten; new conveniences and possessions, soon taken for granted. The pleasures afforded by increased leisure and material comforts seldom carry over from one generation to another. At least, it would be hard to show that the much shorter workweek, greater material comforts and increased possessions of a laborer or mill foreman today make these men and their families happier than their counterparts of 20, or even 200 years ago.

It is sad to reflect how quickly the gains of recent years have been dissipated in terms of satisfactions. Forty years ago, if a steel worker in Gary had known that his son would earn a great deal more (in actual purchasing power) in 40 hours than he earned in 65 hours, he might have supposed that life for his son would be far more pleasurable, and far sweeter in terms of human relationships than it now appears to be.