MIDDLETOWN

A Study in American Culture

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Foreword by
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FOREWORD

On every hand we hear the admonition, "The study of society must be made objective." When one asks what is meant by this, he is referred to the natural and the biological sciences. But while the average man has little difficulty in comprehending what is meant by objective in the study of electricity, bees, etc., he finds himself at a loss to visualize the objects of study in a social inquiry. There is nothing strange in this, because the professionals in social science are still far from confident that they have their hands upon the social reality. True, many attempts have been made to find the basic factors in society, but these factors have been sought, for the most part, in the laboratories of biology and psychology, which is not unlike groping behind the scenes and digging under the stage, disregarding the comedies, tragedies, and dramas in plain sight. On the other hand, experience with social phenomena is bringing us nearer and nearer to a realization that we must deal directly with life itself, that the realities of social science are what people do. Seemingly in full realization of this, the authors of this book have patiently observed an American community and sketched out for us, in the large, the whole round of its activities. No one had ever subjected an American community to such a scrutiny; probably few would regard it as worth while. Rather have we been taught to set store by studies of the individual on one hand, and on the other, on the gathering of intimate statistics as to wages, living conditions, etc., for groups in our national population at large, as coal miners, teamsters, working girls, etc. The first of these seems to have been ordered upon the theory that maladjustments of individuals might be dealt with effectively if one knew a true sample of personal histories, and, in the main, studies of this kind have justified their making. The second seems to rest on the assumption that occupational groups present collective problems which can be dealt with on a national level, the maladjustments in this case arising in the failure of these groups to articulate properly with other groups. Here
Chapter III

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Two major experiences in Middletown antedate 1890, the
date taken as the horizon of this study; the pioneer life of the
earlier part of the century, and the gas boom of the end of
the eighties which ushered in Middletown’s industrial revolution.
Both are within the memory of men who still walk the streets
of the city.

The first permanent settlement in this county occurred in 1820,
and county government was granted in 1827. The memory
of one of the oldest citizens, a leading local physician
throughout the nineties, reaches back to the eighteen-forties.
Within the lifetime of this one man local transportation has
changed from virtually the “hoof and sail” methods in use in
the time of Homer; grain has ceased to be cut in the state by
threshing the sickle into the ripened grain as in the days of Ruth
and threshing done by trampling out by horses on the threshing
floor or by flail; getting a living and making a home have ceased
to be conducted under one roof by the majority of the Amer-
ican people; education has ceased to be a luxury accessible only
to the few; in his own field of medicine the X-ray, anaesthetics,
sepsis, and other developments have tended to make the heal-
ing art a science; electricity, the telephone, telegraph, and radio
have appeared; and the theory of evolution has shaken the
theological cosmogony that had reigned for centuries.

This local physician whose lifetime so nearly spans that of

1 That this stupendous change within a single lifetime was a phenomenon
of the whole country, not merely of a backwoods section, is indicated by the
recollections of a man born a year earlier than this physician, under the
shadow of Boston State House: Henry Adams writes, “... on looking back,
fifty years later, at his own figure in 1854, and pondering on the needs of
the twentieth century, he wondered whether, on the whole, the boy of
1854 stood nearer to the thought of 1904, or to that of the year 1 ... —in essentials like religion, ethics, philosophy; in history, literature, art;
in the concepts of all science, except perhaps mathematics, the American
boy of 1854 stood nearer the year 1 than to the year 1900.” Education of

2 The boy grew up not in the county in which Middletown is situated
but in a near-by county. His boyhood environment described here was not
that of the rude pioneer villages of the state but of the open country; but
the facts that life in the diminutive Middletown of 1840 did not differ
markedly in fundamentals from that of the open country around it and
that some people in Middletown today grew up under open country condi-
tions not unlike those described are the reasons for the inclusion of this
material here.

Middletown, the tenth of a family of eleven, was named, with
the characteristic political fervor of the time, General William
Harrison K——. The log farmhouse of his father was ceiled
inside without plaster, the walls bare save for three prized pic-
tures of Washington, Jackson, and Clay. All meals were cooked
before the great kitchen fireplace, corn pones and “cracklings”
and bread being baked in the glare of a large curved reflector
set before the open fire. At night the rooms were lighted by
the open fire and by tallow dips; there was great excitement
later when the first candle mold appeared in the neighborhood.
Standard time was unknown; few owned watches, and sun time
was good enough during the day, while early and late candle
lighting served to distinguish the periods at night. When the
fire went out on the family hearth the boy ran to a neighbor’s
to bring home fire between two boards; it was not until later
that the first box of little sticks tipped with sulphur started the
neighborhood.

The homely wisdom of pioneer life prescribed that children
be passed through a hole in the trunk of a hollow tree to cure
“short growth”; hogs must be slaughtered at certain times of
the moon or the bacon would shrink; babies must be weaned at
certain times of the zodiac; the “madstone,” “a small bone from
the heart of a deer,” was a valuable antidote for hydrophobia
or snake-bite; certain persons “blew the fire out of a burn,” ar-
rested hemorrhage or cured erysipelas by uttering mysterious
charms; a pan of water under the bed was used to check night
sweats; bleeding was the sovereign remedy for fits, loss of
consciousness, fever, and many other ills; and “in eruptive
fevers, especially measles, where the eruption was delayed, a tea
made of sheep’s dung, popularly known as ‘nanny tea,’ was a
household remedy.”

Social calls were unknown, but all-day visits were the rule, a
family going to visit either by horseback, the children seated
behind the grown-ups, or in chairs set in the springless farm
wagon. Social intercourse performed a highly important service; there were no daily papers in the region, and much news traveled by word of mouth. Nobody came to the home around mealtime who was not urged to take his place at the table—preachers being particularly welcome. Men would talk together for hours on the Providential portent of the great Comet of 1843, or of the time ten years before when the "stars fell." Men and women went miles and spent days in order to hear champions argue disputed political or religious points. People "got religion" and were "awakened to sin" at camp meetings under the vivid exhortation of baptizing preachers. The "Word" wove its influence closely about everyday acts.

Forty years later, in 1885, before gas and wealth spouted from the earth, bringing in their wake a helterskelter industrial development, Middletown, a placid county-seat of some 6,000 souls, still retained some of the simplicity of this early pioneer life. "On the streets... on fair days lawyers, doctors, the officials of the county courts, and the merchants walked about in their shirt sleeves. The house painter went along with his ladder on his shoulder. In the stillness there could be heard the hammers of the carpenters building a new house for the son of a merchant who had married the daughter of a blacksmith." a Men in their prime who had grown up under pioneer conditions now controlled the affairs of Middletown. They were occupied with such momentous matters as offering "$200 for the scalp or body of any person in the city caught setting fire to the property of another," or passing regulations in response to complaints about neighborhood cows running through the streets and destroying lawns, or with badly blundering the job of laying the first town sewer.

The thin edge of industry was beginning to appear, though few people thought of the place then as anything but an agricultural county-seat: a bagging plant employed from a hundred to a hundred and fifty people, making bags from the flax grown in the surrounding countryside; a clay tile yard employed some fifteen; a roller-skate "company" in an old barn up an alley, perhaps eight; a feather-duster "factory," five or six; a small foundry, half a dozen; and a planing mill and two flour mills, a few more. It was still for Middletown the age of wood, and a new industry meant a hardwood skewer shop, a barrel-heading shop, or a small wooden pump works.

Such modest ventures in manufacturing as the community exhibited were the tentative responses of small local capital to the thing that was happening to the whole Middle West. The Federal Census reveals a steady movement westward of the center of manufacturing; in 1880 it was still in Pennsylvania, but by 1890 it had pushed on until it was eight and one-half miles west of Canton, Ohio. Dry-goods clerks were beginning to spend their evenings perfecting little models of washing-machines, mechanical hair-clippers, can-openers, various power-driven devices. The proprietor of a small Middletown restaurant who led a town band in the evening and "was always neglecting business to tinker around at things" saw a crude cash-register in a saloon in a neighboring city while on a trip there with his band, conceived the idea of a self-adding register, and set to work in the hope of making his fortune. The annual total of patents registered in Washington, which had remained practically constant during the decade of the seventies, jumped in 1890 to roughly double the 1880 figure.

In the state in which Middletown is located, the number of wage-earners increased from 69,508 in 1880 to 110,590 in 1890, and by 1900 was to total 155,956. The capital invested in manufacturing plants in the state doubled between 1880 and 1890 and was almost to double again by 1900.

The quiet life of the town drowsing about its courthouse square with its wooden pump—and iron dippers, punctually renewed every Fourth of July—was beginning to stir to these outside influences. A small Business and Manufacturing Association was formed about 1886 for "the promotion of any and all undertakings calculated to advance the interests, improvements and general welfare of the city."

And then in the fall of '86 came gas.

In 1876 a company boring for coal twelve miles north of the town had plugged up the hole and abandoned the project after boring 600 feet; all they "struck" was a foul odor and a roaring sound deep in the bowels of the earth, and rumor had it that they had invaded "his Satanic Majesty's domain." Nine years later, when natural gas was discovered at other points in the Middle West, the incident of the plugged-up hole

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a From Sherwood Anderson's description of the even tenor of life in these Middletowns of the '80s in his Four White.
INTRODUCTION

north of town was recalled. In October, 1886, there was
great local excitement over the plans “to bore for gas or oil
or both.” In November we read, “The persons employed to bore
for oil have this morning ‘struck’ gas, and everybody is on
the way to see for themselves.” The roar of the escaping gas
is said to have been audible for two miles and the flame when
it was “lit up” could be seen in Middletown a dozen miles
away.

The boom was on.

The laying of a pipe line to bring the gas into the county-seat
began immediately, and new wells were sunk. By the following
April a local well was producing 5,000,000 feet daily. New
wells multiplied on every hand. In January, 1891, the local
paper exclaimed, “We have a new gas well which really does
eclipse all others in the [gas] belt. Daily output is nearly
15,000,000 feet, and they worked over thirty hours trying to
anchor the flow.” No wonder the little town went wild!

Meanwhile, from the spring of ’87 on through ’91 and ’92, the “boomers” were arriving:

“Four vestibule, one dining-room and one baggage special train
from Buffalo with 134 of its capitalists came in last night to see
for themselves what gas can do and are much pleased. . . . Taken
in carriages to all the factories and sites. . . . Grand manufactur-
ing exhibition at the Rink, and a beautiful display of four open
car street cars.” “A trainload of 1,200 from Cincinnati.” “Quite a
number of New York City capitalists and newspaper men came in
from the East last night; three and one-half pages of the —
Hotel register were covered with their signatures.” “American
Association for the Advancement of Science visits the city and
witnesses the wonders of natural gas; 300 scientists and men of
affairs in the party.”

Real estate was being turned over with dizzy rapidity. In
1888 a man tried to buy an eight-acre chunk of farm land on
the outskirts of town but, shying at the price of $1,600, took
only a sixty-day option. Before the sixty-day option expired
the eight acres changed hands five times, the final price being
$3,200.

Nothing short of the sky seemed an adequate limit to the cit-
izens of Middletown. A contemporary parody runs—

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

“Tell me not in mournful numbers
That the town is full of gloom,
For the man’s a crank who slumbers
In these bursting days of boom.”

Optimists predicted a population of 50,000 in five years and
even the pessimists allowed only ten years. The general sent-
iment was that the gas supply was inexhaustible. Some called
it “The City of Eternal Gas.” The Introduction to the Middle-
town City Directory announced confidently, “Every forty
acres will supply a gas well, and 576 wells can be drilled within
[the] corporate limits and suburbs.” “The mathematical
deduction would be,” chanted a “boom book,” “that the continu-
ance of this supply would be, at least, one hundred times as
long as at Pittsburgh, which would be 700 years.” Great flam-
beans burned recklessly day and night in the streets and at the
wells. When the pipe lines were laid, consumers were charged
by the fixture rather than by any system of exact measure-
ment. It was cheaper to leave the gas on and to throw open
doors and windows than to expend a match in relighting it. 4

With the boomers came new industries hired by free fuel
and free building sites. The earlier Business and Manufactur-
ing Association awakened to new life in February, 1887, as the
“Board of Trade,” and concerted efforts were made to “sell the
town” to industrial capital. Glass came first. Next were the
iron mills—a bridge company, a nail works. A diary for 1888-9
buzzes with rumors of the coming of these new plants:

“Report that another glass factory is coming immediately.”
“Work progressing on the pulp mill and rubber factory.” “A
nail works wants to come here from ——.” “Considerable talk
about a Palace Stock Car Factory.” “A boot and shoe factory is
coming; building commenced this afternoon.”

4 “For the past six months” (the latter half of 1887), according to the
State Geologist, “there has been an average waste of about 100,000,000
cubic feet of gas per day in this state. This is worth $10,000. . . . The
volume of gas wasted in the last six months is . . . worth $1,500,000.”
(Sixteenth Annual Report of the [State] Department of Geology and
Natural History: 1888, p. 202.)
The value of the natural gas produced (not including that wasted) in
the state in 1888 was $500,000; it doubled in ’87 and again in ’88; by ’90
it was two and one-third million dollars, in ’95 passed five million, and in
1900 reached its high point of seven and one-quarter millions.
INTRODUCTION

By the summer of 1890 the local paper speaks of the thriving little "gasopolis" with pardonable pride:

"Two and one-half years ago when natural gas was first discovered [Middletown] was a county-seat of 7,000 inhabitants. . . . It has grown since that time to a busy manufacturing city of 12,000. . . . Over forty factories have located here during that time. . . . There has been $1,500,000 invested in Middletown manufacturing enterprises employing 3,000 men. . . . Over thirty gas wells have been drilled in and around the city, every one of which is good. . . ."

The first boom of '87 and '88 was the spontaneous, unorganized rush to a new El Dorado. When the earlier boom was renewed in '91 it was engineered by the Eastern land syndicate and carried forward by the local boosters' association, the Citizens' Enterprise Company, organized in August, 1891. The last-named organization raised a $200,000 fund to lure new industries with free sites and capital.

Several years later, as abruptly as it had come, the gas departed. By the turn of the century or shortly thereafter, natural gas for manufacturing purposes was virtually a thing of the past in Middletown. But the city had grown by then to 20,000, and, while industry after industry moved away, a substantial foundation had been laid for the industrial life of the city of today.

And yet it is easy, peering back at the little city of 1890 through the spectacles of the present, to see in the dust and clatter of its new industrialism a developed industrial culture that did not exist. Crop reports were still printed on the front page of the leading paper in 1890, and the paper carried a daily column of agricultural suggestions headed "Farm and Garden." Local retail stores were overgrown country stores swaggering under such names as "The Temple of Economy" and "The Beehive Bazaar." The young Goliath, Industry, was still a neighborly sort of fellow. The agricultural predominance in the county-seat was gone, but the diffusion of the new industrial type of culture was as yet largely superficial—only skin-deep.

This, then, suggests the background of the city which is the subject of this field investigation.

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8 These figures should all be deflated a little, for among the "over forty factories" were many that were operating on a "shoe-string" or less, and plant after plant failed to weather the first year. The air was full of new inventions, and these infant industries plunged courageously into manufacturing anything and everything for a frequently, as yet, vague market. Thus one local industry manufactured a wooden clothes washing-machine, a fire-killer scarcely proclaimed "surely one of the grandest inventions of the age," and a patent can-opener.

8 Bidding was keen for new industries among cities in the gas belt. In return for specific aid from local capital, the new company would frequently pledge itself to grow at a desirable rate, e.g., a Brass and Novelty Company from Rochester, N. Y., contracted "to employ fifty men the first six months, one hundred at the end of the first year, and 150 at the end of the second year."