

The Americans

The Democratic Experience

Daniel J. Boorstin



"The most exciting and stimulating book on what Americans are up to that I have seen in many years." —Bruce Catton

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THE
AMERICANS

THE
DEMOCRATIC
EXPERIENCE

Daniel J. Boorstin

"American life is a
powerful solvent."

GEORGE SANTAYANA



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THE AMERICANS

**THE DEMOCRATIC
EXPERIENCE**

FOR *Ruth*

CHANGES

In 1868, as the first transcontinental railroad was nearing completion, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., predicted the impending transformation of American experience:

"Here is an enormous, an incalculable force . . . let loose suddenly upon mankind; exercising all sorts of influences, social, moral, and political; precipitating upon us novel problems which demand immediate solution; banishing the old, before the new is half matured to replace it; bringing the nations into close contact before yet the antipathies of race have begun to be eradicated; giving us a history full of changing fortunes and rich in dramatic episodes. Yet, with the curious hardness of a material age, we rarely regard this new power otherwise than as a money-getting and time-saving machine. . . . not many of those . . . who fondly believe they control it, ever stop to think of it as . . . the most tremendous and far-reaching engine of social change which has ever either blessed or cursed mankind. . . . Perhaps if the existing community would take now and then the trouble to pass in review the changes it has already witnessed it would be less astounded at the revolutions which continually do and continually must flash before it; perhaps also it might with more grace accept the inevitable, and cease from useless attempts at making a wholly new world conform itself to the rules and theories of a bygone civilization."

The century after the Civil War was to be an Age of Revolution—of countless, little-noticed revolutions, which occurred not in the halls of legislatures or on battlefields or on the barricades but in homes and farms and factories and schools and stores, across the landscape and in the air—so little noticed because they came so swiftly, because they touched Americans everywhere and every day. Not merely the continent but human experience itself, the very meaning of community, of time and space, of present and future, was being revised again and again; a new democratic world was being invented and was being discovered by Americans wherever they lived.

CONTENTS

Changes ix

BOOK ONE EVERYWHERE COMMUNITIES

PART ONE

<i>The Go-Getters</i>	3
1. "Gold from the Grass Roots Up"	5
2. Rituals of the Open Range	18
3. Private Wars for the Public Domain	26
4. Lawless Sheriffs and Honest Desperadoes	34
5. Rounding Up Rock Oil	41
6. Generalized Go-Getters: Lawyers	53
7. Exploiting the Federal Commodity: Divorce and Gambling	64
8. Crime As a Service Institution	77

PART TWO

<i>Consumption Communities</i>	89
9. A Democracy of Clothing	91
10. Consumers' Palaces	101
11. Nationwide Customers	109
12. Goods Sell Themselves	113
13. How Farmers Joined Consumption Communities	118
14. Citifying the Country	130
15. A New Freedom for Advertisers: Breaking the Agate Rule	137
16. Building Loyalty to Consumption Communities	145

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 17. "The Consumer Is King" | 148 |
| 18. Christmas and Other Festivals of Consumption | 157 |

PART THREE*Statistical Communities* 165

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 19. A Numerical Science of Community: The Rise of the Average Man | 167 |
| 20. Communities of Risk | 173 |
| 21. Statistical Expectations: What's Your Size? | 188 |
| 22. Making Things No Better Than They Need to Be | 193 |
| 23. "The Incorruptible Cashier" | 200 |
| 24. Income Consciousness | 205 |
| 25. The Rediscovery of Poverty | 214 |
| 26. Measuring the Mind | 219 |
| 27. From "Naughtiness" to "Behavior Deviation" | 227 |
| 28. Statistical Morality | 238 |

PART FOUR*The Urban Quest for Place* 245

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 29. An American Diaspora | 247 |
| 30. Politics for City Immigrants | 252 |
| 31. Stretching the City: The Decline of Main Street | 261 |
| 32. Booming the Real Estate Frontier | 273 |
| 33. Antidotes for the City: Utopia, Renewal, Suburbia | 281 |
| 34. Cities within Cities: The Urban Blues | 291 |

BOOK TWO**THE DECLINE OF THE MIRACULOUS****PART FIVE***Leveling Times and Places* 307

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 35. Condense! Making Food Portable through Time | 309 |
| 36. Meat for the Cities | 316 |
| 37. Varying the Everyday Menu | 322 |
| 38. People's Palaces on Wheels | 332 |
| 39. Walls Become Windows | 336 |
| 40. Homogenizing Space | 346 |

PART SIX

<i>Mass-Producing the Moment</i>	359
41. Time Becomes Fungible: Packaging the Unit of Work	361
42. Making Experience Repeatable	370
43. Extending Experience: The New Segregation	390
44. The Decline of the Unique and the Secret	397
45. In Search of the Spontaneous	402

BOOK THREE

A POPULAR CULTURE

PART SEVEN

<i>The Thinner Life of Things</i>	411
46. Endless Streams of Ownership	413
47. New Penumbrae of Property	422
48. The Semi-Independent Businessman	428
49. From Packing to Packaging: The New Strategy of Desire	434

PART EIGHT

<i>Language, Knowledge, and the Arts</i>	449
50. The Decline of Grammar: The Colloquial Conquers the Classroom	451
51. From Oratory to Public Speaking: Fireside Politics	462
52. A Higher Learning for All	478
53. Educating "the Great Army of Incapables"	490
54. Art Becomes Enigma	502
55. The Exotic Becomes Commonplace	514

BOOK FOUR

THE FUTURE ON SCHEDULE

PART NINE

<i>Search for Novelty</i>	525
56. The Social Inventor: Inventing for the Market	527
57. Communities of Inventors: Solutions in Search of Problems	537

58. Flow Technology: The Road to the Annual Model	546
---	-----

PART TEN

<i>Mission and Momentum</i>	557
-----------------------------	-----

59. Prologue to Foreign Aid	559
-----------------------------	-----

60. Samaritan Diplomacy	568
-------------------------	-----

61. Not Whether but When: The New Momentum	579
--	-----

<i>Epilogue: Unknown Coasts</i>	599
---------------------------------	-----

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	601
------------------------	-----

<i>Bibliographical Notes</i>	605
------------------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	683
--------------	-----

Book One

EVERYWHERE COMMUNITIES

“When you get there, there isn’t any there there.”

GERTRUDE STEIN

AMERICANS reached out to one another. A new civilization found new ways of holding men together—less and less by creed or belief, by tradition or by place, more and more by common effort and common experience, by the apparatus of daily life, by their ways of thinking about themselves. Americans were now held together less by their hopes than by their wants, by what they made and what they bought, and by how they learned about everything. They were held together by the new names they gave to the things they wanted, to the things they owned, and to themselves. These everywhere communities floated over time and space, they could include anyone without his effort, and sometimes without his knowing. Men were divided not by their regions or their roots, but by objects and notions that might be anywhere and could be everywhere. Americans lived now not merely in a half-explored continent of mountains and rivers and mines, but in a new continent of categories. These were the communities where they were told (and where they believed) that they belonged.

PART ONE

The Go-Getters

"Most of the time we were solitary adventurers in a great land as fresh and new as a spring morning, and we were free and full of the zest of darers."

CHARLES GOODNIGHT

"Money-getters are the benefactors of our race."

P. T. BARNUM

"To live outside the law you must be honest."

BOB DYLAN

THE YEARS AFTER the Civil War when the continent was only partly explored were the halcyon days of the Go-Getters. They went in search of what others had never imagined was there to get. The Go-Getters made something out of nothing, they brought meat out of the desert, found oil in the rocks, and brought light to millions. They discovered new resources, and where there seemed none to be discovered, they invented new ways of profiting from others who were trying to invent and to discover. Lawyers, who in the Old World had been the staid props of tradition, became a Go-Getting profession, profiting from the hopes of others, from the successes and frustrations of boosters and transients. Federalism itself became a profitable commodity, making business for lawyers and hotelkeepers and bartenders, and building improbable new cities. The moralism of Americans, even their high-minded desire to prohibit vice, itself

became a resource, created new enterprises, accumulating fortunes for those who satisfied illicit wants. All over the continent—on the desert, under the soil, in the rocks, in the hearts of cities—appeared surprising new opportunities.

1

"Gold from the Grass Roots Up"

AMERICANS WOULD BECOME the world's great meat eaters. In the Old World, beef was the diet of lords and men of wealth. For others it was a holiday prize. But American millions would eat like lords—because of the efforts of American Go-Getters in the half-charted West.

The Western combination of desert, inedible forage, and unmarketable wild animals offered a puzzling, enticing opportunity to men in search of new wealth. It was seized by Western cattlemen and cowboys. Their great opportunity was to use apparently useless land that belonged to nobody. "There's gold from the grass roots down," declared California Joe, a guide in the gold-rich Dakotas in the 1870's, "but there's more gold from the grass roots up." Westerners took some time to discover that gold. But once they discovered it, a rush for the new gold was on. That rush would transform much of the West, would shape the American diet, and created some of the most distinctive American institutions and folk heroes—including the cowboy.

NOBODY KNOWS EXACTLY how it all began. Legend has it that sometime toward the end of the Civil War a heavy-laden govern-

ment ox train traveling through the northern plains of eastern Wyoming was caught in a snowstorm and had to be abandoned. The driver returned the next spring to see what had become of his cargo. Instead of the skeletons he had expected to find, he saw his oxen, living, fat, and healthy. How had they survived?

The answer lay in a resource that unknowing Americans had trampled underfoot in their haste to cross the "Great American Desert" to reach lands that sometimes proved barren. In the Eastern parts of the United States the preferred grass for forage was a cultivated plant. It grew well with enough rain, then when cut and stored it would "cure" and become nourishing "hay" for winter feed. But in the dry grazing lands of the great West, that familiar blue-joint grass was often killed by drought. To raise cattle out there seemed risky or even hopeless.

Who could imagine a fairy-tale grass that required no rain and somehow made it possible for cattle to feed themselves all winter? But the surprising Western wild grasses were just like that. They had wonderfully convenient features that made them superior to the grasses cultivated by Eastern cattlemen. Various known as buffalo grass, grama grass, or mesquite grass, they were not only immune to drought; the lack of summer and autumn rains actually preserved them. They were not juicy like the cultivated Eastern grasses, but had short, hard stems. And they did not need to be "cured" in a barn, but dried right where they grew on the ground. When they dried in this way they remained naturally sweet and nourishing through the winter. Cattle left outdoors to fend for themselves thrived on this God-given hay. And the cattle themselves helped plant the fresh grass year after year, for they trampled the natural seeds firmly into the soil to be watered by the melting snows of winter and the occasional rains of spring. The dry summer air cured them, much as storing in a barn cured the cultivated grasses.

In winter the drifts of snow, dissolving under the warm breath of the cattle, enlarged the range which in summer was limited by lack of water. Even when deep snow covered the grama grass, the Western range offered "browse feed" in the form of low shrubs. The white sage (*Eurotia lanata*; sometimes called winter fat) had, like other sages, its own remarkable qualities, for its nutritious value improved after it had been through a frost.

The Western cattle, too, had surprising virtues all their own. The great career of the Texas Longhorns had begun in Spain. Their ancestors had been brought over by the Spanish explorers and missionaries, who raised them for beef or for the bullfight. By the eighteenth century thousands of head, strayed from the missions, were roaming wild. When settlers from the United States came to the Mexican

province of Texas in great numbers in the 1830's, they found large stocks of wild cattle bearing no brand or any other mark of ownership. To acquire a herd of Texas Longhorns required only the skill of the hunter. Texans, forgetting that these were descended from Spanish cattle, began to think of them as native wild animals—"wilder than the deer."

When the knowledgeable Army scientist Major William H. Emory was surveying the southern boundary of Texas in 1857 after the Mexican War, he reported that "hunting the wild horses and cattle is the regular business of the inhabitants of Laredo and other towns along the Rio Grande." But such hunting was no child's play. "The wild cattle of Texas, miscalled tame," were, according to an experienced hunter, "fifty times more dangerous to footmen than the fiercest buffalo." In the years after Texas' independence, they ranged over most of the state. This was the cow that made the cowboy.

Seldom has a wild animal so shaped the life of a civilized people. We read with incredulity how the buffalo dominated the life of the Plains Indians, yet the Texas Longhorn wielded a similar power over thousands of Western Americans. One consequence was, as J. Frank Dobie has explained, that "America's Man on Horseback" was "not a helmeted soldier, but a booted cowboy" who had his own kind of pride and insolence and self-confidence. The Texas Longhorn put the cowboy on horseback, kept him in the saddle, and fixed the rhythm of his life. The wildness of the Wild West, then, was in large part the wildness of the Texas Longhorn.

"In Texas," the saying went, "cattle live for the sake of man, but in all other countries, man lives for the sake of his cattle." Old World peasants were accustomed to coddle their cattle, and in harsh weather brought them indoors to sleep with the family. The "well-bred" Shorthorn cow of the East, as the cowboys remarked, had been spoiled by civilization. "Take her away from her sheltered surroundings and turn her loose on the range, and she is as helpless as most duchesses would be if left on a desert island." But since the Longhorns had preserved the wild animal's ability to fend for itself, the Western cattleman was saved much of the trouble of looking after them. Their long, sharp horns were no mere ornament, for the mother cows knew how to use them against wolves and others who attacked their calves. The Longhorns liked water and were ingenious at finding it. Ranging in solitude or in small groups, they did not require the large water source of a traveling herd. When a number of cows traveled together with their brood, they even developed their own lookout system. Two at a time would stand guard against the wolves while the other cows took the long trip to water, and then returned to refresh their own calves with milk.