

Third Edition

# The Private Side of American History

Readings in Everyday Life

Edited by Thomas R. Frazier



Since **2** 1865

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**Third Edition**

**The Private Side  
of  
American History**  
**Readings in Everyday Life**

**Edited by**

**Thomas R. Frazier**

*The Bernard M. Baruch College  
of The City University of New York*

Since  1865

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## Preface

Most studies of history concentrate on public figures and public affairs, the events and people that most historians consider important and influential. What tends to be left out in these traditional presentations is the ordinary, day-to-day life of most of the members of the given society—that is, the “private side” of history. This phrase is meant to suggest not events hidden from public view but, rather, personal incidents and the attitudes of ordinary people—especially their responses to the policies of the dominant power in their society.

This Third Edition of *The Private Side of American History* continues and expands on the themes of the first two editions. The essays collected here present a sampling of the varied attitudes, life-styles, living arrangements, and cultural conflicts that have affected the American people. The selections deal both with the mainstream culture and with cultural groups considered deviant by the mainstream. Portrayed here are people—rich and poor, black and white, male and female, old and young—as they go

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about their daily tasks trying to provide for themselves a satisfactory way of life. New topics covered in this Third Edition include the settlement of the Great Plains, the formation of an all-black community, the expansion of women's employment opportunities, the political power of conservative religion, the structure of a high school education, the struggle of farmers against ecological disaster, the impact on society of returning war veterans, the plight of undocumented workers, and the influence of television on perceptions of social reality.

This portrayal is necessarily incomplete, for only an encyclopedic work could encompass the complexities of everyday life throughout American history. But it is hoped that the essays presented here will give the reader a taste of the manifold cultures found within American society today and in the past.

The sixteen selections, arranged in roughly chronological order, are grouped into four sections, each of which concludes with an annotated bibliography. The headnote accompanying each selection attempts to place the subject matter in its historical context. A brief introduction to the volume describes the major areas that should be considered in a historical survey of everyday life.

For assistance in the preparation of this revision I would like to thank Drake Bush, my new editor at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and my former editors, William J. Wisneski and Thomas A. Williamson, who suggested the theme of the original edition and provided support and encouragement. For scholarly assistance I would like to express my appreciation to the following colleagues: Paul S. Boyer, University of Wisconsin—Madison; Timothy H. Breen, Northwestern University; Joseph R. Conlin, California State University, Chico; Ronald K. Hambleton, University of Massachusetts—Amherst, David Nasaw, City University of New York, College of Staten Island; Daniel T. Rodgers, Princeton University, Terry P. Wilson, University of California, Berkeley; and Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, Rutgers University.

Thomas R. Frazier



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# Introduction

In recent years the traditional presentation of American history in schools and colleges has come under criticism. The growth of various liberation movements in the 1960s has led to a rewriting of many history texts to include material on blacks, American Indians, white ethnic groups, and women, among others. New Left historiography has brought about a consideration of economic and class interests both domestically and in foreign policy. A third area in which the historical record has been remiss is the one represented by the essays reprinted in this volume—the realm of the everyday life of the American people, the private side of American history. The traditional emphasis on public events has resulted in an historical record that fails to provide sufficient insight into the role of ordinary people in the development of our culture and society. Their feelings, the ways in which they responded or reacted to public events, the hopes, desires, and needs that have been the basis of their response are now recognized by many American historians as a legitimate and important area of historical concern.

In attempting to understand and write about the everyday life of ordinary people, it has been necessary for historians to draw on the theoretical and methodological approaches of the social sciences. Several of the selections in this volume, in fact, have been written by professional sociologists and anthropologists. Historians are only just beginning to apply to recent American history the new historiographical approach so well represented in the third edition of Volume I of *The Private Side of American History*, which treats America's early growth.

This second volume is concerned not so much with a growing America as with the attempts to build a national culture based on "traditional American values" in the face of serious challenges by different groups who have little desire to participate in such a value system at the expense of



their own culture and perceived past. The consensus on the national culture so sought has proved to be extremely fragile and ultimately incapable of being sustained. When history is viewed from the perspective of the "movers and shakers" of the nation, as it has been in the traditional textbooks, the consensus appears to have been established. When the everyday life of the American people is examined, however, the fragility of the consensus is clear. While the people may appear quietly to acquiesce in the dominant culture of the society, they go right on living their lives, often outside its stated values.

In this volume we will examine the attempts to establish a cultural consensus and will look at those who try to pattern their lives after its perceived values. We will look more often, however, at those who live by a different set of norms, those whose continued existence challenges the dominant culture and who, ultimately, refuse to abide by the rules of what has been called "the American way of life." The groups dealt with in this volume fall, for the most part, then, into the category of those left out of or briefly mentioned in, the traditional texts: women, poor people, ethnic minorities, the young, and the old, among others. But the focus here is not on the causes of their oppression or the conflicts in which they engage in their attempts to come to grips with the dominant power in our society. We concentrate, rather, on the effects of their oppression and the adaptations and adjustments they have made in their attempts to live as fully as possible under often difficult circumstances. Throughout the nation's history, the majority of the people in the United States have lived outside the dominant culture; so we are, in fact, exploring here the private lives of most Americans.

What we are concerned with, then, are the things that most Americans do most of the time—the day-to-day activities and experiences that concern and shape the individual and, thus, are factors in shaping American society. This "private side" of American history is revealed by studying those areas of concern common to the majority of people throughout history.

The quality of individual life is determined largely by such basic factors as work, education, family relationships, and stage in the life cycle. By examining what work people do, how they feel about what they do, what its effect is on them, and whether or not it does what they expect it to—to provide them with a living—we can see the effect employment, or lack of it, has on society as a whole. We need also to understand the impact that the various sources of education in our society—schools, mass media, advertising, family and peer group interaction, and religious institutions, among others—have on the total development of the individual. Because, traditionally, the family has been one of the major forces shaping an individual's life, we must look at the family structure in the United States and see how changes in the structure affect the lives of all of its members. We should also note the impact of changes in the society on the various members of the family in their relationships with each other.

Religion is another important part of American life. The religious institutions have been a major force in the establishing of societal norms, and religious ideas have often been influential in forming counter-norms and in providing emotional support for those outside the mainstream of Amer-

ican culture. So, an understanding of the roles religion has played in the cultural development of America is necessary to our study.

Also important are those areas of concern that, for the most part, are even less directly governed by the individual. Included here are such factors as the effect of drought; violence, war and its aftermath; governmental policy; and social control. We can examine how the people of the United States have dealt with these crucial and, in some cases, ultimate questions. We will observe the impact of ecological disaster on critical segments of the population. We will explore both personal and institutional violence. We will look at the contradictory influence governmental decisions have on the lives of the young and on war veterans. We will also examine the means society uses to shape the individual's behavior to the desired norm. Here we will consider how the dominant society attempts to assimilate or govern the groups it considers deviant; the actions "deviant" groups take to maintain their distinctiveness—and the price they pay for their efforts; and, of particular importance, the way certain institutions such as schools and churches operate directly or indirectly as agents of social control. The areas of concern considered here by no means exhaust the possible categories for the study of everyday life, but they are at least suggestive of the kinds of experiences that must be covered in exploring the private side of American history.

In this volume, each section contains at least one selection that attempts to delineate the norms or activities of one segment of the dominant culture. The other selections describe behavior or attitudes that deviate from the traditional norms. The volume begins with an essay that explores the settlement of the Great Plains. This restatement of the classic pattern of town settlement and land speculation describes the last phase of the conquest of the American landscape by the Euro-Americans. The values expressed in this enterprise still operate, but the arena of their implementation has shifted to metropolitan areas. Other essays in this section deal with the attempt of freed slaves to form a community independent of the dominant white culture, technological advances which have both expanded and restricted areas of female employment in the work force, and the attempt of the traditional elite to escape from a changing society by withdrawing into restricted enclaves where they need associate only with others of their own class.

In the next section, we see the struggles of European immigrants to find their place in American life—the first selection deals with childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood among the Jews of New York City's lower East Side, and the second with the struggle of immigrant mill workers to achieve a decent standard of living in the face of oppressive working conditions. The third selection explores the conflict between conservative Protestantism and the perceived threat to the truth of "God's Word" by scientific education. The concluding essay in this section describes the functions of public education in a business society.

The first essay in the third section shows how poor conservation methods combined with adverse weather conditions led to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Also, we see how the dominant society dealt with two of its prominent racial and ethnic minorities—blacks and chicanos. Also included in



this section is an essay on the returning veterans of the Second World War showing how a governmental policy made their reentry into American life more equitable than has been the case after other wars.

The last section opens with an analysis of the quality of suburban life, a mode of existence chosen by a majority of the American people at the present time. In contrast to the contentment expressed by the suburbanites, the next selection examines the powerful and persistent counter-culture movement that affected so many Americans, particularly adolescents and young adults, in the late 1960s. The third selection deals with the problems facing an increasingly disadvantaged segment of American society—the working-class family. Finally, we take a look at the influence of television and how it contributes to Americans' conceptions of social reality.

This volume provides but a sampling of the enormous variety of lifestyles and life experiences of the groups and individuals who make up what we call the American nation. The editor has attempted to acquaint the student with the possibility of better understanding the history of the United States through a study of the many different ways in which people have shaped their lives in order that they might live with as much of their essential humanity intact as possible. For many this has been an extremely difficult task because of the structural disorders in American society. Only if these disorders are seen for what they are, however, and seriously challenged, will the private lives of the American people improve in significant ways.