

Burnham Holmes

7/13/05, Wednesday, lunchtime presentation
Teaching American History Summer Seminar - Castleton State College

Nineteenth Century Poetry of Immigration and Industrialization

In 1825, President John Quincy Adams, was present, along with four of the five previous presidents (John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe) for the opening of the Erie Canal to connect the Hudson River with the Great Lakes.

"Oh the E-ri-ee was a ris-in',--The gin was a -git-tin low, and I scarce-ly think
We'll git a drink till we git to Buf-fa-lo-o, till we git to Buf-fa-lo." (1)

That's from a popular song of the era, called appropriately enough, "The Erie Canal."

You know, with that lineup of presidents for the dedication of the canal, I cannot resist interjecting this bit of doggerel from Arthur Monks:

Twilight's Last Gleaming

"Higgledy-piggledy
President Jefferson
Gave up the ghost on the
Fourth of July.

"So did John Adams, which
Shows that such patriots
Propagandistically
Knew how to die." (2)

In the 1830s, a young girl named Sarah Hodgdon journeyed to Lowell, Mass. for a job in the textile mills, and wrote a poem in a letter back to her parents in Rochester, New Hampshire:

"I want to see you more I think
Than I can write with pen and ink.
But when I shall I cannot tell
But from my heart I wish you well.
I wish you well from all my heart
Although we are so far apart.
If you die there and I die here,
Before one God we shall appear." (3)

Rebecca Harding Davis later wrote about how hard life could be in her "Life in the Iron Mills":

"A cloudy day: do you know what that is in a town of ironworks? The sky sank down before dawn, muddy, flat, immovable. The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings..."

"The idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke. It rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets. Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,--clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by." (4)

Jacob Riis later observed the million people crammed together in New York's Lower East Side to write about what he witnessed in *How the Other Half Live*:

"With the first hot night in June police dispatches, that record the killing of men and women by rolling off roofs and window-sills while asleep, announce that the time of greatest suffering among the poor is at hand. It is in hot weather, when life indoors is well-nigh unbearable with cooking, sleeping, and working, all crowded into the small rooms together, that the tenement expands, reckless of all restraint. Then a strange and picturesque life moves upon the flat roofs." (5)

One who was in favor of big business was none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Money is another kind of blood," he wrote. "Men of the mine, telegraph, mill, map, and survey"... "esteem wealth to be the assimilation of nature to themselves and talk up their projects in marts and offices and entreat men to subscribe." "Speculative genius is the madness of a few for the gain of the world." (6)

By the 1850s Industrialization was in full force in the United States, and in 1851 England's *Punch* magazine made fun of the mechanization of America in this satire entitled "The Last Appendix to Yankee Doodle":

"Your gunsmiths of their skill may crack,
But that again don't mention:
I guess that COLTS' revolvers whack
Their very first invention.
By YANKEE DOODLE, too, you're beat
Downright in Agriculture,
With his machine for reaping wheat,
Chaw'd up as by a vulture." (7)

In the 1850s along the border between Texas and Mexico comes this corrido or ballad. It is often staged as a face-off between two singers, and it might even be thought of as the forerunner of the free-style battles between today's rappers. This tradition which survives to this day, depicts a Mexican-American hero who in his defiance of Anglo authority, resists oppression and injustice:

I am not an American
But I understand English.
I learned it with my brother
Forwards and backwards
And any American
I make tremble at my feet.

When I was barely a child
I was left an orphan.
No one gave me any love,
They killed my brother,
And my wife Carmelita,
The cowards murdered her.

I came from Hermosillo
In search of gold and riches.
The Indian poor and simple
I defended with fierceness,
And a good price the sheriffs
Would pay for my head. (8)

In 1854 William Grayson of South Carolina published a poem, "The Hireling and the Slave" that painted a different portrait of oppression:

"No mobs of factious workmen gather here,
No strikes we dread, no lawless riots fear;
...Secure they toil, uncursed their peaceful life,
With freedom's hungry broils and wasteful strife,
No want to goad, no faction to deplore,
The Slave escapes the perils of the poor" (9)

These hard-working people, these slaves, had an oral tradition that included such spirituals as:

"Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go."

"No more auction block for me,
No more, no more,
No more auction block for me,
Many thousand gone.

"Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,
Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan,
Pharaoh's army got drowned,
Oh Mary, don't you weep."

"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

"There's a better day a coming--
There's a better day a coming--
Oh, Glory, Hallelujah!" (10)

Paul Robeson later popularized these traditional Negro spirituals beginning with his first concert in 1925.

One of the important ways that people traveled by mid-century is the next leap in transportation, what Henry David Thoreau referred to as "the devilish Iron Horse," here described by Emily Dickinson in a poem written in 1861:

I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks;
And then, prodigious, step

Around a pile of mountains,
And, supercilious, peer
In shanties by the sides of roads;
And then a quarry pare

To fit its sides, and crawl between,
Complaining all the while
In horrid, hooting stanza;
Then chase itself down hill

And neigh like Boanerges;
Then, punctual as a star,
Stop--docile and omnipotent--
At its own stable door. (11)

Walt Whitman also wrote about America's favorite mode of transportation in his 1876 "To a Locomotive in Winter":

"Thy black cylindrical body, golden brass, and silvery steel;
Thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating,
Shuttling at thy sides;
Thy metrical now swelling pant and roar--now tapering in the distance;
Thy great protruding head-light, fix'd in front
Thy long, pale, floating vapor-pennants, tinged with delicate purple;
The dense and murky clouds out-belching from thy smoke-stack;
Thy knitted frame--thy springs and valves--the tremulous twinkle of thy wheels;
Thy train of cars behind, obedient, merrily-following,
Through gale or calm, now swift, now slack, yet steadily careering;
Type of the modern! Emblem of motion and power! pulse of the continent!
For once, come serve the Muse, and merge in verse, even as here I see thee...." (12)

But not all were for the great swath cut across the continent by the locomotive. Here is part of a song written for the Great Railway Strike of 1877:

"There's an army of strikers
Determined you'll see
Who will fight the corporations
Till the country is free" (13)

The people who had been in America before the settlers arrived, before industrialization, were, of course, the Native Americans. Here is a tale of an Eskimo recorded in 1875 that is about another indigenous person, but it could also be about these newcomers to their shores:

"The south shore, O yes, the south shore I know it;
Once I lived there and met
A fat fellow who lived on halibut, O yes, I know him.
Those south-shore folks can't talk;
They don't know how to pronounce our language;
Truly they are dull fellows;
They don't even talk alike;
Some have one accent, some another;
Nobody can understand them;
They can scarcely understand each other." (14)

In 1876, after the battle of General Custer and his Union army at Little Big Horn, and later after Sitting Bull surrendered, the great chief of the Teton Sioux sang his last song:

A warrior
I have been
Now
It is all over.
A hard time
I have. (15)

For millions of immigrants to the United States, one of the key experiences was their first sighting of the Statue of Liberty and their processing through Ellis Island.

Although Emma Lazarus did not immigrate to America (she was born in 1849 in New York City), her famous poem of 1883, "The New Colossus," engraved on the pedestal of the 151-foot high Statue of Liberty, dedicated in 1886, has come to be associated with this experience:

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to be free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (16)

Or as Walt Whitman seemed to have foreshadowed in his "Salut au Monde!" from *Leaves of Grass*:

"Toward you all, in America's name,
I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,
To remain after me in sight forever,
For all the haunts and homes of men." (17)

In a lighter vein, Frank Martocci, who reached New York from Italy in 1897, had this memory of his arrival:

"There is a post at Ellis Island which through long usage has come to earn the name of 'the Kissing Post.' It is probably the spot of greatest interest on the island, and if the immigrants recall it afterwards it is always, I am sure, with fondness. For myself, I found it a real joy to watch some of the tender scenes that took place there...where friends, sweethearts, husbands and wives, parents and children would embrace and kiss and shed tears for pure joy." (18)

Or as the feeling stated in another poem of Walt Whitman's, "The Mystic Trumpeter":

"The ocean fill'd with joy--the atmosphere all joy!
Joy! Joy in freedom, worship, love! Joy in the ecstasy of life!
Enough to merely be! Enough to breathe!
Joy! joy! all over joy! (19)

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