

# Material Life

## 1890s Family

1890s Family

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### Backdrop

The late 19th century was a time of transition and promise of upcoming technological improvements. New forms of transportation – rail, steamboat, electric streetcar, bicycle, and the beginnings of the “horseless carriage” – all unknown

in 1810 – encouraged travel and trade across the country and facilitated movement in and around cities. In 1869, a few years after the end of the Civil War, tracks of the Central and Union Pacific Railroads were joined together in an extraordinary engineering feat, connecting the east and west coasts to “shrink the continent and change the world.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, refrigerated railroad cars allowed perishable goods to travel to new markets.



Map from *New England Magazine*, vol. XII, no. 5, July 1895, p. 17

In cities of New England, electric streetcars made it possible for people to live farther away from their work, creating suburbs. Boston opened the country’s first subway system in 1897. Leisure posters advertised train rides to the Rocky Mountains, Canada, and Mexico. The individual’s world had expanded. While traveling to distant places was still a dream for most people, people could now read about these adventures in a myriad of monthly, weekly, and daily newspapers and magazines.<sup>2</sup>



# 1890s

Backdrop

## Life in the 1890s

The average family in the 1890s is slightly smaller than in the 1810s, and their living space is larger. In general, the typical dwelling is brighter, cleaner, more comfortable, and more colorful. Most of the New England population live in cities or towns, where multiple family dwellings are common. Newly built homes have



July 4, 1893, Medford,  
Massachusetts  
*Courtesy of Society for the  
Preservation of New England  
Antiquities*

running water and indoor plumbing, but most of the population still depends on outdoor privies and wash basins. The Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogue for 1897 doesn't yet advertise toilets; instead, it lists chamber pots and the accompanying slop buckets. That changes just five years later, when there are numerous ads for different types of water closets and toilets.<sup>3</sup> Stoves replace fireplaces for cooking, and kerosene or gas lamps provide much brighter lighting. At the beginning of the 1890s, approximately 13,000 outdoor

"lamps" illuminate the streets of Boston at night. Of these, 70 percent are gas fueled, 25 percent use kerosene or oil, and 5 percent use the new power source, electricity.<sup>4</sup>

Large department stores and mail order catalogues sell an unprecedented variety of goods. The Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogue for 1897 has over 20,000 items for sale. Every item in the 1890 material life display at the **Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Economic Adventure** can be purchased through this catalogue. Ready-to-wear clothing for both men and women is available in a range of styles, quality, and prices.

New photographic and printing techniques make inexpensive reproduction of images possible. Pictures brighten the walls of homes and work places, and books, magazines, and newspapers are much more plentiful and affordable.<sup>5</sup>

Periodic expositions and World's Fairs display fantastic new products like the telephone and the typewriter, although it will be several decades before either of these becomes commonplace in the home.<sup>6</sup> The Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893-1894 features electrified streetcars that take people to the exhibits and the



Life in the 1890s



Chicago Columbian Exhibit of 1893  
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Frances Benjamin Collection

amusement park on the grounds. This novel idea of joining electric transportation to a leisure activity paves the way for electrified amusement parks to be constructed at the end of streetcar lines.<sup>7</sup>

Public works projects such as water treatment plants and sewage removal aid in curbing sickness and disease. Vaccination against smallpox begins in the late 1890s. Standard

railway time is created in 1883, standardizing time across newly created time zones and permitting precise railroad timetables.<sup>8</sup> Affordable Connecticut clocks are part of many homes and become increasingly necessary as people “go to work” instead of working for themselves on a farm.

### Our “Average” Family and Their Home

Our “average” family<sup>9</sup> of the 1890s comprises five people: father, mother, daughter, and two sons, all living.<sup>10</sup> Father, 38 years old, is a highly skilled printer; mother, 35, works primarily at home; the daughter, age 17, works at the mill in Dorchester Lower Falls but wants to attend typing school and has dreams of moving to San Francisco, California. Both sons, ages 12 and 14, attend school and work part-time — one as a helper at a neighborhood grocery store and the other at his father’s print shop.

The family rents an apartment with 900 square feet in a newly built three-family house in Dorchester. Their living space is roughly one-third larger than the typical 1810 farmhouse dwelling.<sup>11</sup> The apartment has two chambers (bedrooms), a parlor, a kitchen with a small pantry, and a dining room. The parents have their own chamber, and the two boys, theirs. One closet has recently been converted to create a room for the daughter. The family gathers in the kitchen for meals and



Young man learns printing skills.  
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lewis W. Hine Collection



Average Family





Dorchester street scene  
*Courtesy of Society for the  
 Preservation of New England  
 Antiquities*

conversation. The dining room is converted into an extra bedroom when relatives or occasional boarders from the print shop come to stay. The parlor is rarely used.

The family pays rent of \$18 per month for their apartment. They hope to be able to buy their own home. Father has just seen an ad in the *Dorchester Beacon* for a house in Everett with a yard of 3,700 square feet. The price is \$2,500, with \$50 down and the rest payable as rent.

The revolutionary improvement in this tenement<sup>12</sup> apartment is that it not only has running water but also has a modern bathroom — with a toilet, sink, and tub. This was still unusual for Dorchester at that time. In the late 1890s, the Boston “suburbs” of Dorchester, Brighton, and Jamaica Plain still had the largest percentage of privies<sup>13</sup> in the city since these areas had the most outdoor land. (Our 1810s family washed from a basin in the kitchen and used an outhouse or a chamber pot.) Water closets — a toilet with a tank of water that came from an above-ground cistern — were prevalent, but a separate “bathroom” was still uncommon at this time. Back Bay, a wealthier district, had the highest percentage of bathrooms in rental areas.<sup>14</sup>

**“The social status of a population may accurately be gauged by the standard of cleanliness which prevails.”**  
*Massachusetts Statistics of Labor, 1892*

### Father

The print shop where father works is on Washington Street in Boston, an area that has a high concentration of printing enterprises. His particular business specializes in chromolithography and the printing of colorful trade cards, a popular form of advertising. His shop also prints some fine art lithographs, but in this business his shop doesn’t compete in volume with Boston’s premier printing house, Prang & Company.

Father had spent the usual seven years as an apprentice in a smaller shop. The requirements for his apprenticeship were that “he be in good health, have good



Exploding lamp trade card  
*Courtesy of Society for the Preservation  
 of New England Antiquities*



**Father**

eyesight; his education should be far enough advanced to be able to answer the ordinary questions in grammar, history, and geography; he should have a familiarity with writing and know how to spell. The study of books on typography should be of interest to him.”<sup>15</sup> His job requires learning how to operate the machinery and set type, learning several formulas for making inks, and caring for the printing stones. During his early apprenticeship, he worked on a hand press that had a maximum output of 2,000 images per day. Later, the shop purchases a steam press that can produce 9,000 to 10,000 images per day.<sup>16</sup>

Skilled craftsmen like printers, machinists, and master carpenters are the “aristocracy” of labor.<sup>17</sup> Father earns a very good living – \$1,200 a year – double what a factory worker earns and about the same as high school and normal school (middle school) teachers are paid. In 1889, at the high end of the *salaried* range (excluding the vastly wealthy railroad, finance, shipping, and oil entrepreneurs), the President of the United States earned \$50,000 per year; the mayor of Boston, \$10,000; U.S. Senators, \$5,000; U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, \$8,000. In Boston, the superintendent of printing earned \$2,500 per year, and the headmaster of a school was paid \$3,500 per year.<sup>18</sup>

The hazards of Father’s job are numerous, including handling and breathing hazardous toxic chemicals. There are sometimes explosions and fires in print shops. The detrimental effects of lead paint aren’t yet known. Cutting and preparing paper and working the large presses sometimes results in injuries – for which there is no worker’s compensation or medical insurance.

## Mother

Mother, 35 years old, was married at age 18, which is younger than the median age for women to marry.<sup>19</sup> In the late 19th century, it is customary for the wife to stay at home. “Households are the locales in which our society produced healthy people, and housewives are the workers who are responsible for almost all of the stages in that production process. Before industrialization, women fed, clothed, and nursed their families by preparing (with the help of their husbands and children) food, clothing, and medication. In the post-industrial age women feed, clothe, and nurse their families (without much direct assistance from anyone else) by cooking, cleaning, driving, and shopping.”<sup>20</sup>

The multiplicity of chores involved in caring for her family and home<sup>21</sup> do not



Mother



Girls working at a commercial laundry

Courtesy of Library of Congress,  
Lewis W. Hine Collection

leave mother much spare time. While she has more “labor saving devices ” than her grandmother – a wringer for her washing tub, a carpet sweeper, and a stove, to name a few – her husband and children all work outside the home. Consequently, she does most of the

housework herself.

The first recurring household chore to go to an outside service when a family has any disposable income is the laundry.<sup>22</sup> In the late 19th century, professional laundries become common. A luxury that mother allows herself is having all linens washed and pressed, saving her at least half a day’s work. (A laundress came to help her once a week before she started sending her linens out.) She still has the wide assortment of irons of different weights (from 2 pounds to nearly 10 pounds), although she doesn’t use the heavy irons for starched tablecloths anymore.

Mother is thrilled to have a sewing machine. As historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan wrote, having a sewing machine in the home “eliminated the need to hire seamstresses but not the hours spent by the housewife herself.”<sup>23</sup> Women no longer weave cloth, but buy it. Even though “ready made” clothes are now widely available for women, mother usually buys a pattern and sews the garment, rather than buying it “off the rack.” (Ready made clothes first became available to men beginning in the 1870s; women’s ready made clothing came along later.) Less expensive cloth and the speed with which garments can be made or altered make it possible for each family member to have a significantly larger wardrobe than in 1810.

To the extent that she has time, mother is involved with her church and in helping with fund drives for various causes, including women’s suffrage and The Poor Widows Fund.

### Daughter

The family’s 17-year-old daughter works at a mill in Dorchester Lower Falls, where she operates a spooling machine. Her salary of \$4.50 per week allows her to save a bit and to contribute to the household – but she is thinking of leaving the mill. There is always news of nearby mills closing and the work moving to the South.



Daughter





Young girl working in a textile mill at a spooling machine  
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Lewis W. Hine Collection

Sometimes on Saturday afternoons, daughter goes to her father's shop, where there is a newly purchased typewriter. Insurance offices, law firms, business offices, and banks have begun to need typists. Spurred on by

an article she read about possible salaries of \$10 to \$20 per week,<sup>24</sup> daughter wants to attend one of the new business schools. Until she has saved enough money to attend school, she will study Brown's Business Correspondence and Manual of Dictation.

### Family Possessions

. . . Here (in the Sears catalogue) we find the development of countless new attitudes — towards reading, the use of cosmetics, the virtues of fresh air and of bathing, and the pleasures of sports. We note how the luxuries of one generation become the necessities of the next generation, and how the clothing of the middle class tends to approximate that of the rich in fashion and materials, even if inferior in design and workmanship.<sup>26</sup>

**“Many men said it was silly to pay \$125 for a new fangled machine that could merely do the work of a one cent pen.”<sup>25</sup>**

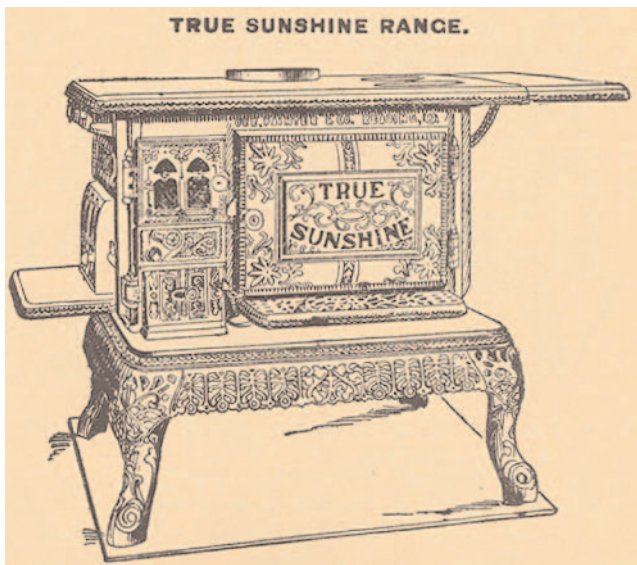
Household furnishings in the late 19th century are highly ornamented — simplicity is not admired. The family's stove is adorned and trimmed with chrome. Sears advertises other stoves with “rococo molding, a handsome rococo base, heavy nickel trimmings throughout.” The catalogue describes in detail the type of ornamentation available on various objects — couches and divans that are heavily upholstered, tufted, tasseled, and carved. “Oriental” influences like the “Turkish” couch are common. The ornamentation extends to towels, tablecloths, fabrics, clothing, wallpaper, curtains, carpets, comforters, and plates. The only visible simplicity is in the pictures that Sears sells, many of which are of idyllic farm scenes — the farmer and his wife walking peacefully in front of the ox on their



Family Possessions

farm or the husband and wife sitting in their clean, orderly farmhouse, the wife spinning, the husband reading.

While they enjoy outings to the large department stores in the area of Boston known today as Downtown Crossing, the family purchases many items by mail order catalogue. A big event at their home is the arrival of the Sears catalog twice a year. The 1897 catalog sells for 15 cents — all 800 pages and estimated 20,000 items.



Stove from 1897 Sears Catalogue  
Courtesy of Crown Publishing Group, Division of Random House

The family's most recent purchase is a parlor organ for \$44. Sears ships it directly to their home from the warehouse in Chicago. The family gets a 3 percent discount for paying cash.<sup>27</sup> The family considered buying one of the new gramophones (the so-called talking machines) and, to go with it, records like the Beautiful Blue Danube waltz, but these machines are still very expensive. The gramophone costs \$25 for just the machine and \$35 for the machine, case, and a hearing tube for three persons. For this much money, father prefers to see a substantial, ornamental piece of furniture. In addition, the children are interested in learning to play the

organ, and the family decides that the organ would be better since it is instructive as well as entertaining. The family had hoped to be able to buy a piano, but the least expensive pianos are priced at around \$125 — still out of their reach.

The family's stove was also purchased from Sears. It is mid-priced, costing \$25 (approximately \$500 in today's dollars). While gasoline stoves are available, the majority of stoves are coal and/or wood burning. Prices vary according to the number of burners, size of the oven, and whether or not a high shelf and a reservoir are attached. Ornamentation is important (as it was on the parlor organ), and ads mention ornamentation as a selling point. Most stoves are made of iron and typically weigh 200 to 300 pounds. Stainless steel stoves with an asbestos lining that aids in conductivity are also advertised. These stoves weigh over 500 pounds. (Today's completely unornamented, mid-priced gas stoves have four burners, weigh 160 pounds, and cost about \$400.)



Family Possessions





Stereoscope with ghost  
 Courtesy of Visual Media

## Leisure Time

For entertainment, the family buys an inexpensive stereoscope, a “cheap flexible, useful instrument which provided pleasure and amusement for thousands of American homes in the pre-automobile and pre-radio-moving-picture days.”<sup>28</sup> Images appear to have a solid, three-dimensional quality when viewed through this apparatus. Unable to visit the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, the family is able to view 50 images from the Fair on the stereoscope. They also catch glimpses of beautiful parks, like Yellowstone’s geysers, and enjoy humorous vignettes using this apparatus. For more entertainment, one of the boys buys “Ventriloquism Self Taught” for 20 cents at the general store in Dorchester center.

A wide variety of sports equipment appears in the Sears catalogue after the turn of the century. Men can purchase football shoes, several types of baseball shoes, running shoes, walking shoes, and bicycling shoes. The options for women’s sports are more limited – not surprising, since women are still cinched up in tight corsets. In a first concession to women’s sports activity, walking skirts are made a little shorter than their normal ankle length, and sports corsets are manufactured. (Young girls typically started wearing garments called corsets at the age of 8.) Bicycling offers unprecedented freedom to men and women – freedom of mobility to men and freedom of both mobility and dress to women. As the bicycle trend continues, bicycle skirts and pants become popular for women, and corsets are loosened.



1897 Sears Catalogue women’s bicycle suit  
 Courtesy of Crown Publishing Group, Division of Random House



# 1890s

Leisure Time

## On the Horizon

On the horizon are cars and the transformation of the American landscape. While no one could imagine how far reaching this technological change would be, there were fierce supporters and opponents even in the early days. Here are two opposing views:



On the Horizon

### For Automobiles

A writer in *Progress of the World*, a New York monthly, said that he had made a study of the “new fangled” device called a “horseless carriage,” and was ready to report on it to his readers. Horseless carriages “must soon come into general use. They have many advantages, being capable of three times the speed of an average horse, always under perfect control, never obliged to stop for a rest. The most unsettled feature of the new vehicle is what name to give it. The daily press, in a half-joking spirit, has dubbed it ‘the horseless wagon,’ while some call it ‘motorcycle,’ ‘motor carriage,’ ‘automobile vehicle,’ etc. Steam electricity, petroleum, gasoline, compressed air, gas, kerosene, hot air, ammonia, gunpowder, ether, and springs have been tried as power. . . .”<sup>29</sup>



Advertisement for Pope automobiles.  
Courtesy of Melita Podesta

### Against Automobiles

“Every hand is against the automobiles, from the hoodlums who throw stones to the magistrates who inflict fines. The squeaking, snorting, stinking machines are debarred from the ferryboats and have no more right on the streets than the locomotive of the Empire State Express has to steam down the avenue. . . . I am not of those who advocate shooting automobilists when they run down pedestrians. Shooting is too good for them. . . . How such vehicles, in which there is no comfort or style, have become the vogue is impossible to explain.”<sup>30</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://cpr.org/#Promontory>

<sup>2</sup> There were 5,500 journals in the United States in 1895. Cheaper paper, presses run by steam engines, improved methods for printing illustrations, many more goods and services available to be advertised, and falling postage rates brought down the prices at which magazines could be produced profitably. The advent of halftones, an improvement in photogravure techniques, cut the price of an illustration from \$300 to \$20. In 1885, the postage rate for all second-class mailings was cut in half, from 2 cents to 1 cent. Loftier, more literary magazines were priced at 35 cents per issue; others were cheaper. *History of American Magazines*, volumes 2 and 4. Harvard University Press, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> 1897 and 1902 catalogues, Sears, Roebuck and Company.

<sup>4</sup> *The Boston Almanac and Directory*, 1889.

<sup>5</sup> According to *History of American Magazines* (see footnote 1), magazines were characterized by “copious and well-printed illustration, liveliness and freshness in presentation of nonfiction articles, variety in subject matter, a serious treatment of contemporary problems, a keen interest in new inventions and progress in general, and attention to major world success.”

<sup>6</sup> Between 1876 and 1916, nearly 100 million people visited a dozen major international expositions in the United States. Thomas Schelereth, *Victorian America*. Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., New York, 1992, p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*. MIT University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 122. The first “Ferris Wheel,” named after its inventor George W. Ferris, was another spectacular achievement of this exhibition. In the decade after the Columbia exhibition, ferris wheels became common attractions at amusement parks.

<sup>8</sup> “Standard time in time zones was instituted in the United States and Canada by the railroads on 18 November 1883. Before then, time of day was a local matter, and most cities and towns used some form of local solar time, maintained by some well-known clock (for example, on a church steeple or in a jeweler’s window).” <http://webexhibits.org/daylightsaving/d.html>

<sup>9</sup> This is a sketch of a hypothetical “average” New England family.

<sup>10</sup> While our example family has all of the children living, and strides were being made in public health, it was not uncommon even at the turn of the 20th century for a child to die.

<sup>11</sup> By the 1960s, the “average” dwelling size was 1,200 square feet.

<sup>12</sup> The word “tenement” did not carry the pejorative connotation that it does today.

<sup>13</sup> The meaning is “outhouse” — a small exterior building shielding a hole dug in the ground.

<sup>14</sup> *Massachusetts Statistics of Labor*, 1892, p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> *American Dictionary of Printing and Bookmaking*. Lenox Hill Publishers, New York, 1894 (reprinted 1970), p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 342. Steam presses were introduced in the United States shortly after the Civil War, but it took a while for them to be widely used.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Schelereth, *Victorian America*, p. xiii.

<sup>18</sup> *The Boston Almanac and Directory*, 1889.

<sup>19</sup> In 1890, the median age at first marriage was 26.1 years for males and 22.0 years for females. *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Colonial Times to 1957.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*. Basic Books, New York, 1893, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “house work” was a new term that came into use in 1871.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*. Henry Holt & Company, New York, 2000, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> S. S. Packard in *What Women Can Earn, Occupations of Women and Their Compensation*, Frederick A. Stokes Company, New York, 1898, p. 144. Packard observed, “The rates paid for good stenographers in the best business houses vary from \$10 to \$20 per week, and there is possibly no line of work in which women engage having a fairer prospect of leading to something better.”

<sup>25</sup> David L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1940, p. 244.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. xxvii.



<sup>27</sup> Sears accepted post office money orders, Express money orders, postage stamps, bank drafts, cash, and COD (collect on delivery). No discount was given for COD. For cash upfront, a discount of 3% was given on orders, no matter how small, up to \$50; 4% was given on orders from \$50 to \$100, and 5% was given on orders over \$100.

<sup>28</sup> David L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days*, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> *Progress of the World* (a New York monthly), October 1895.

<sup>30</sup> *Town Topics*, August 1904.