CHAPTER II
MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY CONDITIONS IN AMERICA
With Emphasis on The Rural and Agricultural Life of the People

The stage of industrialization and urban development that we are in today, with its specific problems, can, for our purposes here, best be understood as it contrasts with conditions of a past age. The general period from 1800 to 1900, centering around 1850, is a convenient one to consider, being, as it is, well documented by county histories, maps, gazeteers, and the actual physical ruins and other relics easily available to any student of local history of the life of the people.

A small proportion of people then lived in large towns and small cities--small, as we view cities today*--these concentrations of population naturally arising as centers of culture, trade, transportation, manufacturing, and so forth that serve the needs of all civilized, interdependent, trading societies. Confluences of natural transportation routes, the formations of terrain along rivers at various points affording easy crossings by bridges and sites for dams for water power and manufacturing, and deep, sheltered harbors all tended to determine the location and promote the growth of cities. To an extent the people in them led lives of specialized work in trades or industries that were a part of the emerging economic interdependence of the whole country, and hence were geared to the ups and downs of all other regions, prospering or suffering with them. Many had memories of rural life from which they had brought the strengths of self-reliance typically developed there. But many others probably lived much like the typical city "cliff dwellers" of today.

However, considering the country as a whole, as it was thus far settled, the majority lived in small rural communities of little villages and isolated homes scattered along dirt roads running up through the hills or along the winding valley streams. The old abandoned cellar holes, which in many regions outnumber existing homes, and the now discarded, crumbling dams, overgrown little canals and other relics of past, family-sized activities all bear mute testimony to the former, rural industry and life of the relatively self-reliant people of several generations ago. When I say they were "relatively" self-reliant, I mean they were as compared to those in cities then. Obviously they obtained many things by purchase or trade, such as salt, iron, glass, boots, shoes, farm tools, oil for lubrication and lamps, and many others. They were, to that extent, dependent on others' buying their products or paying for their services.

* Only a short time before this the five largest cities on the continent had populations as follows: Philadelphia, 42,000; New York, 33,000; Boston, 18,000; Charleston, 16,000; Baltimore, 13,000.

FARMING in its most comprehensive sense was outstandingly t most characteristic feature of the economic life of these people Though this is well known to historians, the ordinary reader wil find it interesting to look over old atlases or maps of towns or counties published around the former time we are considering, to see that in the small towns or villages even the men with specia professions often considered themselves farmers, presumably with equal importance with their specialty. The old maps show the names of every house, mill, church, school and cemetery along every road; and often for each town, there is a "Business Directory," with listings, with names such as these: Farmer and Mille Farmer and Carriage Manufacturer; Farmer and Mechanic; Attorney and Farmer; Farmer and Agent for N. Y. Life Insurance Co.; Farme and Rough Stone Mason; and many more. It is to be presumed that those advertised as farmers, along with some specialty, not only raised their own farm products but regularly had some to sell. We Can well imagine this item from the Clarendon Business Directory: "Nicholas Powers, Farmer and Bridge Builder." This noted man from Vermont went to Havre-de-Grace, Maryland, in 1866 to build the great double wooden span across the Susquehanna; in th fall when the job was almost done, his wife wrote frantic letter to him to come home where he was needed to get in the crops; he wrote that he would, and on the final day, even without waiting to line up with his crew for the photograph and celebration, started the long journey north, making it by Thanksgiving.

Yes, it was typical of most everyone in rural regions to ha some roots in the soil. They could raise their own grain, hay, potatoes, vegetables, meat, milk, cream, eggs, butter, sugar, wool, and many herbs. They cut their own wood for fuel, and thei ice for refrigeration. The women and girls, as well as doing al cooking and preserving, could, with home-grown wool, spin yarn and knit stockings, sweaters, shawls, and mittens. (One young lady, on seeing a demonstration of all the old textile machines and hand tools, used in the average farmhouse of 1800, now kept at Old Sturbridge Village, joyously exclaimed, "How ingenious people were then!") And the men and boys, with perhaps some expert guidance, could build house, barn, and outbuildings. In fact, most every farmer was a jack of many trades -- herdsman, horticulturist, blacksmith, butcher, woodsman, hunter, fisherman, horseman, veterinarian, bricklayer, plumber, fireman, sickroom sitter, carpenter, and, in a pinch, midwife. It can surely be seen that families had a degree of economic and other forms o independence of considerable importance.

And the various towns or regions had some measure of self-sufficiency with specialized producers of many things, such as carriages and sleighs, coffins and other cabinetwork; there were tanneries, lumbermills, brick yards, grist mills, blacksmith sho carding mills, dressmakers and cobblers, harness-makers and othe producing first for local customers and later for the more gener market. Producers and consumers had the advantages of personal

contacts, hence some measure of mutual interest.

All establishments allowed visitors. You might drop in every few days to see how your new carriage was coming along. And there your boys would absorb the romance and principles of true craftsmanship. I myself - not in 1850 of course! - after walking two miles home from school in winter, used to run down to the local blacksmith shop and pump the old leather bellows or help in other ways, and be given iron scraps for practicing shaping and welding under the guidance of the smith who took a great shine to me.) When you did your business at the grist mill or the saw mill, your boys would disappear down the rickety stairways to see the works below. The overshot wheels, and later the mid-Victorian scroll-case turbines, the revolving shafts and whirring pullies and belts all revealed their working principles at a glance, as the minds of the young subconsciously absorbed mechancial ideas. Customers of all these country businesses were thought of as neighbors whose patronage and personal thanks, together with pride in workmanship, were all part of the compensation for a life's work.

Food for man and beast was produced and stored on local farms, first for family needs, then for some neighbors, perhaps then for the general market.

Though productivity per man-hour was low, compared to that of the present, taxation and paper work were less of a drain on the economy than now. And though such an event as the famine of 1816 in the northeast -- frost every month of the year =- was not mitigated as such an event today could be, still there was a greater flexibility in the economy then than now. Individuals were more versatile, and the productivity of a given region was more diversified, so that disruptions in business far off had less local effect. Strikes or transportation failures could not deprive a family or neighborhood of, say, food or fuel, where these were produced locally.

Much theatrical entertainment in those days was a community affair. "Local talent" directed and acted. Compared to actors of the professional stage, such performers would seem crude. But they were your friends and neighbors; or their sons and daughters and wives, or your own. Maybe the lovers sat on the sofa you loaned, or the villain carried your old sword or axe. But they were all loved, rooted for and happily recalled long afterward. Personal talent and initiative grew in this way. And the proceeds went to some good local cause.

The work and business of life must have been reasonably comprehensible to young people then, compared to its aspect now. The subject matter of business and industry were more visible in their elements, work more often being the manipulation of real material objects rather than of only the symbols of them -- the unloading of

bags of oats at the local grist mill, rather than a million bush sold over the telephone, or the selling of insurance or magazine subscriptions! The ethical relationships between the getting an spending of money, or the producing and consuming of necessities must have been more evident.

The practical activities around them in home and community offered them effective, appropriate and gradually remunerative ou lets for their growing physical and mental abilities, allowing th to ease gently into the work of the world with some sense of direction, finally to set up homes, farms, or other establishments their own, often in a familiar part of their home community. You couples planning their future together might have dreamed for yea of some special "rise of ground" worthy of their best efforts in building something together and putting down roots. Youth had sc of the natural, ethical and moral restraints one feels when movir in a social environment containing old relatives and friends, not often so far from home as to be irresponsible objects of unconcer Near Nature -- the woods, the fields, the streams and hills, familiar parts of a whole region thought of as home -- they could at least, have had a grasp and love of reality and beauty in something toward which they would feel in time a sense of responsibility and devotion. They would have had a chance to help in some of the projects that bind all ages together -- bees of many kinds, for husking corn, haying, painting churches, rebuilding burned-out neighbors -- in all of which there was often much forgetting of self in a common, visible effort. Youth and old age would have had something in common; Grandpa and Grandma were around, still in the running, preserving the lessons and wisdom, the uncanned humor and the history of the past, kept available for coming generations -- never dreaming of retirement in the formal sense.

Life in such areas and times as I describe had many physical hardships -- or so we might regard them now -- that took strength and at times induced aching bodies: lifting logs, chopping wood, holding plow handles, milking cows, shoveling snow, spreading manure, hoeing crops, walking long distances, bucking the cold for miles in an open sleigh. But the strength was developed and maintained by the task, and where the rewards were realized there would not have been much complaint. Nature was a hard task master, as now, but most learned to live with her laws. And it wa by these people that the once-neat homes and villages of New England were built.

I am not forgetting that there were pitiful exceptions to th substance and spirit of all I have said. In many a shiftlessly r home, squalor, spiritual and cultural emptiness accentuated by poverty and isolation, led to despair, depravity and crime. There were, as Whittier wrote,

"Shrill, querulous women, sour and sullen men,
Untidy, loveless, old before their time,
With scarce a human interest save their own
Monotonous round of small economies,
Or the poor scandal of the neighborhood."

But these were the exception, mostly suffering a self-imposed exile in their own stale bayous, off the main stream of the life of those who learned to get along with others and to accept life's disciplines. Just what proportion actually found general satisfaction and success in those days, through adaptation to Nature and by hard, well-directed efforts, no one can now say. But the evidence is that it could be done and that a significant number did.

The important heads of local government -- in New England at least -- were a man's peers, friends, and fellow taxpayers, servants of the town: selectmen, school board and road agent. These were elected, then later praised or lambasted in that great stronghold of free speech and pure democracy, the Town Meeting. The works of these public servants were plain for all to see, executed with a degree of effectiveness, high or low, whose results and attendant costs they would share. Their financial accountings could be brief, simple, and possible to audit and understand. If there were burdens or interferences of higher levels of government -- county, state or national -- they were felt but little.

The cities, with their growing industries, seeming to offer the hope of new and brighter futures, were, by this time, drawing many away from rural life. This great attraction, together with some peoples' discouragement with their old lives, ambition for new opportunity, curiosity or just plain wanderlust, all started a migration whose end is not even yet in sight. A few of these became rich and famous as business leaders and tycoons in the big new industries; among these were the men who gave schools, libraries, and other monuments bearing their names, to their old home towns. Many others, less able, became mere menials and sank into all but nameless oblivion. But for the purpose of this study it is to be noted that a few always came back, having been unsuccessful, in their own lights, in finding congenial work, or failing to adapt to strange living conditions. It is important to contemplate the degree of possibility of coming back. Robert Frost said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." In contrast with the average city apartment of today, the old "home" would have had room for "you" and many chances to fit in and to be useful. Among family and friends and old acquaintances, with their homes, farms and other businesses still intact as going concerns, whose business relations were mitigated by that sense of "community" that makes friends of associates on all levels, the returning native could have found a way or a place to "pull his own weight," for a week, a year, or a lifetime. Even the bare possibility of getting back,

or nearly back, to the land, the source of all wealth, while it lasted was a fact of that age of great significance. (The relative impossibility of any such a return today, whether one wants to do it or not, as will appear later on, is an important consideration for us in this study.)

These matters of early rural community life are not just idle imaginings of mine. As well as having explored the actual relics of the earlier age, and having read many books, records and documents on them, I lived as a boy where there were sufficient remnants of the ways and means of "Candle Days," and knew personally enough people steeped in the things of that age, to have enabled me to understand, see and participate in all the activities I have described.

I do not mean to over-eulogize the former age of our country. But I do mean to give it its due, for the value that that will have when, in the next chapter, I shall point out, by contrast, the weaknesses of the present age.