

Stop Crying, Get Over Yourself and Live!

Lately, it's becoming increasingly clear to me that many Americans are wimps—greedy wimps at that. People are always whining about some ailment, real or imagined and looking for someone to blame. Lawyers, ever quick to smell money, hasten to whump up some legal precedent for what's bothering their client and sue.

This happened with the cigarette industry. Is it me, or do you too find it absurd to dun the tobacco industry millions to pay off someone who spent the past thirty or forty years sucking on a three-pack-a-day habit? Did anyone literally twist their arm to start? Putting all the so-called addictive properties of cigarettes and tobacco aside, like alcoholism it comes down to a personal choice to start, or not start a particular habit. Once started, it comes down to personal choice to decide to quit.

But I'm getting off my point. When you get right down to it, what do 21st-century Americans have to complain about? Where is our sense of rugged individualism in a society that makes rugged individualism possible in the first place? We've been given great gifts, something those who've lived in our past couldn't possible have, given the technology of their day. Why is it that millions of immigrants, both legal and illegal, can see this and many in this country can't?

Take a minute to read this description of pioneer life in the wilderness that at one time comprised vast areas of Texas in 1860. I've excerpted certain passages for brevity and clarity.

Although the children ... grew up in an idyllic natural setting, everyday life was far from utopian. The older ... children, accustomed to the relative comfort and urbanity of San Antonio, must have been appalled by the new living conditions....

Popular culture, especially western movies, has tended to elevate the living standards of settlers on the Texas frontier during the 1860s. In John Ford's *The Searchers*, for instance, the pioneer family lives in a rustic but comfortable house of several rooms. Its wood-plank floors are covered by woven rugs. The glass windows are curtained. The family eats substantial meals off elegant Blue Willow china neatly laid out on a long, polished table, with plenty of spare dishes on the shelves. Their clothes are tidy and look barely worn. A rocker and a padded armchair wait invitingly beside the fire. On the mantel of the broad fireplace sits a kerosene lamp and a handsome clock.

A typical house ... during the 1860s would have looked nothing like that. The immigrants' dwellings were crude log cabins of one or two rooms. The walls never quite fended off the strong gales of a winter norther; however, they did manage to trap the one-hundred-plus-degree heat of August. The floors were hard-packed dirt. No matter how many times a housewife swept them, they still wouldn't seem clean. The thatch roofs leaked. The windows had no screens or glass, only shutters. During the daytime, a person could either leave them open and risk an invasion of grasshoppers, wasps and mosquitoes, or close them and sweat in a dark room. Cooking was done over an open fire, either in a fireplace, if the family were fortunate enough to have one and the weather wasn't sweltering, or else outside the cabin. At night, the only source of light was a twisted rag dipped in tallow and set on a tin plate. It was barely enough to read by; but that didn't matter, because there was hardly anything to read, except the family Bible and maybe an almanac. Most of the children were illiterate, anyway.

The settlers ... supplemented their simple diets with whatever they could take off the land: deer, turkey, rabbits, wild plums and grapes, persimmons, even prickly pear apples and weeds. Occasionally, the native plants they ate turned out to be poisonous, making them seriously ill. They didn't do much canning or preserving to store food for the winter, because they didn't have jars. They rarely got wheat flour for bread and they were desperate for corn. Any time U. S. soldiers camped nearby, the locals scoured the ground afterward for corn their horses might have left uneaten. They also tried to keep a little whiskey on hand to trade the soldiers for grain.... The children dreaded the arrival of visitors during the Sunday meal, because they had to wait and eat at the second table.

Money was scarce. Sometimes the men ... left home to take odd jobs such as splitting rails, leaving their wives and children to fend for themselves. Even when the settlers had money, there wasn't much food for sale.

The ... children didn't attend school—there wasn't any. Sometimes a teacher would attempt to hold classes for a few days or weeks at one of the settlers' houses. Usually, however, the children were needed at home. Like the adults, the youngsters spent almost every day carrying out tedious and repetitive chores. [The children] hauled water, gathered firewood, milked cows, ground corn (or acorns when there was no corn), herded livestock, made soap, sewed and washed clothes. The laundry list wasn't extensive; each family member had only about two suits of clothing, made of coarse cotton fabric or deerskin. The kids had no shoes. Their feet and arms itched from frequent brushes with stinging nettle, cat's claws and thistles. As they went about their work, they had to watch out for diamondback rattlesnakes along the sandstone ledges and cottonmouth moccasins in the river bottom....

If western movies have underplayed the harsh living conditions on the Texas frontier, they've also exaggerated the bravery and self-reliance of the farmers who lived there. On the whole, the Texas settlers were ordinary folks, no more or less courageous than their kin in Tennessee or Wisconsin or Pennsylvania. Many of these people had moved to Texas because they hadn't succeeded back home. Often they remained there in the face of adversity, not because they were stouthearted but because they were trapped. Poverty kept them from relocating and starting over....

When Indians came around their homesteads, the settlers were usually outnumbered and they seldom stood and fought to defend their home if they had a chance to hide or escape....

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Unless you're bereft of an imagination, it doesn't take much to realize how difficult life could be—*as a matter of course*—for the pioneers who opened up this country. Reading the above passage turned my thinking around and made me realize I have *nothing* to complain about. I have my health and can look forward to a life span nearly twice that of someone living at the dawn of our nation, I also have a great standard of living and, for the most part, financial security (if government would stop tinkering with the economy!). Our level of technology today makes it all possible, yet many of today's crybabies feel it's reprehensible! They fail to realize that technology can fix the problems it creates. Who'd want to go back? Kings and queens of the past centuries would envy what we take for granted.

No matter what speed bumps come across my path, all I need to remember is that they're just speed bumps, not walls. When I tend to get peeved at certain things, I just need to step back for a second and realize I don't have it bad by any stretch. Compared with the rest of the world, life in the good old US of A is "mahvelous, just *mahvelous!*" There's one sure way to realign your thinking if you need a reminder....

Ask any immigrant.