

The Good Old Days?
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"Originalists" (conservatives who believe that we must follow everything that our founders established in the Constitution) are not alone in their love of the past.

The ugly White Nationalists roiling the country now believe the same thing, with violence replacing intellect. They think they would like this country better if it harkened back to a time when women, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans were barred from voting and governance. The most ignorant among them also would like to revoke the Emancipation Proclamation, rendering Blacks back to chattel slavery. They make no bones about their wishes when they chant: Jews (and all the others) will not replace us (superior White men).

It is not only the ignorant and violent who worship the imagined past, but many decent and romantic citizens as well. We all have memories of times past in our own lives when things seemed peaceful, "normal," and better. Unfortunately, memory is selective.

The romantic souls harkening to the past do not consider what it was like to be a Black person in the "good times" after World War II. Even Black soldiers returning from war were required to submit to the segregation insults in much of the country. There were lynchings to remind them of what happens to those who offend. Today's problems of "driving while Black" (police harassment) was the rule in the past, not the publicized illegality it is today.

Women can romantically harken back to the secure past when they were wives and mothers supported by a single man. They should remember that they could not vote, were compelled to submit to the authority of husbands, and were limited to a small range of occupations if they needed or wanted to support themselves. Women need to recall how little they were permitted to do.

Most repulsive in the past was the total control that men had over women's fertility and bodies. Women were the slaves of their biology, relegated to breeding. Aborting a pregnancy, even one created by force, was illegal. Women who did so risked their lives in dangerous secret abortions, a process otherwise so easy by modern medicine.

Other romantics who pine for the past are those fighting modern medicine. They like to believe that their bodies are capable of fighting or surviving illness, just as God had designed them. They resisted masks, vaccines, and other medical requirements for avoiding death out of sheer stubborn suspicion of modern medicine.

A real eye opener was the "Local History" column of Ross Gibson in the Santa Cruz Sentinel (June 20, 2022) about the history of the lighthouse built to protect shipping from the rocks. The family that built and maintained that lighthouse had the following medical experiences, common from 1806 to the end of the century.

Adna Hecox was born in 1806. He married in 1832. His first wife died of Cholera. He then had dysentery for seven months, recovered, had bouts of influenza, pneumonia, and pleurisy, and moved, with second wife and four children, to California. He and his party spent the winter in the deserted Mission of Santa Clara, where 14 of them died of typhoid from stagnant water.

His 6-year-old daughter was struck by paralysis, stammered, and walked with crutches. When his son Tilden was 6, he contracted scarlet fever, which left him deaf and mute. This one family illustrated the normal health conditions of the good old days, before the blessings of modern science and medicine.

I am a historian, fascinated by the past, but without the romantic illusions about how wonderful the good old days were. In teaching history, I ask my students which time they would visit (or live in) if they had a time machine. They always have romantic illusions about their chosen period until I ask if they would take their chances on being born Black, not White; female, not male; poor, not upper class? Would they really love Ancient Rome if they were a slave, or the lively Middle Ages if they were a woman or peasant?

I think not. Nostalgia for the past is delusional.

686 words

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