**City Life in the Early 1900s**

Imagine the year is 1920 and you are talking with a sixty year-old man who moved to New York City around 1880. Listen as he reflects back on the changes he has seen over the past forty years:

"Back in 1880, it was wise to watch where you walked. Horse-drawn trolleys provided the main form of transportation and pollution it

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/snpim2a.jpg |
| Washington Square New York City1909 |

seemed. Horses can produce 20 to 30 pounds of manure a day. Multiply that times a couple thousand, and you've got quite a mess. By the 1890s, electric streetcars had replaced horse drawn vehicles, running above or below ground to avoid the crowded streets. After Henry Ford introduced his Model T car in 1908, a pedestrian soon had to dodge not only the streetcars, but also a new urban menace--the automobile. Strangely enough, paved streets came about late in the century at the urging of bicyclists, not the automobile drivers.

"The family would spend my one day off from work in Central Park. Frederick Olmsted designed it in the 1850s as a refuge for city folk with its open fields and small lakes. Other cities did the same. Any excuse to get away from those tenement buildings. Four to six stories high, with four apartments on each floor, they held two or three families in each apartment, all with no elevator or indoor plumbing. We used cesspools and outhouses for sewage. And people just threw their garbage in the street. But the reformers and scientists

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| Building the City: Workers atop the Singer Building, the tallest in the world at 35 stories New York City, 1908 |

stopped all that with sanitation laws. 500,000 people per square mile living on the Lower East Side got awfully crowded and smelly!

"Walking to my factory job took me past the newest innovation in construction, the skyscraper. Elisha Otis' electric elevator and the use of a structural steel framework allowed builders to erect the Woolworth Building in 1913--at 55 stories, the world's tallest building. City planning has helped to make sense of where everything is going. They started it in Chicago after the 1893 Columbian Exhibition.

"On the way, one might pass all sorts of new arrivals to the city. See that young man talking about how things are different on the farm where he's from? He is just part of the large country-to-city migration that's taken place within my lifetime. According to the most recent census, more people live in urban areas than rural ones for the first time in American history. Millions of immigrants poured into the cities, trying to get jobs and make a better life. The political bosses helped them out with jobs and food when they could, but the reformers keep trying to outdo them with their settlement houses and such.

"Blacks have been flocking to cities since after the Civil War looking for better jobs and some political freedom. The labor shortage after 1914 brought millions more to the cities, but the problems they face are no less difficult than what they left behind on the Southern farms. Up north they face economic discrimination instead of just political. They piled into neglected and overcrowded sections like Harlem, where the white middle-class used to live before they moved to the suburbs. They still don't have much political power, but it's beginning to grow."

**The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire, 1911**

A majority of the immigrants that landed on America's shores made their way to the tenement sections of the teeming cities of the Northeast. Often illiterate and with a limited knowledge of English, they found jobs wherever they could, often taking the lowest paying and most menial employment. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company located in New York City exemplified the working conditions these new immigrants often encountered.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company occupied the top three floors of a ten-floor building in the heart of Manhattan's

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| Bodies of victims litter the street March 25, 1911 |

Garment District. The company employed over 500 women ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-three and mostly Jewish or Italian. The majority labored at sewing machines turning out clothing for which they were paid "by the piece." To encourage the seamstresses to stay at their machines and to inhibit stealing, company management routinely locked the exit doors. The hours were long (9-10 hours per day), the work monotonous, the pay low - in short, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company epitomized the "Sweatshop."

On Saturday March 25, 1911 disaster struck. As the women approached the end of their workday, a small fire started in the cutting room on the eighth floor. It was 4:30 in the afternoon. Within minutes, flames fueled by loose cloth lying in innumerable piles engulfed the area and spread to the floors above. Panic spread with the flames and smoke. The women madly dashed to the exits only to find them locked. They furiously pounded on the doors to no avail. The one fire escape at the rear of the building collapsed, killing many and cutting off that route of escape. Some attempted to slide down the elevator cables only to lose their grip and fall to their deaths. Others, their clothes afire, jumped in groups from the top of the building or from open windows on the lower floors.

Bessie Gabrilowich ran frantically first to the locked main door and then luckily found an open stairway near the freight elevator. Groping her way through the smoke to the street below, she looked up to see many of her co-workers leaping from the windows of the upper stories. Among them was a friend, Dora Wolfovitch, aged 15. Years later Bessie recalled: "Everybody was running to get out. And there was this beautiful little girl, my friend Dora, I remember her face before she jumped." Dora did not survive.

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/snpim3b.jpg |
| Firemen search for victims |

Firefighters arrived quickly but found their way to the building hindered by bodies lying in the street. Their ladders reached only to the sixth floor and their safety nets broke as they tried to catch groups of women jumping from the flaming building.

In less than 30 minutes, the fire had spent itself. In its wake it left 147 dead - the worst factory fire in New York City's history. The tragedy, and the working conditions it revealed, inflamed public opinion leading to reform of working conditions for women and children. It also fueled the union movement adding impetus to the organization of the International Garment Workers' Union.

The owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were tried for manslaughter but acquitted. Three years after the fire, a court ordered the owners to pay $75.00 to each of twenty-three families who had sued for the loss of family members.

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**Immigration in the Early 1900s**

After the depression of the 1890s, immigration jumped from a low of 3.5 million in that decade to a high of 9 million in the first decade of the new century. Immigrants from Northern and Western Europe continued coming as they had for three centuries, but in decreasing numbers. After the 1880s, immigrants increasingly came from Eastern and Southern European countries, as well as Canada and Latin America. By 1910, Eastern and Southern Europeans made up 70 percent of the immigrants entering the country. After 1914, immigration dropped off because of the war, and later because of immigration restrictions imposed in the 1920s.

The reasons these new immigrants made the journey to America differed little from those of their predecessors. Escaping religious, racial, and political persecution, or seeking relief from a lack of economic opportunity or famine still pushed many immigrants out of their homelands. Many were pulled here by contract labor agreements offered by recruiting agents, known as *padrones* to Italian and Greek laborers. Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks, Bohemians, and Italians flocked to the coal mines or steel mills, Greeks preferred the textile mills, Russian and Polish Jews worked the needle trades or pushcart markets of New York. Railroad companies advertised the availability of free or cheap farmland overseas in pamphlets distributed in many languages, bringing a handful of agricultural workers to western farmlands. But the vast majority of immigrants crowded into the growing cities, searching for their chance to make a better life for themselves.

Immigrants entering the United States who could not afford first or second-class passage came through the processing center at Ellis Island, New York. Built in 1892, the center handled some 12 million European immigrants, herding thousands of them a day through the barn-like structure during the peak years for screening. Government inspectors asked a list of twenty-nine probing questions, such as: Have you money, relatives or a job in the United States? Are you a polygamist? An anarchist? Next, the doctors and nurses poked

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/snpim1c.jpg |
| Medical examination Ellis Island, 1910 |

and prodded them, looking for signs of disease or debilitating handicaps. Usually immigrants were only detained 3 or 4 hours, and then free to leave. If they did not receive stamps of approval, and many did not because they were deemed criminals, strikebreakers, anarchists or carriers of disease, they were sent back to their place of origin at the expense of the shipping line.

For the newcomers arriving without family, some solace could be found in the ethnic neighborhoods populated by their fellow countrymen. Here they could converse in their native tongue, practice their religion, and take part in cultural celebrations that helped ease the loneliness. Often, though, life for all was not easy. Most industries offered hazardous conditions and very low wages--lowered further after the *padrone* took out his share. Urban housing was overcrowded and unsanitary. Many found it very difficult to accept. An old Italian saying summed up the disillusionment felt by many: "I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, found out three things: First, the streets weren't paved with gold; second, they weren't paved at all: and third, I was expected to pave them." In spite of the difficulties, few gave up and returned home.

After reading the above articles, answer the following questions:

1. What was city life like in the early 1900s?

2. What happened during the Triangle Shirtwaist fir that made it so tragic?

3. What would you do to prevent such a tragedy from happening again?

4. How were immigrants treated in America?

5. Why did they come?

6. What’s different about our life now, than what it was like in the early 1900s?