

Counting Our Lucky Stars

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 08 April 2014 13:54



I keep trying to stay upbeat. Remember that wonderful Shirley Temple song, "Be Optimistic" from the 1930's movie "Little Miss Broadway"? I shoot for that only without the dimples and curly hair. Some days that quest seems to get a tailwind behind it, like this little gust.

A nice young man (well, he looks nice) named Morgan Housel recently published an interesting article in "The Motley Fool" describing "50 Reasons We're Living Through the Greatest Period in World History."

Since the huge bulk of what passes for "news" these days focuses on unsettling events, troublesome trends and outright disasters, 50 sure sounds like a boatload of reasons for handstand-y optimism . . . wouldn't even ten or twelve be a lot? I took a few moments to ponder them and found myself alternately inspired, skeptical and flabbergasted. Here are some of my favorites.

- U.S. life expectancy at birth was 39 years (hello Jack Benny) in 1800 compared to 49 years in 1900, 68 years in 1950, and 79 years today. The average hot-off-the -presses baby today is projected to live an entire generation longer than his great-grandparents would. One reason among many for the improvement lies in our battle over influenza. A flu pandemic in 1918 infected 500 million people worldwide and killed as many as 100 million. An average case of the flu is intensely uncomfortable, can last for weeks, and may still prove fatal. Today, you can go to pharmacies and get a painless flu shot for about the price of lunch in a nice restaurant or a one-year magazine subscription. Or how about a cotton sweater (in any color no less!). And consider this: in 1952, 38,000 people contracted polio in America alone, according to the Centers for Disease Control. In 2012, there were fewer than 300 reported cases of polio in the entire world.

- Despite a surge in airline travel, there were half as many fatal plane accidents in 2012 as there were in 1960, according to the Aviation Safety Network.

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- The average American now retires at age 62 (yeah, who is that character?). A mere century ago, the average American died at age 51.
- In 1949, shortly before I was born, Popular Mechanics magazine brashly predicted that someday a computer could weigh less than 1 ton. My laptop weighs about five pounds and the new tablets with their amazing capabilities are weighed in ounces.
- A scant 2% of American homes had electricity in 1900. Impossibly wealthy banker J.P. Morgan was a real innovator, one of the first to install electricity in his home, and it required a private power plant on his property. Even by 1950, close to 30% of American homes didn't have electricity. It wasn't until the 1970s that virtually all homes were powered.

According to the Census Bureau, only one in 10 American homes had air conditioning in 1960. That rose to 49% in 1973, and 89% today — the 11% that don't are mostly in cold climates. "Simple improvements" like this have "changed our lives in immeasurable ways." (Note to Mr. Housel: I sincerely doubt that Willis Carrier, the inventor of modern air conditioning or any of his industrial heirs at Carrier Corporation, would have used the word "simple.")

Almost no one's home had a refrigerator in 1900, never mind a car in the driveway. Today one can buy a car with refrigerators in them. Not so long ago—1950— nearly 40% of American homes lacked a telephone. Today, there are 500 million Internet-connected devices in America, which equates to some 5.7 per household. Housel cheerfully notes that "according to AT&T archives and the Dallas Fed, a three-minute phone call from New York to San Francisco cost \$341 in 1915, and \$12.66 in 1960, adjusted for inflation. Today, Republic Wireless offers unlimited talk, text, and data for \$5 a month."

- The Federal Reserve asserts that the number of lifetime years spent in leisure (retirement plus time off during your working years) jumped from 11 in 1870 to 35 by 1990. It's roughly 40 years today. The average American therefore spends nearly half his life in leisure. Tennis anyone? How about an oyster roast?
- Back to longevity: from 1920 to 1949, an average of 433,000 people died each year globally

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from "extreme weather events." That figure has plummeted to 27,500 per year, according to Indur Goklany of the International Policy Network, largely thanks to "increases in societies' collective adaptive capacities." Fascinatingly, and perhaps paradoxically, extreme weather manages to often dominate the nightly news in the U.S. Grab your snow shovel, sand bags, plywood and duct tape.

- Average inflation-adjusted household income was around \$25,000 per year in the 1950s. It's nearly double that amount today. If you dig into how the average "prosperous" American family lived in the 1950s, it's relatively easy to discover a standard of living that many would call "poverty" today. I mean, did Ozzie and Harriet have 3-4 color TV's with hundreds of channels?
- Adjusted for inflation, the cost of an average round-trip airline ticket fell 50% from 1978 to 2011, according to Airlines for America. Thank heavens that the experience of flying and hauling luggage through airports is such unmitigated fun!
- According to the perky bureaucrats (no, I couldn't resist) at the U.S. Census Bureau, the average new home now has more bathrooms than occupants. No wonder everyone looks so darned clean today. According to professor Julian Simon, the average American house or apartment is twice as large as the average house or apartment in Japan, and three times larger than the average home or apartment in Russia. (Is that why Putin is looking to annex so much land?)
- Google Maps doesn't cost consumers anything, at least not directly. This comes almost spookily close to astounding. It's a contender for the most useful piece of software ever invented and we have to wonder how many bona fide wizards work at Google. (Maybe we can Google that one.)
- In 1940, less than 5% of the adult population held a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2012, more than 30% did, again according to the Census Bureau.
- The average American car got 13 miles per gallon in 1975 but more than 26 in 2013 according to the Energy Protection Agency. This has an effect comparable to cutting the cost of gasoline in half.
- The percentage of Americans age 65 and older who live in poverty has dropped from nearly 30% in 1966 to less than 10% by 2010. For the elderly, the war on poverty has perhaps been won. Adjusted for inflation, the average monthly Social Security benefit for retirees has increased from \$378 in 1940 to \$1,277 by 2010. What used to be a safety net is now practically a pension.

So there we have it. Only 4% of humans get to live in America, and only a tiny fraction of that in the Lowcountry. And here we are among them—we've all but won the lottery. It's time to count

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